

Leavenworth Papers

No. 7



August Storm: The Soviet 1945 Strategic Offensive in Manchuria

by LTC David M. Glantz

Combat Studies Institute

U.S. Army Command and General Staff College
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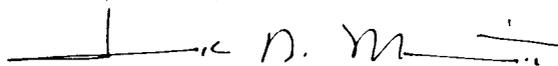
FOREWORD

Too often soldiers fall victim to their preconceptions about potential adversaries' patterns of behavior. A popular notion among U.S. officers is that military history in the Soviet Union consists of little but propaganda broadsides to justify Soviet actions. On too few occasions do U.S. officers critically analyze the past campaigns of potential adversaries. In particular, the rich vein of military history in Russian language military periodicals and literature has been neglected. The language barrier, time constraints, and changing Army requirements combine to hinder the type of in-depth historical research that affords penetrating insights into Soviet military planning, operations, and tactics.

LTC David M. Glantz, a Russian linguist at the Combat Studies Institute, has, using a wide variety of Soviet sources, reconstructed a comprehensive two-part account of the 1945 Soviet Manchurian campaign. This *Leavenworth Paper* offers an operational overview of the campaign, while *Leavenworth Paper* no. 8 expands the general campaign analysis in eight case studies that highlight Soviet tactical doctrine and operations in Manchuria. In both papers, LTC Glantz has also used Japanese accounts of the campaign to check the veracity of the Soviet version. For these reasons, I believe that these two *Leavenworth Papers* will become the standard works in the English language on the campaign.

Two features of Soviet war-making stand out in the Manchurian campaign: (1) meticulous planning at all levels; (2) initiative and flexibility in the execution of assigned missions. For those who dismiss the campaign as a walkover of an already defeated enemy, LTC Glantz presents overwhelming evidence of tenacious, often suicidal, Japanese resistance. The sophistication of Soviet operations made an admittedly inferior Japanese Kwantung Army appear even more feeble than it actually was. Reminiscent of the lightning German victory in northwest Europe in May 1940, surprise, bold maneuver, deep penetrations, rapid rates of advance, and crossing terrain the defender thought impassable enabled the attacker to rupture vital command and control networks of the defenders and to hurl defending forces into disarray. In 1945 the Soviets demonstrated their mastery of combined arms warfare that four blood-soaked years of fighting against the Germans had perfected. As LTC Glantz observes, the Manchurian campaign was the postgraduate exercise for Soviet combined arms.

Finally, this operational level account drawn almost exclusively from Soviet sources gives the U.S. Army officer an insight into how the Soviets interpret the Manchurian campaign, the lessons they draw from it, and how they relate their Manchurian experience to Soviet military art. Indeed, much truth lies in Ovid's words, "It is right to be taught, even by an enemy."



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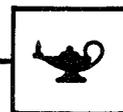
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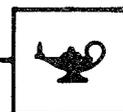
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Abbreviations



Soviet Forces

A	Army
AEB	Assault engineer-sapper brigade
BGBn	Border guards battalion
Cav-Mech Gp	Cavalry-mechanized group
CD	Cavalry division
FD	Forward detachment
FFR	Field fortified region
FR	Fortified region
G	Guards
HSPR	Heavy self-propelled artillery regiment
MB	Mechanized brigade
MC	Mechanized corps
MnRR	Mountain rifle regiment
MRD	Motorized rifle division
RBA	Red Banner Army
RBn	Rifle battalion
RC	Rifle corps
RD	Rifle division
RR	Rifle regiment
TA	Tank army
TB	Tank brigade
TC	Tank corps
TD	Tank division

Japanese Forces

BGU	Border guards unit
IB	Independent mixed brigade
ID	Infantry division

Symbols



Soviet

	Front boundary
	Army boundary
	Corps boundary
	Division/brigade boundary
	Infantry unit assembly area
	Tank/mechanized unit assembly area
	Cavalry unit assembly area
	Infantry unit deployed or moving
	Tank/mechanized unit deployed or moving
	Cavalry unit deployed or moving
	Self-propelled artillery unit deployed or moving
	Tanks in firing positions
	Self-propelled guns in firing position

Japanese

	Field fortifications, defensive positions
	Fortified region, permanent
	Section position
	Squad position
	Platoon position
	Company position
	Battalion position
	Regiment position
	Brigade position
	Division position
	Division boundary
	Army boundary
	Area army boundary
	Kwantung Army boundary

Preface



This critical examination of the final Soviet strategic offensive operation during World War II seeks to chip away at two generally inaccurate pictures many Westerners have of the war. Specifically, Westerners seem to think that only geography, climate, and sheer numbers negated German military skill and competency on the eastern front, a view that relegates Soviet military accomplishments to oblivion. Moreover, Westerners have concluded that little worthy of meaningful study occurred in the Asian theaters of war. These impressions reflect a distinct German bias in the analyses of operations on the eastern front and an anti-Asian front bias concerning World War II in general. Both impressions are false. Yet, over the decades since World War II, they have perpetuated an inaccurate view of the war, particularly of Soviet performance in that war. This Western misconception perverts history, and that perversion, in turn, warps contemporary attitudes and thus current assessments of Soviet military capabilities—past, present, and future.

Our view of the war in the east derives from the German experiences of 1941 and 1942, when blitzkrieg exploited the benefits of surprise against a desperate and crudely fashioned Soviet defense. It is the view of a Guderian, a Mellenthin, a Balck, and a Manstein, all heroes of Western military history, but heroes whose operational and tactical successes partially blinded them to strategic realities. By 1943—44, their “glorious” experiences had ceased. As their operational feats dried up after 1942, the Germans had to settle for tactical victories set against a background of strategic disasters. Yet the views of the 1941 conquerors, their early impressions generalized to characterize the nature of the entire war in the east, remain the accepted views. The successors to these men, the Schoeners, the Heinrichs, the defenders of 1944 and 1945, those who presided over impending disaster, wrote no memoirs of widespread notoriety, for their experiences were neither memorable nor glorious. Their impressions and those of countless field grade officers who faced the realities of 1944—45 are all but lost.

This imbalanced view of German operations in the east imparts a reassuring, though inaccurate, image of the Soviets. We have gazed in awe

at the exploits of those Germans who later wrote their personal apologies, and in doing so we have forgotten the larger truth: their nation lost the war—and lost it primarily in the east against what they portrayed as the “artless” Soviets.

Our second bias, so conspicuous in our historical neglect of the Pacific theater of World War II, has combined with our acceptance of the German interpretation of the eastern front so as to blind us to what was the pre-eminent Soviet military effort in World War II—the Soviet strategic offensive of 1945 in Manchuria.

For the Soviets, the Manchurian offensive was the logical by-product of their war experience, a surgically conducted offensive with almost predestined results. The fact that Japan was a seriously weakened nation by the summer of 1945 was clear. What was not clear was the prospect of an immediate Japanese surrender. The likelihood of a Japanese *Götterdämmerung* on the scale of Germany’s loomed large in the eyes of American and Soviet planners. The potential cost in Allied manpower of reducing Japan could be deduced from the fanatical Japanese resistance on Okinawa as late as April—June 1945, when more than 49,000 (12,500 dead) Americans fell in battle against about 117,000 Japanese troops. And the Home Islands still had more than 2.3 million Japanese soldiers; Manchuria, more than 1 million. So Allied planners expected the worst and designed operations in deadly earnest for what they believed would be prolonged, complicated campaigns against the remaining Japanese strongholds.

Based on proven capabilities of the Japanese High Command and the individual Japanese soldier, Soviet plans were as innovative as any in the war. Superb execution of those plans produced victory in only two weeks of combat. Although Soviet planners had overestimated the capabilities of the Japanese High Command, the tenacious Japanese soldier met Soviet expectations. He lived up to his reputation as a brave, self-sacrificing samurai who, though poorly employed, inflicted 32,000 casualties on the Soviets and won their grudging respect. Had Japanese planners been bolder—and Soviet planners less audacious—the price of Soviet victory could well have been significantly higher.

Scope, magnitude, complexity, timing, and marked success have made the Manchurian offensive a continuing topic of study for the Soviets, who see it as a textbook case of how to begin war and quickly bring it to a successful conclusion. They pay attention to the Manchurian offensive because it was an impressive and decisive campaign.

Our neglect of Soviet operations in World War II, in general—and in Manchuria, in particular—testifies not only to our apathy toward history and the past in general, but also to our particular blindness to the Soviet experience. That blindness, born of the biases we bring to the study of World War II, is a dangerous phenomenon. How can we learn if we refuse to see the lessons of our past for our future?

Introduction



Shortly after midnight on 9 August 1945, assault parties of Soviet troops crossed the Soviet-Manchurian border and attacked Japanese positions in Manchuria. This was the vanguard of a force of more than 1.5 million men that was to advance along multiple axes on a frontage of more than 4,400 kilometers, traversing in its course virtually every type of terrain from the deserts of Inner Mongolia to the shores of the Sea of Japan. Thus began one of the most significant campaigns of World War II.

For the Soviets, the Manchurian offensive marked the culmination of four years of bitter conflict with Germany in the west and a similar period of worried attentiveness to Japanese intentions in the east. The Soviets had absorbed the potent attacks of the Germans in 1941, 1942, and 1943 and had rebounded with their own 1944 and 1945 offensives, which finally crushed the military machine of Germany. While the Soviets waged a war of survival with the Germans, precious Soviet units remained in the Far East to forestall a possible Japanese attack in support of its Axis partner. Because of the combination of Soviet victories in the west and Japanese defeats in the Pacific, the potential for Japanese attack on the Soviet Far East diminished. Conversely, as Allied victory over Germany approached in 1945, Allied leaders continued to press Stalin to commit his forces against Japan in order to complete the destruction of the Axis combination.¹

Moved by Allied appeals for support and wishing to cement the Soviet Union's postwar position in the Far East, Soviet leaders began planning a final campaign to wrest from Japan Manchuria, northern Korea, southern Sakhalin Island and the Kurile Islands. The enormity of the task of conquering the vast expanse of Manchuria before a Japanese surrender rivaled the challenges of earlier operations. More than 10,000 kilometers separated Manchuria from the main area of Soviet operations in Europe. Forces and equipment destined for deployment to Manchuria had to move along a transportation network limited in capacity and fragile in its composition. Soviet estimates of force requirements necessary to undertake such an extensive campaign were correspondingly large. Thus, the anticipated campaign involved extensive planning and preparations stretching over a five-month period from April to August 1945. The results of the campaign attested to

the success of the planning and the thoroughness of preparations. In nine days Soviet forces penetrated from 500 to 950 kilometers into Manchuria, secured major population centers, and forced the Japanese Kwantung Army and its Manchukuoan and Inner Mongolian auxiliaries to surrender. Thus, Soviet forces achieved their territorial objectives within a limited period of time, despite severe terrain obstacles and significant Japanese resistance. The campaign validated the experience Soviet forces had gained in the war against Germany. The Red Army applied the advanced tactical and operational techniques it had learned in the brutal school of war in the west. It also displayed the requisite degree of audacious leadership Soviet commanders had laboriously developed during the western campaigns. The Manchurian campaign represented the highest state of military art in Soviet World War II operations. Contemporary officers and any serious student of twentieth century warfare can benefit greatly from an understanding of the nature of this campaign.

Concentrating on Soviet ground operations in Manchuria proper, this study provides general information on the strategic context of the campaign, a detailed account of the operational techniques of armies, corps, and divisions, and the tactical employment of regiments, brigades, and lower echelon units. It also includes information concerning initial planning for the operation, redeployment of forces, high level organization for combat, and the essentials of front planning. It analyzes Soviet force structure and the published tactical doctrine governing the use of those forces in 1945, highlighting the tactical innovations and demonstrating the adjustments in force structure that contributed to Soviet victory. An assessment of the utility of those tactical and structural innovations and their implications for the future completes the study.

Volume two, Leavenworth Paper no. 8, relates the conduct of battle in a limited number of sectors representative of the wide range of operations the campaign encompassed. The following eight detailed case studies from the Manchurian campaign focus on Soviet small unit tactics and how the Soviets tailored forces to achieve success: the attack by the Soviet 5th Army on the Japanese Volynsk and Suifenho Fortified Areas (9–11 August), the 39th Army advance to Wangyemiao (9–15 August), the 300th Rifle Division advance to Pamientung (9–10 August), the 35th Army advance east of Lake Khanka (9–10 August), the 36th Army advance to Hailar (9–12 August), the battle of Mutanchiang (14–16 August), the 35th Army reduction of Hutou Fortified Zone (9–18 August), and 15th Army operations to Chiamussu.

This study is based primarily on Soviet secondary sources, supplemented with Japanese materials. Soviet literature on the Manchurian campaign is extensive, and coverage has intensified in recent years. Many of the participants in the campaign have written memoirs or shorter commentaries on operations in Manchuria. The Far East commander, Marshal A. M. Vasilevsky, front commanders and chiefs of staff, army commanders, service

commanders, and military historians have contributed their accounts of operations, many in book form. Numerous articles have appeared in *Voenno-Istoricheskii Zhurnal* [Military history journal] on specific aspects of the operation. Japanese sources are rarer, in large part because the Soviets captured the records of the Kwantung Army during the campaign. The Japanese monograph series on operations in Manchuria, published in the early 1950s, provides a sketchy account reconstructed from the memories of Japanese officers who served in Manchuria. Unfortunately, no monographs exist for some of the most heavily engaged Japanese units, and the few memoirs written on limited aspects of the operations are of marginal value.

In contrast to Japanese sources, Soviet sources are complete and accurate in their generalizations and in much of their operational detail. They freely discuss operational difficulties, although they sometimes exaggerate the scale of individual victories or denigrate the impact of local defeats. Often the Soviets simply gloss over unpleasant events. This study compares Soviet accounts with accounts contained in the Japanese monographs and other Japanese studies, notes where details match, and highlights some differences in interpretation and emphasis.

I give special thanks to Dr. Edward J. Drea of the Combat Studies Institute for his assistance with Japanese sources. Throughout this study all Japanese personal names appear in the Japanese manner, surname preceding given name.

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