

RUSSIAN DEEP OPERATIONAL MANEUVER:

FROM THE OMG TO THE MODERN MANEUVER BRIGADE

LTC (RETIRED) LESTER W. GRAU

Russia stretches across 11 time zones and has the longest border of any country on the planet. Russia sees herself surrounded by hostility and has been invaded by the Mongols, Tatars, Vikings, Turks, Swedes, French, Germans, British, Austro-Hungarians, United States, and Japan. Over the past thousand years, the bulk of the invasions have come from the west and south. Much of the area in which Russia is most likely to experience combat is defined by rolling plains, forest, large rivers, and marshland. In some areas, urban sprawl will canalize movement. Russia lacks the comprehensive road network of Western Europe and the United States, and much of its transport is conducted on a well-developed rail and barge system. Much of current Russian military thinking is guided by the works of General Aleksandr Svechin (1878-1938). He posited that in the event of an invasion, Russia has vast areas where she can trade space for time — and then launch a powerful counterstroke once the enemy has exhausted his combat power and over-extended his supply lines.¹

During the Cold War period, the Soviet and NATO use of nuclear weapons was believed highly likely. With the development of high-precision weapons, the probability of early use of nuclear weapons by both sides subsided; however, nuclear and high-precision weapons changed the nature of the future battlefield. The Soviet General Staff viewed future war as dynamic, high-tempo, high-intensity land-air operations that would extend over vast expanses and include new realms (such as space and the Arctic) and weapons of new physical principles. Tactical combat would be even more destructive than in the past and would be characterized by fragmented (очаговый) nonlinear combat. The front line would disappear as mobile groups, strong points, and maneuvering artillery fires would contest each other; safe havens and the deep rear would disappear. Nuclear war must be avoided as it could escalate to strategic exchange.²

The issue facing Soviet planners was how to make the enemy safe havens and deep rear vulnerable. A tank battalion can be more operationally effective combatting the enemy's laundry and bath units, depots, railheads, airfields, and water ports than going turret-to-turret with an enemy tank battalion. The issue was how to get the tanks behind the enemy combat forces to wreak destruction on his logistics and crucial infrastructure. The answer was the use of forward detachments at the tactical level and operational maneuver groups (OMGs) at the operational level. The Soviets had long considered the tank as the optimal exploitation weapon and during the 1930s designed and manufactured reconnaissance tanks (танкета); infantry support tanks (танки непосредственной поддержки пехоты);



light (лёгкие), medium (средний) and heavy (тяжёлый) main battle tanks; and long-range exploitation tanks (танки дальнего действия). After World War II, the Soviets produced medium tanks and long-range exploitation tanks. The T-64 tank, a long-range exploitation tank, was as equally armed and armored as the T-62 medium main battle tank, but was smaller and lighter with a three-man crew and an operational range of 700 kilometers (compared to the 450 kilometers of a battle-ready T-62).

The theory of deep battle was that once artillery and the main attack breached the enemy defenses, a maneuver element would enter the breach and drive deeply to attack the enemy nuclear weapons systems, headquarters, logistics, infrastructure, staging areas, key terrain, and airfields — the thought being that an optimum air defense weapon is a tank attacking parked aircraft.³ The attacking maneuver unit could be an air assault or a forward detachment. The forward detachment's mission was to avoid combat until it reached its objective.⁴ A common forward detachment for a regiment was a reinforced tank battalion. Usually the regiment's forward detachment objective was 30-50 kilometers from the departure point. A common forward detachment for a division was a reinforced tank regiment.

The Soviets considered armies and fronts as operational-scale forces. Once the enemy defense was penetrated, the Soviets planned on conducting deep operations to destroy or seize enemy operational nuclear weapons systems, headquarters, logistics, infrastructure, staging areas, key terrain, airfields, ports, and crucial cities. The deep operation was to be undertaken by the OMG. The basis of the OMG was an armored unit heavily reinforced with self-propelled artillery, motorized rifle units, engineers, and logistics. An army OMG was built around a tank division or tank corps. A front OMG was built around a tank army with a mission of 150 kilometers or more depth.⁵

Comes the Crash

During the Cold War, the Soviet army was a huge force of 211 divisions. Many of these were cadre (mobilization) divisions that would only be fully manned at wartime. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the military was a low priority for the new leadership. Officers went without pay for six months at a time. No new equipment was procured, and existing equipment in the mobilization divisions rotted and rusted unattended. Popular support and admiration for the military and its officers disappeared as people wrestled with mega-inflation, the legacy of a no-win war in Afghanistan, an unpopular draft, concepts such as democracy and free-market capitalism, the creation of a small wealthy class, and rampant poverty. Former states of the Soviet Union declared independence and broke away. Many were hostile toward Russia and some joined NATO. Russia was smaller and had a population size similar to Nigeria — but still the world's longest border. Nobody wanted to import anything from Russia except oil, timber, and prostitutes. Russia's role as a superpower and regional power was lost, along with Russia's dignity.

Chechnya decided to join the list of breakaway states and regions, but its oil refineries and sweet crude oil were essential to what remained of Russia's economy. The Russian leadership decided to force Chechnya back into Russia despite the fact that there was not a single ready division in the entire Russian army. The result was predictable but still a shock to the Russian population. The Russian army was defeated. It came back, only to be defeated again. The infirm Russian president handed the keys of power to Vladimir Putin, a former KGB officer. Putin's ascendancy to the presidency coincided with the rising price of oil. Putin grappled with the economy and gained a popular following as a strong, charismatic leader. Putin sent the army back into Chechnya and, after a long struggle, brought it to heel. The economy strengthened; Russian military equipment and agricultural sales increased; and nations again began to take notice of Russia as a regional power. Putin restored Russia's dignity and its position in Eurasia.

The Russian military was still cumbersome, equipped with old equipment and old thinking. Russia needed a smaller, more capable force that could cover 11 time zones and protect the world's largest border. The old guard, consisting mainly of retired generals, wanted to maintain the oversized army with its cadre divisions awaiting mobilization to fight World War III. President Putin had other ideas. No longer could the country fight behind thousands of kilometers of interconnected trench lines stretching across the continent. He needed a smaller, better-trained, more lethal, highly mobile army capable of deploying rapidly where needed. The old guard resisted, but eventually the sweeping Serdyukov reforms were implemented. The regiment-division-army front model was replaced by the brigade-army-military district model. The maneuver brigade contains four maneuver battalions, four artillery battalions, two air defense battalions, an engineer battalion, a logistics battalion, and an electronic warfare company. It is more lethal than the regiment but not as lethal as the division. The advantage is that the brigade is much easier to move and

deploy than a division, and it is designed for maneuver combat. The Russian army has retained some divisions which are deployed on critical avenues of approach into Russia or as part of the strategic reserve.

A Scaled Approach to Operational Maneuver

The Cold War is history. The Warsaw Pact is gone. Cold-War NATO, which was large, had a common commitment and focus and could man a long, deep continuous defensive front. Present-day NATO is small, with an ambiguous commitment and focus, and is mostly dispersed into small groups. The OMG is not a threat to NATO since there are no Soviet or Russian tank armies.⁶ What may be a threat to NATO are smaller, scalable armored Russian formations well equipped with organic motorized rifle, artillery, air defense, engineer, electronic warfare, and support elements. While NATO and Russian forces have gotten smaller, the Russian forces have restructured, modernized, improved training and mobility, and developed a force that is capable for the current time. Operational maneuver is still possible, but it is scaled to meet the realities of today. The OMG mission may now be conducted by one or two tank brigades.

The Russian army still trains to conduct linear warfare but will not fight a future war involving thousands of kilometers of connected frontage. It is no longer as powerful as the Cold War Soviet army, but NATO is also considerably smaller and weaker. Future war will incorporate linear combat on critical axes and fragmented nonlinear combat elsewhere. Linear warfare is roughly analogous to U.S. football. An attacking and defending side face each other on line. After a short period of concentrated effort to gain or deny ground or advantage, both sides regroup and reform to try again. Nonlinear warfare is roughly analogous to European football (soccer). There is constant activity with players on the same team simultaneously attacking, defending, or transitioning between the two. Team members rapidly coalesce into temporary attack or defensive groups and then disperse again.

The Russians see that requisite superiorities of forces on main offensive and counteroffensive axes may be achieved by surprise, firepower, and mobility.⁷ The Russians see nonlinear battle as combat in which tactically-independent battalion tactical groups and maneuver brigades fight meeting battles and cover their flanks with obstacles, artillery fires, and tempo. There are no safe areas, and combatants will suffer heavy attrition. Armies and divisions may influence the battle through employment of their reserves and long-range attack systems, but the outcome will be decided by the actions of battalion tactical groups and maneuver brigades fighting separately on multiple axes in support of a common plan or objective. Attacks against prepared defenses will be a rarity as neither side will be able to tie in their flanks or prepare defenses in depth.⁸

Historically, this is nothing new. Before the industrial revolution, armies fought using strong-point defenses and mobile forces. The mobile forces seldom had their flanks tied in since industry and agriculture were unable to field and support large field armies. Mobile forces patrolled their flanks while moving and refused their flanks while defending or preparing to attack. Following the Thirty Years War, European armies evolved to the fortress-depot system to supply their forces. Mobile forces were constrained by their distance from their depots. The genius of Napoleon was his ability to utilize nationalism and the nascent industrial revolution to create large conscript armies that lived off the land that they advanced over. However, by the time of the Crimean War, the improving industrial revolution and improved military technology led to the stalemate of positional trench warfare around Sevastopol. The American War between the States began as a war of maneuver that devolved increasingly into positional trench warfare, particularly in the east. World War I in Western Europe was the extreme example of positional trench warfare dominated by barbed wire, interlocking fields of machine-gun fire, and massed artillery. This was not so much the case in Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. World War I ended coincidentally with the introduction of the tank that was supposed to eliminate the horrors of trench warfare by restoring mobility to the battlefield. This worked somewhat during World War II in Europe, particularly when used by the Soviet Union in the latter stages of the war. Still, terrain and prepared defenses blunted the tanks' mobility in all theaters. The introduction of antitank guided missiles during the Cold War further restricted maneuver war. Technology has proven a dialectic — the advances in one system are offset by the advances in its counter.

Armchair tacticians delight in comparing one system against another: tank versus tank or fighter-bomber versus fighter-bomber. One-on-one duels are seldom fought in warfare. The comparison needs to be aggregates of the effects of one side versus the aggregates of the effects of the other. This is what enables success and supports maneuver. Mass has an advantage all its own. Paying for the effects is an enabling factor as well. If one side can produce artillery rounds at a fraction of the cost of what the other side pays for its artillery rounds, one side can shoot more rounds than the other.

Another development of warfare is the “empty battlefield.” Man began forming fighting formations to mass the effects of swords and spears and to steel the resolve of the non-resolute. Eventually, accurate, rapid-reloading firearms resulted in more space between combatants and a willing use of the shovel. More lethal weapons resulted in much broader formations, yet there is a point where combat resolve drops dramatically when proximity to one’s neighbor (or sergeant) decreases. Mobile maneuver warfare will still require somewhat compact combined arms units, even as the lethality of the combatants increase.

That being said, the Russian maneuver brigade with its battalion tactical groups seems an optimal force for modern Russia. It offers increased mobility and lethality and can fight in the traditional linked-in fashion as well as fighting true maneuver warfare. It can also perform as part of or as an OMG. Still, equipment and force structure do not automatically lead to combat effectiveness. Training and resolve remain essential ingredients.

Notes

¹ However, the current hundred-mile stretch between the Estonian border and the Russian major city of Saint Petersburg does not offer that option.

² V. G Reznichenko, *Тактика [Tactics]*, Moscow: Voenizdat, 1987, 63, 181, 194; Lester W. Grau, “Soviet Nonlinear Combat in Future Conflict,” *Military Review*, December 1990, 16-17. The second article introduces the concept of the battalion tactical group (BTG), which is drawing current interest in Russian ground force tactics.

³ Alternately, the forward detachment could infiltrate. The best English-language book on the development of Soviet tactical maneuver is David M. Glantz’s *The Soviet Conduct of Tactical Maneuver: Spearhead of the Offensive* (London: Frank Cass, 1991).

⁴ This is in contrast to an advanced guard, whose mission was to take on any enemy it met.

⁵ For an in-depth treatment of the topic, see Glantz’s *Soviet Military Operational Art: In Pursuit of Deep Battle*.

⁶ The recently reconstituted First Guards Tank Army is not really a tank army. It is smaller and decidedly combined arms. It was so designated since it was one of the Soviet Union’s premier armies from the Great Patriotic War (World War II against Germany) and the Cold War. It keeps a famous name alive in active service (if not the function) as does the U.S. 10th Mountain Division.

⁷ This concept is not new, but was being seriously considered before the collapse of the Soviet Union. G. I. Salmanov, “Советская военная доктрина и некоторые взгляды на характер войны в защите социализма” [“Soviet Military Doctrine and Several Views on the Nature of War in the Defense of Socialism”], *Военная Мысль [Military Thought]*, December 1988, 9.

⁸ “Absence of a continuous front, considerable dispersal of the forces and presence of exposed flanks and large gaps all promote maneuver, bold envelopments, and deep encirclements, rapid advances on the enemy flanks and rear, and sudden and decisive strikes from different directions. The highly mobile character of modern battle means that protracted, carefully measured combat actions are not consistent with the potential of modern weapons and equipment and would hinder their effective employment. Contemporary combat emphasizes movement, marches, combat from the march, and dynamic mobile battle. Forces will often switch from combat to column formation to swiftly advance and maneuver widely to achieve varied goals and missions.” *Ibid*, 60.

LTC (Retired) Lester W. Grau served his 26-year military career as an Infantry officer and Soviet foreign area officer. Grau served as a company commander and in a variety of battalion, corps, and theater-level staff positions. He served a combat tour in Vietnam as an Infantryman and served four European tours and a Korean tour in addition to a posting in Moscow. He served as an intelligence officer in Headquarters, Allied Forces Central Europe (AFCENT) and taught Soviet tactics as the branch chief and then director of the Threat, Intelligence, and Early Warning division at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. He has traveled to the Soviet Union and Russia more than 40 times. He has served as a Soldier and civilian Russian and Afghan open source analyst at the Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO) for 26 years. Grau has published more than 200 articles and studies and 13 books. His latest book, *The Russian Way of War: Force Structure, Tactics and Ground Force Modernization*, is co-authored with Chuck Bartles and is available at <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmsso/p/fmsso-bookshelf>.