

Book Review

Soviet Cavalry Operations During the Second World War and the Genesis of the Operational Manoeuvre Group by John S. Harrel; Yorkshire, UK: Pen & Sword Military; 2019; \$23 hardcover.

The Soviet-German front in World War II was characterized by massive operations and immense violence. It is often thought of as a conflict between armored forces. German panzers dueled Soviet T-34s, with the infantry doomed to suffer in the cold and in the cities. The conception of cavalry units of significant size and impact has largely been omitted from the war's historiography.

John S. Harrel's latest work serves as a reminder that the era of horse-mounted warfare had not passed and, indeed, continued until the war's conclusion. ***Soviet Cavalry Operations During the Second World War and The Genesis of the Operational Manoeuvre Group*** is an expansive analysis of the technical, tactical and operational employment of Soviet cavalry against the Germans and their Axis allies. For practitioners who want to understand the history and development, the book is a goldmine of overlooked campaigns and actions. As during World War II, while new technologies promise to shift combat operations, the study of the seemingly archaic cavalry serves as a reminder that old platforms continue to be effective long after becoming outdated.

While initially solely horse-mounted, the Soviet cavalry, like much of the Red Army, was increasingly motorized and mechanized as the war progressed. The Soviet cavalry maintained an essential mobility advantage over their German opponents in areas lacking a significant road network, regardless of their mounts. As Harrel elucidates, the cavalry was the only reliably mobile Soviet force during the first years of the war. Despite their mobility, horse-mounted cavalry, like the rest of the Red Army, often paid a heavy price for minimal gains.

The first operational-level raid was launched in early 1942, as 1st Guards Cavalry Corps penetrated the German 4th Army's lines in an effort to strike at 4th Panzer Army's rear near Vyazma. Their efforts, combined with paratroopers dropped behind German lines, led German GEN Franz Halder, chief of the German General Staff, to cite supply difficulties in the area and requirements to shift German forces from the front lines to counter the threat to the rear.

While deployed to cut vulnerable supply lines and disrupt rear-area operations, cavalry forces often faced significant logistical problems as the Red Army was unable to reliably supply them with ammunition, replacements or medical support. The cavalry troops were frequently required to live off the land and, due to mounting losses, to consolidate their forces into ever-shrinking formations as the Germans pursued them. Nevertheless, as Harrel recounts, their impact on German rear areas was significant and they tied down large numbers of troops.

The book is organized into 25 chapters with an introduction, glossary, notes and a bibliography, all supplemented with 63 maps and 48 illustrations. The first 15 chapters cover the origins of the Soviet cavalry as an operational force, as well as its equipment and organization before World War II. From there, operations are told chronologically, often covering multiple operations across multiple fronts in the span of a few pages. Some actions are extensively covered, while others are relatively sparse on details. For students of the Eastern Front, this is unsurprising and does not detract from the work's overall value. The inclusion of so many maps is valuable. This said, the keys on the maps are often lacking scale and other normal information, reducing some of the maps' value.

By the end of World War II, while the Red Army was largely motorized, cavalry units continued to play significant roles in the final strategic offensives. The cavalry units, with tables of organization now containing increasingly armored and motorized formations, continued to penetrate Axis lines, conducting reconnaissance and threatening lines of communications. They kept Axis defenders off-balance and helped spearhead the Soviet's concluding operations in Europe and against Japan. Along with the rest of the Red Army, the Soviet cavalry grew in terms of operational prowess and skill as the war progressed, and Harrel's work brings to light the operational impact that seemingly obsolete tactics and formations had on a modern battlefield. The book's dense and detailed presentation makes it valuable to operational planners and those interested in the Soviet-German war.

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