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Glavnoe komandovanie, the Soviet equivalent of the Western concept of theater command, was usually used in World War II in those critical operations requiring coordination and direction of two or more fronts and involving the several services. Soviet military literature is evincing increased interest in the concept and there have been hints that such a command has already been established in the Far East.

GLAVNOE KOMANDOVANIE: THE SOVIET THEATER COMMAND

by
Gregory C. Baird

Introduction. The command and control of a Soviet front, the highest strategic ground formation, is typically understood as a direct Moscow-to-front scheme, devoid of intermediary command entities. In fact, the command and control of Soviet fronts throughout World War II included a number of such intermediaries. Of these, one equates to our conception of a theater command. The theater of military operations (*Teatr voennykh deystvij* or TVD) had become accepted by many Western analysts as the Soviet equivalent of a theater command.¹ However, the TVD is, simply, "that place where military operations will be carried out."² It roughly equates to the European military-geographic term, theater of operations. The actual Soviet equivalent to a theater command is the *Glavnoe komandovanie* or high command. This article will briefly describe the high command, the Soviet use of this command echelon during World War II

and its modern applicability as evidenced in Soviet literature.³

The High Commands of 1941-1942. The formation of the high command echelon was a direct result of the failure of Soviet prewar defense plans following the German attack on 22 June 1941. The Soviets had envisioned a forward defense of their European border by three fronts—the North-western, Western and Southwestern—each charged with the defense of a strategic sector (i.e., the approaches to Leningrad, Minsk and Kiev). The front, as it had been in both WW I and the Civil War, was virtually a theater command in this scheme. Consequently, the necessity for multifront coordinated operations had not been envisioned prior to the war.

Overall strategic direction of these fronts was the responsibility of the Central Military Council headed by the Commissar for Defense. Centralized

strategic planning and execution control were the responsibilities of "branches" of the General Staff's Operations Directorate. Each branch was responsible for a single strategic sector or theater of operations.⁴

The system failed miserably owing in part to the inexperience and incompetence of the Soviet field commanders, the lack of preparation prior to the attack, the mistaken estimate of the primary direction of the German attack, and continued communications disruptions resulting from German attacks. Most importantly, from the Soviet perspective, the General Staff proved unable to manage the course of the war. As one Soviet author put it, the formation of the high commands was an attempt to rectify "imperfections in the system of command and control" and "to simplify... the leadership of military actions...."⁵ The Soviet *Stavka* on 10 July 1941, in order to bring "strategic leadership closer to the troops," created three high commands.⁶

According to the *Soviet Military Encyclopedia*, a high command is an agency of control, constituted to direct armed forces in a strategic axis or within a theater of military operations. It is headed by a commander-in-chief [*glavnokomanduyushchij*] under whom is a staff, commanding the unified operations of ground forces, air forces and naval forces.⁷

The three high commands created in 1941 represented the first use of this command echelon.⁸ The Northwestern, Western and Southwestern High Commands had in subordination the ground, naval and aviation forces (other than strategic reserves) deployed within their areas of operations. Each was responsible for an area that constituted a strategic sector after which the command was named. However, these first high commands departed from the current definition in one significant respect—they did little or no directing

Instead, these high commands "fulfilled basically the functions of coordination of the efforts of the operational units subordinate to them...."⁹ In 1941 the high commands "carried out... an extremely limited scope of missions of operational-strategic leadership of the troops."¹⁰ They were, as General Shtemenko characterized them, "a superfluous intermediate stage between GHQ and the fronts."¹¹

The almost universally negative assessment by Soviet authors of the high commands of 1941 no doubt stems from the failures of those commands. There were numerous reasons for their failure. A significant one, pointed out by Marshal Kulikov, was that they "lacked the necessary reserves of forces, means, and material resources."¹² For example, a 19 August 1941 *Stavka* order to the Southwestern High Command assigned only seven divisions of the sector's total of 67 divisions to the high command; the remainder were assigned directly to the fronts.¹³ With a frontline stretching some 1,300 kms, this high command was obviously not a significant operational entity.

Lastly, the failure of these high commands resulted from a "duplication in leadership" between the *Stavka*/General Staff and the high commands.¹⁴ The Operations Directorate "branches" responsible for the western Soviet Union had been abolished in the fall of 1941. In their stead, operations officers were organized under a "chief of sector" and made responsible for a single front. The strategic sectors of the Soviet-German Front as the formal geographic planning units were abandoned.

The change resulted in improved centralized planning and direction. The new system proved more flexible, and simplified strategic command and control. As Kulikov observed, "within the boundaries of a single theater of military operations the presence of an intermediate strategic level [the high commands] complicated the progress of

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leadership and did not ensure sufficient troop command efficiency."¹⁵ By September 1941 the high commands were being bypassed and ignored as the *Stavka*/General Staff dealt directly with the fronts. Not surprisingly, the last of these initial high commands was abolished by the end of September.

In 1942, three other high commands (Western, Southwestern and North Caucasian) were formed, also responsible for operations within a single strategic sector. These commands had considerably reduced authority. Their Commanders in Chief were concurrently front commanders and no separate high command staff was formed. The CINC, supported by his front staff, was primarily responsible for ensuring "the most suitable unity of effort" of the fronts in multifront operations.¹⁶ Little data are available on these commands and thus it is not possible to assess their utility. However, it is unlikely that they were any more successful than their predecessors as by June 1942 the last of these high commands was abolished. The commands were not used again on the Soviet-German Front.

The High Command of 1945. The high command was resurrected in 1945 for the Soviet Manchurian campaign. Several factors dictated this decision. Primary among them was the remoteness of the Far East TVD and the paucity of communications linking the theater to Moscow. Secondly, the planned operations in the theater, involving three fronts on three strategic sectors, were considerably more complex than was typical of operations on the Soviet-German Front. As Shtemenko, then Chief of the Operations Directorate, observed:

In the West the neighboring fronts had as a rule advanced in parallel, in close contact with one another.

In the Far East, owing to the enemy's unusual position, they

would have to launch converging attacks from three different directions with the active assistance of the Navy.¹⁷

Combined, these factors made an independent, powerful command a necessity. Consequently, the High Command of Soviet Forces in the Far East was "invested with broad authority for direction of combat operations" and had "a relatively autonomous character."¹⁸

The high command directed the operations of the 1st Far Eastern, the 2nd Far Eastern and the Transbaikalian Fronts; the Pacific Fleet and Amur Flotilla; and the 9th, 10th and 12th Air Armies. To provide execution direction, the Commander in Chief, Marshal Vasilevskiy, had the services of a deputy CINC and commanders for aviation, navy, artillery and armored troops plus chiefs of engineering, medical and rear services. Staff support to the Commander in Chief, under Chief of Staff Colonel General Ivanov, probably included the same staff directorates as the earlier high commands: operations, intelligence, military transportation and communications.

The Soviets spared little in staffing the high command with quality personnel. Besides Marshal Vasilevskiy, longtime representative of the Supreme High Command and former Chief of the General Staff, the high command included the commanders of the Soviet Air Force and Navy, the Deputy Chief of Soviet Signal Troops, the Deputy Commander of Artillery and the Deputy Chief of Rear Services. The High Command of Soviet Forces in the Far East represented one of the most impressive concentrations of Soviet military luminaries of the entire war.

This high command best exemplifies the authority granted this command echelon. Like its predecessors the high command of 1945 was not a planning echelon. The plan for the Manchurian

campaign was developed in Moscow by the Operations Directorate of the General Staff with the participation of the commanders who would implement it. The plan was later modified in part, primarily by the fronts, with some participation of the high command. However, these modifications consisted primarily of reductions of the length of certain operational phases in light of the Japanese dispositions and the placing of an armored army in the first echelon of one front as had been earlier recommended by the General Staff.

The high command primarily directed the execution of operations planned by the General Staff and served as an onsite executive inspector. The isolation of the Far East from Moscow coupled with the absence of adequate communications precluded the type of centralized direction by Moscow characteristic of the war in Europe. In effect, the high command of 1945 acted as a field-deployed surrogate of Moscow. For example, Vasilevskiy was authorized to determine independently the date and time of attack for one front.

Functionally, the high command might appear to have been of marginal significance. However, from the Soviet perspective the functions of execution control and coordination plus the inspection of proper compliance with Moscow directives were of continued concern to Moscow throughout the war. The centralized nature of Soviet strategic command and control was dependent upon accurate reporting, precise execution, and the coordinated efforts of the fronts/branches of armed services. Shtemenko noted that commanders "assess the situation and position of the troops from their own more or less narrow, or let us say local, positions." Further, "inasmuch as the commander bears responsibility for the actions of his unit or large unit, of course he strives to ensure that these actions look good. Therefore, intentionally or unintentionally, he is inclined to

embellish reality."¹⁹ To ensure that none of these human propensities hampered the success of the Moscow-planned operations required the presence throughout the war of onsite intermediary command and control entities. The high command was the most formal and powerful of these. Particularly in 1945, it assumed significant execution control responsibilities that the remoteness of the theater from Moscow necessitated. From the Soviet perspective the high command was a critical element to effective strategic command and control.

One cannot escape the impression that to a great extent the popularity of the 1945 high command among modern Soviet military commentators is also a reflection of the lack of interference from the *Stavka* and General Staff that the high command enjoyed. The high command in 1945 had the requisite authority and autonomy from Moscow actually to direct the operations of the forces within the TVD. The attractiveness of this high command as a model can only be enhanced by the success of the Manchurian campaign. In addition to successful amphibious operations in North Korea, Sakhalin Island and the Kuriles, the ground forces in 12 days achieved advances of 600-800 kms and killed or captured nearly 700,000 Japanese soldiers by the end of the operation in September.

The operations of the Amur Flotilla and Pacific Fleet during the Manchurian campaign are of particular interest. As one Soviet author observed, "One of the characteristic features of Soviet military art in the Far East campaign in 1945 was the close interaction between the Ground Forces and the Navy and the Amur Military Flotilla."²⁰ It was for this very reason that the Commander in Chief of the Soviet Navy, Admiral Kuznetsov, was sent to the Far East where, under Marshal Vasilevskiy's overall command, he was "delegated

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direct command of the naval forces in the Far East...."²¹

By the beginning of the operation, the Soviet Navy in the Far East deployed some 296 combat vessels, including 78 submarines, and 1,356 aircraft.²² In contrast with the ground and aviation forces participating in the campaign, the Soviet Navy did not enjoy a quantitative superiority over the Japanese Navy, particularly in large surface combatants. The Pacific Fleet deployed only two cruisers, ten destroyers and two destroyer escorts. Further, its delineated area of operations based on the agreed U.S.-Soviet demarcation of zones of naval responsibility was quite restricted. These factors resulted in limited initial missions; the Pacific Fleet was

to disrupt the enemy's shipping and lines of communication in the Sea of Japan, to assist the advance of the troops of the First Far-Eastern Front on the Korean coastal axis, and, in coordination with the forces of the Second Far-Eastern Front, to defend the Soviet coast.²³

Based on the 7 August *Stavka* order to the High Command, the disruption of shipping apparently constituted primarily minelaying and submarine attacks.²⁴ Except for such limited operations, the Pacific Fleet maintained a predominately defensive posture until 11 August.

In contrast, the Amur Flotilla began active combat the evening of 9 August when the 2nd Far Eastern Front began its offensive. The Flotilla's activities "had a crucial influence on operations of the... 2nd Far Eastern Front."²⁵ It initially supported the crossing of the Amur and Ussuri rivers, providing fire support and transport to the ground troops. Once the bridgeheads had been secured, the Flotilla became a "sort of advance guard" for the 15th Army.²⁶ With rifle units aboard, it entered the Sungari River and led the 15th Army's

advance on the city of Harbin. Along the way it put ashore several landing teams and provided fire support both to these teams and other lead elements of the 15th Army. In 10 days, the Flotilla "covered more than 900 kilometers along the Amur and Sungari."²⁷

On 11 August the Pacific Fleet switched to offensive operations, supporting amphibious operations in Korea, southern Sakhalin and the Kuriles. The purpose of these operations was to establish the Soviet occupation zone in North Korea and reestablish Soviet sovereignty over southern Sakhalin and the Kuriles.

The operations in North Korea met an unusual difficulty. Prior to the start of the Manchurian campaign on 9 August, the United States had sown 587 mines on the approaches to the Korean ports of Seisen and Rasin.²⁸ As a result, during the landings the Soviets lost several ships including the cargo ships *Nogin* and *Dal'stroy*.²⁹

The Sakhalin and Kurile amphibious operations took place between 11 and 25 August, and 18 August and 1 September, respectively. These operations were carried out with the troops of the 2nd Far Eastern Front and apparently met with few difficulties. However, the absence of suitable landing craft and the consequent necessity of employing combat ships in a landing role has been noted by at least one Soviet author.³⁰ Still the operations met with success, netting over 60,000 Japanese prisoners.

In addition to these amphibious operations and the fire support provided the ground troops by surface combatants, Pacific Fleet aviation was also active. During the campaign naval aviation flew over 4,000 sorties including over 1,000 bombing sorties against troops, fortified areas and rail facilities. Additionally over 800 reconnaissance flights were conducted in support of ground and naval operations.³¹

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The intricacy and length of interaction between ground and naval forces are unique characteristics of operations during the Manchurian campaign. The scope of coordinated ground and naval operations, encompassing Manchuria, North Korea, Sakhalin and the Kuriles, vastly exceeded previous Soviet experience obtained in Europe. It was this "necessity of utilizing the Pacific Fleet in the most expedient and prompt manner in support of all three fronts" that provided a major impetus for the formation of the High Command of Soviet Forces in the Far East.³² The success of these coordinate ground and naval operations undoubtedly proved the correctness of this decision.

The Modern Applicability. What relevance does this WW II Soviet experience with a theater command echelon have beyond mere historical interest? In part the answer to this question derives from the unique Soviet attitude toward their WW II military experience:

In spite of radical changes in military matters, which have taken place in the post-war period, not one question in the area of armed combat can be completely studied and mastered without a deep knowledge of the experience of World War II.³³

At a minimum this historical experience provides a successful precedent for "strategic leadership of troops in an independent TVD remote from the center,"³⁴ or, implicitly, what worked in the Manchuria of 1945 should work today.

However, not all Soviet authors assess the modern applicability of the high command so narrowly. Colonel Skirido observed as early as 1970 that because of the exigencies of a nuclear war

it may be necessary to create high commands for leadership of armed struggle in the separate theaters.

This will be required by the enormous spatial scope of a nuclear missile war and the unprecedented complexity of leadership in combat operations.³⁵

Even the Chief of the Soviet General Staff (Kulikov) in 1975 admitted that in a future war the high commands might have "some application." This is not a minor admission inasmuch as the use of high commands would reduce the responsibilities of the General Staff.

The most recent and substantive endorsement of the high command is found in Colonel Vyrodov's April 1979 *Military Historical Journal* article. Vyrodov, a specialist in strategic command and control, emphasized the use of the high commands not only by the Soviets but also by the Germans, Japanese, British and Americans in a review of WW II strategic command and control. He concluded this review by categorically stating that WW II experience demonstrated "that it became practically impossible for a supreme high command to exercise direction of military operations of major groupings of armed forces without an intermediate echelon. . . ."³⁶ Vyrodov argued that in contrast to WW II the entire strategic C² system and "its echelons must be set up ahead of time, before the beginning of a war. . . ."³⁷ Implicitly, Vyrodov would also argue that the structure must be exercised during peacetime as well.

While the above certainly demonstrate the possibility of the Soviet use of a modern high command, this is far from a certainty. And unfortunately the additional evidence is no more specific. The Chinese have asserted that a new Soviet command was established in the "Far East theatre" in 1979.³⁸ It is tempting to conclude from this that the Soviets have established a high command modeled on their 1945 experience. However, until more evidence becomes available such a conclusion is unwarranted.

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Similarly, Rumanian President Ceausescu's speeches following the November 1978 Warsaw Pact heads-of-state meeting appear to indicate a Soviet attempt to expand operational control over Warsaw Pact national forces. Certainly rumors of such an attempt were so prevalent that Ceausescu was moved to state categorically in public that "...I have not signed any other commitment and any other document aside from the declaration published... [T]he Rumanian Army will only take orders from the supreme Party and State bodies and at the call of the people, and it will never receive orders from outside..."³⁹ Again this is only suggestive. If the Soviets had decided to establish one or more functioning high commands in Europe, an increase in operational control over Warsaw Pact national forces would be a prerequisite. However numerous other interpretations are admittedly possible.

Conclusion. The Soviets do have a concept equivalent to the theater command, the *Glavnoe komandovanie*, or high command. The high command is not a major planning entity. Rather, its principal responsibility is to provide coordination and executive direction of fronts implementing a General Staff-developed plan. It is not employed in every TVD or strategic sector but only in the most critical. The high command might be employed in critical strategic operations involving more than two fronts for which closely coordinated, multifront/multiservice operations are required.

The contemporary Soviet assessment of their WW II experience suggests that if deployed strategic-level command and control is deemed required in a future conflict, the high command probably will be the preferred choice. In the Far East where a future conflict would likely require coordinated airborne and amphibious operations on South Korea and Hokkaido in addition to ground operations in China and ASW/ACW naval engagements, a high command appears a strong possibility.⁴⁰ If the complexities of planned operations and the necessity for coordinated ground, air and naval operations in the Far East of 1945 necessitated the formation of a high command, it is highly unlikely that this experience has been ignored with the vastly more complex situation in the Far East of 1980. The increased interest in the high commands, evidenced in the Soviet military literature, may well portend the revival of the command.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



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NOTES

1. John Hensley, "The Soviet Ground Forces," in John Erickson and E.J. Fenchwange, eds., *Soviet Military Power and Performance* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 49.
2. *Slovar' Russkogo Yazyka* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Russkij Yaz," 1977), p. 727.
3. A more detailed treatment of the Soviet high command and other **intermediary command** entities during World War II can be found in the author's *Soviet Intermediary Strategic Command Entities: The Historical Experience*, DNA 4355T3 (Washington: Defense Nuclear Agency, 1979).
4. During WW II the Soviets fought in at least four theaters of military operations: the Northern (Soviet-Finnish border), the Soviet-German Front, the Caucasus and the Far East. The key distinction between a theater of military operations (TVD) and a strategic sector is the degree of autonomy of the

operations within them. TVDs are geographically discrete as, for example, the Allied WW II North African, Mediterranean and Western European TVDs. Consequently, the operations within them are relatively independent of operations in other TVDs. The strategic sector, a subdivision of the TVD, is not necessarily geographically discrete and operations within them require more coordination with and consideration for operations in other strategic sectors within the same TVD. Unfortunately, Soviet authors tend to colloquially substitute "theater" for strategic sector when the context is the operations within a single strategic sector. This can create confusion.

5. V.P. Morozov, "Soviet Strategic Leadership in World War II," *Istoriya SSR*, no. 3, 1975, trans. JPRS 65273, 21 July 1975, p. 40.

6. V. Ivanov and A. Arkhopov, "Leadership of Military Operations in Theaters of Military Operations Based on the Experience of World War II," *Voyennaya Mysl*, April 1967, trans. FBIS 1135/67, 24 November 1967, p. 71.

7. *Sovetskaya Voennaya Entsiklopediya* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1977), v. II. p. 562.

8. Morozov, p. 40.

9. Ivanov and Arkhipov, p. 71.

10. *Ibid.*

11. S.M. Shtemenko, *The Soviet General Staff at War: 1941-1945* (Moscow: Progress, 1975), p. 41.

12. V. Kulikov, "Strategic Leadership of the Armed Forces," *Voyenno-Istoricheskiy Zhurnal*, June 1975, trans. JPRS 65167, 8 July 1975, p. 44. This article was written when Kulikov was still an Army general and Chief of the General Staff. He currently is a Marshal and Commander in Chief of the Warsaw Pact combined command.

13. A. Pokrovskiy, "Memoirs: On the Southwest Sector (July-September 1941)," *Voyenno-Istoricheskiy Zhurnal*, April 1978, trans. JPRS 71395, 3 July 1978, p. 46.

14. Ivanov and Arkhipov, p. 71.

15. Kulikov, p. 44.

16. Ivanov and Arkhopov, p. 72.

17. Shtemenko, p. 339.

18. I. Vyrodov, "Strategy and Operational Art: On the Leadership of Military Operations of Strategic Troop Groupings in World War II," *Voyenno-Istoricheskiy Zhurnal*, April 1979, trans. JPRS 73677, 13 June 1979, p. 22.

19. S.M. Shtemenko, *General 'nyj Shtab v Gody Vojny Kniga Vtoriya* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1973), trans. JPRS 65733-1 and 65733-2, 22 September 1975, p. 215.

20. I. Krupchenko, "Some Features of Soviet Military Art," *Voyenno-Istoricheskiy Zhurnal*, August 1975, trans. JPRS 65785, 29 September 1975, p. 78.

21. A. Vasilevskiy, "The Campaign in the Far East," *Voyenno-Istoricheskiy Zhurnal*, October 1975, trans. JPRS 66257, 2 December 1975, p. 27.

22. There are discrepancies in various Soviet accounts of the naval strength. The figures for ships come from *ibid.*, p. 26, and those for aircraft from G. Bryukhovskiy, "Some Features of Employing Aviation in the Manchurian Operation," *Voyenno-Istoricheskiy Zhurnal*, August 1979, trans. FBIS, JPRS 74489, 31 October 1979, p. 21.

23. V. Maslov, "Combat Operations of the Pacific Fleet," *Voyenno-Istoricheskiy Zhurnal*, August 1975, trans. JPRS 65926, 14 October 1975, p. 62.

24. The order is quoted in A. Vasilevskiy, "Victory in the Far East," *Voyenno-Istoricheskiy Zhurnal*, August and September 1970, trans. JPRS 51712, 4 November 1970, pp. 41-42.

25. Krupchenko, p. 84.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

29. "Route of the Kwantung Army," *Voyenno-Istoricheskiy Zhurnal*, August 1975, trans. JPRS 65926, 14 October 1975, p. 54. *Dal'stroy* may have been the same vessel that transported prisoners to the arctic Kolyma camps both before and after the war. If it is the same vessel then it wasn't completely destroyed in 1945; it was reported sabotaged by Latvian and Lithuanian nationalists in 1946. See Robert Conquest, *Kolyma: The Arctic Death Camps* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), pp. 25-26.

30. Krupchenko, p. 85.

31. Bryukhovskiy, p. 28.

32. "Route of the Kwantung Army," p. 51.

33. V. Samoylenko, "There Is No Last Day in Training," *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 11 April 1975, trans. JPRS 64878, 30 May 1975, p. 14.

34. Vyrodov, p. 22.

35. M.P. Skirdo, *The People, the Army, the Commander*, trans. DGIS, Secretary of State Department, Canada (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., n.d.), p. 118.

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The translation is edited to substitute "high command" for "main command" to avoid confusion. Both translations are used by the Soviets themselves.

36. Vyrodov, p. 24.

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Beijing Review*, 28 January 1980, p. 18.

39. *Survival*, March/April 1979, pp. 85-86. Emphasis added.

40. The addition of the amphibious ship, *Ivan Rogov*, to the Pacific Fleet last year and the expansion of the airfield on Etorofu off Hokkaido provide some substance to the Soviet threat to Hokkaido. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 14 March 1980, p. 23.

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