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# SOVIET THINKING ON THE NEXT LAND WAR

by

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Writing in the Soviet General Staff journal *Voyennaya Mysl'* in 1968, Marshal Sokolovskii and Major General Cherednichenko argued that theory had to anticipate possible changes in the methods of conducting war by 10 or 15 years, roughly the time needed to develop and introduce the most important types of new and improved weapons.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, they called for essential changes in military art to deal with the contingencies of a limited nuclear war fought with both conventional and nuclear weapons, or of a general and relatively protracted nuclear war.<sup>2</sup> As it turned out, during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, a sustained buildup of all types of conventional and nuclear weapons did occur, as well as corresponding changes in operational concepts and force structure. In fact, the character and scale of this buildup seemed to bear out Sokolovskii's prognosis in 1968. Together with the thorough integration of nuclear weapons, including nuclear-capable artillery, into the force structure, the Soviets have introduced new and improved conventional weapons and operational concepts to put into being Tukhachevskii's theory of deep offensive operations developed in the 1930s.

Judging by Sokolovskii's formula, the late 1970s should have witnessed further revisions in Soviet military doctrine in response to any reassessment of the character of a future war or anticipation of a new cycle

of weapons development. In a book published in 1980, top Soviet military historians began to refer to NATO's renewed emphasis on the conventional defense since 1976 and cited NATO sources on the possibility of a "total conventional war" in Europe and "technological leaps" leading to new conventional weapons that match nuclear ones in destructive power.<sup>3</sup> Marshal Ogarkov, the Soviet Chief of the General Staff from 1977 to 1984, also pointed to this development in 1978 when he referred to the continuing contradiction "between the massing of forces at selected points and their destruction through firepower."<sup>4</sup> In July 1982 Soviet Defense Minister Ustinov declared that "in the training of the armed forces ever greater attention will now be paid to the tasks of preventing a military conflict from developing into a nuclear one," indicating that the conventional options in Soviet strategy were receiving greater emphasis.<sup>5</sup> In fact, according to Lieutenant General Kir'yan, the Soviet force development process is now seen to be governed by "the possibility of conducting military operations only with the use of conventional weapons under conditions of constant threat of the probable enemy's resort to weapons of mass destruction," and thus "the preeminence of one type of weapon to the detriment of others cannot be allowed."<sup>6</sup>

There is evidence that the leap forward in the development of conventional firepower,

together with the possibility that a future war could remain conventional, prompted some serious rethinking and debate on the character of the next land war and its implications for Soviet offensive strategy during Ogarkov's tenure. Soviet thought, and second thought, on the deep battle—the centerpiece in the Soviet conception of land warfare—thus demands our attention.

#### THE DEEP BATTLE IN THE NEXT LAND WAR

The modern followers of Tukhachevskii, Marshals Babadzhanyan and Losik and Major Generals Krupchenko and Radzievskii, were the main proponents of the concept of mobile tank forces and were, not surprisingly, leading members of the tank establishment. Based on the works of Babadzhanyan, Losik, and Krupchenko, Richard Simpkin has provided an excellent treatment of Tukhachevskii's turning operation concept.<sup>7</sup> Exploiting the breakthrough of a section of the defense, highly independent forward tank formations are funneled through the gap to achieve a rapid thrust into the depth of the defense in coordination with deep artillery strikes and air attacks. These tank forces then act as a lever turning on a moving fulcrum composed of the all-arms main forces, which also serve as the "magnetic steamroller" that holds opposing forces forward and crushes them.<sup>8</sup> According to Radzievskii, during the latter half of the Second World War, at the front level, the Mobile Groups performing the function of the lever were composed of one, two, or sometimes even three tank armies.<sup>9</sup> In general, the Mobile Groups that developed the success of the all-arms front were formed at the army level, whereas those that did so for the all-arms army were formed at the corps level.<sup>10</sup> At the operational level, therefore, the functions performed by these Mobile Groups required formations larger than a tank division. The recent organization of two tank divisions into a corps-like structure indicated that this formation will comprise the Operational Maneuver Groups (OMGs) of the future.<sup>11</sup> On the echeloning of these forces, if the breakthrough was required

only against a defense that was hastily organized with little depth, the Mobile Groups could belong to the first echelon of the offensive formations.<sup>12</sup>

Ogarkov himself was the leading critic of the modern application of Tukhachevskii's "deep battle," but not of the concept of mobile force itself. His emphasis on the effect of firepower on the modern battlefield was shared and developed further by Major Generals I. Vorob'yev and N. Kuznetsov. An important assumption underlying the view of this school was stated by Major General Vorob'yev in a theoretical article in *Voyennaya Mysl'* in 1980. According to Vorob'yev, of the triad of firepower, strike, and mobility, firepower is the main "driving force" in the evolution of forms and methods of conducting combat operations and has become even more important with the great improvements in the range, speed, mobility, yield, and precision of the means of firepower. Firepower also provides the impetus for changes in troop disposition and echeloning, in forms of combat actions and mobility to avoid enemy fire.<sup>13</sup> On the implications of recent developments in conventional firepower for Soviet strategic planning, Major General Kuznetsov stated in *Voyennaya Mysl'* in 1984,

Changes in the character of war in general, especially in the forces and means of conducting war, in the forms and methods of strategic actions, have a direct effect on the construction of plans to rebuff a surprise attack . . . . The constant improvements in the destructive capabilities of not only nuclear but also conventional weapons have led to the unprecedented destructiveness of military activities at every level. A situation in which massive casualties are incurred due to the lack of in-depth research on protective measures cannot be accepted . . . . Problems of redistribution of troops, of securing the freedom of action for troop groupings, are those that need to be studied more deeply.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, the impact of long-range conventional power on the traditional strategic principle of concentration of forces at the

decisive place and time is such that "while conducting combat with long-range conventional means, it is possible to prepare and carry out within a short period *fire strikes* throughout the depth of the formation of large enemy groupings and create a decisive impact on the course of the operation."<sup>15</sup> The critical rethinking by the school of firepower on the current application of the concept of mobile tank forces was thus centered on two key issues: the effects of new developments in firepower on the future mechanized battle, and the relative balance between offense and defense.

### FIREPOWER AND THE FUTURE MECHANIZED BATTLE

In 1978, Ogarkov called attention to current developments of "qualitatively new types of weapons and equipment, as well as the improvement of conventional, 'classic' means of combat and the sharp increase in their combat potentials." He argued that the contradictions between offense and defense, between the massing of forces at selected points and their destruction through firepower, and between the "requirements of the armed forces for costly weapons and equipment and the economic potentials of the state" are among the most basic forms of contradictions in armed struggle.<sup>16</sup> Pointing out the dynamic nature of developments in these three areas, Ogarkov thus signaled the opening of a debate—in anticipation of a new cycle of weapons development—on basic principles of military science, similar to the call made by Sokolovskii in 1968. Ogarkov refrained from discussing the latter two themes at length (the Soviet mobilization experience in World War II was briefly mentioned) but raised discreet questions about the relationship between offense and defense.

Stressing that "the age-old struggle between the means of attack and defense is one of the causes for the development of the means of combat, and together with them the methods of conducting combat operations," he went on to argue that at a certain point the quantitative growth of new weapons may

lead to qualitative changes in the dialectical relationship between offense and defense. This dialectical process is guided by the principle of "negation of the negation," as illustrated by the "negation" of the cavalry by the machine gun and improved firepower during World War I, which were then "negated" by tanks and airplanes. Of course, for the "negation of the negation" to occur, sufficient quantities of the new types of weapons had to be available, which was not the case until after World War I. Through this line of reasoning, Ogarkov admonished that "the process of negation" has not ended and that "at the present time, corresponding means of combat against tanks are being massively developed." Moreover, "they have reached such a quantitative and qualitative state" that "attentive studies of these tendencies and their consequences are required."<sup>17</sup> In other words, Ogarkov was subtly raising the question of whether mobile tank forces would suffer the same fate as the cavalry in the near future.

Ogarkov's challenge was probably in the minds of Marshal Babadzhanyan and a group of tank officers who coauthored a book on tank operations in 1980 when they stated, after a discussion of methods of defense against antitank guided missiles (ATGMs), that "there are no objective reasons to speak of a demise of the tank troops, of how the tank has allegedly ceased to be viable on the battlefield."<sup>18</sup> Specifically, they argued that the law of "negation of the negation" was still confirmed here by the fact that the appearance of ATGMs had led to "a new stage in the improvement in tanks and the development of new methods of using them and

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combating the ATGMs.” Major General Vorob’yev, on the other hand, stated categorically in 1980 that deep offensive operations would have to face “resolute resistance” from defense forces due to the “saturation in their combat formations of large quantities of anti-tank means, the rise in the effectiveness and mobility of these means, and the increase in anti-tank capabilities of the defense in general.”<sup>19</sup> As a result, “in modern operations, tank losses will occur on a tremendously increased scale, as the experience of the Mideast war in 1973 has shown.” Marshal of the Tank Forces O. A. Losik insisted, however, that despite heavy tank losses during the October War, “massive employment of tanks” has increased the “mobility and strike power of Ground Troops” and “the potential for rapid creation of large troop groupings and inflicting powerful primary strikes,” and has created the “preconditions for conducting a maneuver war.” To increase their effectiveness, Losik argued, the combat independence of tank formations should be constantly enhanced, especially in deep operations when they are detached from the main forces. Specifically, Losik suggested that tank and mechanized infantry formations should be made fully independent by incorporating into their force structure “self-propelled artillery, combat vehicles equipped with anti-tank missiles, means of air defense, etc.,” besides their usual array of main battle tanks and infantry fighting vehicles.<sup>20</sup> Although concurring with this opinion, Vorob’yev stressed that only when they are fully independent can these forward formations maintain their rapid tempo of attack, exploit the results of their firepower, and protect themselves from enemy fire.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, to preserve the momentum of an attack, one needs not only tanks—weapons traditionally regarded as offensive—but also tactical air defense systems and antitank missiles—weapons usually associated with the defense.

Apparently unmollified by the reassurances of Soviet tank specialists, Ogarkov returned again to the same theme in 1981 and 1982, citing the continued use of the cavalry

and the disbandment of independent tank formations in the Soviet army before World War II as a historical example of outdated thinking.<sup>22</sup> Judging by the historical analogy that he employed, Ogarkov may have had in mind the development of airmobile formations in future deep operations, a new type of independent, forward formation with far greater mobility than the bulk of the force. Vorob’yev might have had something similar in mind when he predicted that in addition to direct air strikes and airborne landings, future operations would involve “the *concentrated movement of troops by air* into the enemy rear in order to rapidly transfer combat operations into the depth of the enemy formations, to cut up and isolate enemy forces not only along the front but also in depth, to pass over enemy defense lines and contaminated zones with high tempo, and to continuously pursue retreating enemy forces.”<sup>23</sup> For that reason, Vorob’yev argued, any operation or battle in the future will be *air-land* [sic] in nature, i.e. “success will depend directly on conditions in the air, the soundness and stability of the air defense system, and high effectiveness in the employment of aviation.”<sup>24</sup> Vorob’yev again returned to this theme in September 1984, stating categorically that aerial combat is becoming an organic element of any engagement and that combined arms commanders must have a “profound knowledge” of the air force’s capabilities and the ability to interact with it precisely and constantly.<sup>25</sup>

In 1982, Ogarkov repeated the warning about “the quantitative and qualitative state” that has been reached by antitank means and added that “to ignore this trend is dangerous” in view of the “diversified” nature of the threat, especially from the air.<sup>26</sup> Whether Ogarkov has bought Vorob’yev’s air-land concept or not, in 1983 he again called attention to “the ever accelerating process of quantitative stockpiling and qualitative changes in systems and means of destruction” in the West and complained that “the development and training of the Soviet Armed Forces is not taking place on a qualitatively new basis.” Moreover, in view of the “emergence of new means of armed

struggle," Ogarkov called for "bold experiments and solutions . . . even if this means discarding obsolete traditions, views and propositions." The Soviet Chief of the General Staff also made the point that the mechanized forces now have the potential for independent operations in depth and possess "a sufficient quantity of self-propelled artillery and combat helicopters," besides tanks and armored vehicles.<sup>27</sup> However, by Losik's standard for an independent forward formation, Ogarkov failed to mention mobile air defense means, an extremely important factor. Moreover, while Ogarkov considered the quantity of combat helicopters, which are currently used in an antitank and ground support role, a kind of "flying artillery," as being sufficient, he did not mention troop transport helicopters for air assault units, a vital component of the OMGs. Ogarkov also mentioned, in particular, the need to devise new methods of combat operations to counter the "deep-strike" weapons and new means of electronic warfare and automated troop control.<sup>28</sup> On the importance of electronic warfare, Vorob'yev went so far as to state in 1980 that without reliable protection for the command and control system and the means to counter enemy electronic warfare, success for the attacking side may not be possible, even with superiority in the quantity and quality of forces and means of combat relative to the defense.<sup>29</sup>

#### OFFENSE VS. DEFENSE

The debate that Ogarkov initiated in the late 1970s has gone beyond arguments about the weapons mix or force structure for the mechanized battle to touch upon fundamental questions about the relationship between offense and defense itself. As Vorob'yev put it, modern firepower not only increases the tempo and depth of maneuver and the ability of the attacking side to crush the defense troop groupings but also enhances the stability and active nature of the defense and allows the defense to strike the attacking side while the latter is still at the

preparatory or transitional stage.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, "in modern conditions, the defense has absolutely not lost any of its advantages" but, on the contrary, has acquired "an increasingly active nature."<sup>31</sup> In this view, the modern defense is based on a combination of positional defense and maneuver, with a preponderant emphasis on the latter.<sup>32</sup> The increased weight of mobility in the defense gives rise to the possibility of not only weakening and wearing down attacking forces but also of destroying them. As a result, there is a certain "balance" between offense and defense, with both using the same mixes of weapons and maneuver elements and with the possibility that at some point the attacking side will have to devote part or all of its forces to the defense to repulse the enemy counterattack.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the encounter battles may occur not only during the course of development of combat operations but also right at the start of the offensive or defensive operations themselves since both sides would like to fulfill their tasks with active offensive methods.<sup>34</sup> Given the balance between offense and defense in both means and methods and their "interpretation," what conclusions can one make about the character of a future war? Vorob'yev seemed to point to the experiences of World War I as a possible guide. As Vorob'yev indicated, every General Staff in Europe at that time was planning for a short war stressing mobility and offense. As a result,

Many General Staffs during the process of the war had to reexamine from the beginning their views on military strategy, to rebuild their force development process, and to reorganize their military economy in new ways because the reserves accumulated during peacetime were only sufficient for the first few months of the war.<sup>35</sup>

Soviet interest in the lessons of World War I was evidenced by the publication of a study on Russian military thought during this period done by top military historians of the General Staff, an unusual attention to such a subject.<sup>36</sup> According to this study, Russian

military theoreticians, particularly those at the General Staff Academy, correctly predicted the protracted nature of a future world war and the vital role of economic mobilization in war planning. Based on the "new conditions of combat operations" at the time, one theoretician predicted the failure of the German Schlieffen plan and the inability of the German economy to support a protracted two-front war.<sup>37</sup> Mikhnevich, a General Staff theoretician, was also among the first to explore the nature of a war of coalitions, which in his opinion is full of "contradictions" between coalition partners who constantly tried to shift the burden of war-fighting to the others. As a result, a coalition "is always less than the sum of its parts."<sup>38</sup> The parallel to the present is hard to miss, given the Soviet penchant for using historical arguments to debate on sensitive issues. On this issue, Major General Kuznetsov argued in the more restricted forum of *Voyennaya Mysl'*,

The reliable defense of the gains of world socialism requires the resolution in depth of problems of coalition warfare in accordance with changes in the military-political situation, in the composition of the participants in the coalition of states, in the economic, political-psychological, and military capabilities of these states.<sup>39</sup>

In the light of his assessment that NATO "could initiate and carry out quite resolutely large-scale combat operations with *limited* objectives,"<sup>40</sup> Kuznetsov probably had in mind the possibility that the composition of the coalition itself might change if a future war is not won in the "initial period" and degenerates into a war of attrition.

Citing possible heavy losses of weapons and equipment in a future conflict, Ogarkov raised in 1981, for the first time, the question of "the timely transition of the Armed Forces and the whole national economy into wartime conditions" and their "mobilization expansion."<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the timely conversion of the economy to wartime production requires "precisely planned measures already in peacetime" as well as "the coordinated

actions of party, soviet and military organs in the localities." In this respect, it is interesting to note that two years earlier, under the rubric of "foreign specialists," Army General Maiorov had stated in *Voyennaya Mysl'* this thesis on the strategic requirement for the simultaneous transition of the whole national economy and the armed forces into wartime conditions in an extremely short period in order to ensure the readiness of the armed forces "to rapidly initiate resolute combat operations until the final objectives have been achieved."<sup>42</sup> In an interview in May 1984, Ogarkov again seemed to buttress this argument by stressing the immediate extension of modern conventional operations "to the whole country's territory" and hence the "incomparably greater" significance of the initial period and operations.<sup>43</sup> After all, the ultimate argument in favor of the burdensome demand for immediate mobilization of the whole economy in case of war is that a new war "will certainly be strikingly different in nature from the last war."<sup>44</sup>

## CONCLUSION

It is possible to speculate that it was the call for putting the mobilization preparedness of the economy at the same level as that of the armed forces that led to Ogarkov's demotion in September 1984, primarily because the measures that he proposed touched upon politico-economic domains, not just military ones. Ogarkov's controversial proposition, however, was a reflection of profound concerns about the impact of new developments in firepower on the workability of the deep battle concept and the balance between offense and defense. It is too early to tell whether the critical rethinking on the modern application of the deep battle concept has inexorably redirected the Soviet force development process toward Vorob'yev's vision of the three-dimensional "air-land" battle and the employment of helicopter formations in deep operations together with heliborne artillery support. As Richard Simpkin pointed out, such a force is extremely expensive in terms of combat manpower and materiel resources and operates at

great risk when air superiority is not assured.<sup>45</sup> However, the conceptual basis for such a force was already laid down by Vorob'yev, and its realization in the future is probably a function of economic resources and hence political decisions, although the views held by advocates of mobile tank forces toward such development could be an important factor as well.

#### NOTES

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5. D. F. Ustinov, *To Avert the Threat of Nuclear War* (Moscow: Novosti Press Agency, 1982), p. 9.

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Vorob'yev, "Forward Detachments in Offensive Operations and Battles" (April 1965) in *Selected Readings*, Part I.

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