

## **THE SOVIET MILITARY 1936-1945: DEVASTATION TO VICTORY**

JONATHAN PHILLIPS (HISTORY)

**Abstract:** This essay, using specialised military literature and relating the subject matter to current Anglo-American debates on Stalin's Russia, assesses the internal and external factors shaping the fate of the Soviet military from 1936-45. The factors highlighted include the impact of Stalin's purges, Soviet military strategy and policy, any failure made by the Germans themselves and Western aid to the USSR. The essay seeks to evaluate the relative merits of each of these in explaining the transformation of the Soviet military from the purges, which began in the late 1930s, through to the end of the Second World War.

**Keywords:** Lend-lease, Red Army, Second World War, Soviet Military Strategy, Stalin's Purges, Wehrmacht.

On June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1941 German forces, comprising some 2800 tanks, 4950 aircraft, 47,260 artillery pieces and 5.5 million soldiers, thundered across the Soviet border, beginning a devastating war in which 25 million Soviet citizens, both soldiers and civilians, would die (Ward 2011, 189 and Rees 1999, 13). The German Army, the *Wehrmacht*, made astonishing initial victories, annexing the Baltic States and driving deep into Belarus and the Ukraine by August. By the end of the year German troops had captured Kiev, besieged Leningrad and were threatening Moscow, killing 1.5 million and capturing some 3 million Soviet soldiers along the way. The Soviet Red Army's failure in the face of this onslaught, alongside similar military disasters in the inter-war period – particularly the Red Army's pyrrhic victory in the 1939-40 Soviet-Finnish war where Soviet forces lost 175,000-200,000 men compared to just 23,000 Finnish losses – suggest that the Red Army of the immediate pre-war period was a fundamentally weak institution (Ward 2011, 189-91). One of the most common explanations for this weakness is that the 1937-8 purges of the Soviet officer corps devastated the Red Army's ability to fight effectively (Stone 2002, 75). If this is the case, one might assume that, when placing the Red Army's early failures alongside their ability to – in a stunning counter offensive which saw them smashing into the German hinterland by January 1945 – reverse the German offensive, the Soviet military, between the pre-war period and 1945, went from devastation to victory.

This essay examines the state of the Red Army prior to the purges and investigates the effects of the purges and Soviet rearmament in the inter-war period to assess whether the Red Army can be considered 'devastated' and to what degree the source of this devastation lies in the 1937-8 purges. It also examines the development of the Red Army between 1941 and 1945, allied assistance given

to the Soviet Union during the War and German mistakes during their invasion of the Soviet Union, in order to understand the contribution of each to Soviet victory.

The common assertion that the devastation of the Red Army began with the 1937-8 purges suggests that prior to this period the Red Army, if not a strong military force, was at least a competent one. A brief inspection of the state of the Red Army in 1936 would seem to support such a suggestion. David R. Stone notes that the growing threat perceived in Japanese hostility in the 1920s, culminating in the Japanese occupation of Manchuria in 1931, created a massive rearmament drive in the Soviet Union (Stone 2002, 69). For the last year of the First Five Year Plan (economic goals created by Stalin to strengthen the Soviet economy between 1928 and 32) and the duration of the Second Five Year Plan (introduced in 1932) rearmament was a priority of the Soviet Economy. This enabled the Soviet defence industry to increase production rates massively. In 1932 the USSR produced 4000 tanks, a number that in 1929 would have taken four years to produce (Stone 2002, 69). From 1933 onwards, approximately 3000 tanks and other armoured vehicles were produced per year with similar rates of growth in the production of aircraft, artillery and other armaments, making the USSR the world's foremost producer of mechanised military hardware (Glantz & House 1995, 9-10). A combination of tank designs purchased abroad and talented Soviet aircraft designers ensured that much of the hardware produced in this period was advanced for its time (Stone 2002, 69-70). Furthermore, the Red Army Military theory of this period was also particularly advanced. During the 1920s and early 1930s Soviet Military theorists, such as Civil War Veterans, Mikhail Tukhachevsky and Vladimir Triandafillov, drew on the lessons of the First World War and Russian Civil War to develop a new strategic theory for the Red Army known as Deep Operations. This focused on the use of concentrated, combined arms forces utilising planes, tanks, artillery and infantry 'to penetrate the elaborate defence systems developed during the First World War' (Glantz & House 1995, 8), then to use mobile mechanised forces to encircle enemy formations attacking them from the rear and flanks preventing the enemy from forming a solid frontline. Whilst similar ideas were being developed in most major armies of the time, many failed to appreciate the benefits tanks could provide in penetrating enemy defences. The Soviet Union's superior production rate, technological advancement and advanced strategic concepts gave the Red Army of 1936 the potential to field a world class mechanised force.

Thus, on the eve of the purges the Red Army was far from devastated. That the purges altered this state of affairs is difficult to deny. Beginning with the execution of 8 members of the Red Army Command in June 1937, accused of treason and participating in a counter-revolutionary Trotskyite

plot against the Communist Party leadership (Conquest 2008, 182-3), by the end of 1938 Stalin's purge of the military had removed – via execution, arrest and dismissal – 35,020 officers from their posts within the Command Structure (Glantz 1998, 37). The loss of so many was to have a devastating effect on the effectiveness of Red Army leadership, particularly because the Army was still expanding under the Second Five year plan (Glantz 1998, 29). In order to replace those purged, the Red Army began a process of accelerated promotion of junior officers to ranks beyond their training. Between March 1937 and March 1938, 39,090 officers were promoted, with those formerly trained in commanding regiments or battalions now being given command of whole armies and even, in some cases, fronts (Glantz 1998, 26-9). To fill the gaps left by these junior officers, trainee officers were released from training into positions of command early, leading to a wholesale deficiency in experience at all levels of the Red Army Command Structure. It was not just the sheer number of officers removed during the purges that damaged the Red Army, but also the individuals removed. The purges claimed some of the Red Army's most capable minds, from proven Commanders/military theorists, such as Tukhachevsky, to specialists in armoured warfare, e.g. Army Commander Khalepsky, and aerial warfare, e.g. Army Commander Alksnis (Conquest 2008, 183 & 208). Losing such talented individuals alongside the comprehensive reduction in experienced leadership utterly crippled the Soviet Military's ability to plan and mobilise effectively (Glantz 1998, 30). In addition, the purges affected Red Army morale. Fear of joining the ranks of the purged utterly destroyed any spark of creativity or individual initiative amongst Stalin's remaining commanders, leading them to rely solely on textbook solutions learnt during their inadequate training, demonstrating a tactical inflexibility that would prove disastrous for Soviet Forces in the first years of the war with Germany (Glantz & House 1995, 64; Roberts 1995, 1297).

The question then lies, not in whether the purges weakened the Red Army, but rather in whether they were the only factor contributing to its weakness in 1941 and, if not, to what degree they can be held responsible for that weakness.

Adelman and Gibson (1989) argue that the purges were not the only factor weakening the Red Army in the pre-war period. They suggest that it was also weakened by the massive expansion of Soviet Military personnel resulting from the introduction of the Soviet Union's law of Universal Military Obligation (1989, 89). Under the universal conscription this law established, the size of the Soviet forces exploded, rising from 1.6 million men and 98 divisions in 1939 to 5.3 million men and 303 divisions by mid-1941 (ibid.). Adelman and Gibson argue that this was an expansion the Soviet Defence industry, despite its significant expansion and development in the same period making it

superior both quantitatively and qualitatively in 1941, when compared to previous years, was ill prepared to cope with (1989, 84-5). The failure of Soviet defence production to keep pace with personnel growth left Soviet troops 'critically short of equipment, weapons, ammunition, [and] Transport' (Adelman & Gibson 1989, 89). The expansion did not just create a shortage of equipment however; it also exacerbated the already serious shortage of command personnel initiated by the purges. This in turn had a major effect on the quality of training for Red Army soldiers, insufficient and inexperienced command personnel providing training to the rapidly expanding numbers of recruits meant that by 1941 most had still only received a rudimentary incomplete training. The damage to the Red Army caused by these factors can be seen in the fact that by 1941 only 125 of the Red Army's 303 divisions were combat ready (*ibid.*).

David Stone suggests another contributing factor to the weakness of the Red Army in 1941: that Soviet rearmament through the 1930s focussed heavily on quantity and, as a result, largely neglected the need to keep abreast of technological advancements in military hardware, producing large numbers of increasingly obsolete tanks and planes (Stone 2002, 75). Stone notes that this neglect was only addressed in the late 1930s after Soviet experiences during the Spanish Civil War and Soviet-Finnish War highlighted the need for increased production of the Soviet Union's more advanced hardware (2002, 70 & 76). To this end the Soviet defence industry ramped up production of its most effective tank designs, the T-34 medium and KV-1 heavy tanks, and its most advanced aircraft, such as the Il-2, but, by this time, it was too late to correct the mistake that had been made and the Soviet Union entered the war with over 80% of its tanks and a majority of its aircraft obsolete (Stone 2002, 75).

It seems reasonable then to suggest that the net result of the purges, the expansion of the Red Army in the late-1930s and Soviet neglect of advancements in military hardware caused the 'devastation' of the Red Army. However, Cynthia Roberts has challenged this view. Roberts argues that the Red Army had one major flaw that contributed to its failures in Finland and against Germany that predated the purges: a dogmatic strategic doctrine, claiming that the offensive strategies, developed through the 1920s by Soviet military theorists such as Tukhachevsky and Triandafillov, became fused with political notions of the Red Army as an offensive, revolutionary body and of defence and attrition as bourgeois concepts fit only for the imperialist armies of the First World War (Roberts 1995, 1294-5 and 1305-6). This, Roberts suggests, evolved into strategic dogma prolific amongst officers both before and after the purges 'blocking institutional learning' and creating an ignorance amongst Red Army strategists of the importance of a solid defensive strategy and of the deficiencies

in their existing offensive strategy (ibid., 1294-5). As noted above, Soviet military strategy from the 1920s to early 1930s was based on the principles of Deep Operations, using mobile assaults to prevent the enemy creating a firm frontline. By 1941 this strategy had changed very little; in fact Soviet defensive strategy on the eve of war called for a defensive line to be established as close to the border with German territory as possible, so that after repulsing the enemy's initial attack, the Red Army could adopt this same offensive strategy, driving the conflict back on to enemy soil. This plan was based upon two assumptions: first, that Germany could not mobilise the main body of its forces until two weeks after the declaration of hostilities, and secondly, that the Red Army would have the advantage in agility and tactical flexibility to effectively reverse the momentum of any German attack (Roberts 1995, 1294-7). Of course, by 1941 it should have been obvious to Soviet strategists that neither assumption was correct. The *Wehrmacht* had proven in Poland and France that it was perfectly capable of mobilising its main strength prior to an initial attack, whilst Soviet forces in Finland had effectively proven the damage done to the Red Army's agility and tactical flexibility by the purges and military expansion. Nevertheless, in war games held on the eve of war, Soviet commanders – including Georgi Zhukov, one of the most capable officers to have survived the purges – still based the defence of the USSR upon these assumptions. Roberts suggests that this strategic dogma prevented Soviet strategists from identifying these problems and proposing more suitable defensive strategies focussing on the Red Army's strength in numbers and territory size (1995, 1304-7). Thus, the previous assessment of the pre-war Red Army may merit revision. It is perhaps more accurate to say that while the purges, military expansion and technical obsolescence all seriously damaged the Red Army, it was ideological tunnel vision which prevented the Soviet military from identifying these weaknesses and alternate strategies which may have limited the expression of weakness on the battlefield, that truly devastated the Red Army.

There seems then to be a convincing argument, suggesting that the Red Army entered the War with Germany in a state of devastation. Unfortunately, yet unsurprisingly, the German invasion did little to help matters. Soviet forward positions were completely unprepared for the sheer mass of the *Wehrmacht* and they suffered catastrophic losses. Within six months Soviet forces had lost over 80% of their pre-war air force and Tank Park (Roberts 1995, 1307). The resulting shortages of hardware prevented any attempts to implement 'Deep Operation' style counter offensives, with the necessary mechanised forces being reallocated to provide infantry support (Glantz & House 1995, 65-6). These initial defeats refuelled the distrust of the military Stalin had displayed in the purges; political commissars were assigned to commanders to ensure loyalty to the party and given co-equal command, extinguishing any remaining sparks of initiative amongst Red Army officers. Stalin also

imposed his own will on the Army. Despite lacking knowledge of military matters Stalin quickly tried to organise the Red Army's resistance from the centre ordering a general counter-offensive against the *Wehrmacht*. His poor direction – obeyed by officers in the field, regardless of the situation, out of fear of repression – were the root cause of several early military disasters suffered by the Red Army (Glantz & House 1995, 51; Rees 1999, 63).

Given the severity of these initial defeats, one has to wonder how the Red Army was ever able to defeat the mighty *Wehrmacht*. The simplest answer to this is that over the course of the war the Red Army was able to correct all of its major weaknesses. At the outbreak of war the Red Army's leadership was hopelessly inexperienced. Soviet commanders, lacking practical understanding, frequently deployed their forces in textbook formations, ignoring the particularities of the terrain in which they were fighting (Glantz & House 1995, 64). As Roberts notes, all that saved the Red Army from complete annihilation in the initial German assault was that it had both the space and manpower reserves to absorb the momentum of the German offensive (1995, 1307). The vastness of the USSR and its seemingly inexhaustible supply of soldiers served, at great human cost, to buy Soviet commanders time to develop the experience they lacked (Glantz & House 1995, 288). Soviet commanders quickly learnt the benefits of long overlooked defensive strategies. By the winter of 1941-2 defending forces in Moscow (organised by Zhukov) and forces in Leningrad had established a model for Soviet defensive tactics; using, for the first time, dense trench networks alongside anti-tank guns and minefields set up along the most likely paths of enemy attack to effectively repulse German attacks (Glantz & House 1995, 101; Rees 1999, 31). This style of defence would become common between 1942 and 1943. As the competence of his commanders increased, Stalin began to trust them more and to value their decisions. As Soviet troops began to turn the tide against the German aggressor in 1943, political commissars were reduced to deputy commanders, giving commanders in the field a much greater degree of freedom (Glantz & House 1995, 156). Furthermore, Stalin relaxed his personal control. Between 1943 and 1945 control passed first from the all-powerful *Stavka*, headed by Stalin, to trusted Commanders (such as Zhukov, as representatives of the *Stavka*), then to front headquarters until finally fully de-centralised control through the chain of command was introduced (Glantz & House 1995, 288). Time and experience allowed the Red Army to overcome not just the crippling effect of the purges, but also tactical deficiencies created by the pre-war strategic dogma and the initiative-repressing conditions of centralised control of the armed forces.

Increased experience, however, could not end the Soviet military's debilitating shortages of equipment. Rather this particular weakness was solved in a massive operation in which Soviet industrial production assets in the west of the country, vulnerable to the *Wehrmacht's* advance – particularly in the Ukraine and around Leningrad – were dismantled and moved on railcars east to the Volga River, Siberia and Central Asia. The evacuation between July and October 1941 moved in total 1523 factories, with 1360 of those being directly related to armament production (Glantz & House 1995, 72). This tremendous upheaval did little initially to solve the Red Army's supply issues, the huge effort involved in the procedure meant that Soviet production would take a year after the initial invasion to reach its full potential. This said, however, throughout 1942 Soviet production capacity expanded so rapidly that in that year Soviet industry was already out-producing Germany in terms of military hardware (Rees 1999, 171-5). Whilst centralised control was the bane of initiative amongst Soviet officers, for Soviet defence production it was a blessing. Economic historian Mark Harrison notes that the success of Soviet industry in 1942 was largely due to the ability of the centrally planned Soviet economy to strip the civilian economy of its resources to fuel defence production (Harrison 2000, 273). At the end of 1942, after victory at Stalingrad removed the threat of German occupation of the Volga, and with financial assistance from its western allies, the USSR was able to devote more resources to improve the civilian economy in turn ensuring that Soviet defence workers would not go hungry, creating a 'coherent, rapidly expanding war economy' (Harrison 2000, 273-4). The strength of Soviet defence production meant that by 1943 the Red Army were able to introduce combined arms, mechanised armies suitable for the implementation of Deep Operations strategies as well as brand new tank armies, the equal of German panzer armies (Glantz & House 1995, 101-2 and 154-5). These new army types along with the increasing experience of Red Army officers allowed the Red Army to effectively use the strategy of Deep Operations to launch decisive offensives against the *Wehrmacht*, beginning the rout of the German offensive (*ibid.*, 288-9).

From 1943 onwards the Red Army solved all its major problems, improving its leadership, solving hardware shortages and developing effective offensive and defensive tactics. The Red Army did not win the war alone however; it had significant help from its Western Allies in particular Britain and the United States. One way in which one might expect the US and Britain to have assisted the USSR is through their own military campaigns against Germany. The effect that Western attacks on Germany had in aiding the Soviets on the Eastern front is debatable however. Throughout its involvement in the war, the USSR was constantly engaged with over 50% of Germany's existing forces. Even after the opening of the second front in Europe the Red Army still faced twice as many

German forces (2 million) as the armies of the West (Glantz & House 1995, 282-3). This is not to suggest that allied military ventures against Germany did not help the Soviet Union, rather it puts into perspective the titanic struggle that the Red Army faced even with allied assistance. Of particular effect was the Allied Bomber Offensive, which significantly damaged both the Luftwaffe and Germany's defence production. Following a step up in the frequency and intensity of allied bombing raids in August 1942, Hitler was forced to direct more resources into air defence (Beaumont 1987, 10-15). Luftwaffe losses defending German cities reduced the quantity and quality of German pilots available to oppose the Red Air Force (*ibid.*, 15). Similarly, German armaments factories were forced to increase production of anti-aircraft guns thus cutting anti-tank gun production in half. Furthermore, damage caused to German industry and the need to employ large numbers of potential workers to clean up bombed residential areas led to a 17% reduction in German industrial production by 1944 (Beaumont 1987, 15).

While the bomber offensive certainly hurt Germany, economic aid through the American lend-lease scheme provided more decisive aid to the Soviet Union. Between 1941 and 1945 the Soviet Union received \$12 billion worth of lend-lease assistance in the form of food, fuel, raw materials, armaments and industrial equipment and products (Weeks 2010, 8-9, 25 and 122). Whilst lend-lease aid did not flow in sufficient quantity to provide much benefit to the USSR until near the end of 1942 (Glantz & House 1995, 285), the total amount sent by the end of the war equated to roughly 30% of Soviet aircraft and wheeled vehicle production, over 50% of Soviet aviation fuel and ordnance production and 30% of Soviet production-line machinery (Weeks 2010, 8-9). Glantz and House suggest that raw materials and machinery acquired through lend-lease was instrumental in supporting the growth of the Soviet war economy, whilst lend-lease military hardware – particularly trucks used for troop transport – allowed the Soviets to equip their mechanised forces necessary for conducting Deep Operations (1995, 285 & 150). They conclude that, although a Soviet victory was likely even without lend-lease aid, it would have taken an extra 12-18 months to build the strength necessary for this victory (*ibid.*, 285).

It seems then that the Soviet victory was accelerated considerably by allied aid. To understand to what extent the Soviet victory was the victory of the Red Army, however; it is not enough to consider only the actions of the USSR and its allies, one must also consider the failings of the *Wehrmacht*. When Germany entered into the war with the USSR they did so with two distinct advantages: a highly experienced, decentralised command structure enabling individual initiative, and a well trained technologically advanced Army (Glantz & House 1995, 287-8). However, it also

entered the war under several dangerously misinformed assumptions. Firstly, German planners for the invasion of the Soviet Union (codename Operation Barbarossa) woefully underestimated the Red Army's capacity to resist. German estimates on the eve-of-war placed the total strength of the Red Army, including reserves, at a maximum of 12 million, in reality the Soviet Union mobilised 29.5 million men over the course of the war (Glantz 1998, 290). In addition, German planners, after viewing the Red Army's abysmal performance in Finland, assumed even its numerical superiority would not prevent them from falling before the *Wehrmacht's* superior leadership as easily as France had in 1940 (Rees 1999, 20 & 27). The initial victories of the *Wehrmacht* did little to disabuse Germany of a quick victory in the USSR; in fact many within German High Command, including Chief of the Army General Staff, Franz Halder, were so buoyed by the *Wehrmacht's* meteoric advance that they suggested that victory would come 'in the space of two weeks' (Rees 1999, 19). In the face of the Red Army's dogged defence, Hitler became increasingly frustrated with the failure of his Generals to maintain the tempo they had set in the initial invasion (Glantz & House 1995, 153). This frustration was to seriously weaken the *Wehrmacht*, as Hitler began to take a greater degree of direct control of German forces, attempting to correct the mistakes of his officers. Hitler first issued the Führer Defence Order in September 1942, which abolished the effective *Wehrmacht* practice of retreating in the face of Soviet offensives, luring Soviet troops into mass encirclements, and declared that all German forces were to stand fast in the face of any attack, a practice which left German defenders dangerously exposed to Soviet encirclements (ibid.). Hitler went on to stamp out all individual initiative from the *Wehrmacht*, removing officers who he disagreed with, threatening reprisals for those who disappointed, ordering that no retreat should be made without his express permission and even instituting his own version of Stalin's political commissars the *Führungs-offiziers* (Seaton 1982, 209-12; Glantz & House 1995, 287-8).

As well as initiative of Command, the *Wehrmacht* also lost their advantages in advanced hardware and skilled soldiery. Even during its initial advances, stubborn Soviet resistance left the *Wehrmacht* badly bloodied. Germany's Army Group Centre engaged in Moscow at the end of 1941 was, by January 1942, short of 182,000 men, '4262 anti-tank guns, 5890 mortars and 3361 larger artillery pieces' (Glantz & House 1995, 103). Whilst Soviet defence production assisted by American lend-lease grew significantly throughout 1942, German factories were underperforming. The Nazi Party's emphasis on providing jobs in the pre-war period purposefully neglected labour saving technologies in German industry (Harrison 2000, 170). Furthermore, both before and during the war, German defence production largely depended on Russian raw materials (Ericson 1998, 263-5; Harrison 2000, 170; Rees 1999, 29). Successful scorched earth tactics during Soviet retreats into the interior denied

Germany those raw materials, while the effects of the Allied bomber offensive and the inefficiency of German industry ensured that defence production could not match the *Wehrmacht's* hardware losses. Germany also lacked the Soviet Union's huge reserve of manpower; meaning the *Wehrmacht* was unable to replace its human losses (Glatz & House 1995, 72-3 and 103). As the war continued and casualties mounted the insufficient replacements Germany could provide became increasingly poorly trained, the *Wehrmacht* eventually being reliant on elderly or otherwise unsuitable recruits to prop up its failing strength (Seaton 1982, 211). The German army of 1945 then strongly resembled the Red Army of 1941; a force with a centralised Command structure which punished commanders for exercising initiative and crippling supply issues.

So, did the Soviet Military go from devastation to victory between 1936 and 1945? It seems highly unlikely that the Red Army of 1936 were devastated. At that point it had not only advanced military concepts, but also the necessary hardware and production capacity to put them into practice. A more substantial claim would be that between 1937 and 1941 the Red Army was seriously weakened, first by the 1937-8 purges and then by the rapid 1939-41 expansion of the armed forces beyond the capabilities of the defence industry and military schools. This weakness was in turn transformed into devastation by an ideologically enforced inability to adapt that had existed since the 1920s. In terms of victory in 1945, it is difficult to see how without solving their leadership, supply and tactical deficiencies, the USSR would have been able to do anything more than use its superior numbers to wear down the *Wehrmacht* to a stalemate. That they were able to solve these problems allowed them to launch effective counter-offensives against the *Wehrmacht*, forcing them out of Soviet territory to defeat. The fact that *Wehrmacht* mirrored, with near perfection, the Red Army's rise to power with its own decline, almost certainly made this task far simpler. Britain and America's role in the Red Army's victory can be considered a catalyst, with American lend-lease facilitating the growth of the Soviet war economy, allowing the Red Army to form mechanised armies far faster than it could have alone; whilst the joint-bomber offensive further exacerbated the problems of the German economy in supplying its front line units. In this sense, one can certainly argue that the Red Army's victory over the *Wehrmacht* was its own, but the fact that it came as quickly as 1945 was due to the Soviet Union's allies' assistance and the *Wehrmacht's* weaknesses.

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