

The Red Road to Victory: Soviet Combat Training 1917-1945

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

This thesis provides a comprehensive account of early Soviet combat training and its associated attitudes from 1917 to 1945. From its inception in 1918 and throughout the evolution of Soviet military doctrine and practice, the Red Army paid insufficient attention to existing and growing deficiencies in military training. Due to a combination of Bolshevik ideology, leftover Imperial Russian influences, and unique historical circumstances, Soviet leaders – both deliberately and accidentally – embraced a military culture based on amateurism and dilettantism. The military leadership’s systemic oversights regarding combat training and military professionalism undermined the tactical combat capacity of the Soviet Armed Forces in the short and long term. While Joseph Stalin’s dictatorial policies had a negative impact on combat training during the 1930s, they merely exacerbated an existing crisis that began with the formation of the Soviet state in 1917. Despite periodic efforts to remedy this problem, military reformists largely failed to overcome the formidable institutional forces that continue to advance a harmful military culture on combat training to the present day. This study also provides valuable historical context to a similar crisis in combat training faced by the Russian Armed Forces during their ongoing invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

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Introduction

“In war the experienced soldier reacts rather in the same way as the human eye does in the dark: the pupil expands to admit what little light there is, discerning objects by degrees, and finally seeing them distinctly. By contrast, the novice is plunged into the deepest night.”

– Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*.¹

On 22 June 1941, the Soviet Union plunged into the deepest night of its existence. The sudden Nazi invasion of its territories was as swift as it was devastating for Soviet soldiers and civilians alike. By the end of 1941 alone, according to state archives, the Red Army suffered a total of 3,137,673 irrecoverable casualties compared to the 201,876 irrecoverable casualties of the German Army, and in addition, a small number of casualties sustained by the German Air Force and Navy. The stark contrast of missing and dead, excluding those of minor Axis powers, constituted an approximately 15.5:1 ratio.² In addition to the Red Army’s staggering casualty numbers, the loss of thousands of kilometres of valuable economic territory nearly brought the Soviet Union to its knees. The Soviets eventually rebounded from the jaws of defeat and, in turn, overwhelmingly defeated Germany within a few years, but there has been much discussion among historians over the cost of victory.³ While researchers have pointed to numerous operational, strategic, and political reasons for the Soviet Union’s failures during World War II

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed./trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 122.

² Grigori Krivosheev, *Soviet Casualties and Combat Losses in the Twentieth Century* (London: Greenhill Books, 1997), 96-97. The irrecoverable casualties of the German Air Force and the Navy from 1 September 1941 to 31 August 1942 across all fronts equalled 28,727 and 8,741 men respectively, V. I. Dashichev, ed., *Sovershenno sekretno! Tol’ko dlia kommandovaniia’* (Moscow: Nauka, 1967), pp. 662-665; 701. This calculation excludes the casualties of the minor Axis powers attached to German forces. The 4th Romanian Army, for example, one of two operating on the Eastern Front, alone suffered 119,833 total casualties (including wounded) from 22 June to 16 October 1941, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg, Germany BA-MA, RH 31-I/166, DHM, “Beobachtungen aus dem Feldzug gegen Odessa.”

³ For examples of discussions among historians about the high cost of the Soviet Union’s victory and its accompanying reasons, see David Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus: The Red Army on the Eve of World War* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 258-260; Alexander Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 560-562, 569-574, 578-580.

(WWII), one crucial factor continuously remains understated or ignored in most academic works: the volume and quality of combat training in the Red Army. While troop training does not fully reflect the overall combat capacity of a modern army – as there are a number of factors at play – it remains a dominating element at the tactical level of war. This study examines the Imperial and interwar factors that both deliberately and accidentally shaped ambivalent Bolshevik attitudes towards combat training from 1917 to 1945 – the result of which led to poor combat performance and devastating loss of life in the Red Army during the Second World War.

Few well-known historical studies have addressed Soviet combat training at an appreciable depth. Since Soviet national archives were highly restricted, it was difficult for Western scholars to study the Red Army's tactical combat capacity before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Only with the fall of Soviet communism could several Western historians, and many more Russian ones, access these archives. Roger Reese⁴ and David Glantz⁵ were the first Westerners to provide candid and well-researched appraisals of the Red Army's combat capacity leading up to WWII. Both authors compellingly show that the Soviet Union was ill-prepared for a modern war with Germany. However, considering the broad scope of their research, both authors' assessments of combat training are much thinner. While formidable, new research must update these texts to address minor misconceptions and oversimplifications about Soviet combat training.

More recently, authors such as Andrei Smirnov and Alexander Statiev have delved deeper into the dismal state of Soviet combat training. In his untranslated two-volume work,⁶ Smirnov compellingly argues that the Red Army suffered from poor combat training before the

⁴ Roger Reese, *Stalin's Reluctant Soldiers: A Social History of the Red Army, 1925-1941* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1996).

⁵ Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*.

⁶ Andrei Smirnov, *Boevaia vyuchka Krasnoi Armii nakanune repressii* (Moscow: Rodina Media, 2013), Vol II.

Great Purge of 1937, effectively debunking the idea that Stalin's repression was solely responsible for the army's dismal performance during Operation Barbarossa in 1941. While it is well-researched, the scope of his study is limited only to the 1930s before the Great Purge. Statiev also addresses the poor state of Soviet combat training, but he assigns his treatment of the phenomenon to one chapter, and it is mainly directed at the Soviet WWII experience.⁷ While such works have blazed a trail for the study of Soviet military training, this thesis represents the first comprehensive account of individual and small-unit combat training from the Red Army's inception in 1917 to the end of the Second World War. The analysis also emphasizes Bolshevik and leftover Imperial influences that did not allow the Red Army to raise a well-trained force. Finally, with Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine in 2022 – the first large-scale interstate conflict in Europe since the Second World War – this study provides valuable historical context for the difficulties in combat training that continue to plague the Russian Armed Forces.

As Smirnov points out, many historians lay blame for the Soviet Union's initial devastating losses in WWII at the feet of Joseph Stalin and his inner circle. According to this theory, the Great Purge of 1937-1941 resulted in the replacement of creativity, initiative, and professionalism with ideology-driven clichés, inflexibility, and poor skills within the Red Army. Consequently, the military's readiness for war substantially decreased and directly led to the disasters of 1941-1942.⁸ While that may be true at an operational and strategic level, this study will support and expand on the view that the Red Army's poor tactical combat capacity stemmed not from the Great Purge, but from a general contempt for professionalism developed from the

⁷ Alexander Statiev, *At war's summit: the Red Army and the struggle for the Caucasus Mountains in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁸ See David Glantz and Jonathan House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2015), 8-11; Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 26-41; John Erickson, *The Soviet High Command: A Military-Political History, 1918-1941* (London: Macmillan, 1962), ix-x, 509, 565, 666-668. In contrast, Smirnov writes that the Great Purge cannot be the main reason for the defeat of the Red Army in 1941. Smirnov, *Boevaia vyuchka Krasnoi Armii nakanune repressii*, Vol II, 551.

formation of the Bolshevik state in 1917. Indeed, Stalin's repression of the army had a negative impact on its readiness to fight a modern war, but it only aggravated existing tendencies and did not initiate them.

Throughout the interwar period, Soviet combat training suffered tremendously and resulted perhaps in the most poorly trained army among the great European powers at the time. This is not to say that the entire military was uniformly untrained, as hundreds of examples of "bad" training can be countered by hundreds of others of "good" training; nor does this study claim that the Soviet Union relied on "steamroller/horde" tactics to win the Second World War, as popular media would lead some to believe. Several historians have convincingly debunked this myth.⁹ However, throughout the interwar and wartime periods, the Red Army notably lacked consistency or unified direction as a military institution with respect to combat training. As such, it more often produced soldiers inadequately prepared for modern combat. Soviet leaders predicted an apocalyptic future war between the Soviet Union and the major capitalist powers since the 1920s.¹⁰ Why, then, was the quality and volume of combat training so poor for most of the Soviet era? The answer lies not only in the USSR's early economic difficulties, but also in the institutional reforms of the Red Army during the 1920s that directly followed the Russian Civil War. Driven by a mix of Bolshevik ideology and established Russian Imperial traditions, the new Bolshevik vision of a socialist army produced a Soviet military culture driven by amateurism and, consequently, addressed the issue of combat training with increasing

⁹ German generals largely propagated this myth in the aftermath of the Second World War. Western popular media, such as the 2001 Hollywood movie *Enemy at the Gates*, only reinforced such sentiments. For some examples of notable historians disputing these claims, see Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 60-62; Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War*, 1-2.

¹⁰ The concept of "future war" consistently drove the work of Soviet military theoreticians. See Richard Harrison, *The Russian Way of War: Operational Art, 1904-1940* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas), 126; James Schneider, "The Origins of Soviet Military Science," *The Journal of Soviet Military Studies*, 2:4 (1989): 515-516; Lennuart Samuelson, *Plans for Stalin's War Machine: Tukhachevskii and Military-Economic Planning, 1925-1941* (Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press, 2000), 203.

ambivalence. In some ways, this was intentional. However, a host of unintentional and unsanctioned developments began to evolve out of this culture, which severely hampered successive efforts to improve combat training. The Red Army was unique because, unlike any other nation at the time, the Soviets had the daunting task of creating an entirely new military infrastructure from the ground up during the Russian Civil War. Not only did the *Rabochie Krestianskaia Krasnaia Armia* (RKKA) – otherwise known as “The Red Army of Workers and Peasants” – have to be effective in serving Bolshevik objectives, but military and state officials constantly had to find a middle ground among ideological, theoretical, and practical considerations during the process.

The body of this thesis will be divided into eight chapters, each touching on essential elements relating to the evolution of Soviet combat training during the interwar period and WWII. The first chapter, “The Russian Way of War,” briefly discusses some of the holdover cultural traditions, social factors, and intellectual continuities that remained in the Red Army after the fall of the Russian Empire, which negatively affected its combat capacity at a tactical level. Chapter 2, “The Birth of a Unique Socialist Army,” begins with the creation of the Red Army in 1917; its formative experiences in the Russian Civil War; and the ensuing ideological debates and influences that formed the basis of Soviet military doctrine. The results of these debates began the long-term shift from military professionalism in favour of amateurism and set a precedent for disorganized and inadequate combat training. Chapter 3, “Training in the Territorial Forces and the Regular Armed Forces,” examines in detail the quality of training that Soviet conscripts would have typically received while serving in the territorial militia districts and regular army formations during the interwar period. Training regimens during this period were generally poorly organized and lacked any standard methodology for the development of

combat-related skills. The predominance of the territorial system until the late 1930s further hampered the combat readiness of Soviet troops. Continuing this theme, Chapter 4, “Distractions Abound,” looks to the various non-military and non-combat related tasks that continuously seeped into Red Army training schedules throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Such distractions prevented many Red Army formations from focusing on developing combat-related skills and further reduced their tactical combat capacities.

Chapter 5, “Combat Training Through the Lens of Soviet Military Science,” details the creation of the Soviet concept of “Deep Battle” and its incompatibility with existing military formations. While the concept was revolutionary for its time, the poor status of combat training in the army meant that the theory could not effectively be carried out in practice. Although this began to worry Soviet military theoreticians in the early 1930s, the Great Purge interrupted their work to steadily improve the state of training in the army. The following chapter, “Four Baptisms by Fire,” provides a case study of Soviet military performances during the late 1930s and 1940 in the Battle of Lake Khasan, the Battle of Khalkin-Gol, the Soviet invasion of Poland, and the Winter War. Despite being generally victorious, the Red Army performed exceptionally poorly in these conflicts at the tactical level. While this revealed obvious inadequacies in combat training, only the Winter War against Finland convinced Soviet High Command to implement positive changes in training procedures. Chapter 7, “The Timoshenko Reforms,” examines the ensuing reforms that took place and concludes that they were insufficient to improve the army’s combat capabilities before the German invasion in 1941. Finally, Chapter 8, “The Grim Experience of the Great Patriotic War,” provides an additional case study of the Red Army’s poor combat performance due to inadequate combat training throughout WWII, which led to exorbitant Soviet casualties.

The source base for this study is constrained due to the Russian government's restrictions on access to state archives in recent years. This has been even further intensified by the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has essentially closed the country off to all Western scholars searching for archival data. Thus, the crux of primary evidence used for this analysis consists of open Soviet documents, newspapers, and various memoirs and interviews of WWII veterans. These interviews and memoirs, typically published in the post-Soviet period, are mostly honest, but their effectiveness is limited due to the fickleness of human memory and inherent political and personal biases. On the other hand, using these sources en masse can help us paint a rough portrait of historical reality by gleaming common patterns among testimonies. While they need to be treated with care, regardless of their quantity, because Soviet and anti-Soviet biases were endemic across all of them, many of these sources provide abundant information on life and training in the Soviet Armed Forces. They are also supported by building upon the secondary works of established authors in the field, both in English and Russian. While these works have their own strengths and weaknesses, they generally provide illuminating and thoughtful discussions, upon which this study will build its own.

Chapter 1: The Russian Way of War

Although Bolshevik ideology made a profound impact on the nature of the Red Army, its lack of concern with military professionalism and the value of human life stemmed from an earlier military culture. This Soviet phenomenon shared remarkable continuity with the Imperial Russian Army. In fact, the Russian way of war had evolved naturally due to Russia's technological inferiority compared to other European great powers, which was aggravated from the early nineteenth century onward.¹¹ Russia's rulers and generals made up for this disadvantage through the empire's vast population; meaning that Russia consistently conjured up much larger armies than their adversaries. As Dima Adamsky explains, "strategy, generalship, and operational art relied heavily on the resource of the human mass, throughout Russian and Soviet military history."¹² As interest in the mass-army increased, the value of the individual soldier decreased. In other words, barring rare periods of great reforms, the Russian state was, for the most part, disinclined from investing resources in the individual soldier. The most critical military reform enforced by General Nikolai Sukhozanet and his successor, Field Marshal Dmitry Milyutin, in the late 19th century turned a large professional army with a 25-year service term, which was an unbearable burden on the state budget, into a small standing peacetime army backed by a much shorter-term universal military service.¹³ This reform was a rational way to modernize the army and make it financially sustainable; it also provided the possibility to expand the armed forces in wartime greatly. However, quickly developing weapons technology at the turn of the 20th century required permanent tactical reforms. The new tactics and modern

¹¹ Dima Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation: The Impacts of Cultural Factors on the Revolution in Military Affairs in Russia, the US, and Israel* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 43.

¹² For a more in-depth discussion on the culture of Russian military innovation, see Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation*, 42-44.

¹³ E. Willis Brooks, "Reform in the Russian Army, 1856-1861," *Slavic Review*, 43:1 (1984): 68-69, 76; J. E. O. Screen, "Russian Officer Training in the 1870s-70s: The Helsinki Yunker School," *Slavonic and East European Review*, 65:2 (1987): 209.

weapons presumed a qualitatively higher standard of individual training. While the reform opened the way to the modernization of the Russian Army, its officers neglected to train their soldiers up to the standard presumed by the new military realities.

The Russian approach to warfare also had enormous implications on command and control, which conspicuously persisted into the Soviet era. As opposed to Western military culture, which emphasized initiative and improvisation from the individual soldier,¹⁴ Russian officers were taught that the most efficient way of leading their masses of men was through a strict top-down command structure. This meant that enlisted soldiers learned to follow any command unquestioningly, and officers expected them to think of nothing besides how they should accomplish the specific order they had been given.¹⁵ Naturally, this culture also hindered the effectiveness of individual combat training. Since a soldier's subservience to his superior was the central theme of training, officers rarely encouraged their troops to act independently in battle in the absence of leadership; nor did they teach them to act on their own initiative amid opportunities. As a result, entire units sometimes deteriorated into "helpless herds" after their officers were put out of action, rendering them combat ineffective.¹⁶ This enormous gap in combat training was especially problematic considering the high officer mortality rates during the conflicts of the first half of the 20th century, making the "helpless herd" phenomenon a

¹⁴ For a more in-depth discussion of Western military culture and its effect on the individual soldier, see Eric Stephen Fowler, "Culture and Military Effectiveness: How Societal Traits Influence Battle Outcomes," PhD diss., (Old Dominion University, 2016), 41-42.

¹⁵ During his stay in Russia during the early 20th century, W. Barnes Steveni wrote extensively about what he witnessed in the late-Imperial Russian Army, including how soldiers tended to fulfill their orders to the letter – sometimes to the detriment of the officer's intent. See W. Barnes Steveni, *The Russian Army from Within* (London, New York, and Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, 1914), 154-155.

¹⁶ For the Imperial Russian Army, see John Bushnell, "Peasants in Uniform: The Tsarist Army as a Peasant Society," *Journal of Social History*, 13:4 (1980): 572. This phenomenon also appeared in first-hand accounts during the Second World War. Artem Drabkin and Alexei Isaev, *Barbarossa Through Soviet Eyes: The First Twenty-Four Hours*, trans. Christopher Summerville (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military, 2012), 70.

relatively common one in the RKKA.¹⁷ Therefore, the impact of Bolshevik ideology exacerbated several older cultural factors that permeated into the Soviet era. Such ideological and cultural influences had a substantial impact on budding Soviet perceptions of combat training and military professionalism.

¹⁷ The experiences of the Imperial Russian Life Guards Grenadier Regiment during WWI, considered an elite unit, provides a good case study of the effect of high officer casualties, David Jones, "The Imperial Russian Life Guards Grenadier Regiment, 1906-1917: The Disintegration of an Elite Unit," *Military Affairs*, 33:2 (1969): 296-299. Soviet officer casualties were also very high during the Second World War, Krivosheev, *Soviet Casualties and Combat Losses in the Twentieth Century*, 88, 94-95; Vladimir Osaulenko, interview by Artem Drabkin, *iremember.ru*, July 28, 2006. <https://iremember.ru/memoirs/drugie-voyska/osaulenko-vladimir-feodosievich/> [accessed November 8, 2022].

Chapter 2: The Birth of a Unique Socialist Army

As the Bolsheviks seized power in October 1917, they soon engaged in a civil war against various nationalist groups, Cossacks, other socialists, and, most notably, the counter-revolutionary “White” forces aided by various foreign powers – in what would amount to a brutal four-year war for the very survival of the Bolshevik state. At first, the Bolsheviks planned to fight their enemies with Red Guards – a volunteer people’s militia. After a series of embarrassing defeats suffered by poorly equipped and undisciplined Red Guards consisting primarily of completely untrained personnel, the Bolshevik government introduced military conscription and began building a regular army. However, due to its rushed and improvised nature, it took a long time to turn this army into a worthy force. Beginning in August 1918, military discipline and a strict chain of command were gradually introduced, allowing the army to resemble a disciplined fighting force by 1919.¹⁸ Yet, apart from the conscripts who had fought in World War I, the training of most Red Army peasant-soldiers remained poor beyond the basics, such as how to fire a rifle. Among the advantages the Bolsheviks possessed during this time were the harshness of their conscription policies; a powerful appeal of the agrarian reform enforced by their government along with other populist social policies; and the unpopularity of the White forces in Russia. As a result, the Red Army had reached 400,000 men by the autumn of 1918 and a paper strength of five million by the end of 1920. Despite high desertion rates, it had an enormous numerical advantage over all its opponents combined.¹⁹

¹⁸ Francesco Benvenuti, *The Bolsheviks and the Red Army, 1918-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 39; W. Bruce Lincoln, *Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 197-198, 361-362.

¹⁹ For Red Army recruitment, see A. B. Murphy, *The Russian Civil War: Primary Sources* (Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press, 2000), xv-xvii. See also Lincoln, *Red Victory*, 197.

While the Bolsheviks won the civil war, the way in which it was fought had some important consequences. A lively debate ensued in the RKKA over its next steps and, among other questions, the role of military professionalism within it. The result of this debate, among other topics, informed how combat training would evolve in the Red Army. On one side of the debate was Leon Trotsky, the People's Commissar of Army and Navy. Trotsky was an early proponent of using ex-Tsarist officers to lead the Red Army and dictate its tactics and strategy. Accordingly, almost the entire General Staff during the civil war was composed of such officers after the Bolshevik takeover. In the war's aftermath, Trotsky argued in favour of a "small, permanent, professional army supported by a large militia, incorporating within it the expertise of ex-Tsarist officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs)." Moreover, he rejected the proposal to develop a unique socialist military doctrine, and instead supported the use of fundamentally tried and tested Western European approaches to warfare.²⁰

On the other side of the debate was Mikhail Frunze, an accomplished commander during the civil war who had risen to the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party by 1921. His view conflicted with Trotsky's in several important ways. Frunze recommended that the Red Army adopt its own unique Socialist military doctrine that rejected a professional standing army on economic grounds and barred ex-Tsarist officers from attaining significant influence during the army's reformation. *Voenspets* (ex-Tsarist "military specialists"), according to Frunze, could prove helpful for reforming the army, but they could not attain any significant influence and had to be closely monitored by *politruks* ("political commissars"). In essence, Frunze wanted to transform the General Staff into a "military and political headquarters of the proletarian state."²¹

²⁰ Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art: In Pursuit of Deep Battle* (London: F. Cass, 1991), 65.

²¹ Lincoln, *Red Victory*, 173-174; Mark von Hagen, *Soldiers in the proletarian dictatorship: the Red Army and the Soviet socialist state, 1917-1930* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 146. For the debate on the

The victory in the civil war, during which the untrained Red Army, through numbers and revolutionary zeal, defeated its professional opponents, backed this thoroughly Bolshevik view that downplayed the importance of military professionalism. While both Trotsky and Frunze were intelligent and successful military leaders during the civil war, neither had a formal military education or military training. Thus, the two men who chiefly presided over the debate that would define the direction of Soviet military doctrine were amateurs in the field.

With Trotsky's political downfall beginning shortly after Vladimir Lenin's death and Joseph Stalin's rise to power in 1924, Frunze's theoretical position, although somewhat revised, became the foundation of Soviet military thought. A few thousand *voenspets* were allowed to continue their essential work in the army, just as Trotsky had proposed. With the help of their formal military education, they provided the theoretical backbone that would hold the RKKA together and allow it to evolve in a relatively structured manner.²² To strike a compromise in the debate and release strain on a dilapidated economy, the Tenth Party Congress of 1921 decided to create a relatively inexpensive mixed military system: a small regular army and a much larger network of territorial districts consisting of citizen-conscript-militias that served on a part-time basis.²³ This point marked the beginning of the failure of military professionalism – and consequently, the quality and volume of combat training – in the Red Army. The introduction of the poorly implemented territorial system and short rounds of conscription meant that qualitative professionalism gave way to an army of quantity, but relatively poor quality. The result of Frunze's theoretical victory, combined with economic necessity, signalled a crucial ideological

direction of military doctrine between Trotsky and Frunze, see Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art*, 65; Schneider, "The Origins of Soviet Military Science," 510-511.

²² For example, Aleksandr Neznamov was a vital *voenspets* theoretician who gave clarity and structure to early Soviet military doctrine, Harrison, *The Russian Way of War*, 29-35.

²³ Makhmut Gareev, *M.V. Frunze, Military Theorist* (Washington D.C.: Pergamon Brassey's, 1988), 228-232.

shift away from military professionalism in favour of amateurism and a resultant poor combat capacity.

An ideological stance borne from the civil war experience heavily reinforced this shift and was further bolstered by Joseph Stalin, who had been fervently building his personal dictatorship since the mid-1920s. The mentality that he and his inner circle introduced was that any person, regardless of education and skill, and if they possessed the correct tools for the job and were guided by their unequivocal belief in communism, could do any job well, no matter its complexity. The Bolshevik leaders themselves were glaring examples of this mentality. In Oleg Suvenirov's words,

[Viacheslav] Molotov, a college dropout, was perceived as an eminent scholar; the paramedic [Sergo] Ordzhonikidze supervised the entire heavy industry of the state; [Kliment] Voroshilov, who had attended school for only 'two winters', commanded the armed forces for fifteen years and also supervised military studies; [Nikolai] Ezhov with his 'unfinished primary education' was the terrifying NKVD chief and secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party ... ; and nobody knows whether [Lazar'] Kaganovich, a key Politburo member, had any formal education.²⁴

Nobody used these personal facts to contest the Soviet leadership's ability to govern the country. Instead, their stories served as beacons of hope for ambitious Soviet citizens, implying that education and expertise were not necessary, or even conducive, to success. At the same time, a humble social background facilitated career progression. Official slogans and constant propaganda made this view increasingly popular in the Soviet Union, especially in the military. As Statiev explains,

[...] enthusiasm, improvisation, hard work, and the total mobilisation of resources were more important than expertise, painstaking calculation, and skill. Applied to the Red Army, this stance meant that high numbers, modern hardware, and ideological zeal were

²⁴ Alexander Statiev, *At War's Summit*, 325.

of higher value than professionalism. The government sought to raise the largest army in Europe and to supply it with high-quality weapons, while commanders had to follow simplified training procedures that would allow them to process the enormous number of recruits within a short timeframe.²⁵

This ideological belief gained traction because of the decisive Bolshevik victory in the civil war. The Red Army had managed to defeat qualitatively superior, professional forces on numerous occasions through clever strategic manoeuvring, sheer will, and numbers. While victory came at a high cost in human lives, it was a sacrifice the Soviet leaders were willing to make. Thus, officers of all ranks in the RKKA were typically convinced of their ability to succeed in battle, regardless of their military expertise and the quality of their training and education. All they needed to display was ideological conformity, revolutionary zeal, and a willingness to sacrifice the lives of their men and themselves to achieve victory. Soviet military doctrine postulated that losses would be high in a modern war, regardless of the measures taken. Accordingly, rather than seeking ways to ensure soldiers' survivability, military theorists put considerable planning into replacing those losses effectively and quickly.²⁶ This emphasis would be reflected in the poor combat training of Red Army conscripts.

²⁵ Statiev, *At War's Summit*, 325.

²⁶ David Glantz, *The Military Strategy of the Soviet Union: A History* (London: F. Cass, 1992), 94-95.

Chapter 3: Training in the Territorial Forces and the Regular Armed Forces

After the Bolsheviks had won the civil war by 1922, the government decided to reduce its army of over five million men to 562,000 during peacetime.²⁷ Since the state did not yet possess the funds to maintain a large regular army, and because demobilized manpower was needed in the civilian sector to rebuild the economy, the territorial system was devised to consist of “a small, standing regular army and a large territorial army of conscripted citizen-soldiers serving part-time, led by regular army personnel.”²⁸ In 1925, the cadre-territorial system was introduced for the peacetime forces, which mainly consisted of citizen-conscripts. By 1935, Soviet territorial forces comprised 74 percent of the Red Army’s divisions – revealing how vital these forces had been during the interwar period.²⁹ The idea behind this system was that the Soviet Union would maintain a large defensive force with little economic expenditure. Additionally, a constant rotation of conscripts ensured that a large portion of the male population had multiple stints of temporary service, during which they gained valuable military experience. Periods of conscription usually lasted two months during each summer, for a total of four years, during which conscripts would ideally obtain some degree of military training.³⁰ After each stint, territorial conscripts were allowed to go back to their regular civilian jobs for the rest of the year. In contrast, regular army conscripts served a minimum of two years before they were discharged and automatically enrolled into the reserve. Only in 1939 did the state raise conscription periods up to five years.³¹ Hence, the Soviets conceived that the majority of the male population would

²⁷ Hagen, *Soldiers in the proletarian dictatorship*, 175.

²⁸ Reese, *Stalin’s Reluctant Soldiers*, 9.

²⁹ Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art*, 75, 76, 85; Tukhachevsky, “Speech at the Second Session of the Central Executive Committee of the U.S.S.R.,” 15 January 1936, in *The Soviet Union and the Path to Peace: Lenin, Stalin, Molotov, Voroshilov, Litvinov, Tukhachevsky (A collection of statements and documents 1917-1936)* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1936), 51.

³⁰ Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship*, 206.

³¹ Reese, *Stalin’s Reluctant Soldiers*, 17.

become somewhat trained in basic combat and be ready for mobilization on short notice should an armed conflict arise. While this idea seemed to be rational on paper, its execution revealed several problems that substantially reduced the RKKA's military effectiveness at the tactical level over the short and long term.

During the initial transition to the territorial system in 1925, Frunze had admitted that the replacement of a regular army with a territorial one was an undesirable outcome due to the drop in military professionalism: "If we had had before us a choice between a regular army of 1.5 to 2 million men and the current system of the militia... all the arguments would have been in favor of the former."³² Yet, by this point, the Soviet Union had no choice due to the economy's poor condition since 1917. The anxiety of Frunze and other officers was well-founded because the quality and volume of training in the territorial forces was insufficient throughout the entire interwar period.

Before each prospective conscript was called up for duty, both in the territorial and regular forces, they were expected to undergo a minimum of 200 hours of preconscription training. The rationale held that since each stint of military service was relatively short, the authorities wanted soldiers to be familiar with the basic skills and duties they would encounter in the army.³³ Then, when they were conscripted, new soldiers could immediately delve into more rigorous military exercises. This measure, however, was rarely enforced because of confused administrative jurisdictions. Preconscription training was considered the joint responsibility of the regular army, the territorial forces, and the Communist Party. After 1935, the system was further muddled because it was taken entirely out of the control of the RKKA. Instead, the

³² Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship*, 207.

³³ B. Tal', *Istoriia Krasnoi Armii* (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1929), 192-193; Semen Belitskii, *Besedy o voennom dele i Krasnoi Armii: Sbornik dlia kruzhek voennykh znanii nafabrikakh, zavodakh, pri klubakh i shkolakh* (Moscow: Voennyi Vestnik, 1926), 32-55; Reese, *Stalin's Reluctant Soldiers*, 15-16.

government assigned these duties to unprepared civilian organizations that lacked any competence or direction. Under civilian aegis, and with the shortage of material and human resources, preconscription training was often unenforced.³⁴

Once inducted into the territorial forces, a conscript spent their yearly seasonal service being trained by regular army personnel assigned for military and political education. Not only was it more difficult to train territorial units because of the complexity of its organization, but there were few personnel to administer it altogether. At the company level, there were only two instructors – the company commander and the *politruk* – who had to conduct training by themselves.³⁵ Training usually consisted of basic skills such as shooting, marching, and political education, but it was commonly executed in a haphazard manner. Many territorial division commanders seemed not to know how, or did not care enough, to give effective training instructions to their subordinate units. Due to the over-representation of the peasantry in the Red Army and poor education standards in general, the Soviet officer corps was severely undereducated compared to other nations. As Smirnov shows, the command staff of Soviet divisions were often borderline illiterate and could not even solve simple arithmetic problems. The situation was even worse at the middle and junior levels of command. It was reported in 1936 that up to 30 percent of lieutenants and 70 percent of sergeants had no more than a fourth-grade elementary education.³⁶ In 1933, a military investigation concluded: “The results of such ‘instructing,’ if we can call it that, were quickly noticed: many commanders went to their area without well-defined, definite plans of work, without aids and notes for training.”³⁷ This meant

³⁴ Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship*, 240-243; Roger Reese, *The Soviet Military Experience: A History of the Soviet Army, 1917-1991* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 58.

³⁵ Reese, *Stalin’s Reluctant Soldiers*, 31.

³⁶ For a more detailed discussion on education standards in the Red Army, see Smirnov, *Boevaia vyuchka Krasnoi Armii nakanune repressii*, Vol II, 12-24

³⁷ Reese, *Stalin’s Reluctant Soldiers*, 31.

that many territorial units had to waste multiple days of valuable training time, just for the officers to haphazardly plan out a training regimen at the beginning of the two-month assembly.

Due to the poor state of the economy and army logistics, entire units frequently experienced shortages in uniforms, equipment, weapons, and ammunition, which arrived late at their assembly areas, and further shortened their training time.³⁸ In times of severe shortages, such supplies sometimes did not arrive at all. In such cases, combat training was conducted without the use of weapons or equipment and was instead learned using a manual or a lecture. Soldiers received theoretical instructions on the mechanics and function of a rifle without actually having a rifle or cartridge, or anything, to practice with. This early trend, along with the reluctance of commanders to use scarce resources, eventually expanded to the point where there would be a “lecture-theoretical bias” in training. This often resulted in a severe lack of practical training which hampered the development of applicable combat skills among troops.³⁹

A territorial conscript, serving for only two months each year, and with such a disorganized training regimen in place, scarcely obtained the knowledge and experience he needed for combat. This lack of organization, structure, and consistent guidelines meant that the quality and volume of training for territorial troops varied and rarely produced the desired results. Nikolai Iakovlev, who would later become Marshal of Artillery during WWII, was Chief of Staff of a territorial division in 1929. In his memoirs, he describes the muddled training schedule:

In this regiment, as well as in the division as a whole, there was a completely different system for the organization of training than, say, in my native 28th Rifle Division. The latter was a [regular] cadre formation. In this instance, we commanders of all ranks, in

³⁸ *Krasnaia zvezda*, May 12, 1935. <https://www.prlib.ru/item/340302> [accessed November 3, 2022]; Reese, *Stalin's Reluctant Soldiers*, 29.

³⁹ Smirnov, *Boevaia vyuchka Krasnoi Armii nakanune repressii*, Vol II, 109, 112.

general, conducted basic training during so-called musters for new recruits that began in May and continued until September – that is, until the general muster... During the general September muster, the territorials who had already completed the four-month basic training course appeared from towns and railway halts and were now listed as members of artillery batteries with different specialties. And it turned out that for only one month a year the regiment became a fully-fledged military unit. At this time, live artillery firing and tactical field exercises were carried out. But in October... In October, the [territorial] conscript element again left for home, and the batteries remained at reduced strength until the spring. Mostly middle and junior command staff and a small number of Red Army men remained, whose task was to maintain equipment [throughout the rest of the year].⁴⁰

As noted by Iakovlev, the sporadic and limited training the territorial units received was reflected in their performance as well:

As a result, batteries, *divizioni* [an artillery battalion consisting of three batteries], and indeed the whole artillery regiment, had rather mediocre training. This was clearly revealed by the district manoeuvres that took place in the autumn of 1929, in which the 13th, and also the 9th Rifle Divisions of the territorial troops took part. Their units and regiments, in contrast with the [regular] cadre units, lacked confidence, acted slowly, and moved clumsily.⁴¹

The limited feasibility of the territorial system was becoming increasingly obvious to the Red Army General Staff. With the Soviet Union's economy stabilizing and beginning to expand, the idea of a permanent regular army became ever more tempting. Therefore, in 1931, with the spectre of potential conflicts in the Far East and Europe looming, the Red Army began phasing out territorial units in favour of regular divisions – a process accelerating in 1935 with the Politburo's approval. This transition was largely completed by 1939-1940.⁴²

⁴⁰ Nikolai Iakovlev, *Ob artillerii i nemnogo o sebe* (Moscow: Vysshiaia shkola, 1984), 26-27.

⁴¹ Nikolai Iakovlev, *Ob artillerii i nemnogo o sebe* (Moscow: Vysshiaia shkola, 1984), 26-27.

⁴² Reese, *Stalin's Reluctant Soldiers*, 32; Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art*, 85.

Unfortunately, many of the same problems in the territorial forces existed in the RKKA as a whole and thus heavily affected the regular army as well. After a soldier's limited preconscription training, if he received any, he was sent to a Red Army unit to commence two years (pre-1939) of military service – likely under the command of an uneducated officer. There were generally two components to the Red Army's peacetime training cycle: the winter months (15 November to 30 April) and the summer months (1 May to 15 September). During the winter months, soldiers generally focused on winter-specific training such as skiing and small unit tactical training, usually within close proximity to their barracks.⁴³ Most often, however, since officers were reluctant to train in snowy, cold weather, the troops typically wasted the winter training cycle in idleness. In fact, until 1940, the political administration practically forbade commanders from conducting field exercises at minus-15 degrees Celsius.⁴⁴ As Brigade Commander Stepan Oborin complained during a military conference that year:

Anyone who started organising an exercise in cold weather would be harassed. I myself was in a similar situation in 1938. If you organised an exercise in cold weather, they began a search for the frostbitten. If there was none, they'd say it couldn't be cold. If they found someone, the special and political administrations would pick you to pieces. Seeing it, the commander thought to himself, 'Why should I ask for trouble?' And he kept silent, and everyone kept silent.⁴⁵

At the end of the fifth session of the same conference, and in a typical disregard for his own role in the matter, Stalin expressed his frustration over the lack of winter training as well: "Comrades, how can we tolerate the nonsense that soldiers not be led out of barracks at minus 15 degrees centigrade, if we keep in mind that small children go to school at minus 25 degrees centigrade.

⁴³ Reese, *Stalin's Reluctant Soldiers*, 21.

⁴⁴ E. N. Kulkov and O. A. Rzheshesky, eds., *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War, 1939-1940*, trans. Tatyana Sokokina, ed. (in English) Harold Shukman (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 20-21.

⁴⁵ Kulkov and Rzheshesky, *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War, 1939-1940*, 27-28.

Our Red Army soldiers proved to be weaker than small children.”⁴⁶ Thus, winter training was woefully inadequate in the RKKA leading up to the Second World War. Throughout the interwar period, the most important season for training proved to be the summer, during which the army could easily train outdoors.

Like in the territorial units, regular army officers tended to be confused and disorganized at the outset of the summer training season and were liable to waste an entire week setting up camps and taking care of administrative duties.⁴⁷ In addition to their poor education, officer disorganization could be attributed to the crushing workload placed on their shoulders. Unlike in Western armies, where officers benefitted from the existence of a dedicated and professional non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps, the Red Army consistently lacked one. NCOs in Western armies have traditionally held responsibilities for training enlisted troops; ensuring their well-being; and, in the officer’s absence, leading the unit with a strong emphasis on close coordination with their troops. They were also in charge of maintaining order and discipline in the barracks.⁴⁸ Therefore, NCOs served as an effective intermediary between the officers and their troops, and they lessened and distributed the burden of command.

In the RKKA, the officers alone inherited such tasks, resulting in a vastly increased workload. The Red Army possessed junior commanders in the interwar years, which in theory, acted as NCOs and the equivalent of sergeants in Western armies. Still, they represented non-professional conscripts who usually left the army as soon as they finished their term. Due to the low retention rates among junior commanders, commissioned officers overwhelmingly did not

⁴⁶ Kulkov and Rzheshesky, *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War, 1939-1940*, 180.

⁴⁷ It seems to have been common practice for officers to waste time at the beginning of the summer training cycle preparing the camp. The Red Army newspaper takes pride in how “comfortable and beautiful” the training camp will be because of the hard work officers put in, *Krasnaia zvezda*, May 12 1935. <https://www.prilib.ru/item/340302> [accessed November 3, 2022].

⁴⁸ Victor Vogel, *Soldiers of the Old Army* (Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 1990), 38, 40.

bother to train them to fulfill traditional NCO duties.⁴⁹ Consequently, junior commanders were scarcely better trained than the enlisted men they led. As one 1935 report outlined, combat training was typified by “insufficient general development, with little to distinguish the junior commander from among the fighters.”⁵⁰ According to a different 1936 report, “The training of junior commanders is sometimes weaker than the training of many cadets [of regimental schools].”⁵¹ The Great Purge, which had ramped up in 1936-1937 and continued until 1941, exacerbated this institutional crisis. During that period, many experienced officers were replaced with inexperienced ones, who were rapidly promoted through the ranks without prerequisite training. Said officers could not train subordinate commanders on the basis that they were still trying to learn their own responsibilities and duties.⁵² In November 1940, the formal ranks of Junior Sergeant, Sergeant, Senior Sergeant, and Chief Petty Officer, or First Sergeant, were formally introduced, but they were novices with little experience and a pale imitation of their Western counterparts.⁵³ Thus, in the lead-up to Operation Barbarossa in 1941, Red Army officers consistently struggled to keep up with the seasonal training cycle, among other duties, because of the lack of a dedicated NCO corps.

When Red Army commanders had the opportunity to train their soldiers, small unit exercises were similar to that of foreign armies and, as Roger Reese describes, consisted of:

[...] fundamental skills, such as the use of cover and concealment; they were taught how to dig foxholes and use a variety of weapons in defense and offense. They learned basic squad fire and maneuver tactics and how to move at night. Leaders stressed teamwork in the squads and took the men on long, conditioning marches carrying up to seventy pounds of equipment. Artillerymen practiced standard firing techniques, emplacement,

⁴⁹ Reese, *Stalin's Reluctant Soldiers*, 121.

⁵⁰ Smirnov, *Boevaia vyuchka Krasnoi Armii nakanune repressii*, Vol II, 29.

⁵¹ Smirnov, *Boevaia vyuchka Krasnoi Armii nakanune repressii*, Vol II, 115.

⁵² Reese, *Stalin's Reluctant Soldiers*, 25-26; Harrison, *The Russian Way of War*, 235.

⁵³ Amnon Sella, “Red Army Doctrine and Training on the Eve of the Second World War,” *Soviet Studies*, 27:2 (1975): 260.

and displacement of guns. The cavalry performed mounted drills and tactics normal to all armies of the day.⁵⁴

Despite Reese's idealized picture, there was a noticeable lack of organized methodology among regular army training methods throughout much of the interwar period, which meant that each commander had to devise his own training scheme for fundamental skills and unit tactics. This often led to disastrous results, as many junior commanders and officers were not adequately prepared to fulfill this task. During 1935-1937, the OKDVA (Separate Red Banner Far Eastern Army), located in one of the largest Soviet military districts, produced shooting scores that "fluctuated between two and three [on a scale to five]."⁵⁵ Results as weak as these could be attributed to the poor training of the instructors. According to one 1937 report, "The skills of the practical work of the middle and junior commanders [officers and NCOs] in training fighters and units are not fully mastered, and often they cannot personally show the fighter a technique or action."⁵⁶ Another report of the same year outlined: "The junior commander, in terms of his training and practical skills in handling weapons and performing physical and combat training techniques, is not a fine example for a fighter."⁵⁷ The Commander of the BVO (Belarussian Military District) produced a similar scathing report for his entire district: "In 1935, [...] a significant part of company and squadron commanders were not exemplary in their methodological and organizational skills while preparing fighters for close combat, cunning tactics of small units, or in combat education."⁵⁸ Thus, even during the 1930s, junior commanders and officers simply lacked the necessary skills or guidance to train their troops

⁵⁴ Reese, *Stalin's Reluctant Soldiers*, 21-22.

⁵⁵ Smirnov, *Boevaia vyuchka Krasnoi Armii nakanune repressii*, Vol II, 5.

⁵⁶ Smirnov, *Boevaia vyuchka Krasnoi Armii nakanune repressii*, Vol II, 114.

⁵⁷ Smirnov, *Boevaia vyuchka Krasnoi Armii nakanune repressii*, Vol II, 115.

⁵⁸ Smirnov, *Boevaia vyuchka Krasnoi Armii nakanune repressii*, Vol II, 89.

effectively. Moreover, when units from various military schools combined to form a battalion or division, the new commander often had the burdensome task of re-standardizing all the disparate tactics and training the soldiers had learned beforehand.⁵⁹ While the General Staff was aware of such problems and attempted to remedy them by publishing standard training manuals, such as MTPP-33 in 1933 and PU-36 in 1936, many divisional commanders were reluctant to switch from their old methods to new ones.

Why were commanders so ineffective at training their men according to a standardized set of procedures, especially after such procedures were published? Also, why did they choose to fall back on outdated methods of training when newer ones became available? The answer to both questions may lie with the norms and attitudes that developed during the RKKA's establishment in the 1920s. Prior to MTPP-33 and PU-36, and highly reminiscent of earlier Russian military culture, training regulations and officer expectations had little to no regard for the development of the individual soldier, squad, or even platoon, but instead typically focused on the collective company, battalion, or regiment. In other words, an instructor typically demonstrated a combat skill to a large group of recruits all at once. Individual soldiers rarely received one-on-one instruction, even in matters such as live-fire rifle training, where mistakes needed to be corrected on an individual basis.⁶⁰ As one military report dryly put it, "In the individual training of fighters, group training still prevails."⁶¹ Moreover, field regulations manuals were much too vague for commanders to have any real sense of how they were to train their men. According to the 1929 Field Regulations of the RKKA, which were a modified version of the 1925 Temporary Field Regulations, seven listed factors contributed to military

⁵⁹ Reese, *Stalin's Reluctant Soldiers*, 24-25.

⁶⁰ Reese, *Red Commanders*, 62; Smirnov, *Boevaia vyuchka Krasnoi Armii nakanune repressii*, Vol II, 108.

⁶¹ Smirnov, *Boevaia vyuchka Krasnoi Armii nakanune repressii*, Vol II, 109.

success. The only mentions of training were as follows: "... political training of the forces, firm decisiveness of all soldiers, based on revolutionary will...;" "... the training of troops in the use of technical means and... the rapid mastery of new methods of war that are caused by the improvement of technical means or appearance of new ones;" and the "... development of the feeling of revolutionary duty."⁶²

With extremely vague items such as these, a Red Army commander could hardly infer what sort of training he had to conduct for his troops. As Smirnov writes, "the commanders did not really know how to plan this training. Often, he did not even really imagine what he actually wants to achieve, what is the specific goal of a particular lesson, or even combat training in general."⁶³ The regulations provided little clear direction on how to train soldiering skills or small-unit tactics. Therefore, commanders simply assumed that training was up to them to decide on an individual basis. It is no surprise, then, that many commanders ignored the standardized training manuals published in the 1930s – those intended to address this very problem. By that point, many of them had already become accustomed to running the training of their units in their own distinct ways. It follows that there was a serious lack of oversight over the army's various training regimes, which reduced its combat capacity.

⁶² Reese, *Red Commanders*, 62.

⁶³ Smirnov, *Boevaia vyuchka Krasnoi Armii nakanune repressii*, Vol II, 97.

Chapter 4: Distractions Abound

While training in the RKKA was of variable quality and lacked consistent oversight and standards, any combat preparation was better than none. Unfortunately, one of the most significant factors that hindered combat capacity in territorial and regular forces was that of constant distractions, which wasted soldiers' training time. This came in five fundamental forms. First, throughout much of the interwar period, standards of living in the Red Army were often abysmal, which forced units to regularly engage in unit-based economic activities unrelated to their primary missions. Second, the Soviet state often assigned nonmilitary tasks to the Red Army that side-tracked from training. Third, the Soviet Union's multi-ethnic nature meant that Soviet officers often struggled to communicate and develop a healthy rapport with their ethnic conscripts.⁶⁴ Fourth, soldiers were consistently distracted from combat training by political indoctrination classes. Finally, a large portion of Red Army training time was dedicated to perfecting military parade drills rather than improving combat training.

Since the Imperial era, Russian soldiers traditionally partook in a phenomenon called the "regimental economy." According to this system, since the government was unwilling or unable to supply sufficient funds for unit upkeep, entire regiments had to maintain themselves through an internal economy. This meant that, among other tasks,

regiments baked their own bread, procured their own meat, vegetables, and fodder, and used the soldiers' earnings in the civilian economy to purchase food... make their own uniforms, use their own money to purchase blankets and bed linen, repair and furnish their own barracks, and build their own summer encampments.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ The Soviet Union consisted of many smaller nations and ethnicities that did not necessarily speak Russian. The participation of these ethnic minorities in the army was often problematic due to language and culture barriers.

⁶⁵ Bushnell, "The Tsarist Officer Corps, 1881-1914: Customs, Duties, Inefficiency," *The American Historical Review*, 86:4 (1981): 774.

These constant distractions not only left soldiers with little time for actual training, but they also distracted the officer corps with practical problems of supply when it could otherwise focus on improving and maintaining standards of combat training. According to John Bushnell, the regimental economy also “imbued officers with a bureaucratic, proprietary, and pacific mentality,” as opposed to one geared towards improving combat skills.⁶⁶ In other words, imperial “officers were rated more for their proficiency as economic managers than for their ability to train and lead men – which, given the predominance of the regiment’s economic functions, was logical enough.”⁶⁷

The imperial tradition of the regimental economy also persisted into the Soviet period. Many units wasted valuable training time performing unnecessary or redundant tasks. For instance, a Red Army pilot in the 1930s recounted how his unit’s training was constantly disrupted by orders to “dig trenches, hoe potatoes, or put up fences.”⁶⁸ A brigade commander reported: “To combat training, we devote only 50% of the time, the rest goes to household work.”⁶⁹ In a more famous instance, Georgy Zhukov, a young brigade commander in 1932, wrote in his memoirs:

In 1932 the division was hastily transferred to the town of Slutsk in the Belorussian Military district... at that time, there was no need for a hasty transfer of the division to a completely unprepared base. It is important to emphasize this, since within a year and a half, the division was forced to build its own barracks, stables, headquarters, residential buildings, warehouses, and the entire training base. As a result, a brilliantly trained division turned into an inefficient labour force. The lack of building materials, rainy weather, and other unfavourable conditions prevented timely preparations for the winter.

⁶⁶ Bushnell, “The Tsarist Officer Corps, 1881-1914: Customs, Duties, Inefficiency,” 772.

⁶⁷ Bushnell, “Peasants in Uniform: The Tsarist Army as Peasant Society,” 570.

⁶⁸ Vladimir Unishevsky, *Red Pilot: Memoirs of a Soviet Airman* (London: Right Book Club, 1940), 84. Also see Petro Grigorenko, *Memoirs*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1982), 59.

⁶⁹ Smirnov, *Boevaia vyuchka Krasnoi Armii nakanune repressii*, Vol II, 206.

This disastrously affected the general condition of the division and its combat readiness. Discipline fell and horses often became sick.⁷⁰

These eighteen months made up three-quarters of a conscript soldier's tour of duty. At the end of a term such as this, a soldier would have never developed the basic soldiering skills required for combat. In the 40th Rifle Division, 4,000 troops reportedly had to be removed entirely from training to construct eleven warehouses, thirteen stables, and seven barracks. Another 1,500 soldiers prepared 12,000 tons of hay for two months.⁷¹ From 1932 onward, the RKKA officially delegated a portion of their combat troops to maintaining "unit farms" to make the army more self-sufficiently nourished. During 1936, the 40th, 59th, 66th, 69th, and 92nd Divisions of the OKDVA reportedly spent the entire summer completing agricultural work instead of combat training. The 45th and 51st Divisions had to harvest vegetables and hay for themselves as well.⁷² Colonel I. V. Zaikin reported in 1937 that "no particular improvement was noticed in terms of reducing the number of people not engaged in instruction [training]... the course of combat training is systematically disrupted."⁷³ Another regimental report outlined: "The condition of the artillery regiment with combat training is catastrophic. We don't study; we work."⁷⁴ For all intents and purposes, such conscripts ceased being soldiers and instead became construction labourers and farmers.

While the Red Army attempted to lessen the effects of the regimental economy system on the eve of World War II, its implementation during nearly the entire interwar period had already done significant damage to combat training. Even during the war, some units saw its continued

⁷⁰ Georgy Zhukov, *Vosponinaniia I Razmyshleniia* (Moscow: Olma-Press, 2002), Vol I: 118.

⁷¹ Smirnov, *Boevaia vyuchka Krasnoi Armii nakanune repressii*, Vol II, 200.

⁷² Reese, *Stalin's Reluctant Soldiers*, 49-51; Smirnov, *Boevaia vyuchka Krasnoi Armii nakanune repressii*, Vol II, 201, 209.

⁷³ Smirnov, *Boevaia vyuchka Krasnoi Armii nakanune repressii*, Vol II, 207.

⁷⁴ Smirnov, *Boevaia vyuchka Krasnoi Armii nakanune repressii*, Vol II, 206.

effects. According to a Bezh Aviation School cadet, “Throughout 1942, we were engaged in agricultural labour – planting, weeding, and harvesting.”⁷⁵ That same year, another soldier in an anti-tank artillery regiment spent his entire summer converting a dilapidated factory into a workable cadet barracks:

Over the summer, we managed to equip them [the barracks], build triple bunkbeds, and furnaces for heating. But the kitchen, the latrine, and most importantly, the bathhouse were not built in time, and in the winter of 1942-1943 we suffered greatly from the cold... Particularly exhausting were the five-kilometre walks into the forest every evening, from which each cadet had to bring a log to heat the barracks and instructors’ houses.⁷⁶

Thus, both prewar and wartime cadets assigned to combat units often were forced to give up enormous amounts of their training time to take care of regimental chores and improve their abysmal living conditions.

Another significant distraction from Red Army combat training was the Soviet Union’s tendency to engage soldiers in grand economic projects, which was especially prevalent during the first two Five-Year Plans (1928-1937), when the state leaders focused overwhelmingly on agricultural and industrial development. For example, the Dnieper Hydroelectric Station, Kharkiv Tractor Plant, Magnitogorsk metallurgical complex, and Gomel’ agricultural machinery factory represented notable construction projects relegated in large part to territorial and regular divisions rather than civilian labourers.⁷⁷ Having spent months at a time as a mere labour force, many conscripts received little to no training throughout their entire terms of service. During the collectivization of agriculture in 1933, “thousands of soldiers spent five weeks of training time helping collectivized peasants with the spring sowing and the harvest in the Urals, the Don basin,

⁷⁵ Vladimir Pshenko in Artem Drabkin, ed., *Ia – bomber* (Moscow: Iauza-Eksmo, 2011), 507.

⁷⁶ Vladimir Temerov in Drabkin, ed., *Ia – Bomber*, 131.

⁷⁷ Reese, *Stalin’s Reluctant Soldiers*, 23.

and the North Caucasus.”⁷⁸ The Red Army had become so intertwined with collectivization that it also provided “the largest component of the machine tractor station personnel.” As such, tens of thousands of soldiers were completely diverted from military training tasks to ready themselves as farm tractor drivers during their military service.⁷⁹ Constant distractions by a plethora of such nonmilitary tasks eroded the time available for military training with a predictable outcome for the overall combat capacity of the Red Army.

The third factor that distracted soldiers from training was the multi-ethnic nature of the Soviet Union and, by extension, the Red Army. New conscripts ranging from non-Russian ethnic regions such as Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Tadzhikistan, and others, often did not possess a sufficient understanding of the Russian language, the lingua franca of the RKKKA, during their inception into the army. For instance, in the Transcaucasian Military Districts alone, the total amount of Red Army conscripts that did not speak Russian amounted to 37.6 percent of its total number at the start of the Second World War.⁸⁰ As Brandon Schechter explains, “This made cadres who could not understand Russian a liability, rendering them ignorant of commands, a mystery to their officers, and largely untrainable.”⁸¹ Many more troops likely only had a minimal understanding of the Russian language. Ideologically driven social policies exacerbated the problem of communication even further, according to Statiev:

the integration of minorities ‘into the common culture of our united multi-ethnic nation’ prohibited placing recruits who came from the same region in the same small units. This policy, whose long-term aim was to attain an ethnic ‘melting pot’, had negative

⁷⁸ Reese, *Stalin’s Reluctant Soldiers*, 23.

⁷⁹ Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship*, 324-325.

⁸⁰ A. Bezugol’nyi, “Narody kavkaza v vooruzhennykh silakh SSSR v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny,” PhD diss., (Stavropol State University, 2004), 30.

⁸¹ Brandon Schechter, “‘The People’s Instructions’: Indigenizing the Great Patriotic War Among ‘Non-Russians’*,” *Ab Imperio*, 2012:3 (2012): 114.

repercussions in the short term. Soldiers from various ethnic groups found themselves mixed together without a shared language.⁸²

This meant that Soviet officers, especially in non-Slavic military districts, regularly dealt with a diverse mix of recruits who could not understand either them or each other. This problem could only be remedied by either teaching new recruits the Russian language or by using interpreters. In either case, valuable training time was wasted on matters of simple communication and instruction.

Even if ethnic conscripts understood Russian, this did not necessarily mean that training went smoothly. In non-Slavic Military Districts, the predominance of racism among Russian commanders against ethnic minorities meant little respect existed between commanders and their conscripts. Accordingly, as Statiev explains, discipline mostly had to be maintained through draconian measures, which even further hampered officer-conscript relations. The resultant poor loyalty, mass-desertion, low morale, ill-discipline, and lack of cohesion among such military formations meant that the time allocated to actual combat training was, at best, minimal.⁸³

The fourth factor that limited the volume and quality of combat training was the Red Army's emphasis on political training and indoctrination among the troops – a project spearheaded by the Political Directorate of the Red Army (PURKKA, also known as PUR). Alongside increasing literacy rates among predominantly peasant conscripts, it was considered an essential part of a soldier's training regimen. In fact, it was one of the first orders of business after an individual's induction into the army. According to one recruit, "Our military training began with a steam bath, the disinfection of all our clothes, a haircut that left our scalps as

⁸² Statiev, *At War's Summit*, 79.

⁸³ Statiev, *At War's Summit*, 80-81.

smooth as our faces, and a political lecture.”⁸⁴ Political lectures were important because Red Army men needed to know what they were fighting for and how to draw inspiration from the cause. Simultaneously, political indoctrination and the army’s continued loyalty ensured the political stability of the Soviet state. While this initiative met with moderate success in the army, many soldiers tended to be unconvinced and disillusioned by their PUR political instructors. Mikhail Soloviev’s colourful account as a military correspondent in the 1930s typifies this sort of sentiment:

The political instructor is thus perfectly capable of trotting out an answer to literally any question that comes up. If a soldier tells him: “My family at home is starving, they ought to be helped,” the political instructor automatically retorts: “That, comrade soldier, is an ailment of growth. Now we’ll develop our industry, consolidate the collective farms, and everything will be O.K.” After which the soldier doesn’t even bother to point out that while industry is being developed and the collective farms consolidated his family will die of starvation; or if he does dare to make such a comment he is told that mortality is very low in the present socialist society and it will drop still more in the future. The soldier goes away angry and disillusioned; but the political instructor enters in the appropriate column that he has had a “personal conversation” on collective farm construction and the fall of the Soviet mortality rate... They [*politruks*] are stuffed full with quotations, superficial information, and instructions, and thus they do the work of the party.⁸⁵

This practice remained the same leading up to the war, and political training consistently impeded on an already strained training schedule. According to Boris Gorbachevsky, a Tiumen Combat Infantry School cadet in 1942, his unit only had “tactical classes twice a week, and political instruction every other day.” He goes on to describe every cadet’s frustration with these classes:

The very first thing we had to endure, as it turned out, was not the parade drills or cramming in the Field Regulations, but the political classes. Someone accurately

⁸⁴ Viktor Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom* (New York: Scribner’s, 1946), 47.

⁸⁵ Mikhail Soloviev, *My Nine Lives in the Red Army* (New York: David McKay, 1955), 97.

described them as ‘funerals with honor’ – three times a week, we honorably lay to rest the time, which had been ‘killed’ by the classes with the political instructor, the deputy commissar.⁸⁶

Hence, political lectures typically maintained a higher priority than tactical instruction and constituted one of the largest portions of a soldier’s training regimen. Even during the Second World War, as Gorbachevsky’s testimony shows, Red Army combat training always came second to the political indoctrination of its soldiers. Furthermore, the regular promotion of political dogmas about the ever-attacking Red Army dictated wrong emphases in combat training. Stepping into the shoes of some of their imperial predecessors who criticized the decision to train infantry on the use of cover because it allegedly encouraged timidity in battle,⁸⁷ some Red Army commanders embraced an idea presuming that shovels were unnecessary for offensive operations. The officers who adopted this belief, contradicting the PU-36 manual, did not train their soldiers to dig in under fire.⁸⁸

The final significant factor that distracted Soviet troops from improving their combat skills was the RKKA’s consistent infatuation with the perfection of military parade drills. This tendency stemmed from a combination of leftover Imperial influences and from the ideological importance of spiritual training in the Soviet Union. Since Nicolas I’s reign (1825-1855), the Russian Imperial Army had developed an unhealthy habit of judging its performance based on absurd criteria, such as the ability to “parade with awesome accuracy, and to [perfectly] play artificial war games in His Majesty’s severe and scolding presence.”⁸⁹ In combat, however, as noted during the Russian defeat in the Crimean War (1853-1856), there was much to be desired

⁸⁶ Boris Gorbachevsky, *Through the Maelstrom: A Red Army Soldier’s War on the Eastern Front, 1942-1945*, trans./ed. Stuart Britton (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 13.

⁸⁷ Bushnell, “The Tsarist Officer Corps, 1881-1914,” 776.

⁸⁸ *Krasnaia zvezda*, 3 June 1937. <https://www.prlib.ru/item/339145> [accessed November 3, 2022].

⁸⁹ Brooks, “Reform in the Russian Army, 1856-1861,” 64.

in terms of battlefield performance. Although a series of reforms during subsequent years saw, among other improvements, a reduction of parade drills during military training, these adjustments were not universally accepted. Many high-ranked traditionalist officers in the army pushed back against such changes. Primarily, such officers argued that “close-order drill was essential to developing that lack of concern with self that was crucial if orders were to be obeyed unthinkingly in battle.”⁹⁰ Thus, while the Imperial Army took steps to improve the quality of training, the burdensome and deep-rooted tradition of parade drill persisted by the time the Bolsheviks seized power.

While the Bolsheviks generally attempted to move away from the practices and beliefs of the Russian Imperial Army, a fixation on parade drill reminiscent of Nicolas I’s reign made a notable comeback in the RKKA. *Shagistika*, or close-order drill, continued to take up a large portion of troop training at the expense of developing combat skills. This was the case even during the Second World War, when recruits were forced into accelerated training schedules due to the high demand for reinforcements. According to one recruit, a mortar platoon commander in 1942, his class did “parade drills everyday. Twice a week, target practice.”⁹¹ Another veteran aviator expressed his frustration with parade drill since it constantly impeded on his flight training:

[...] we, as always, under the guidance of special infantry instructors, practiced *shagistika*. Oh, how they drove us, the scum! Our tunics were wet through and through from the sweat, the salt stains. Why do aviators need this? Yes, and the infantry, in principle, also had no need of it.⁹²

⁹⁰ Bushnell, “The Tsarist Officer Corps, 1881-1914,” 776.

⁹¹ Gorbachevsky, *Through the Maelstrom*, 7.

⁹² Vasilii Kanishchev in Artem Drabkin, ed., *My dralis’ na istrebiteliakh* (Moscow: Iauza-Eksmo, 2014), 377.

In general, veterans remembered parade drills as: “every soldier in his right mind hated it.”⁹³ Thus, the combination of the regimental economy and various nonmilitary tasks wasted enormous quantities of time that could otherwise have been used to create battle-worthy soldiers. Even when Red Army units did get the opportunity to train despite the plethora of other non-military distractions, the military training itself was replete with distractions of a different kind. Political indoctrination and parade drill exercises were deemed necessary by the state but did little to prepare soldiers for war.

⁹³ Statiev, *At War's Summit*, 329.

Chapter 5: Combat Training Through the Lens of Soviet Military Science

It is clear that the Red Army during the 1920s and 1930s was not ready for modern combat, nor was it consistently trained on a tactical basis. Yet, the question remains, why did Soviet military theoreticians and professional officers in charge of developing military science not strive to increase the quality of training in the Red Army? Soviet military science, as defined by Colonel General Makhmut Gareev, was the “system of knowledge concerned with the laws and military-strategic nature of war, the organizational development and preparation of the armed forces and the nation for war and the methods of waging it.”⁹⁴ While training fell under the purview of this conceptual framework, many officers tended to only engage with it at a superficial depth. For instance, when the prominent military theoretician Aleksandr Svechin wrote his seminal work *Strategy* in 1927, he repeatedly discussed the importance of a solid military education and training. In his treatment of the debate between quantity and quality in a modern army, Svechin writes:

Reality provides a very firm answer to this question: one should not sacrifice quality or quantity too much... Quality must also not be lowered below a certain limit of combat readiness, and any troops below this level would be mere ballast... We should keep in mind that current tactical tendencies associated with the refinement of weapons and a change to group procedures require a special emphasis on quality. A well-trained soldier with good weapons has enormous advantages over a poorly trained and equipped soldier... It is particularly important for an economically poor state to avoid pursuing quantity at the expense of quality. A bad soldier has the same stomach, takes up as much room in a railcar and requires the same number of noncombatants as a good soldier. But he is much more expensive when a war begins... It takes a very wealthy country to fight a modern war with bad troops.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Schneider, “The Origins of Soviet Military Science,” 493.

⁹⁵ Aleksandr Svechin, *Strategy*, trans./ed. Kent Lee (Minneapolis, Minnesota: East View Publications, 1992), 180-181.

However, apart from one other short paragraph on the importance of military schools, Svechin tends to take the quality of this training for granted; he does not expand on how it should be improved; and, for the rest of his theoretical analysis, assumes that the Red Army would be well-trained enough to be able to conduct his version of a modern war.⁹⁶ While Svechin wrote his acclaimed treatise in 1927 and overestimated the quality of training the Red Army had to offer, by the early 1930s, some important theoreticians had begun to understand how dire the training crisis really was.

At the onset of the 1930s, Vladimir Triandafillov, Mikhail Tukhachevsky, and some other prominent officers, conceived the revolutionary combined arms military concept known as the “Deep Battle” (*glubokii boi*), also known in its operational format as the “Deep Operation” (*glubokaia operatsiia*). Somewhat similar to its famous German equivalent, *Blitzkrieg* (lightning war), Soviet theoreticians developed the theory to be even more effective as a guiding principle in war.⁹⁷ From that moment onward, Deep Battle theory was permanently cemented as the core of Soviet and post-Soviet operational thought. According to PU-36, where it was officially codified, Deep Battle/Operations was defined as:

Simultaneous assault on enemy defenses by aviation and artillery to the depths of the defense, penetration of the tactical zone of the defense by attacking units with widespread use of tank forces and violent development of tactical success into operational success with the aim of the complete encirclement and destruction of the enemy. The main role is performed by the infantry, and the mutual support of all types of forces are organized in its interests.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ For Svechin’s brief treatment on military schools, see Svechin, *Strategy*, 321.

⁹⁷ Richard Harrison, *The Russian Way of War*, 268; Jacob Kipp, “Soviet Military Doctrine and the Origins of Operational Art, 1917-1936,” in *Soviet Military Doctrine from Lenin to Gorbachev, 1915-1991*, ed. Willard C. Frank, Jr., and Philip S. Gillette. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 117.

⁹⁸ Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art*, 25.

According to this definition, Soviet military theorists had presumed coherent cooperation between various arms, which evidently depended on those arms being sufficiently trained. However, the Red Army during this time was nowhere near the required level of training for Deep Battle to function successfully. Thus, if the doctrine was ever to work, its creators had to resolve the issue of training as quickly as possible.

In his ground-breaking work on the theory of Deep Operations, *The Nature of Operations of Modern Armies* (1931), Triandafillov agreed with Svechin that a poorly trained army would quickly lose a modern war. However, unlike Svechin, Triandafillov admitted that the Red Army was on a wrong path that needed to be corrected, which deserves to be quoted at length:

The general prerequisites for creating *highly-qualified* soldiers at the present time are less favorable than they were prior to the World War. Despite the incontrovertible general technical and cultural growth of the populace, mastery of contemporary military affairs given the great variety of weapons and equipment that modern armies possess still requires more time and greater effort than before. Besides that, everywhere we are faced with a reduction in terms of service (two- and one-year terms now, instead of three- and four-years terms prior to the World War) and, at the same time, there is the radical reduction in peacetime cadres... The share of reserves fed into organic units is increased considerably... Despite the readiness training sessions for which they are called up periodically, the combat training of these reservists cannot be considered fully sufficient for the conduct of modern combat. Short terms of service and the complex conditions under which combat is conducted make it impossible to release a fully-trained soldier to the reserve. Reservists, who stay in the reserves for a long time, suffer a significant loss of professional skills. That is why many organic units will have to be knocked together (to a significant degree) and receive appropriate tempering during the war itself.⁹⁹

Triandafillov's concern was well-founded. He hoped that the Red Army's quality of training could still be brought up to the "level of training of the 1914 German Army," which he

⁹⁹ Vladimir Triandafillov, *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, trans. William Burhans, ed. Jacob Kipp (Ilford, Essex: Frank Cass, 1994), 50.

considered a template of professionalism the RKKA should strive for.¹⁰⁰ However, he provided no recipe for attaining this goal prior to his untimely death in a plane crash in 1931.

Marshal Tukhachevsky, another central creator of the Deep Battle concept, had similar concerns over the RKKA's training standards. During the 1920s, he admitted that the army's "beggarly" state, combined with the "weakness of the command staff," was detrimental to troop combat and tactical training.¹⁰¹ Additionally, the ineffectiveness of the territorial forces worried him enough to call for its reduction in 1936 in favour of a larger regular army. Despite high financial costs, he argued that "additional barracks must be built, training-grounds and artillery ranges extended, and additional sums spent on the maintenance of personnel."¹⁰² Evidently, Tukhachevsky was aware of the distractions that prevented Red Army units from conducting combat training, such as the lack of proper facilities. Despite this, he was not concerned with the growing amount of political indoctrination in the army. In fact, he wrote extensively on it and argued it was essential for winning over the peasantry, since they were slow to yield to communist principles and represented the majority of the RKKA.¹⁰³ According to

Tukhachevsky:

Only political maturity and consciousness can give a Red Army soldier the will to win, determination, and endurance, without which neither drill nor tactical training can be understood by him. The same and vice versa. In a word, these areas of training are so related and so intertwined with each other that it is completely unnatural to separate them.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Triandafillov, *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, 51.

¹⁰¹ Tukhachevsky, *Selected Works*, Vol I (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1964), Vol I: 95.

¹⁰² Tukhachevsky, "Speech at the Second Session of the Central Executive Committee of the U.S.S.R.," January 15, 1936, in *The Soviet Union and the Path to Peace*, 51-52.

¹⁰³ Tukhachevsky, *Selected Works*, Vol I, 102.

¹⁰⁴ Tukhachevsky, *Selected Works*, Vol I, 92.

Overall, Tukhachevsky was optimistic that “an energetic pull-up, inspection, and briefing of junior command personnel will give brilliant results in terms of training troops.”¹⁰⁵ He never expanded on this point despite the glaring major deficiencies in the junior commander system of the RKKA. With respect to training procedures, Tukhachevsky considered combat training important and warned against the encroachment of parade drill on combat training time: “Less *shagistika* and trumps, and more combat skills and knowledge.”¹⁰⁶ His early writings emphasized drilling exercises, shooting lessons, tactical lessons, military-scientific training, and spiritual preparation. However, aside from spiritual preparation, which focused on maintaining high morale during battle, Tukhachevsky did not expand on each of these points in sufficient detail beyond a few vague sentences, making them only nominally helpful to any officers who sought to learn from his work.¹⁰⁷ At last, in 1936, Tukhachevsky and Alexander Yegorov attempted to remedy such problems in combat training and supervised the creation of PU-36. The new Field Service Regulations helped to standardize commanders’ understanding of new tactics and, therefore, standardize the level of tactical and combat training provided for the army.

Unfortunately for Tukhachevsky and his associates, PU-36 proved to be their last major accomplishment. Within the next two years, Stalin purged the most talented and experienced theoreticians in the RKKA alongside their ideas. The officers that survived the Great Purge “were junior, generally orthodox, or reluctant for obvious reasons to vocally embrace the ideas of their fallen predecessors,” and developed a self-preserving mentality that hindered the effectiveness of all forms of troop training.¹⁰⁸ Fearing for their safety, many surviving officers refused to show any sort of initiative toward military improvement that was not explicitly

¹⁰⁵ Tukhachevsky, *Selected Works*, Vol I, 95.

¹⁰⁶ Tukhachevsky, *Selected Works*, Vol I, 102.

¹⁰⁷ Tukhachevsky, *Selected Works*, Vol I, 98-100.

¹⁰⁸ Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art*, 25-27, 89.

ordered by the state. The army slowly and unevenly implemented the ideas of PU-36, making their effect on the improvement and standardization of training minimal. Thus, while prominent Soviet military theorists attempted to identify and address several problems relating to combat and tactical training in the 1930s, they did not live long enough to implement the corrective measures. The improvement of training once more took a backseat and became a forgotten task. As Russian scholar N. Ramanichev writes, prior to the Second World War,

The main mass of enlisted recruits in a partial mobilization consisted of those who had undergone military training in territorial units and did not have firm professional skills. An inexperienced command element, and rank and file's extended breaks from combat training for economic purposes, told extremely negatively on the results of combat and operational training. Figuratively speaking, there was no one to teach, no one to be taught, and nothing to teach with.¹⁰⁹

It took a series of "small wars" in the late 1930s, culminating in the Winter War, for Soviet leaders to come to a similar realization regarding the poor quality of organization and training in the RKKA.

¹⁰⁹Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 34.

Chapter 6: Four Baptisms by Fire

On the eve of World War II, the Soviet Union had the opportunity to test its newly equipped and quickly growing army in four baptisms of fire: the Soviet-Japanese border conflicts which culminated in the Battles of Lake Khasan (July 29 – August 11, 1938) and Khalkin-Gol (May 11 – September 16, 1939); the Soviet invasion of Poland (September 17 – October 6, 1939); and the Winter War (November 30, 1939 – March 13, 1940). Apart from the Battle of Lake Khasan, which ended in stalemate, each other conflict resulted in victory for Moscow. Yet, they simultaneously revealed many glaring weaknesses in the Red Army's ability to wage war – an important one of which, albeit rarely mentioned, was the lack of sufficient combat training and tactical proficiency. In typical fashion, during the first three conflicts, the Soviets paid little attention to addressing these weaknesses, partially because they were mostly victorious and partly because they did not garner much international scrutiny from military observers. For political and diplomatic reasons, information about the Soviet-Japanese border conflicts was swept under the rug by both parties involved, while the Polish campaign was short and waged against an already defeated army. Additionally, international attention, which would have otherwise been critical of the Red Army's performance, mainly focused on the rapidly growing German menace in Western Europe.

Furthermore, the political environment within the RKKA after the Great Purge was not conducive to criticism or radical change in force organization. Rather than critically assessing the numerous deficiencies in the army, the RKKA was showered with political propaganda and notions of the Red Army's invincibility – along with messages of Stalin's infallible leadership

qualities.¹¹⁰ Even during the “pre-purge” years, “the troops were oriented towards the possibility of an easy victory over a ‘weak’ enemy and were not accustomed to overcoming the difficulties of modern combat.”¹¹¹ However, the Great Purge exacerbated these tendencies to an unprecedented level. The Soviets only learned their lesson during the largest and most famous of the four conflicts, with the Red Army’s dismal performance during its invasion of Finland. In the aftermath of this Pyrrhic victory, having been thoroughly embarrassed in front of the international community, the Soviet leadership finally decided to initiate a program of reform dedicated to increasing overall combat readiness and training. Unfortunately, not only was the plan flawed in many ways, but the RKKA implemented it far too late. One year later, German vanguard divisions would cross the Soviet border and catch the Kremlin unprepared.

Evidence of the army’s weak training at the tactical level first became apparent during the two conflicts against Japan, despite the Soviet Union’s overall victory. During Lake Khasan and Khalkin-Gol, many Soviet troops at the battalion level reportedly had poor coordination between each other and armoured units simply because they had not sufficiently practiced such manoeuvres. Protocol Number 18 of the Main Military Council of 31 August 1938 reported that at Lake Khasan, “The military preparation of troops, headquarters, and the commanders of the front was of an unacceptably low standard. Military units were not coherent [*razdergani*] and not ready for action.”¹¹² At a microscopic level, the Soviet infantry tended to have poor positional security and consistently allowed Japanese patrols to breach their outer lines. Additionally, at night, Soviet troops formed a poor habit of shooting randomly in the dark and exposing

¹¹⁰ Harrison, *The Russian Way of War*, 224.

¹¹¹ Smirnov, *Boevaia vyuchka Krasnoi Armii nakanune repressii* (Moscow: Rodina Media, 2013), Vol I: 4.

¹¹² Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War*, 89.

themselves and their defensive positions to Japanese units.¹¹³ The same Protocol Number 18 of the Main Military Council of 31 August 1938 stated that “all branches, but especially the infantry, revealed an inability to function on the battlefield, to manoeuvre, to integrate fire and manoeuvre, and to make use of the terrain.”¹¹⁴

Partially, deficiencies in combat preparation can be blamed on the poor geographical conditions of the Far East. Many of the newly arrived units – composed of fresh conscripts and hastily-assembled territorial reserves – would have had little time for adequate training once they arrived. The long, severe winters in Manchuria cut down on possible training time for both the Soviet and Japanese troops.¹¹⁵ Likewise, due to logistical constraints on keeping the Far Eastern Front well-equipped and fed, such as long supply lines, coupled with limited railway velocity, the issue of combat training was obstructed by the Soviet policy to render their military units as self-sufficient as possible. In a typical case of the regimental economy at work, what little existing training time the troops already possessed was replaced by “such matters as cultivating hay, chopping firewood, growing vegetables, managing construction, washing under-clothes, and similar tasks.”¹¹⁶ While unit self-sufficiency was practiced in the Red Army at large, the remote location of the Far-Eastern front intensified this practice even further. The resultant difference in combat training between Soviet and Japanese troops was unmistakable. For instance, individual Red Army artillery batteries during 1934 and 1935 only received 40-60 shells for live-fire

¹¹³ Alvin Coox, *The Anatomy of a Small War: The Soviet-Japanese Struggle for Changkufeng/Khasan, 1938* (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1977), 170-171.

¹¹⁴ Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War*, 91.

¹¹⁵ The Japanese 23rd Division, being only a year old, had reportedly lacked experience and combat training as well. Training was limited by the severe winter in the region in 1938-9, which “hampered large-scale training exercises,” Stuart Goldman, *Nomonhan, 1939: The Red Army’s Victory that Shaped World War II* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2012), 91. One can imagine that the growing Red Army in the Far East felt the exact same predicament, since they notoriously had even more relaxed attitudes towards training during winter months.

¹¹⁶ Limitations in rail transportation heavily affected Soviet logistics in the Far East, Goldman, *Nomonhan, 1939*, 20; Reese, *Stalin’s Reluctant Soldiers*, 170.

exercises. In contrast, a typical Japanese artillery battery would have used approximately 280 shells over the same period.¹¹⁷ Although Soviet after-action reports detailed such deficiencies, the army did not circulate them and, thus, they were largely ignored. The RKKA had effectively become immune to large-scale criticism by this point.

Similar problems had also manifested during the surprise invasion of Poland, which came underway as the Battle of Khalkin-Gol wound down in September 1939. While the Polish campaign saw fighting in localized regions against an army that the Wehrmacht had already defeated, similar problems of training became apparent.¹¹⁸ The German offensive's great speed surprised the Kremlin in such a way that Stalin feared German units would violate the established demarcation line and take the rest of Poland.¹¹⁹ Thus, the RKKA's Kyiv and Belorussian military districts rushed to mobilize for an invasion they had little warning of, and with a reservist-majority force that was utterly unprepared for combat. In the Kyiv district alone, one-third of the men pulled for mobilization were reportedly out of shape and poorly trained, which wreaked havoc on the combat preparation of multiple divisions before they had even crossed the border.¹²⁰

In terms of the campaign itself, although the Soviets encountered minimal resistance, deficiencies similar to the ones outlined in Manchuria occurred again, albeit on a smaller scale. In contrast to the German invasion of Poland, the Soviets seemed far more sluggish and unprepared. Like in Manchuria, armoured units and infantry were not sufficiently trained and struggled to coordinate with one another. The Commander of the 52nd Rifle Division on the

¹¹⁷ Smirnov, *Boevaia vyuchka Krasnoi Armii nakanune repressii*, Vol II, 216.

¹¹⁸ For a Polish perspective of the Soviet invasion, see David Williamson, *Poland Betrayed: The Nazi-Soviet Invasions of 1939* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2009), 120-122.

¹¹⁹ Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, 537-538.

¹²⁰ Reese, *Stalin's Reluctant Soldiers*, 177.

Belorussian front, Ivan Russiianov, claimed that before the invasion “the personnel of the formation gave all their strength to the improvement of combat skills;” and that “commanders and political workers paid it [combat training] maximum attention.”¹²¹ His positive attitude toward training well may have been the case, but it would have been an uncommon one. Considering how inconsistent and poor combat training tended to be amongst various divisions throughout the interwar period, one can only surmise how effective Russiianov’s training regimens indeed were. After all, he admits in his memoirs that a large portion of the division’s time was consumed by military construction projects, which on its own would have heavily impeded on training time.¹²² Regardless of the numerous setbacks and inadequacies, the already-dying Polish state could only give nominal resistance. The Red Army suffered 2,953 dead and 2,383 wounded and sick by the invasion’s completion.¹²³ Since the outcome of the invasion was overwhelmingly positive, the army promptly ignored whatever lessons could be gleaned from the campaign. Over the following winter, the RKKA was finally taught its most humiliating and vital lesson in the requirement of consistent combat training, approximately a year before the Soviet state fought for its survival.

In its final test before the German invasion, on 30 November 1939, the Red Army invaded Finland through the Karelian Isthmus. Since many foreign observers believed prior to

¹²¹ I. N. Russiianov, *V boiakh rozhdennaia* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1982), 3-4. Hill credibly claims that it is unclear what this “maximum” was, and that perhaps conscript training even in the 52nd Rifle Division may have been poor, Alexander Hill, “Voroshilov’s ‘Lightning’ War—The Soviet Invasion of Poland, September 1939,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 27:3 (2014): 411.

¹²² Russiianov, *V boiakh rozhdennaia*, 3.

¹²³ Krivosheev provides what is likely to be the most accurate portrayal of combat losses, given his superior access to sources, Krivosheev, *Soviet Casualties and Combat Losses in the Twentieth Century*, 58-59. Glantz and Jonathan House provide a lower number of dead, based on official Russian figures – 1,475 dead and 3,858 wounded and sick, Glantz and House, *When Titans Clashed*, 15-16.

1937 that the RKKA was the “most well-equipped and best-led force on the planet,”¹²⁴ the Kremlin and the wider international community assumed that the Soviet Union would defeat Finland by a short and overwhelming attack. After all, the Soviets possessed what the Finns did not: a large air force, tanks, and overwhelming amounts of artillery. Despite the technical and numerical advantage, and to the surprise of everyone, Soviets and Finns included, the RKKA performed poorly and could not effectively surpass Finnish static defences in its initial assaults.

A significant factor contributing to the poorly executed invasion can be attributed to a noticeable lack of combat training. In the immediate build-up to the war, the Red Army expanded its forces considerably by introducing newly formed infantry divisions and bolstering their undermanned existing divisions with poorly trained reservists and untrained conscripts, sometimes literally press-ganged into service off the streets. These divisions were immediately sent to the front, often accompanied by woefully inexperienced commanders. Such was the case, for example, with the 136th Rifle Division that was sent into combat only three months after its inception, which was nowhere near the time it would have required to become combat worthy.¹²⁵ A commander, describing this crisis in a post-war conference held by the General Staff, complained:

It turned out that up to 47 per cent of the Red Army men [in the division] did not know how to handle the weapons they'd been given. This referred mostly to heavy and light machine-gunners. Up to 60 per cent of reservists did not have shooting practice over the past three years.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Robert Edwards, *The Winter War: Russia's Invasion of Finland, 1939-1940* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2008), 16-17. Proponents of this view still existed even after the Great Purge. The U.S. military attaché to China, Colonel Joseph Stillwell, praised the Soviet victory: “those who believe the Red Army is rotten would do well to reconsider their views,” Goldman, *Nomonhan, 1939*, 75.

¹²⁵ Sergei Vasil'ev and Aleksei Dikan', *Gvardeitsy piatnadsatoi* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1960), 9-24.

¹²⁶ Kulkov and Rzheshesky, *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War*, 16.

Another officer lamented:

I regard it as an absolutely abnormal fact if untrained soldiers are sent to the front. There were many of them, up to 20-30 per cent. They did not have combat training. They did not know what to do with a rifle. When we were preparing for the breakthrough in a fortified area, we got 874 untrained men for two divisions and, later, 4,314 untrained men for the 100th and 123rd divisions.¹²⁷

These men, and others, had to be trained in the basics of combat only once they had already arrived at the front – both with whatever impromptu exercises could be arranged by their commanders during operational lulls and through the actual experience of combat. Yet, many were either killed or wounded in action before they had a chance to learn basic soldiering skills. Colonel-General Vladimir Grendal, who served with distinction during the Winter War, acknowledged this necessity, as well as his frustration with it:

The individual training of our infantrymen is poor... Our soldier was often insufficiently drilled in knowledge of arms, in knowledge of weapons. We had to teach soldiers during the war how to use heavy machine-guns, hand grenades, and light automatic machine-guns. This is not normal. It must not be tolerated any longer.¹²⁸

The issue of poor training also revealed itself by otherwise ‘combat ready’ infantry divisions coming from far-flung military districts. Having no experience in Finland’s geography, some units learned the harsh lessons of warfare in this new environment through combat. The 163rd Ukrainian Rifle Division, originally trained to fight on the steppes of Ukraine with its mild climate, was sent straight to the heavily forested Karelian Isthmus without being re-equipped or retrained for that combat environment. Having little idea of how to fight in a dense forest during severe winter, the division was decisively defeated along with three others at the Battle of

¹²⁷ Kulkov and Rzheshesky, *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War*, 12.

¹²⁸ Kulkov and Rzheshesky, *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War*, 226.

Suomussalmi against an outnumbered and outgunned Finnish force.¹²⁹ The Red Air Force, for its part, performed dismally as well. Komkor Shelukhin reported to Voroshilov that:

Hundreds of bombers are sent, thousands of bombs are dropped, and tens of aircraft are lost, in order to destroy some object (for example a radio station, a bridge, etc.), the accomplishment of this mission drags on for weeks and in the end loses its intended purpose...¹³⁰

Even in an environment where the Soviets maintained complete air dominance, pilots were too poorly trained to be able to fulfill their primary roles on the battlefield.

In contrast to the poorly trained and rushed Soviet troops, the Finns prepared for woodland/winter warfare much more rigorously, usually possessing important skills such as navigation, skiing, marksmanship, and the ability to improvise in battle among the rank-and-file. A commander speaking to Stalin after the war reported: "...we must admit that the training of the Finnish soldiers, their technical and tactical training, was of a higher order. One Finnish soldier with an automatic rifle operates as a squad and knows how to manoeuvre."¹³¹ In contrast, Soviet troops were often incapable of thinking for themselves without having officers tell them what to do. The psychological effect of the difference in training, combined with the typical experience of heavy casualties, had a substantial negative impact on the morale of Soviet soldiers. Writing to his brother-in-law back home, a Russian soldier grimly recalled:

We have been sending tanks, artillery, and infantry against the Finns, with no results – just killed comrades; sometimes as many as 300 after our attacks, and the Finns won't let us pick them up. Their fire is extremely accurate, and they mow us down as with a sickle.¹³²

¹²⁹ Richard Condon, *The Winter War: Russia against Finland* (London: Ballantine Books, 1972), 153-154.

¹³⁰ Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War*, 162.

¹³¹ Edwards, *The Winter War*, 177; Kulkov and Rzheshesky, *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War 1939-1940*, 226.

¹³² Edwards, *The Winter War*, 195.

Nevertheless, the problem of training and experience was by no means insurmountable. As Reese points out, some officers and men were still capable of learning under fire and adapting to the unique combat conditions in Finland. If an approach did not work, a battalion or regiment commander sometimes “backed off, regrouped, retrained his unit, and then went at it again with much more success.”¹³³ While this method was uncommon, and often entailed high casualties, it still showed that the Red Army was capable of dramatic improvement at the tactical level. The ability to learn from experiences in combat was mirrored by the Soviet tank forces as well, who, by the war’s end, became “quite skilful and resourceful in adapting to the conditions...”¹³⁴ Specialist units such as sappers and combat engineers proved to be “splendidly disciplined and well trained,” and consistently performed their tasks with distinction.¹³⁵ The RKKA saw further improvements to combat readiness when Marshal Semyon Timoshenko replaced the inept Kliment Voroshilov as commander of the Soviet forces in Finland in January 1940.

Timoshenko was not an imaginative commander, nor was he an intellectual like the recently purged Tukhachevsky group, but he understood that the Red Army quickly needed to modernize – a marked improvement over his incompetent predecessor.¹³⁶ Once in command, Timoshenko intensified combat training in preparation for a large offensive, including for some divisions “full-scale mock-ups... to familiarize the attacking troops with the structure and bulk of the obstacles.”¹³⁷ Ashot Kazar’ian, a machine gunner with the 286th Rifle Regiment of the 90th Rifle Division, recalled that, in January 1940, companies withdrew to the rear one after another

¹³³ Reese, *Red Commanders*, 146.

¹³⁴ Condon, *The Winter War*, 131.

¹³⁵ Kulkov and Rzheshesky, *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War, 1939-1940*, 226.

¹³⁶ John Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad: Stalin’s War with Germany: Volume One* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975), 96, 107.

¹³⁷ Edwards, *The Winter War*, 250.

for training in attacking fortified enemy defenses. Among other skills, they learned to circumvent barbed wire, isolate bunkers from reinforcements, and throw hand grenades.¹³⁸ While these were skills that soldiers should have already possessed prior to the campaign, as Alexander Hill notes, “receiving such training in late January was better late than never....”¹³⁹ In February 1940, the troops conducted a coordinated attack on the Mannerheim Line with renewed vigor against an already weakened Finnish army, eventually leading to a breakthrough and ending the war with favourable terms for the Kremlin.¹⁴⁰

By war’s end, the Soviet Union’s losses in troops and materiel were enormous. Out of 848,570 total men, conservative estimates place their irrecoverable losses at 139,000, with another 288,054 wounded and sick¹⁴¹ against 68,480 Finnish casualties, of which 24,923 were killed or missing. The Soviets fielded approximately 3,200 tanks of various types, of which 1,600 were destroyed or captured, while the Red Air Force lost a total of 900 planes.¹⁴² The truth of the matter was that the Red Army had fared extremely poorly against a small nation that lacked a mechanized army. If the Soviets ever hoped to win a future war with Nazi Germany, a nation that did possess a modern army, the RKKA had to implement large-scale and realistic reforms to bring the army’s combat capacity up to par.

¹³⁸ A. V. Kazar’ian, *Pristiga na vsiu zhizn’* (Moscow: Voenne izdatel’stvo, 1988), 15; Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War*, 163.

¹³⁹ Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War*, 163.

¹⁴⁰ Väinö Tanner, *The Winter War: Finland Against Russia 1939-1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1950), 220-221.

¹⁴¹ Krivosheev, *Soviet Casualties and Combat Losses in the Twentieth Century*, 78-79. Other historians have placed Soviet death figures even higher, between 200,000 and 270,000 out of approximately 1,000,000 men, Gordon Sander, *The Hundred Day Winter War: Finland’s Gallant Stand against the Soviet Army* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2013), 339, 340-341; Condon, *The Winter War*, 153-154.

¹⁴² Condon, *The Winter War*, 153-154. Krivosheev, using Finnish sources, inflates Finnish total dead by an additional 24,000 men, Krivosheev, *Soviet Casualties and Combat Losses in the Twentieth Century*, 78.

Chapter 7: The Timoshenko Reforms

The results of the Winter War demonstrated that the Soviet Union was unprepared for modern combat against the European great powers. Indeed, the outcome of that war convinced Adolf Hitler and his generals of Germany's ability to destroy the Soviet Union. In their eyes, the Red Army had proved to be nothing but a "paper tiger."¹⁴³ The Soviet leadership's frantic reactions in the following year suggested that Hitler was not far off the mark. As soon as the Winter War ended in March 1940, Stalin, Voroshilov, Grigory Kulik, and 46 Red Army field commanders from *front* down to the regimental level convened in a four-day meeting in April to analyze the Red Army's poor performance in the war, and discuss how to improve its capacity in the near future.¹⁴⁴ In this verbatim recorded meeting, Stalin and his colleagues displayed a surprising amount of candor and clarity of mind when debating the Red Army's systemic problems. They admitted that the RKKA had proven ineffective as a military force, and Stalin desperately wanted to reform it. Yet, the effect of the subsequent Timoshenko reforms proved minimal by the outset of Operation Barbarossa – most notably in the sphere of combat training and small-unit tactics.

Timoshenko's ideas primarily stemmed from the Soviet lessons drawn from the Winter War. The Soviet invasion of the Karelian Isthmus had degenerated into slow, grinding, attritional warfare, where attacking Soviet detachments had to constantly overcome static Finnish defences based on concrete bunkers. Dense forests separated by countless swamps made manoeuvres extremely difficult as well. Yet, the RKKA made the grave mistake of assuming the specific conditions of warfare in Finland were universally applicable. Contrary to established Deep Battle

¹⁴³ Glantz, "Preface," in Kulkov and Rzheshesky, *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War, 1939-1940*, xii.

¹⁴⁴ Glantz, "Preface," in Kulkov and Rzheshesky, *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War, 1939-1940*, xiii.

theory that emphasized flexible manoeuvrability, Timoshenko viewed modern warfare as a static battle of attrition in an effort to overcome powerful fortifications:

But while it cannot be gainsaid that in a war of manoeuvre we shall be the weaker party, the position is different with regard to frontal attack. In frontal attack no enemy or combination of enemies can hope to compare with us. By making a succession of direct attacks we shall compel him to lose blood, in other words to lose something he has less than we have. Of course we shall have enormous losses too, but in war one has to count not one's own losses but those of the enemy. Even if we lose more men than the enemy, we must view it dispassionately.

I know of no army in Europe that could hold up our mass advance. And despite everything, that advance will deny the enemy any possibility to manoeuvre on a strategic scale and will force him into a frontal war, advantageous to us and disadvantageous to him.

Having the advantage of manpower, we concentrate our army into an enormous fist. The very fact that such a fist exists will prevent the enemy from dispersing his forces in a war of manoeuvre; he will not be given any opportunity to loosen the close 'interlinking' of his army. On the contrary, he will be forced to concentrate, to go over to the defence on as restricted an area as possible. In other words, we get conditions of a frontal war, we force the enemy to accept our view of the character of war.¹⁴⁵

Timoshenko's approach was antithetical to Soviet Deep Battle doctrine and its German counterpart, Blitzkrieg. Unlike Finland's deep forests and swamps, the geography of the Soviet Union and newly German-occupied territories was much larger, uncluttered, and more conducive toward manoeuvre-style warfare, giving German military doctrine a decided edge. Timoshenko's ideas shaped the focus of the Red Army's military training, which, as soon became apparent, was grossly misplaced.

¹⁴⁵ Soloviev, *My Nine Lives in the Red Army*, 27-28.

Regarding individual training, as Hill shows, “training during 1940 and beyond had a much more obvious combat focus than had previously been the case.”¹⁴⁶ Ignatii Mel’nikov, an anti-aircraft artillery cadet, described it as such:

Before the Soviet-Finnish war of 1939-1940, training conditions were not the most stringent, but after it, when poor training of anti-aircraft artillery personnel was revealed, Marshal of the Soviet Union Semyon Konstantinovich Timoshenko, People's Commissar of Defense, ordered all exercises and classes to be carried out in the field.¹⁴⁷

However, these improvements should not be overstated. While training regimens became more rigorous, they were simultaneously severely truncated between 1938 and 1941. During this time, the Red Army experienced a rapid expansion of its forces in preparation for potential armed conflict and increased its manpower by 200 percent. In Reese’s words, “This equalled an influx of around three million men over 2.5 years, bringing the strength of the Red Army and Navy to around 5 million men and women on 22 June 1941.” This meant that with the rapid influx of cadets and conscripts, military authorities had to process them at a quickened pace and had very little time to ensure they were adequately trained. Additionally, chronic shortages in manpower among the officer corps exacerbated the training crisis, as “the ratio of officers to men decreased.”¹⁴⁸ Strictly speaking, there were not enough officers to effectively oversee the training of the rank-and-file.

The officer cadets the Soviets possessed were typically poorly trained and poorly educated. A high-level report, given to Timoshenko upon his succession as commissar of defence in 1940, outlined: “The quality of command personnel training is low, where up to 68

¹⁴⁶ Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War*, 174.

¹⁴⁷ Ignatii Mel’nikov, interview by Artem Drabkin, *iremember.ru*, November 26, 2013. <https://iremember.ru/memoirs/zenitchiki/melnikov-ignatij-grigorevich/> [accessed October 22, 2022].

¹⁴⁸ Reese, *Stalin’s Reluctant Soldiers*, 4-5, 24-25.

percent have only the short-term six-month training course for junior lieutenants [as opposed to the two to three years of officer training during the interwar period].” Among other criticisms, there was “weak tactical training for all types of combat and reconnaissance,” “unsatisfactory field training,” “extremely poor coordination of forces in combat,” “faulty camouflage..., fire control..., and tactics for attacking fortified regions, overcoming obstacles, and forcing rivers.”¹⁴⁹ In contrast to the Soviet training crisis, as Statiev writes,

The youngest Wehrmacht privates who found themselves in combat on the Eastern Front in the summer of 1941 were those drafted in the early autumn of 1940. Therefore, an average German private knew the war business better than the Soviet lieutenants who had graduated from a six-month programme in the summer of 1941.¹⁵⁰

Thus, while Soviet officer training and education requirements had already been poor throughout the interwar period, the rapid expansion of the army in the late 1930s and early 1940s only exacerbated this crisis.

Although a plethora of deficiencies had been revealed during the Winter War, Timoshenko’s reforms had mostly influenced the army and corps level rather than small unit mechanics.¹⁵¹ Since the RKKA implemented these reforms only a year before Operation Barbarossa, their effect was minimal and frequently counterproductive. Many of the same problems that had plagued Red Army combat training in the past continued to do so until the German invasion. Timoshenko understood this and lamented that “the old oversimplifications, indulgences, and low expectations continue to figure in the training of soldiers and small units.”¹⁵² Conversely, during 1939-1940, the German Army had focused much of its attention on

¹⁴⁹ Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 39.

¹⁵⁰ Statiev, *At War’s Summit*, 327-328.

¹⁵¹ Reese, *Stalin’s Reluctant Soldiers*, 173.

¹⁵² Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War*, 175.

improving its NCO corps and training its companies and battalions. The German High Command also took an active and involved role in “ensuring that commanders focused on small-unit training as long as necessary and that training was as realistic as possible.”¹⁵³

Furthermore, beginning in September 1939, the crux of the German Army had already obtained extensive practical experience fighting a modern war in Poland and France. This meant that by June 1941, most German soldiers were familiar with what it took to fight a war of manoeuvre. As Carl von Clausewitz, the eminent 19th-century German military theorist, wrote:

No general can accustom an army to war. Peacetime maneuvers are a feeble substitute for the real thing; but even they can give an army an advantage over others whose training is confined to routine, mechanical drill. To plan maneuvers so that some of the elements of friction are involved, which will train officers' judgment, common sense, and resolution is far more worthwhile than inexperienced people might think. It is immensely important that no soldier, whatever his rank, should wait for war to expose him to those aspects of active service that amaze and confuse him when he first comes across them. If he has met them even once before, they will begin to be familiar to him. This is true even of physical effort. Exertions must be practiced, and the mind must be made even more familiar with them than the body. When exceptional efforts are required of him in war, the recruit is apt to think that they result from mistakes, miscalculations, and confusion at the top. In consequence, his morale is doubly depressed. If maneuvers prepare him for exertions, this will not occur.¹⁵⁴

Yet, by that same time, the Red Army's combat training standards had improved little since the Winter War, and what new training they did now possess was directed at fighting a style of war that the Germans had no intention of following. Put simply, the Soviets had proven themselves utterly unprepared for modern war at every level.

¹⁵³ Reese, *Stalin's Reluctant Soldiers*, 173-174.

¹⁵⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, 122.

Chapter 8: The Grim Experience of the Great Patriotic War

“Load, unload. Understand? Good job! Who’s next?” – Veteran Vladimir Arsen’evich describing his training in aviation school.¹⁵⁵

After the Wehrmacht attacked the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, it quickly inflicted a strategic paralysis on the Red Army. As one memoirist candidly recalled of the aftermath:

By that time our country was on the verge of catastrophe. The Germans had shot the daylight out of our professional army. In the second half of 1941 they had captured four million of our soldiers and officers. They occupied the most important ‘European’ part of the country, west of the Urals, with the best agricultural land and the main industrial cities. We were desperately forming a new army. Total mobilization was underway. Military enlistment offices were conscripting even those deemed unfit for service on health or other grounds.¹⁵⁶

Among others, a major contributing factor to massive Soviet casualties, which persisted until the end of the war, was the lack of proper military training. In what can be described as a feedback loop, large numbers of poorly trained soldiers were consistently lost to the war, which led to a perpetual demand for reinforcements. This prompted the acceleration of conscription and training in the Red Army during 1941-1942, which produced even more poorly trained troops liable to perish in their first battle. During 1943-1945, the Soviets improved their combat training nominally to stymie the heavy flow of casualties, but troops still consistently arrived on the battlefield with inadequate training. Memoirs of Soviet veterans reflect these evolving war experiences in the Soviet infantry, paratroopers, so-called “marines,” artillery crews, armoured forces, and combat pilots throughout the war.

¹⁵⁵ Vladimir Pshenko in Drabkin, *Ia - bomber*, 505.

¹⁵⁶ Boris Bogachev, *For the Motherland! For Stalin! A Red Army Officer’s Memoir of the Eastern Front*, trans. Maria Bogacheva (London: Hurst & Company, 2017), 49.

While Red Army troops were undoubtedly capable of feats of bravery and determination in battle, their inadequate military preparation gave them a decisive disadvantage against well-trained German divisions. On 23 June 1941, one day after the beginning of the German invasion, Major-General Dmitry Leliushenko reported that his “corps was at 80 to 90 percent personnel fill, [but] of these, 70 percent came from April-May conscription,” and thus were untrained. As a result, he had to leave behind a staggering 17,000 men in winter quarters for “remedial training” because they were too poorly prepared and equipped to fight on the newly opened Northwestern front. In the first month of combat, his corps suffered 6,284 casualties, 60 percent of its remaining combat strength going into battle.¹⁵⁷ The military situation in the first half of the war was especially dire for the rank-and-file, as many commanders did not follow Leliushenko’s example. For the most part, soldiers were sent to the front regardless of their level of preparation which led to exorbitant casualties.

Throughout 1941, the situation on the front lines was desperate: the Germans relentlessly advanced on strategically vital cities such as Kyiv, Moscow, and Leningrad. According to Stalin’s decree, “Cadets of all schools – to the front!,” many cadets had not graduated from their training schools before their regions were overrun and they were sent to fight. On the Mozhaisk defensive line guarding Moscow, 3,000 Podol’sk cadets from the infantry and artillery academies were sent to hold off the German advance until reinforcements could arrive; they did so at the cost of 2,500 cadets.¹⁵⁸ Among other units-in-training fighting in the same area were two sapper companies of the Moscow Military Engineering Academy, the Divisional School of the 316th

¹⁵⁷ Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 127-128.

¹⁵⁸ Bogachev, *For the Motherland! For Stalin!*, 25-26.

Rifle Division, and a composite battalion of the Military-Political Academy.¹⁵⁹ In 1942, while the practice of throwing ungraduated cadets into the meat grinder was less common – as desperation for reinforcements was not as immediately pressing despite continued German progress – certain critical sectors of the front continued to see this practice. In Stalingrad during 1942, “often as their schools were threatened with being overrun – cadets would not be pulled to the rear but thrown into the fray, as in the case of the Rostov Artillery School.”¹⁶⁰ Genrikh Kats, a mortar platoon cadet, recalled that his unit was deployed to Stalingrad before finishing their already-accelerated six-month training schedule. His regiment was almost completely destroyed and had to be combined with the depleted remnants of another.¹⁶¹ From 1943 onward, cadets-in-training were largely exempt from this practice as the tide of war began to turn against Germany.

As for newly conscripted infantrymen, many only received the most rudimentary and theoretical training during the war due to common shortages of weapons, equipment, ammunition, and gasoline. A veteran who was trained to lead a mortar squad remembered:

During our four months of study at the specialist school, not one of us fired a mortar a single time, even though we had been assigned to a mortar battalion. Our instructors probably planned to give us this chance at some point, but that time never came.¹⁶²

Mortars were only implemented in the Red Army in 1940. Most often, as Statiev writes, mortar crews were “hastily assembled from infantrymen who had never fired a mortar before coming to the front; these crews suffered so many accidents that some infantry officers explicitly prohibited

¹⁵⁹ Alexander Hill, *The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union, 1941-45: A Document Reader* (London: Routledge, 2008), 70.

¹⁶⁰ Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War*, 340.

¹⁶¹ Genrikh Kats in Drabkin, ed., *My khodili za liniuu fronta*, 218-219.

¹⁶² Gorbachevsky, *Through the Maelstrom*, 38.

the firing of mortars because they allegedly were ‘dangerous to handle.’”¹⁶³ In some especially tragic examples, many infantrymen recalled that there were severe shortages of rifles and ammunition in their training camps. In the words of one veteran, “We undertook parade drill and studied bayonet fighting. We had [only] one rifle with a bayonet and we lined up to stab an effigy. We were told how to shoot but had no shooting practice.”¹⁶⁴ Another infantryman, Gabriel Temkin, wrote that his training lacked shooting practice altogether; they simply practiced drill exercises with “wooden imitations of rifles.” It was only during his first battle that he held and shot from a real rifle for the first time.¹⁶⁵ The shooting practice of those soldiers who were lucky enough to receive a rifle and ammunition before departing to the front was also insufficient. As veteran Mansur Abdulin wrote of his cohort’s preparation, “Everyone has had a similar experience: a quick course of practice shoots at the Tashkent Infantry School,” before they were sent off to the front.¹⁶⁶

The result of poor combat training and mental preparation among the infantry, who had often never heard a rifle shot, let alone the sound of an artillery round, was evident on the battlefield and had a demoralizing effect on the troops. In most cases throughout the war, Soviet troops viewed the enemy’s warfighting skills as superior to their own. As one infantry veteran put it,

We attacked a village and fired a lot. When we took it, it seemed there were no dead Germans. Well, maybe, there were 30-40 killed, but we had lost about 700 men. Our officers and privates asked themselves: ‘What is going on? We suffer casualties but the Germans seem not to.’ [...] They were very skilled warriors. Their army was well-

¹⁶³ Statiev, *At War’s Summit*, 331-332.

¹⁶⁴ Statiev, *At War’s Summit*, 329.

¹⁶⁵ Gabriel Temkin, *My Just War: The Memoir of a Jewish Red Army Soldier in World War II* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1998), 38-39, 112.

¹⁶⁶ Mansur Abdulin, *Red Road from Stalingrad: Recollections of a Soviet Infantryman*, trans. Denis Fedosov, ed. Artem Drabkin (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military, 2004), 1.

trained, hardened by combat experience... Our company advances, but a section of theirs with one machine gun holds it off.”¹⁶⁷

Soviet ambivalence towards combat training and military professionalism throughout the decades, combined with the numerous institutional deficiencies in the Red Army’s training regimen itself, produced an army that struggled to compete with its German counterparts at a tactical level. After all, even during the Second World War, some instructors still taught new recruits obsolete and outdated civil war-era regulations and tactics.¹⁶⁸ The Soviet Union’s solution to its disadvantage was to make up for its army’s glaring qualitative weaknesses with an overwhelming strength in numbers and the complete mobilization of the country’s resources.

Another consequence of poor training and mental preparation was that many units in the field were liable to panic in the absence of immediate leadership. One soldier described such a scene on the first day of the invasion, which would become a repeated occurrence throughout the war:

The border guard and I were the first to run the distance to the northern garrison. Shooting began, we tumbled, crawled... We both passed. But the 40-60 guys we left behind, without a commander, all stampeded together like a herd of cattle. The Germans opened up a massive fire from automatic weapons... None of them got to us. Maybe they weren’t all killed, but we couldn’t go there... I think they all died... And so, from our unit, I was the only one left alive. Not a single person remained in the second battery. In the third battery, only one soldier was also left alive... This is how we fought. This is the picture we had.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Aleksandr Rogachev in Artem Drabkin, ed., *Glavnoe – vybit’ u nikh tanki* (Moscow: lauza-Eksmo, 2011), 307-308.

¹⁶⁸ Gorbachevsky, *Through the Maelstrom*, 11.

¹⁶⁹ These steep losses may be an exaggeration from the source. Regardless, the emergence of chaos in the ranks was a common phenomenon, which led to high casualties, Osaulenko, interview with Drabkin.

This unfortunate circumstance was common, as poor leadership among junior commanders was an institutional problem since the earliest days of the Red Army. Truncated and ineffective training courses, as well as poor education standards, often produced newly minted lieutenants unequipped to direct their units properly. Instead, they traditionally relied on bravery to lead their men, which usually led to high officer casualties. One lieutenant recalled, “Those days it was considered that a commander should only be in front of his troops, shouting: ‘Forward! Hurrah!’ and so on.”¹⁷⁰ The resultant high casualties among officers led to many inexperienced units being left without leadership, who were not equipped to continue fighting effectively. According to Reese, “When a unit’s officers were all killed, wounded, or otherwise taken out of action – a not uncommon occurrence – soldiers rarely took initiative to create a new chain of command and continue the mission.”¹⁷¹ This was the case because such actions would be contrary to the established culture of the Red Army.

If Soviet infantrymen lacked sufficient combat training, how did the RKKA prepare its specialists in the artillery, tank corps, and air forces? After all, a specialist is defined as a soldier who is specifically trained to perform a certain military mission. As it happened, combat training among specialist branches was also extremely inconsistent, short in duration, and lacking the most basic practical components. In the case of the artillery arm of the Red Army, shortages in equipment, weapons, and ammunition, combined with the accelerated pace of training, meant that many units could not practice shooting at a polygon before being deployed. While some artillery recruits did, in fact, experience sufficient training and were thus in high demand, as was the case of Nikolai Markov, examples such as his were relatively rare during the war. Markov’s

¹⁷⁰ Roger Reese, *Why Stalin’s Soldiers Fought: The Red Army’s Military Effectiveness in World War II* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 41-42.

¹⁷¹ Reese, *Why Stalin’s Soldiers Fought*, 82.

preparation was good enough for him to understand all the types of artillery ammunition and how to use them effectively, which prompted his reassignment to a more elite battery.¹⁷²

However, according to a veteran who was not so lucky during his training,

We shot very little. The battery fire training was only done by a few cadets. I was the ‘shooter’ and ‘fire adjuster’ only once. We fired on tank mock-ups on cables only twice. We only saw German tank models in pictures. But to battle in the anti-tank artillery, we needed more experience.¹⁷³

Another artilleryman described his unit’s battery fire training as minimal; they did not practice shooting at all. Instead, they mostly learned theory and practiced loading their guns with replica shells.¹⁷⁴ One gunner-in-training recalled getting a single practice shot to hit a half-buried tank with an armour-piercing shell. As soon as he hit the target, he had to beg his commanding officer for another attempt since he knew he would not receive it otherwise.¹⁷⁵ Thus, training in artillery schools prior to deployment was often completely inadequate. Instead, these men had to rely on learning the skills of their trade on the front, where many died before they got the chance to do so.

In the mechanized corps, one would expect that taking a tank into battle required extensive specialist training among tank crews. However, apart from the small number of experienced veterans from previous “small wars” who had already learned under fire, Soviet armoured forces were unready for the German invasion. Many of the armoured formations that encountered the Germans in 1941 were only formed that year and had little to no training since their creation. This led to severe losses among tank units and limited the number of objectives

¹⁷² Nikolai Markov in Drabkin, ed., *Glavnoe – vybit’ u nikh tanki*, 83.

¹⁷³ Monsei Dorman in Drabkin, ed., *Glavnoe – vybit’ u nikh tanki*, 161-162.

¹⁷⁴ Nikolai Shishkin in Drabkin, ed., *Glavnoe – vybit’ u nikh tanki*, 217.

¹⁷⁵ Vitalii Ulianov in Drabkin, ed., *Glavnoe – vybit’ u nikh tanki*, 30-31.

that they could complete. Largely, this occurred because the Soviets had erroneously disbanded five tank corps in 1939, after the Great Purge and the denial of the Tukhachevsky group's ideas about modern warfare. However, as Glantz writes, "Shocked by the sensational performance of German armoured forces in the 1940 French campaign, in mid-1940, the Soviets frantically attempted to atone for the mistakes they had made..." by ordering the creation of nine new mechanized corps in July 1940 and an additional twenty in early 1941.¹⁷⁶ At the start of the war, most of these corps were severely understrength, under-equipped, poorly trained, and combat ineffective. Invariably, high numbers of untrained and untested tankmen now had to compete against a confident and experienced German Army. A report prepared by Major General Morgunov on the performance of the armoured forces stated that,

During the course of 25 days of combat, in fulfilling missions to destroy the enemy, all mechanized corps suffered considerable equipment losses [...] The principal reasons for the great quantities of losses are: insufficient personnel training, especially among the conscripts of spring 1941; [...] and operations in forested-swampy terrain.¹⁷⁷

With such a lack of experience among tank crews, it is no wonder, then, that the Soviets struggled to stem the German advance during the first two years of the war. Not only had the Red Army's leadership proven itself inept in terms of command and control by this point, but also in their abilities to prepare the rank-and-file for modern tactical combat.

The difference between pre-war and wartime training in the armoured forces was significant. While Soviet tank training suffered from many of the same deficiencies as other arms during the 1930s, tank commanders had typically graduated after two years of specialist training. Ideally, during this time, they studied all types of tanks, how to drive, how to shoot, and a variety

¹⁷⁶ Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 116-117.

¹⁷⁷ Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 140.

of tank tactics. In the memoirs of tank commander A.V. Bodnar', for example, his cohort learned, among other things, the mechanical features of their BT tank "to the last screw."¹⁷⁸ Tank commander Nikolai Glukhov also remembered his pre-war training fondly: "Everything we learned became useful in battle. Our knowledge of weapon systems, as well as our technical training with the engine, cannon, and machine gun."¹⁷⁹ Bodnar's and Glukhov's experiences demonstrate that despite the systemic issues with training in the Red Army, the RKKA was still capable of producing at least somewhat competent tank crews during the late 1930s. During the war, however, cadets typically graduated from their tank schools with only six months of extremely minimal training. According to one such recruit,

At the time of my graduation from the academy I'd fired three rounds from the main gun and one MG ammo drum. What sort of training was that? They taught us a little bit about driving a BT-5, but they only taught us the basics – starting the engine and driving straight. We had tactical training, but it was mostly walking about on foot imitating the manoeuvring of tanks. We had a demonstration class, 'Tank platoon in assault,' only at the very end of our training. And that was it!¹⁸⁰

Another veteran who trained in the Gorky tank school in 1942 recalled: "Well, how could they prepare us in five months? Somehow... There was practically no shooting at all, we only studied marksmanship in theory. Basically, we studied the mechanics of the tank and driving."¹⁸¹ Two common phrases new tank crews heard from instructors and hardened frontline veterans alike were: "The war will teach you," and "Do as I do!"¹⁸² Even as late as 1943, during the Battle of Kursk, many tank crews had drivers who possessed less than five hours of driver training in their

¹⁷⁸ Grigorii Pervanskii in Artem Drabkin, ed., *la dralsia na T-34* (Moscow: Iauza-Eksmo, 2010), 51.

¹⁷⁹ Pervanskii in Drabkin, ed., *la dralsia na T-34*, 52.

¹⁸⁰ Aleksandr Fadin in Drabkin, ed., *la dralsia na T-34*, 129.

¹⁸¹ Konstantin Shich in Drabkin, ed., *la dralsia na T-34*, 453.

¹⁸² Ion Degen in Drabkin, ed., *la dralsia na T-34*, 357.

machines, making it extremely difficult to fight effectively against their better-trained German counterparts.¹⁸³

It was often the case that, especially in reserve regiments, tank crews were sent to battle only days after they were assembled, which prevented them from training together and developing solid crew cohesion. To make matters worse, as veteran Yuri Polyanovsky explains, such tank crews typically consisted of “motley people... [pouring in] from schools, from hospitals, from the front,” who often should not have found themselves in a tank in the first place. In Polyanovsky’s own tank, the loader was an elderly St. Petersburg worker who was two years older than his father.¹⁸⁴ Another veteran tank commander described his crew:

The driver-mechanic had a ten-year criminal record and, after the brief training, basically could not drive a tank. The gun layer was... a fat elderly man who could barely get in the tank. The gun loader, born in 1917, was somewhat mentally impaired... and feared the gun’s recoil.¹⁸⁵

With minimal training together, and with a crew such as his, it is a miracle that this tank commander lived to tell the tale. Others in similar circumstances were not so lucky.

In addition to the growing list of problems, the replacement of the obsolete light BT tank series with the more advanced heavy KV and medium T-34 tanks required extensive retraining for Soviet tank crews. The variances in the weight, functions, and mechanics of each tank meant that they had different roles in the battlefield environment and, hence, needed to be used differently from one another.¹⁸⁶ The very same tank commander Bodnar’, who had been extensively trained on the BT tank before the war, was re-assigned to a heavy KV tank in 1941.

¹⁸³ Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War*, 414.

¹⁸⁴ Yurii Polianovskii in Drabkin, ed., *la dralsia na T-34*, 91.

¹⁸⁵ Aleksandr Burchev in Drabkin, ed., *la dralsia na T-34*, 152.

¹⁸⁶ Statiev, *At War’s Summit*, 338.

Instead of receiving the rigorous training his and other tank crews deserved, Bodnar' recalled: "We were allowed to get into the heavy tank to drive it to Lenin's monument [in the city square], switch into reverse, and return. One more time, we were allowed to drive to Lenin's monument, this time in second gear rather than first, and return."¹⁸⁷ Bodnar' went to the front in the same KV tank with no additional training.

Even if a tank crew received a brand-new tank of the same model that they had trained in during tank school, they required time to familiarize themselves with the particularities of their new hardware; time which they often did not have. Veteran Nikolai Zheleznov describes the anxiety he felt with that exact problem:

Our exercises were carried out in training vehicles, but when they sent us to the front they gave us brand new tanks. Though they all looked the same, that was only at first glance. Each tank, each tank gun, each engine had its unique peculiarities. It was impossible to know them in advance and they could only be uncovered in the course of daily service. In the end we turned up at the front in unfamiliar vehicles. The commander didn't know the accuracy of his gun. The driver didn't know what his diesel could do and what it couldn't do. Sure, they'd adjust the guns at the production plants and make fifty-kilometre test-runs, but that wasn't enough at all. Obviously, we tried hard to learn more about our machines before combat and took every opportunity to do so.¹⁸⁸

Combat was where most tank crews refined their skills and knowledge of their equipment. Knowing these things could mean the difference between life and death. Yet, having to learn such skills under fire meant that many crewmen perished before they could become combat worthy.

It was only after the Battle of Kursk, having paid for its victory with grave losses, that the RKKA decided to pay closer attention to the combat training of its tank crews. Cadets received

¹⁸⁷ Aleksandr Bodnar' in Drabkin, ed., *la dralsia na T-34*, 71.

¹⁸⁸ Nikolai Zheleznov in Artem Drabkin and Oleg Sheremet, ed., *T-34 in Action*, trans. Dmitri Kovalevich et al. (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military, 2006), 157-158.

more prolonged training periods in tank schools, ranging up to “eight, twelve, or even eighteen months.” As Statiev writes, “From that point on, they were to spend several weeks on the training ground practicing tactics, tank driving, and shooting; other crew members were to go through six months of training.”¹⁸⁹ Still, even these improvements, while helpful, were quite minimal when compared to the training of their German counterparts. As one veteran simply put it, “German tank crews were better trained, and it was very dangerous to encounter them in action.” When recounting a tank engagement, he continued to emphasize the skill gap between Soviet and German tank crews: “We had to kill him instantly: if you let a German tank fire first and he missed with his first round, you had to bail out right away, as he’d always get you with the second. German tank crews were like that.”¹⁹⁰

Like the infantry and mechanized corps, the Red Air Force suffered immensely due to inadequate flight training. Accordingly, Soviet pilots suffered sustained and enormous casualties throughout the war against their well-trained counterparts in the Luftwaffe. In a candid report on the performance of the 43rd Aerial Division during a span of six months of combat operations in 1941, it read: “The flight crews were not sufficiently trained, did not have combat experience, knew very little of the tactics of their [own] aviation and that of the enemy; insufficiently knew how to use the aircraft’s weaponry, both in fighters and bombers.”¹⁹¹ This was not for lack of want among airmen to improve their skills, as they generally took their training very seriously when it was given. Yet, due to the same systemic deficiencies that plagued the Soviet military from its inception, the Red Air Force evolved into an amateur institution compared to other

¹⁸⁹ Statiev, *At War’s Summit*, 339.

¹⁹⁰ Vasili Briukhov in Drabkin and Sheremet, ed., *T-34 in Action*, 129, 141.

¹⁹¹ Mark Solonin, *Drugaiia khronologiia katactrofy 1941: Padenie stalinskikh sokolov* (Moscow: lauza-Eksmo, 2011), 289.

nations. As expressed by Vladimir Unishevsky, who became a combat pilot during the late 1930s,

My joy was soon tempered by the difficulties and vexations which beset the path of every would-be aviator in Soviet Russia. What with the defective organization, the muddled teaching, and the lack of materials and equipment, the pupil is for ever being brought up against an insuperable barrier to his progress. Everything he wants to learn or to accomplish is subject to the proviso: according to available means. If numbers of young Russians have become efficient pilots, it is in spite of, rather than because of, their Soviet training.¹⁹²

During the interwar years, a pilot studied for approximately two-and-a-half to three years before graduating from flight school. However, much of this training was theoretical, and, as Statiev writes, typically consisted in total of “about forty-five hours of flight on combat aircraft, fifteen firing exercises at air targets, and ten individual exercises in air combat, but no practice in team air combat or in flying in clouds or poor weather,” or in winter conditions.¹⁹³ In direct contrast, Luftwaffe cadet pilots prior to the war received 180 to 200 hours of total flight time before graduation, including flights in difficult weather conditions. Once they arrived at their units after aviation school, they were still not considered fully trained and had to undergo additional intensive training to be considered combat ready. By the time they fought Soviet airmen, most German pilots had amassed 250 flight hours, including training in group aerobatics, dog fighting, and aerial marksmanship.¹⁹⁴ Moreover, many such pilots had already amassed combat experience from campaigns in Poland and France. It comes as no surprise, then, that many

¹⁹² Unishevsky, *Red Pilot*, 55-56.

¹⁹³ Statiev, *At War's Summit*, 340.

¹⁹⁴ James Corum, *The Luftwaffe: Creating their Operational Air War, 1918-1940* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 250-251; A. Pekarsh, “Introduction,” in Drabkin, ed., *My dralis' na istrebiteliakh*, 8; Statiev, *At War's Summit*, 340.

candid accounts from Soviet veteran pilots indicate that, at the beginning of the Second World War, German combat aviators generally had superior professionalism in every way.¹⁹⁵

As in the armoured corps, the training crisis in the Red Air Force was worsened by a rapid expansion with thousands of new pilots, officers, and support personnel, which severely truncated training regimens. By spring of 1941, air combat schools typically only lasted ten months rather than two-and-a-half years, during which flight training was extremely minimal and rudimentary.¹⁹⁶ From 1940 to 1942, the Soviets produced a new generation of military aircraft en masse, including the “Iak-1, Mig-3, and LaGG-3 fighters, the Pe-2 dive bomber, and the Il-2 assault aircraft (*shturmovik*).”¹⁹⁷ Even relatively experienced pilots and class instructors had to re-train for the new generation of aircraft, which in turn impeded on the training of cadet pilots. During Operation Barbarossa, many pilots were so unfamiliar with new aircraft designs that they had to meet German pilots with obsolete fighter planes. Others, who had trained to fly older models before the war, were suddenly transferred to newer aircraft that they were hardly acquainted with at all – sometimes only after one practice flight.¹⁹⁸ Of the two alternatives, it is difficult to judge which group of Soviet aviators fared worse. Even if an experienced pilot had ‘familiarized’ himself with a newer model, basic mistakes were still common during battle:

A squadron commander (who had had a chance to master it) took off in the only MiG-1 present in the regiment. At that moment, a German reconnaissance plane came over: the squadron commander converged on it but wasn’t shooting. I thought: ‘What are you doing?!’ He peeled off, converged once more, but again there was no fire. When he landed, we went to clarify the problem. He said: ‘The trigger doesn’t work.’ But it was blocked by the safety frame! He should have just flipped it back!¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁵ Aleksandr Shvarev, Nikolai Golodnikov, in Drabkin, ed., *My dralis’ na istrebiteliakh*, 79, 170-171, 191-192.

¹⁹⁶ Pekarsh, “Introduction,” in Drabkin, ed., *My dralis’ na istrebiteliakh*, 7.

¹⁹⁷ Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 184, 189.

¹⁹⁸ Reese, *Stalin’s Reluctant Soldiers*, 158; Drabkin, *Barbarossa through Soviet Eyes*, 108; Statiev, *At War’s Summit*, 343-344.

¹⁹⁹ Drabkin, *Barbarossa through Soviet Eyes*, 105-106.

Thus, having been caught by the invasion during this overhaul in the air forces' makeup, training, and equipment, most Red pilots were not combat ready. As noted by a Soviet scholar after the war,

A majority of the flight crews lacked combat experience. The rapid growth of the VVS [Air Force] led to the advancement of a great number of young commanders at all levels of the VVS organizational structure. By June 1941 more than 91 percent of aviation formation commanders had commanded them for less than six months, 65 percent of the commanders at all levels had been in their duty positions for less than a year, and 43 percent for less than a year and a half. The young flight crews that had arrived in line units, particularly as a result of accelerated graduation from aviation schools, still required serious additional training.²⁰⁰

Much of a typical Soviet pilot's time in aviation school, both before and during the war, was spent performing tasks utterly unrelated to flight training. This was partially due to shortages in fuel and other equipment, but much of it can also be attributed to the poorly organized training programs. Many pilots frequently got stuck in theoretical classes, parade drills, guard duty, and other basic chores, rather than combat training.²⁰¹ What little flight training pilots received was spent conducting basic flight manoeuvres and training scenarios, which were inadequate for real battle. For instance, after one-and-a-half years of pre-war 'training,' a fighter pilot who graduated in 1940 recalled: "Of course, after aviation school, I did not know how to do anything besides taking off and landing, but it was considered that we mastered the U-2, I-5, and I-15 [aircraft]."²⁰² A bomber pilot, who had graduated in 1943 with 20 hours of flight time, outlined,

²⁰⁰ Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 189-190.

²⁰¹ Nikolai Smol'skii in Drabkin, ed., *Ia – bomber*, 53; Solonin, *Drugaiia khronologiiia katactrofy 1941*, 310.

²⁰² Sergei Gorelov in Drabkin, ed., *My dralis' na istrebiteliakh*, 311.

“The training we received at the school was very weak. 3-5 bombing run flights, once for diving.”²⁰³ Another veteran observed:

[...] when we started flying on the front, we suddenly realized that the flying techniques that we learned in the training school were not good for battle. In school, we were taught to fly safely, smoothly, and carefully. Sharp manoeuvres were not only not welcome, but forbidden... They gave us the training regimen of a ‘regular’ pilot, not an air fighter. At the front, we learned that the sharper your flying, the better.²⁰⁴

Many pilots-in-training understood that they were poorly prepared for combat and attempted to bring this up with their instructors and officers. However, their pleas for additional training fell on deaf ears. The following veteran corroborates the claim that it was forbidden to teach high-level manoeuvres and dog fighting skills in aviation schools despite his protests:

[...] I asked the instructor: ‘Show me how to conduct myself in a dog fight. After the ‘SB’ [high-speed bomber], there was no aerobatic training.’ He replied: ‘First, aerobatics are not allowed, second, if you find yourself in a battle, you’ll figure it out yourself. If not, you’ll be shot down.’ This was our training!²⁰⁵

Another aviator remembered:

So there, we got 5 hours of flight training, after which they decided to send us to the front. Again, I got anxious: ‘How can you send me to the front? I didn’t get to shoot a single time!’ – to which the instructor replied: ‘If you want to live – you’ll instantly teach yourself to shoot!’²⁰⁶

Ultimately, flight training for Soviet trainees was abysmal. In one bomber division, the total flight hours amounted to 4,335 hours over the course of four months, meaning that each crew, on

²⁰³ Andrei Kalinitsenko in Drabkin, ed., *Ia – bomber*, 175.

²⁰⁴ Aleksandr Anosov in Drabkin, ed., *Ia – bomber*, 196-197.

²⁰⁵ Ivan Gaidaenko in Drabkin, ed., *My dralis’ na istrebiteliakh*, 767-768.

²⁰⁶ Ivan Kozhemiako in Drabkin, ed., *My dralis’ na istrebiteliakh*, 403.

average, only received 12 hours of flight training in that time. Another division reportedly amassed 4,091 hours over the same period, giving each crew, on average, 14 hours of flight time. As Russian scholar Mark Solonin notes, even these were generous numbers.²⁰⁷ According to Statiev, most pilots in aviation schools only received up to five hours of independent flight time, and some as few as a single hour.²⁰⁸ When one compares these hours with the 180-250 hours of required Luftwaffe flight training leading up to the war, it is no wonder that Soviet aviators were so outclassed in air combat.

The result of minimal preparation among Soviet cadet pilots not only translated to high casualties in air battles but also in aviation schools and aerodromes. Due to the lack of flight training in poor weather, at night, and in winter, many cadets tragically lost their lives to flying accidents. The lack of parachute training and general safety precautions exacerbated these numbers even further. According to one veteran pilot during the 1930s:

During my time at the Sebastopol [Aviation] School I counted altogether eight fatal aeroplane accidents, and five with parachutes. How this compared with the number of victims elsewhere, I don't know. Even if statistics had been kept, we should not have had access to them. But what our comrades told us of conditions in other schools would appear to justify the general belief that ours held the lowest record for fatal accidents.²⁰⁹

Although precise counts of total flying accidents are difficult to find, this claim can also be corroborated by the Soviet war experience. In the Southwestern Front Air Force alone, Glantz writes that “faulty equipment and poor training led to the loss of... 242 aircraft due to accidents during the period from 22 June through 10 August [1941], which constituted 13 percent of total

²⁰⁷ Solonin, *Drugaia khronologija katactrofy 1941*, 158, 191.

²⁰⁸ Statiev, *At War's Summit*, 342.

²⁰⁹ Unishevsky, *Red Pilot*, 103.

aircraft losses (1,861) during the period.”²¹⁰ Such accidents could have been avoided if pilots knew how to fly in adverse conditions. Unfortunately, since Soviet aviation training was so minimal, many pilots had little choice on the matter and paid for it dearly.

In 1943, having suffered extensive losses in the first two years of the war, the Red Air Force officially recognized that the young pilots they were sending into battle were severely unprepared for the tasks ahead. While Soviet aviation schools continued to churn out undertrained young pilots until the end of the war, commanders at the front began prohibiting their assignment to combat missions until they received additional preparation. In most cases, novice pilots were sent into the frontline reserves to continue their training for periods ranging between ten days and three months, with an increased emphasis on the practical skills they would need in air combat.²¹¹ Only after this period did the more experienced pilots begin taking them on light assignments while keeping a close eye on them. At this point, only the more experienced pilots were sent on the dangerous missions – thereby preserving their skilled manpower as best they could.²¹² This way, while Soviet pilots were still typically less trained than their Luftwaffe counterparts, they at least had an increased chance of survival going into their first battles.

Throughout the Second World War, both the Western Allies and Germans made good use of amphibious landings and airborne missions to surprise their enemies. The Germans used paratroopers successfully during their invasions of Belgium and Denmark in 1940 and Crete in 1941, while the Western Allies, having first failed at Dieppe, famously executed Operation Torch and then invaded Normandy by using a large amphibious landing and an airborne assault

²¹⁰ Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 202.

²¹¹ Statiev, *At War's Summit*, 344.

²¹² Aleksandr Shvarev, Stepan Mikoian, Boris Eremin, Nikolai Golodnikov, Sergei Gorelov, Ivan Kozhemiako, Vladimir Tikhomirov, in Drabkin, ed., *My dralis' na istrebiteliakh*, 71, 100, 126, 178, 322, 477-478, 533; Statiev, *At War's Summit*, 344.

in tandem. The Americans also made numerous amphibious assaults throughout the Pacific campaign using specially trained marines.²¹³ The execution of such risky operations necessarily entailed a highly trained, specialized, and professional force. For their part, the Soviets also experimented with such formations and employed them in a limited capacity during the Second World War. However, unlike other nations' professional marines and paratroopers, Soviet troops were too poorly trained for such missions. Thus, they not only often failed whenever they were employed, but they did so at a high human cost.

On 4 January 1942, the Soviets conducted an amphibious assault against Evpatoria in the Crimea. This was a small but risky operation, for which a single battalion of marine-infantry was deemed sufficient. Yet, as Russian scholar Vladimir Kropotov explains, to call these men marines would be a stretch. There was no proper marine corps in the Red Army at that time. Yet, the designation was baselessly attached to a conglomerate of soldiers who came from various branches, ranging from sailors and regular infantrymen to antiaircraft gunners. Of 560 men taking part in the assault, 208 were drafted into the army only three days prior. None of these troops possessed specialized amphibious training, and almost half of them had no training at all in weapons handling or infantry tactics. Neither were these soldiers given any additional marine training in preparation for the assault.²¹⁴ Of the 560 men who took part in the landing, only 50 survived, 20 of whom became prisoners of war.²¹⁵ While the Soviets learned from this

²¹³ Benis M. Frank and Henry I. Saw, Jr., *History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations in World War II: Volume V: Victory and Occupation* (Washington: Historical Branch, G-3 Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1968), 656-658.

²¹⁴ Vladimir Kropotov, *Takticheskii desant: Evpatoriiskaia desantnaia operatsiia 4-5 ianvaria 1942 goda* (Simferopol: N. Orianda, 2018), 44-45.

²¹⁵ Kropotov, *Takticheskii desant*, 49.

experience, among others, and began to rehearse landings with constructed mock-ups, their success in amphibious operations was mixed until the end of the war.²¹⁶

Soviet paratroopers, for their part, did not fare much better than their amphibious contemporaries. Unlike the marines, Soviet paratroopers were a distinct arm of the RKKA since the early 1930s and were among the most elite of the army. They were well-motivated; typically possessed sufficient ammunition and weapons for training; and consistently practiced navigation both in the daytime and the dark.²¹⁷ Yet, parachute training was dangerous and often done haphazardly, which led to many accidental deaths in the corps.²¹⁸ Moreover, the RKKA had significantly expanded their existing six prewar airborne brigades with an additional five airborne corps by 1 June 1941 – that is, approximately 40,100 newly assigned paratroopers.²¹⁹ This meant that by the start of the war, the new airborne corps were overwhelmingly undertrained in infantry tactics and basic airborne procedures. As Glantz points out, “Many personnel had received only rudimentary parachute training, and 10 of the 16 brigades had received no training in jumping and operating as a unit.”²²⁰ Even well-trained paratroopers were often only nominally better trained than regular infantry. When asked to describe the special training paratroopers received, a veteran replied: “They didn’t make a Rambo out of us. We were regular infantry, ‘cannon fodder,’ it’s just that this ‘meat’ knew how to jump with parachutes and

²¹⁶ For an in-depth analysis of Soviet amphibious warfare during WWII, see Charles Atwater Jr., “Soviet Amphibious Operations in the Black Sea, 1941-1943,” *CSC*, 1995.

<https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1995/ACB.htm> [accessed November 3, 2022].

²¹⁷ Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 147.

²¹⁸ Matvei Likhтерman in Artem Drabkin, ed., *Vstavai, strana ogromnaia* (Moscow: Iauza-Eksmo, 2010), 16, 18.

²¹⁹ The total number of paratroopers in a single corps was determined to be 8,020 men. Roman Alekhin, *Vozdushno-decantr’ie voiska: istoriia rocciiskogo desanta* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2009), 62.

²²⁰ Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 148.

conduct battle in isolated environments.” The same veteran described his combat training as average and that there were only “a few” firing exercises.²²¹

During the summer of 1941, the Soviets attempted to use their airborne corps in large-scale operations on the Northwestern and Southwestern Fronts. Yet, due to a shortage of aircraft and lack of organization, these operations quickly dissolved into failures.²²² In the winter of 1942, the Soviets attempted another drop of paratroopers, this time near Viazma. The operation had to be temporarily postponed because half of the 201st Paratrooper Brigade set to jump had never received any parachute training. Moreover, eight of the thirty assigned air crews had never flown at night, increasing the risk of failure. Thus, over a span of four days, the airborne corps could only deploy 1,000 paratroopers, a small fraction of the number of men required for the entire operation.²²³ For reference, only two years later, the Americans dropped approximately 13,100 paratroopers in one night during the airborne landings in Normandy.²²⁴ While a total of approximately 14,000 Soviet paratroopers were eventually dropped near Viazma over the span of a little more than a month, many of the airborne troops dispersed over too wide an area due to inexperienced pilots and poor weather conditions.²²⁵ Of these paratroopers, only 4,000 managed to survive the ensuing four months behind enemy lines in what amounted to a complete operational failure.²²⁶

The crux of the Red Army, specialists included, consisted of undertrained soldiers who, in many cases, were not combat worthy heading into their first battles. Yet, established Soviet

²²¹ Likhтерman in Drabkin, ed., *Vstavai, strana ogromnaia*, 20, 22.

²²² Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 149.

²²³ Dmitrii Khazanov, *Viazemskie desanty zimoi 1941-1942* (Moscow: TDA, 2018), 33, 39, 44, 50-51.

²²⁴ John C. Warren, *Airborne Operations in World War II, European Theater* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.: USAF Historical Division, Research Studies Institute, Air University, 1956), 224.

²²⁵ David Glantz, *A History of the Soviet Airborne Forces* (Ilford: Frank Cass, 1994), 216.

²²⁶ Glantz, *A History of the Soviet Airborne Forces*, 310.

military culture had another detrimental effect on the specialist branches during the war. As

Statiev writes:

The widespread perception that training was optional caused two interrelated tendencies in the Red Army: assigning soldiers to jobs that had nothing to do with what they had been taught during their basic training and meeting immediate personnel shortages by forcing specialists who had undergone prolonged training to perform jobs that required only basic skills.²²⁷

Thus, in the jumbled call for reinforcements during the first year of the war, Red Army troops often found themselves in situations where their lives and specialized skillsets were wasted on unrelated military tasks. One infantry veteran trained to lead a mortar platoon was instead assigned to serve in an anti-tank battery in the artillery.²²⁸ The same happened to a commander trained to lead a large howitzer artillery battery. Rather than assigning him to one, the army attached him to an anti-tank battalion, for which he had no experience.²²⁹ During the Battle of Stalingrad in 1942, tank crews of the 137th Tank Brigade were waiting for replacement tanks when they were suddenly ordered to attack as infantry. “Having no knowledge of infantry tactics, these personnel suffered grave casualties.”²³⁰ As one veteran bomber pilot summarized the same issue in the Air Force:

Who will recall now, how in 1942 several thousand Air Force pilots and cadets of flight schools were thrown [in] as simple infantry near Stalingrad? And how many cadets were transferred to airborne brigades and disappeared without a trace in the tragic landings of the first period of the war? Why go far for examples... The junior year [cadets] of our KUSH school graduated as bombers, [but were instead] sent to the ski-battalions... When we met them, we could not believe our eyes. Pilot-navigators were preparing for a frontal attack across Lake Ilmen on German positions. White camouflage suits... SVT rifles... All of them were killed...²³¹

²²⁷ Statiev, *At War's Summit*, 329-330.

²²⁸ Gorbachevsky, *Through the Maelstrom*, 76.

²²⁹ Mikhail Chernomordik in Drabkin, ed., *Glavnoe – vybit' u nikh tanki*, 268, 269.

²³⁰ Statiev, *At War's Summit*, 330.

²³¹ Boris Rapoport in Artem Drabkin, ed., *Ia – bomber*, 469.

In December 1942, after many specialized Red Army personnel had been killed performing duties unrelated to their primary functions, Stalin finally released a decree forbidding “the use of tank and air force crews and other specialists as infantry.”²³² Yet, this decree did nothing to improve the poor quality of training these specialists typically received.

Granted, while soldiers in all arms of the Red Army were undertrained, many still became proficient warriors during the war. Soviet war memoirs and veteran interviews point to battlefield experience as being the best teacher of all. Specifically, both the process of combat itself and the diffusion of knowledge from veterans to new recruits were instrumental to adapting to life on the frontlines. However, the issue with this phenomenon was that learning soldiering skills on the front often came at a heavy price in human lives. Since a large proportion of the Red Army was inadequately trained, soldiers often lost their lives in their first battles. As one Soviet scout grimly stated, “We learned with our own blood.”²³³ Yet, once soldiers had survived their first few battles, they tended to have a much greater chance of surviving subsequent ones.

According to a Soviet pilot,

It must be admitted that in that period [1942], as at the beginning of the war, the losses of aircrew were enormous. First of all, this was due to the fact that pilots were released into battle unprepared. The young ones, as a rule, were shot down in their first battles. But if they survived their first 2-3 battles, then they would fly.²³⁴

A tank platoon leader observed a similar rule in the mechanized corps:

²³² Statiev, *At War's Summit*, 330; Joseph Stalin, “Prikaz ob ispol'zovanii tankistov po spetsial'nosti,” December 13 1942, in Artem Drabkin, ed., *Ia dralsia na T-34*, 558.

²³³ Shalom Skopas in Drabkin, ed., *My khodili za liniuu fronta*, 71.

²³⁴ Stepan Mikoian in Drabkin, ed., *My dralis' na istrebiteliakh*, 108.

Of course, experienced tankmen lived longer. A simple example. A replacement company of ten tanks would arrive, but we might have four experienced tank commanders in the battalion reserves. So, we'd take away the four weakest tank commanders from the ten that had arrived and either send them back to a factory to bring more tanks or put them in the battalion reserve. Drivers and other crewmen might also be replaced. After a couple of weeks of fighting only one or two young commanders would be left out of the six, while probably only one 'old pal' would be killed during the same period. Experienced crewmen were killed 30 per cent less than green replacements. Battle experience is an important thing! Even one battle could teach you more than your entire armour academy course.²³⁵

Since battle-hardened soldiers experienced much lower casualties than the rest, it is only natural that newly arrived troops sought their wisdom before the onset of battle. Conversely, veterans tended to teach new replacements as much as they could in their spare time. The skills novice troops obtained in this manner ranged widely from learning how to clean a mortar tube during combat to knowing what to do when under artillery bombardment. Even small pieces of advice were appreciated, such as putting on clean underwear before an attack. According to one veteran, "If your underwear is dirty and you are wounded, bullets or shrapnel will pull dirty bits of fabric into the wound and you can get a potentially lethal infection."²³⁶ One young tank commander perfectly summarized the value of the variety of lessons that veteran soldiers passed on:

We got a lot of help from such experienced tankmen. They taught us the skills and tricks of tank combat. They explained to us how to move, how to manoeuvre so as not to catch a shell. They made us get rid of the springs from the latches of the commander's double-flap hatch: even a pretty strong man had a lot of trouble opening that, and a wounded one wouldn't manage it at all. They explained that it would be better to keep the hatches open, making it easier to jump out. They adjusted the guns for us. They did everything to make us battle-ready.²³⁷

²³⁵ Briukhov in Drabkin, ed., *T-34 in Action*, 140-141.

²³⁶ Abdulin, *Red Road from Stalingrad*, 3; Bogachev, *For the Motherland! For Stalin!*, 61-62.

²³⁷ Aleksandr Burtsev in Drabkin, ed., *T-34 in Action*, 121.

A scout platoon veteran remembered that in his unit, the more experienced soldiers taught what they could to the new replacements: “Everything was according to the principle: ‘Do as I do.’ During the first two months, a newcomer either died or became a professional scout.”²³⁸ Thus, while high proportions of novice troops lost their lives in their first battles, the lessons that the survivors learned improved their warfighting skills considerably over a short timespan. Veteran soldiers then had an increased chance of survival in subsequent battles. In turn, they also did what they could to prepare the next generation of fighters for success. In the Red Army, troops had little choice but to learn quickly on the job, as the alternative was a grave injury or death.

Despite the grim picture that has been set regarding the dismal state of training in the RKKA, this does not necessarily mean that overall Soviet combat capacity during WWII was substantially lower than that of Germany. In the second half of the war, the quality of Wehrmacht troops decreased as experienced soldiers perished and had to be replaced with increasingly hastily trained reserves. Yet, on average, Germany still possessed better-trained soldiers throughout the entire war, even despite eventual Soviet efforts to shorten the gap.²³⁹ Stavka (Soviet High Command) eventually discovered a way to make up for their tactical disadvantage by other means. As Statiev writes, “Soviet generals learned, with time, how to fight a modern war with the force they had at hand – poorly trained but larger than that of the enemy and supported by overwhelming numbers of high-quality weapons.”²⁴⁰ Moreover, the operational ideas of fallen predecessors in the Tukhachevsky group made a stunning return and, over time, Soviet wartime commanders relearned the Deep Battle/Operation doctrine of the 1930s.²⁴¹ From 1943 to 1945, the Soviets began to see increasing success in their operational and strategic goals,

²³⁸ Genrikh Kats in Drabkin, ed., *My khodili za liniu fronta*, 225.

²³⁹ Statiev, *At War's Summit*, 345.

²⁴⁰ Statiev, *At War's Summit*, 345.

²⁴¹ Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art*, 29-30, 98, 100.

and began to regularly outmanoeuvre German divisions until they achieved total victory. Yet, at the tactical level, the Soviets experienced disproportionately higher casualties until the very end of the war. In accordance with Russian tradition, Soviet generals consistently threw unprepared troops into battle, regardless of the losses incurred, in the hopes of crushing their enemies with superior numbers. As one Soviet postwar analyst concluded:

As the analysis of documents, publications, and memoirs demonstrate, a considerable number of senior commanders, including the well-known G. K. Zhukov, I. S. Konev, N. F. Vatutin, F. I. Golikov, A. I. Eremenko, G. I. Kulik, S. M. Budenny, K. E. Voroshilov, S. K. Timoshenko, R. Ia. Malinovsky, V. D. Sokolovsky, V. I. Chuikov, and some of lower ranks, who considered soldiers as “cannon-fodder,” fought with maximum losses. On the other hand, K. K. Rokossovsky, A. A. Grechko, A. V. Gorbatov, E. I. Petrov, I. D. Cherniakhovsky, and several others fought with minimum casualties but still at the required professional level. Unfortunately, the latter were in the minority. Therefore, V. Astef’ev was correct when he declared, “We simply did not know how to fight. We finished the war without knowing how to fight. We poured out our blood and threw back the enemy with our bodies.”²⁴²

²⁴² Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 58. Regular soldiers fully understood that their commanders were willing to sacrifice high quantities of men for victory. See also Gabriel Temkin, *My Just War*, 117.

Conclusion

By the end of the Second World War, according to Krivosheev, the Soviets had lost a staggering 11,285,057 Red Army men and women, with an additional 29,629,205 sick and wounded.²⁴³ A large proportion of the latter group would be maimed for the rest of their lives, and almost all would suffer from psychological stress in the ensuing years. While many – perhaps most – of these casualties could be attributed to far-reaching operational and strategic blunders committed by Soviet High Command prior to and during the war, consistently poor combat training at an institutional level was undoubtedly responsible for a large quantity of deaths and injuries. After all, operational and strategic success hinges on tactical outcomes. Yet, the Red Army never fully mastered tactical training. For decades leading up to WWII, this analysis has shown that the RKKKA, as an institution, was ill-organized and directed to prepare soldiers for modern combat.

To reiterate, in the aftermath of the Russian Civil War, due to economic and ideological constraints, the RKKKA implemented a large militia-based territorial system with a small regular army component that, for the most part, eschewed professionalism. Short rounds of conscription meant that large quantities of Red Army men obtained, at most, a minimal amount of combat training during their tenures of service, after which they returned to civilian life. This reinforced the ideologically driven perception that competence and expertise were not necessary for success, which only further hampered military professionalism. Instead, one only needed to display loyalty and devotion to the revolutionary cause to achieve victory. Additionally, the experiences of the Russian Civil War, which saw large masses of untrained Red Army men defeat smaller, more professionalized armies, supported this idea from a military-historical

²⁴³ Krivosheev, *Soviet Casualties and Combat Losses in the Twentieth Century*, 96-97.

perspective. In effect, the foundations of Soviet training doctrine moving forward from this moment shifted towards dilettantism and amateurism, rather than professionalism and focusing on developing specialized skills among soldiers.

While newfound Bolshevik ideas began to take hold in the military, several negative imperial influences began to seep in as well. The largest of these factors were that the Bolsheviks inherited the Russian wartime tradition of using strict top-down command structures and the exploitation of the mass army as a key military advantage. This had several repercussions on how Tsarist and, later, Soviet commanders approached combat training. First, the rank-and-file was rarely taught to think creatively or seize initiative during battle and was instead taught to obey commands unquestioningly. As a result, in the absence of immediate leadership, Soviet troops were liable to become disorganized and combat ineffective during battle. This also significantly strained the Soviet officer corps since NCOs typically did not learn how to perform leadership and training-related duties. The enormous burden of responsibility placed on largely uneducated officers, combined with the traditional Russian emphasis on quantity over quality, meant that the combat training Soviet troops received was focused almost exclusively on the company or regimental level, and seldom at the squad or platoon level.²⁴⁴ It was especially rare for troops to receive adequate training instruction on an individual level to ensure their aptitude in fighting-related tasks. These old influences contributed significantly to flawed Soviet thinking concerning training, which typically produced soldiers who had little idea of how to perform their jobs effectively.

The training that Red Army territorial and regular troops received was often shoddy, poorly organized, and rife with laziness and shortcuts. Not only were officers severely hindered

²⁴⁴ Smirnov, *Boevaia vyuchka Krasnoi Armii nakanune repressii*, Vol II, 106.

by the amount of responsibility they bore over their units, but they often had little idea of how to conduct combat training in the first place. At first, there was no established methodology for the training of troops and, thus, poorly directed officers, who were often poorly trained themselves, arbitrarily created their own improvised training regimens. These regimens were not only methodologically unsound, but also sometimes resulted in soldiers learning the wrong skills altogether, since there was such minimal central oversight. Only in the 1930s did Soviet military theorists begin to take tentative steps in search of a solution, but by then, unhealthy military traditions were already set in place, and the Great Purge stopped what work theorists did produce dead in its tracks.

In many cases, a plethora of non-military-related tasks severely impeded on combat training in the RKKA. The government assigned some of these as an official component of Soviet economic policy, such as the dedication of troops to grand construction projects and agricultural collectivization efforts. In such instances, conscripts spent most, if not all, of their terms of service acting as cheap labourers rather than soldiers. Even when the state did not explicitly assign economic missions to troops, living conditions in the RKKA had so little central support that entire units had to break off from training to conduct basic chores to increase their poor standards of living. Such “household tasks” varied from maintaining unit farms and raising money for the regiment to constantly having to work on poorly maintained barracks. The additional strain of Soviet multiculturalism on unit training meant that Russian-speaking officers and conscripts belonging to ethnic minorities, who comprised a large proportion of the RKKA, often could not understand one another. In many cases, this led to racism and tyranny among the officer corps, as well as insubordination, a lack of loyalty, and poor morale among enlisted troops. These issues dramatically decreased the combat training and overall combat capacity of

such formations. When the Red Army finally did get to training, a considerable amount of it was replete with exercises that had little to do with sharpening combat capabilities. In most circumstances, units endured more political indoctrination lessons and parade drills than shooting practice. Military and state leaders deemed such exercises necessary, primarily for political and morale purposes, but they evidently did little to increase the army's tactical combat capacity.

The poor interwar training system in the RKKA resulted in a mass of poorly coordinated and undertrained conscripts with few tactical capabilities in a modern conflict. The series of "small wars" waged by the USSR in the late 1930s was testimony to this fact. While the Soviet Union came out on top due to its economic superiority, high-quality weapons, and strength in numbers, the Red Army had still proven itself to be a "stumbling colossus," as coined by Glantz. Not only did the Soviets embarrass themselves on the world stage, but they lost many more troops than they otherwise should have. The poor showing of the Red Army during the Winter War even convinced Hitler that an attack on the Soviet Union would result in massive success, leading directly to Operation Barbarossa.

Hitler was not the only leader convinced of the Red Army's newfound weakness. Stalin himself realized this and started a shift in military policy toward more realistic and practical training. While the Soviets finally attempted to remedy their mistakes during 1940 with the Timoshenko reforms, such efforts were ultimately too poorly conceived and implemented far too late to make any meaningful impact in the span of a little more than a year. The vast expansion of the Red Army and Red Air Force from 1939 to 1941 created additional cracks in an already strained system. The RKKA severely reduced training to the point of almost complete inefficacy, and, as Reese shows, the previously struggling officer corps was even less equipped to arrange for the rapid influx of new conscripts for battle.

As Operation Barbarossa commenced, the Germans caught the Red Army completely off guard. Due to the pressing need for reinforcements in the first half of the war, already accelerated training schedules accelerated even further, and the quality of training decreased accordingly as well. While the Soviets had nominally addressed the training crisis in the second half of the war in response to significant losses, newly mobilized soldiers across all arms of the military still arrived at the front with less preparation than their German counterparts. Thus, for the hard lessons Red Army soldiers learned on the front, they had to pay a steep price in blood. Only if they survived their first few engagements did they have the potential to become proficient fighters on par with their enemy. Yet, the fact remains that the Soviets had not sufficiently trained their troops in preparation for a large-scale modern war; and for this, they paid dearly.

In the end, we must ask one final question: Did the Soviets learn from their mistakes in the Second World War, and did the quality of Soviet military training improve in subsequent decades? During the interwar period and WWII, the RKKA learned many hard lessons regarding combat training. Yet, post-war military and state leaders failed to expand upon them in subsequent decades. It is likely by this point that negative trends in Soviet military culture had become so ingrained in the armed forces, and attempts at reform so mired in bureaucracy, that it would be next to impossible to change the trajectory of official training doctrine. Most notably, the government was unable to overhaul the NCO corps to create professional soldiers capable of training enlisted troops. According to Christopher Connelly, in the post-war period:

Most Soviet NCOs are conscripts – junior sergeants, sergeants or senior sergeants – who have been selected on conscription and sent for the first six months of their two-year national service to a NCO training unit. From here they take up sub-unit appointments for the remaining eighteen months. As they are, therefore, in the main only eighteen or nineteen years of age, they have no advantage or experience over their conscript colleagues. Consequently, the status of sergeant in the Soviet Army is not as high as it is in the British Army... He cannot in terms of ability or responsibility be in any way

equated to a British regular NCO of today... The Soviet conscript NCO cannot be expected to relieve the junior officer who commands the platoon or company of the tedium of running the sub-unit or instructing in basic training in the way that NCOs do for the junior officer in a British Army unit.²⁴⁵

As was the case before, the Soviet officer corps exclusively shouldered the burden of responsibility over basic military functions. Officers regularly conducted haphazard military training, using inadequate methodological instructions on how to instill correct combat skills in their troops.

During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, poorly trained conscripts again suffered significant casualties – this time, in counterinsurgency operations. Many sources consistently point to the poor performance of Soviet regular forces during engagements with the Mujahideen – much of which could have been rectified with more rigorous training in counterinsurgency and mountain warfare.²⁴⁶ During this period, regular conscripts still typically only received three to six months of military training before being deployed in Afghanistan.²⁴⁷ As the WWII experience had shown, this was insufficient time for soldiers to obtain the necessary combat skills. By 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev, the new General Secretary of

²⁴⁵ Christopher Donnelly, "The Soviet Soldier," in *The Soviet Military: Political Education, Training, and Morale*, ed. E. S. Williams, Donnelly, and Moore (Hampshire and London: The Macmillan Press, 1987), 114. Today's Russian Armed Forces are still struggling to form a well-functioning, professional NCO corps. Chuck Bartles, "Russian Armed Forces: Enlisted Professionals," *Foreign Military Studies Office* (2019): 4-6. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2019/March/Russian-NCOs/> [accessed November 3, 2022].

²⁴⁶ Jonathan Gandomi, "Lessons from the Soviet Occupation in Afghanistan for the United States and NATO," *Journal of Public and International Affairs*, 19 (2008): 55; Statiev, *At War's Summit*, 346-347.

²⁴⁷ Petras Gaškas, interview by Cloé Drieu and Elisabeth Sieca-Kozłowski, *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, 20-21, 2019. <https://journals.openedition.org/pipss/4917#tocto1n2> [accessed November 3, 2022]; Robertas Krikstaponis, interview by Cloé Drieu and Elisabeth Sieca-Kozłowski, *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, 20-21, 2019. <https://journals.openedition.org/pipss/4889> [accessed November 3, 2022]; Victor Alerguş, interview by Cloé Drieu and Elisabeth Sieca-Kozłowski, *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, 20-21, 2019. <https://journals.openedition.org/pipss/5518> [accessed November 3, 2022].

the USSR, compelled by public outcry, criticized the party for using “untrained new recruits in the [Afghanistan] conflict.”²⁴⁸

With the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991, the Russian Federation assumed much of the same military culture that had dominated the Soviet Union for seven decades. During the First Chechen War (1994-1996), the Russians again experienced higher-than-expected casualties putting down a large-scale insurgency. Again, the underfunded military often threw young, unprepared conscripts into battle without fully fleshing out their combat skills beforehand. Many recruits received ten days of combat training only. As one unlucky veteran recalled: “There was a week of preparation. Literally, in a week we were supposed to do it all. Well, the preparation was: in basic training we threw grenades a few times and there was shooting practice, we each got maybe three cones of bullets.”²⁴⁹ It was only during the Second Chechen War (1999-2000) that the Russian government under Vladimir Putin understood its mistake concerning combat training. Conscripts were nominally better trained for battle this time, but Russian casualties were mitigated by the indiscriminate bombing and shelling of towns and villages.²⁵⁰

After the Russia-Georgia War in 2008, Russia spent the next four years enacting a large-scale modernizing reform meant to improve, among other issues, professionalism. The Russian Army began replacing a large portion of conscripts with contract professionals. However, as

²⁴⁸ Julie Elkner, “*Dedovshchina* and the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers under Gorbachev,” in Françoise Daucé and Elisabeth Sieca-Kozłowski, ed., *Dedovshchina in the Post-Soviet Military: Hazing of Russian Conscripts in a Comparative Perspective* (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2006), 165.

²⁴⁹ Sergei, interview by Elisabeth Sieca-Kozłowski, *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, 14-15 (2013). <https://journals.openedition.org/pipss/3992> [accessed November 3, 2022]; Stephen Cimbala, “Russian Threat Perceptions and Security Policies: Soviet Shadows and Contemporary Challenges,” *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, 14-15: 14/15 (2012). For a more in-depth discussion of training in the First Chechen War, see Pjer Simunovic, “The Russian Military in Chechnya – A Case Study of Morale in War,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 11:1 (1998): 73, 74-75.

²⁵⁰ Cimbala, “Russian Threat Perceptions and Security Policies.”; Amnesty International, “Amnesty International Report 2001 - Russian Federation,” June 1, 2001. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3b1de38016.html> [accessed November 2, 2022].

Roger McDermott notes, among other factors, the lack of overall direction in planning and the failure to incentivize the creation of a new professional NCO corps have severely limited the reform's success.²⁵¹ The old Soviet military culture had become so ingrained by this point that it was difficult to attain even the limited objectives of the reform. Despite a resultant slow rise in military professionalism, large swathes of the Russian Armed Forces continue to be underfunded and undertrained for their assigned roles. Russia's poor military performance during the recent invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 confirms this assessment.

Numerous interviews and reports emerging from the Russo-Ukrainian War have indicated that Russia is again facing a growing crisis in combat training. Obviously, such sources should be treated with extreme care, given the political sensitivity of the ongoing invasion and the predominance of propaganda in all spheres of discussion. Current Russian law states that newly inducted conscripts are only allowed to deploy to a warzone after four months of training.²⁵² Regardless, many newly mobilized conscripts have received little to no combat training before deployment; the military has even re-introduced penal battalions as a component of the Wagner private military contractor group attached to the Russian Armed Forces. The conscripts typically undergo only one to three weeks to familiarize themselves with their rifles and gear before being sent to the frontline. Sometimes, they are assigned to assault groups with no combat training, both due to lax training standards and the chronic lack of ammunition and equipment.²⁵³ According to some interviews, the professional and specialized components of the

²⁵¹ Roger McDermott, "The Brain of the Russian Army: Futuristic Visions Tethered by the Past," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 27:1 (2014): 9-10, 19-20, 21-24.

²⁵² Sasha Petrova, "Explainer: How Does Conscription Work in Russia?," Al Jazeera, May 5, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/5/are-russian-conscripts-fighting-in-ukraine> [accessed November 10, 2022].

²⁵³ "Video reveals a major problem for new Russian soldiers," CNN, October 13, 2022, YouTube video, 00:10-00:50, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oMROE1Yjvs&ab_channel=CNN [accessed November 3, 2022]; "Interview with captured convict from Wagner PMC in Ukraine," War Translated – Ukraine War

Russian Armed Forces, such as the VDV paratrooper brigades, have performed better than their conscripted counterparts, but still have suffered from insufficient specialized training.²⁵⁴ Tank crews, like the infantry, have reportedly deployed to the front with poor overall combat preparation. Many crews are formed only weeks before being deployed, which does not provide the required amount of time to become a proficient fighting force.²⁵⁵ As increasing amounts of trained professional troops are lost to the war, the depth of the current Russian combat training crisis will only grow. Hastily trained and unmotivated conscripts have served as poor replacements for the Russian war effort, which has contributed to the increased territorial losses Russia has suffered in recent Ukrainian counteroffensives.

Overall, while the situation in Ukraine is fluid and confused, it seems that in over a century, and despite repeatedly stepping on the same rake, the Russians have consistently struggled to address problems related to military professionalism. They have developed a robust military culture that tends to eschew this important element. Thus, it will be difficult for Russian military reformers to remedy the army's tactical weaknesses over the short term. While this

Archive, September 19, 2022, YouTube video, 8:03-8:30, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hxsHFkxYOTY&ab_channel=WarTranslated-UkraineWarArchive [accessed November 3, 2022]; "Konflikt na polygone u glavnogo khrama vooruzhenn'ikh sil RF," Meduza, November 14, 2022, YouTube video, 0:00-2:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYJwlcwlcok> [accessed November 24, 2022]; "Russian mobiks are shocked to find out they're assault troops instead of territorial defense and claim they've never even seen a rifle yet (translation in comments)," u/sunlegion, November 18, 2022, Reddit video, 0:00-1:03, https://www.reddit.com/r/UkraineWarVideoReport/comments/yyqfud/russian_mobiks_are_shocked_to_find_out_theyre/ [accessed November 24, 2022]. For the serious training issues faced by the Luhansk People's Republic and Donetsk People's Republic forces, which are attached to the Russian Army, see also Igor Girkin, "Strelkov (Girkin) -- On the failure of the 2nd phase of the special operation (05/12/2022)," Garri Pol'skii & MAD SHOW BOYS, May 13, 2022, YouTube video, 5:35-6:50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OcdOtZ1N27A> [accessed November 3, 2022].²⁵⁴ Volodymyr Zolkin, "Survivor: Russian VDV Airborne Soldier Talks About Their Initial Invasion Of Hostomel Airport," Conflict Camera, April 21, 2022, YouTube video, 3:30-4:53, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TStvtOgp4ow&ab_channel=ConflictCamera [accessed November 3, 2022].²⁵⁵ "I fought in the war for 5 minutes, asked to stay on Ukrainian side" - Russian soldier in capture," War Translated – Ukraine War Archive, September 18, 2022, YouTube video, 2:15-4:30, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3l2FgTr4fUw&ab_channel=WarTranslated-UkraineWarArchive [accessed November 3, 2022].

study deserves to be followed up by additional analyses, the findings expressed provide useful historical context for Russia's tactical combat capacity during the current Russo-Ukrainian War. It remains to be seen whether Russia can finally learn from its past mistakes and resolve its glaring issues in combat training.

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Glossary

Blitzkrieg – Lightning war, used to describe German tactical doctrine with an emphasis on the element of surprise and combined arms warfare pursuing a swift and decisive strategic victory

BVO (*Belorusskii voennyi okrug*) – Belorussian Military District

Divizion - Artillery battalion consisting of three artillery batteries

Glubokaia operatsiia – Deep Operation, the concept of deep battle applied to an operational context

Glubokii boi – Deep Battle, used to describe Soviet/Russian military doctrine with an emphasis on combined arms warfare and defeating enemy forces throughout the depth of the battlefield

KUSh (*Kursy usovershenstvovaniia letnogo sostava*) – Pilot school

Luftwaffe – German Air Force

MTPP-33 (*Metodika takticheskoi podgotovki pekhoty*) – Manual on Tactical Training of Infantry

NCO – Non-commissioned officer

NKVD (*Narodnyi komissariat vnutrennikh del*) – People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs

OKDVA (*Osobaia krasnoznamenaia dal'nevostochnaia armiia*) – Separate Red Banner Far Eastern Army

Politrak – Political commissar

PU-36 (*Polevoi ustav-36*) – Field Regulations of 1936

PURKKA (*Politicheskoe upravlenie RKKA*) – Political Directorate of the RKKA

RKKA (*Raboche Krestianskaia Krasnaia Armiia*) – The Red Army of Workers and Peasants

Shagistika – Close-order drill

Stavka – High Command of the Soviet Armed Forces

VDV (*Vozdushno-desantnye voiska*) – Paratroopers

Voenspets – Ex-Tsarist military officers in the employ of the Red Army

VVS (*Voenna-vozdushnye sily*) – Air Force

Wagner Group – Russia-based private military company

Wehrmacht – German Defense Force