

Chapter Three

Trapped on the Eve of War, 1941

Stalin and His Generals Failing Separately and Together

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Germany's Operation *Barbarossa*, launched on June 22, 1941, was a war of annihilation against the Soviet Union whose scale and carnage were unprecedented in modern history. Directed by Hitler to surround and extinguish the bulk of the Russian army in Western Russia before they could retreat, the *Wehrmacht*'s surprise attack and *Bewegungskrieg* successfully destroyed the world's biggest army and overran the richest regions of the world's largest country. From June 22 to the end of September the *Wehrmacht* pushed nearly 500 miles into Soviet Russia, crossing the Dvina and Dnepr rivers. By the end of 1941, Soviet battlefield losses totaled nearly three million men with more than two million soldiers taken prisoners of war, essentially wiping out the pre-war army (Krivosheev 2010, 59). More than twenty-six million Soviet soldiers and civilians were killed by the end of the war.

Unaware of the depth of their own unpreparedness, and postured for *offensive* instead of defensive operations, the Soviet Union and Stalin's regime survived this catastrophe largely for three reasons: (1) Russian geography afforded the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) vast strategic depth to recover and relocate the military industrial base while stretching Germany's beyond its limits; (2) favorable demographics allowed Stalin, more than the Axis powers, to field new armies to replace the millions lost in a long war of grinding attrition; and (3) Soviet soldiers fought bravely to victory despite the brutality and grievous errors of their political and military leaders who were responsible for the military disasters in the first year of the Great Patriotic War (VOV).

Eight decades after the cataclysmic German invasion, evidence from the archives and post-Soviet scholarship continues to shed light on many puzzles about the near fatal initial period of the war. Sensational claims that Stalin was preparing a knock-out first strike to transform the Second World War

into a revolutionary war (Suvorov 1992; Mel'tiukhov 2000) have been credibly refuted by both Russian and Western historians (e.g., Bobylev 2000 and Gorodetsky 1995). However, important controversies about Soviet war plans and intentions remain unresolved. German victories in Europe, especially the defeat of France in 1940, quashed Stalin's expectations of protracted attritional war in the West and left the USSR to face Germany alone on the continent. So why were Soviet forces concentrated in border areas, vulnerable to encirclement and destruction, unrealistically expecting an easy shift to counter-offensives after hostilities started? Why did the General Staff, where many prominent figures survived the purges, promote a reckless plan to preempt the German attack instead of prioritizing defensive operations that better matched the Soviet Union's comparative advantages and weaknesses in this period? Why did Stalin fail to demand a robust defensive strategy in case Hitler could not be deterred?

Germany's demonstrated combat skill by mid-1940 starkly contrasted to the USSR's poor performance in Finland (1939–1940), reflecting the Soviets' ongoing fraught transformation of the force, and general unpreparedness. In this strategic environment, a sounder posture, underscored by some generals after the war (e.g., Rokossovskii 1997), would have focused on strategic or mobile defense, trading space for time to prepare viable counter-offensives. Equally important, *an initial defensive posture and operational plan would have been more in line with Stalin's war avoidance and deterrence posture, better integrating political objectives and military means*. To this day, Russian historians insist the pre-1941 military doctrine was defensive (e.g., Kudriashov and Ekshtut 2021), but this assertion is true only in the timing of when the USSR planned to launch its main strikes. The actual war plans and force posture were designed to “cover” and counter border incursions—if not preempt them—and rapidly conduct offensive strikes deep into enemy territory. Soviet generals consistently pressed for offensive and even preemptive options, especially since the heyday of the Red Army's chief modernizer Mikhail N. Tukhachevskii (purged by Stalin in 1937). Yet as circumstances deteriorated, the war planners failed to update their flawed mobilization and planning assumptions.

In 1941, a well-developed defensive military strategy was realistically the only chance the Red Army in the Western front had to avoid being crushed by the onslaught of the *Wehrmacht*. Military leaders grew concerned about the obvious threats building in front of them but discounted the vulnerabilities created by their own war plans, while Stalin, typical of political leaders, woefully lacked military expertise and poorly understood the strategic and operational dangers.¹ As Mikoyan observed, Stalin didn't want war and “stubbornly continued to believe that there would be no war then” (Mikoyan

1999, 381); it was possible to stay out of the war, Stalin remarked, until 1942 (Meretskov 1968, 206).

This chapter, which builds on earlier work by the author and Seweryn Bialer's pioneering monograph on *Stalin and His Generals* (1969)² as well as the author's multi-year work in Russian archives and with Russian scholarship (Roberts 1995, 2005, 2019), argues that existing explanations are insufficient and in important respects incorrect. Notwithstanding Stalin's unconstrained personalist dictatorship, the General Staff's unrealistic offensive plans and posture directly contradicted Stalin's deterrence and defensive political strategy in 1940–1941. This mismatch in political–military strategies and force posture, which had deep roots in the Red Army's offensive organizational ideology, profoundly increased the Soviet Union's vulnerability in the event of a surprise attack well beyond Stalin's failure to bring the forces to full alert.

"ACTIVE DEFENSE" BECAME IGNORING DEFENSE AND A POLITICAL SHIELD FOR OFFENSIVE WAR PLANS

On paper³ Soviet military doctrine recognized a need for an "active defense" [*aktivnaia oborona*] posture in the event of an attack. Specifying that the opponent would attack first allowed Moscow to claim the status of a victim of aggression in the event of war. Further down the political-military means-ends chain, doctrinal treatments of offense–defense relations were more balanced in formal statements than in the pre-1941 war plans and operational training. The 1939 field regulations (PU-39) not only reference active defense but also include an entire chapter on defensive operations that even specify conditions for retreat (PU-39, ch. 10). Both offensive and defensive operations were deemed useful although the regulations hold that "offensive combat is the main type of action for the RKKA [Red Army]." It was enshrined in official documents that in the event of an attack the enemy will receive an immediate rebuff; its offensive will be stopped; the "Red Army will be the most aggressive [*napadaishchei*] army ever attacked" and will lead the war decisively, transferring it to enemy territory (PU-39, ch. 1).⁴

In theory, two options existed to counter the *Wehrmacht* from a defensive position—mobile defense or strategic defense. With respect to the first, the Soviet Union was not yet proficient in modern mobile combat operations necessary for either offensive or defensive operations.⁵ Modern mobile defensive operations require paralyzing the deep penetrations of attacking forces by driving wedges into the flanks of the advancing armored formations and denying the enemy air superiority. The Red Army was in flux, undergoing a major

re-equipment program, and neither before the purges nor after had managed to craft effective organizational structures and integrated operational strategies to prevail in combat with modern armaments. This was starkly evident from the continuous changes in the organization of tank formations (Roberts 2005, 2019) and similar confusion about optimal operational structures in the air staff. The December 1940 High Command conference showed that senior Soviet officers still disagreed on the lessons from their own and foreign wartime experiences which showed both opportunities (Poland, France, Khalkhin Gol) for and obstacles (Finland) to maneuver and rapid exploitation of breakthroughs (Roberts 1995, 2019; Zakharov 1989, ch. 4).

A mobile defense was optimal but arguably beyond existing Soviet capabilities, making a defense in depth the sound strategic choice in 1941. In this variant, a series of defensive positions prepared in great depth wears down and eventually contains the invading forces, employing either a series of defensive lines or a large number of widely dispersed strong points or "islands of resistance." Strategic defense in depth was the safest approach successfully employed against past invaders in Russian history. Favorably assessing the strategy of Russian generals Barclay de Tolly and Mikhail Kutuzov in 1812 against Napoleon, Marshal Konstantin K. Rokossovskii (1997, 125–26) argued that both leaders "wisely grasped the inequality of the sides" and sought to "equalize the forces" by avoiding a decisive engagement and instead "withdrew to the interior of the country." In 1941, the Soviet Union could have spoiled German offensive encirclements by initially trading space for time to prepare powerful counter-offensives. As Steven Biddle explains, a deep defense creates an "entropic effect" that progressively erodes the attacker's power as it advances into depth while increasing the defender's ability to employ reserves to stop the attacking forces when they arrive (Biddle 2004, 46–47).

The Soviet military's principal advocate of strategic defense and nuanced thinker about appropriate contexts for strategies of attrition and annihilation, Alexander Svechin, was roundly ridiculed and suppressed before the purges in the 1930s by both Soviet innovators like Tukhachevskii and also Stalin's most trusted chief of the General Staff prior to June 22, Marshal Boris M. Shaposhnikov.⁶ Svechin recognized Clausewitz' insight about defense as the strongest form of warfare for the achievement of "negative goals," while offense is aimed at "positive goals" but also showed that conditions matter (Svechin 1927). Svechin acknowledged that "for the defense to succeed, we need to be able to lose territory, and we need time to work in our favor" (Svechin 1927–1928, 184). Further, he recognized that the timing and sequencing of a transition to the offensive depends on creating sufficient strength to establish a predominance of force.

There is no evidence in the available documentary record to suggest any military officials briefed Stalin about the advisability of a defensive strategy. Zhukov admits that Soviet military science did not then consider strategic defense important (Zhukov, 1990, 3: 289–91; Zhukov c1965). Moreover, the conventional history of the 1941 disaster rejects any contradiction in civil-military policy, insisting that both Stalin and the Red Army were offensive-minded (e.g., Mawdsley 2003). This view, however, misinterprets Stalin's espousal of offensive ideology for mobilizational, strategic, and opportunistic purposes as evidence of unconditional embrace of an offensive political and military strategy regardless of prevailing conditions. In fact, the Soviet dictator preferred to remain on the defensive while international opponents were weakened by protracted intra-imperialist armed struggles. Revisionist ideology to advance the international communist movement never demanded that communists constantly be on the offensive. In 1941 Stalin sought to deter and avoid provoking Germany, signaling a willingness to do more to uphold the Nazi-Soviet Pact, not launch an offensive war.⁷

Stalin's approval was required for all standing war plans. However, like most civilian leaders, before the invasion, he knew little about conducting military operations and failed to understand the risks embodied in the General Staff's plans. In truth, no one in the political or military leadership fully appreciated that the USSR's initial numerical advantage could be rapidly wiped out by a more effective force. The difference between Germany's offensive thrusts against Poland and France on the one hand, and the Soviet Union on the other, was that the latter could recover because the USSR had both strategic depth and a reserve potential to mobilize replacement armies on an astounding scale unexpected by the *Wehrmacht*.

BIAS FOR OFFENSE IN WAR PLANNING

The Soviet General Staff showed a strong bias for ambitious *offensive* war plans before June 22, 1941, culminating in a final recommendation to *pre-empt* the impending German attack (Roberts 1995; Mawdsley 2003). All of the war plans prepared by the General Staff in the crucial years before June 22, particularly those in 1940–1941, prioritized offensive actions after an initial period of concentration. The declassification of significant portions of the mobilization and operational plans clearly show their roots in offensive (even if counter-offensive) operations. Likewise, the forward deployed posture of the Soviet armed forces flowed from this offensive doctrine, not from neglected defensive requirements that never would have led to the positioning of the bulk of the prewar army along the Western frontier.

Military organizations routinely prefer offensive strategies despite widespread recognition that defense enjoys operational advantages (Clausewitz 1976; Posen 1984; Snyder 1984). Offensive actions are easier to plan and also bolster the professional autonomy of generals on doctrine, as well as institutional prestige and budgets, making soldiers “specialists in victory,” whereas defense makes them “specialists in attrition” (Posen 1984, 50). Before 1914, in both Germany and Russia the lack of informed civilian control produced ill-conceived offensive strategies (Snyder, 1984). Before June 22, 1941, the Soviet case shows how the military can operate under false assumptions and produce self-defeating offensive strategies *even when under strong civilian control*. This can be the unintended effect when political leaders lack specialized knowledge about strategy and military operations and don't have “the time and willingness to acquire it” (Betts 2001, 24).

Stalin rhetorically supported the offensive spirit infusing Soviet military doctrine and ordered bold offensive actions in selective wars and campaigns before June 22. But few observers recognize that the Soviet dictator also ensured that Soviet war plans were formally premised on a defensive strategy and only authorized planning for counter-offensives, that is, those that would respond to an enemy's attack. Although higher readiness would have helped inflict greater costs on the German invaders, it is unlikely that the disastrous initial period of the war could have been fully averted given the Soviet army's vulnerable forward positions and unpreparedness.

Stalin's most serious misjudgment was about the kind of threat posed by Nazi Germany—which required a strong *defensive* posture given the low probability of deterrence success—not, as Stalin erroneously believed, a risk of inadvertent provocation where precipitous mobilization might provoke a German attack and war unintentionally (Roberts 1995, 2019; Holloway 2014). Stalin's misperceptions made him loathe to significantly increase readiness or, like the Tsar in 1914, initiate mobilization given the dangers, insisting that “if we do not provoke Hitler, there will not be war” (*Kommunist*, January 24, 1989, 70; Roberts 1999, 2018; Kudriashov and Ekshtut 2021). Despite ample warnings of impending German attack, Stalin refused to agree to full mobilization and sound the alert of Soviet forces until the measures adopted the evening of June 21, 1941. During a crucial—and *previously undocumented*—meeting of select Politburo members and senior military leaders, the Southern, South-Western, and Northern fronts, their command staffs and armies of the second line of defense were created. The secret resolution, recorded by G.M. Malenkov, included an order (so-called Directive Number 1), signed by Timoshenko and Zhukov, to the military districts to bring the troops into combat readiness in case of a surprise attack by Germany on June 22–23.⁸

FLAWS IN THE WAR PLANS AND PLANNING ASSUMPTIONS

Between 1938 and June 22, 1941, Soviet operational war plans and deployment plans went through at least five iterations and were constantly being marked up in between formal submission to and review by Stalin and selected Politburo members.⁹ The major alterations reflected changes in Soviet borders which shifted a few hundred kilometers to the West after the incorporation of the Baltic states and post-Nazi-Soviet Pact partition of Poland in 1939–1940. These changes also revealed a shift in the center of gravity in deployments from the sector north of the Pripjat swamps to the southern sector, which was more conducive to conducting Soviet offensive operations in the initial period of war.

Throughout this process, the leadership of the defense commissariat and the General Staff made three important errors in the plans that had grievous consequences for the disastrous initial period of the war. First, the military leadership incorrectly assumed that the enemy would not be fully mobilized and concentrated ready to commit all of its forces on the Soviet-German front at the start of the engagement. Despite Soviet forward-thinkers previously theorizing about emerging first mover advantages from increasingly fierce combined arms operations during the initial period of war (Kadishev 1965; Roberts 1995), Zhukov admitted in his memoirs, “The Defense Commissar and the General Staff believed that ‘war between major powers such as Germany and the Soviet Union would begin according to the existing scheme: the main forces enter the battles . . . after the border battles’” (Zhukov 1990, 1: 323–24; Ivanov 1974, ch. 8; Zakharov 1989). In the staff’s assessment, the *Wehrmacht* would follow the same gradual mobilization process as planned for the Soviet army, deploying its grouping on the western border of the USSR ten to fifteen days after the German army started concentrating its troops (Naumov 1998, 1: 183, 239, 743) despite stark evidence to the contrary from German wartime experience in Poland and the West. “The new methods of waging war in the initial period,” Zhukov later acknowledged, “were not practically taken into account” (Zhukov 1990, 1: 323–24). This incorrect assessment about the initial period of war, which some generals later tried to pin on Stalin (see Vasilevskii 1992), led to equally misplaced confidence in the validity of the standard Soviet planning assumption which was completely out of date by 1941.

Second, the military leadership and General Staff included a faction of senior officers that relied on incorrect planning assumptions to promote and inflate the possibility of a rapid shift to counter-offensives, and even a pre-emption option in the one sector of the frontier that most favored offensive operations. Many of these senior officers had studied together at the General

Staff Academy in 1936 and were organizationally tied to Marshals Zhukov and Timoshenko in their common service with the Kiev Military District (MD).¹⁰ In contrast to Shaposhnikov’s 1938 and 1940 plans, this group pushed to shift the focus of the war plan from deploying the main grouping north of Polesie, that is, north of the Pripjat marshes to the southern sector. The southern variant of the war plan corresponded with the interests of the Kiev MD in getting greater resources not for defense, but to conduct the main vector of Soviet offensive operations, either as rapid counter-strikes after a German attack or—as strongly preferred by the generals—launched preemptively in a modernized, full-force version of Triandafillov and Tukhachevskii’s vision of *vpolzanie v voynu* (creeping into war) to deny the German Command the initiative and gain first-mover advantages for the Red Army (Roberts 1995; Mawdsley 2003).

Stalin evidently came to see the logic of this geographic switch of focus from the traditional invasion route to the Kiev southern region, given intelligence suggesting German interest in the region’s natural resources and the availability of forces in the Balkans. It is also likely that his generals’ touting of optimistic offensives were instrumental in tilting Stalin’s thinking away from a focus on the Western orientation with Minsk-Smolensk-Moscow as the main axis into Russia. Regardless, when the generals submitted the plan to Stalin and Prime Minister V. M. Molotov, the leadership approved the reorientation to the SW direction (Vasilevskii 1988, 106), though Stalin never embraced the pre-emptive operational bent of the war planners.

Third, the General Staff failed adequately to develop, update and train in accordance with realistic plans for the war’s initial period, especially scenarios for defense of the border regions before the main Soviet groupings mobilized to conduct counter-offensives. The striking lack of attention to operationalizing and training for those initial defensive operations cannot be blamed on Stalin. The military grossly underestimated the crushing blow that could be inflicted while overrating their own capacity for waging offensives or rapid counter-offensives and neglecting defense. Stalin’s failure to bring the forces into full alert and other errors, notably the purges, severely affected readiness; but the military’s miscalculations and errors were central to the tragedy that ensued in the initial period of war. The Soviet armed forces lacked what Richard Betts calls structural readiness or preparedness to ensure combat effectiveness. Worse than not being fully mobilized and caught in the middle of a transition to new equipment, the army was unprepared for modern war. Its organizational structures and concepts were not yet worked out for combined arms operations; it was plagued by poor training and focused on attack when it desperately needed to master defensive combat to contain the German assault before shifting to viable counter-offensives.

Stalin also overrated Soviet military power, lecturing the top generals that “Hitler is not such a fool to not grasp that the Soviet Union is not Poland, is not France, and that it is not even England and all of them put together” (Zhuikov 1995, 1: 383–84). However, this confidence did not budge his adherence to a defensive, war avoidance strategy: Stalin believed that Hitler could be deterred or bargained with despite gathering evidence to the contrary. Thus, before June 22, the Soviet army was a large modern force but not one that had mastered modern operations (Biddle 2004) for either offensive or defensive actions; and it was postured for attack, not defense, notwithstanding the formal political doctrine that the USSR would only respond to aggression (*1941 God*, 2, doc. no. 655). Strikingly, Stalin’s top generals never considered making *defense* the priority in military planning to avert the risk of deterrence failure and defend against a surprise attack before eventually transitioning to the offense and defeating the enemy. This oversight is one of the most revealing indicators of the military’s offensive bias and causes of the catastrophe in 1941 (Roberts 1995; Bobylev 1995, 2000).

EVOLUTION OF THE WAR PLANS

For most of the interwar period, the General Staff prepared war plans against an expected coalition of Germany and Poland in the West and the real contingency of a two-front war against Japan. The 1938 war plan developed by Shaposhnikov, then chief of the general staff, and approved in November by the main military council (GVS) was the last pre-Pact plan based on the old borders and a different threat situation. The 1938 plan envisioned a Soviet Army counter-offensive with the main grouping north or south of Polesie where a covering force would contain the first wave of an attacking enemy from prepared positions and active defense in the other sector. Over the course of some weeks the mass mobilization and concentration of Soviet forces would take place, allowing the transfer of the war into the enemy’s territory (Shaposhnikov 1938, *1941 God*, 2, doc. no. P11: 557–71; Zakharov 1989, 125–33). In his March 24, 1938, note to Defense Commissar K.E. Voroshilov, Shaposhnikov identified the likely deployment of enemy forces north of Polesie, estimating that it would be a faster mobilization (14–16 days) than in the south which would “drag on up to 28–30 days” (Shaposhnikov, *ibid.*, 560). Shaposhnikov’s forecast corresponded to German plans for Barbarossa, except that crucially, the *Wehrmacht* had completed its mobilization and was at full readiness from the first day of Operation Barbarossa, while Soviet troops were still mobilizing and moving to the border (Bobylev 2000).

The 1938 plan established the basic planning concept and also recognized the Western front as the zone where the main Soviet forces should be concentrated with a reduced presence in the Far East. In the event of the outbreak of aggression in the Western theater of military operations, it was planned to deploy three fronts: in the main direction North-Western and Western, and in the south the South-Western front. The main German-Polish attack was expected from the north and the northwest along the Minsk-Smolensk-Moscow main axis, with a less likely southern attack variant toward Kiev (Shaposhnikov 1938, doc. no. P11, 560; Zakharov 1989, 124–33). The *Genshtab* notes signed by Shaposhnikov added, “From time immemorial, since the Napoleonic offensive on Russia, it was believed that the main direction for the enemy’s actions against us in the west would be the Smolensk-Moscow direction, north of the Pripyat and San rivers” (Zakharov 2005, 421). Following this expectation, the *Genshtab* proposed to put up the USSR’s main forces against the main forces of the enemy (Shaposhnikov 1938, doc. no. P11, 560; Zakharov 2005, 421. See also Nelasov, Kudriavtsev, Iakushevskii, et al. 1992).

A somewhat revised draft war plan, “Considerations Regarding the Basis of the Strategic Deployment of the Armed Forces of the USSR in the West and in the East in 1940 and 1941” [hereafter: 1940 “Soobrazheniia”], still written under Shaposhnikov’s direction by Major General A. M. Vasilevskii, who had become deputy chief of the operations department of the General Staff in April, was submitted to Stalin and Molotov in August 1940.¹¹ As before, the plan anticipated that a German attack would most likely be concentrated north of the Pripyat (without discounting a possible attack on the southern variant) and recommended concentrating 70 percent of the 237 Red Army divisions on the Western frontiers north of the Pripyat so as to be able to defeat German forces in East Prussia and the region of Warsaw, notwithstanding mobilization delays up to thirty days. A cautionary note suggested that superior intelligence and prewar covert Soviet mobilization were needed to enable the Red Army to block a deep German penetration that would attempt to preempt the Soviet counterattack and ensure the fighting would be on Soviet territory instead of the enemy’s soil (1940 “Soobrazheniia,” *1941 God*, 1, doc. no. 95; Mikhalev 2003, 309–11).

After the debacle in Finland 1939–1940, the ineffectual Defense Commissar Kliment Voroshilov was sacked and replaced by Kiev Military District commander, Marshal S. K. Timoshenko. Shaposhnikov was also (temporarily) relieved of his post on August 16, 1940, by Stalin and replaced as Chief of the General Staff by Gen. K. A. Meretskov to signal the Kremlin’s greater attention to defense preparedness. This public move did not reflect a diminution in Stalin’s continued faith in Shaposhnikov. He confided in Vasilevskii

that Stalin acknowledged Shaposhnikov had been right and the Main Defense Committee wrong about Finland, but “only we know that” (Jukes 2002, 278). Shaposhnikov had overseen the first realistic plan for Finland, calling for a massive invasion. Stalin rejected that version, ordering instead the development of a “blitzkrieg light” plan hastily put together by the Leningrad Military District under Gen. K. A. Meretskov.¹² Stalin’s reckless overconfidence led to horrific losses and a bloody stalemate after the first phase of the fight (Anderson and Bobylev 2004; Kul’kov and Rzheshhevskii 1999; Meretskov 1968, 171–74, 179–82; Khristoforov 2009).

Overall, the campaign foreshadowed that the Red Army had replicated the deficiencies of the tsarist army under tsarism. Finland’s Field Marshal Mannerheim (1953, 367) observed that “The Russians based their art of war on the weight of material, and were clumsy, ruthless, and extravagant. There was a striking absence of creative imagination where the fluctuations of the situation demanded quick decisions.” Soviet losses in the short war with Finland averaged 4,000 casualties per day (Roberts 2019). The contrast with Germany’s lightning campaign against France that took less than half as long to defeat a country ten times bigger and at 13 percent of the cost in casualties was not lost on anyone.

With Meretskov’s appointment, the key figures in the general staff and defense ministry were now aligned in favor of a war plan that emphasized offensives launched from the southern vector and priority in Soviet capabilities given to the Kiev MD (subsequently renamed the Southwestern Front, including also the Odessa MD) (Anfilov 1997, 159; Bobylev 2000). Defense Commissar Timoshenko, whose prior leadership post was at the Kiev MD, oversaw the upending of Shaposhnikov’s plan, with the staff work of Vatutin and Vasilevskii (Bobylev 2000; Zakharov 1989). This group of generals included those who shared the easy combat experience in occupying Poland and the other new territories as compared to those who viewed combat from the experience of overcoming firm defenses as in Finland.

The document signed by Meretskov and Timoshenko on September 18, 1940, shows clearly how the priorities were shifting despite the more ominous threat posed by growing German occupation of Europe (1941 *God*, 1, doc. no. 117: 236–53; Rosarkhiv, TsAMO f. 16a. op. 2951. d. 239. l. 197–244). The plan still held that “The main, the most politically advantageous for Germany, and, therefore, the most probable” variant is the deployment of its main forces north of the mouth of the River San. However, the text maintained that it “is not excluded” that the Germans, “in order to capture Ukraine, will concentrate their main forces in the south, in the Siedlce and Lublin region, to deliver the main attack in the general direction of Kiev.” In this case, the variant in the north from East Prussia was reduced in the assessment to an

“auxiliary attack” (ibid., 202–4). Accordingly, the plan estimated Germany would allocate 110–120 infantry divisions, the bulk of their tanks and aircraft for operations in the south, leaving half as much for operations in the north. The approximate time frame forecast for the deployment of German armies on the USSR’s western borders remained ten–fifteen days from the beginning of concentration. During the period of concentration on all fronts, the plan directed “active defense” [*aktivnaia oborona*] as in the Field Regulations, but the generals gave little attention to developing or training for such operations (Denisova and Tumash 2007; Nelasov, Kudriavtsev, Iakushevskii, et al., 166–78; Zhukov 1941 *God*, 2, c 1965, doc. no. 655).

In the September 1940 war plan (approved by the Politburo on 14 October), and in the two follow-on plans in March 1941 and May 1941, the main fight was expected in the West against Germany and its allies (with a secondary focus in the East against Japan) on three specified fronts, the Northwestern, Western and Southwestern. In all three plans, including the May 1941 plan which was the one in place when the Germans attacked on June 22, priority was shifted to the Southwestern front. Even in the Northwestern Front, during the concentration period, the plan called for taking “a more advantageous starting position for the offensive,” (242) and tasked the 11th Army, in cooperation with the 3rd Army of the Western Front, to capture the Sejny, Suwalki area.¹³ Meanwhile, the Western Front, after covering the Minsk direction, was to launch a simultaneous strike with the North-Western Front, in the general direction of Allenstein (now Olsztyn), 140 miles to the west, to pin down the German forces concentrating in East Prussia. An ambitious strike by the left flank army was also expected to help the Southwestern Front move on Lublin and Radom and then further to Breslau (Wroclaw, 150 miles west of Krakow, which was 125 miles west of the border) to split Germany from the Balkan countries, deprive it of its most important economic bases and decisively influence Balkan participation in the war (September 1940 Plan).

The General Staff war planners addressed the respective strengths and limitations of offensive operations in the vectors both north and south of the Pripjat marshes and importantly never changed their conclusions through the last iteration of the war plan in May 1941. The advantage of focusing on offensives north of Brest-Litovsk was in inflicting “a decisive defeat on the main forces of the German army, concentrated in East Prussia, and the capture of the latter.” This area is “of exceptional economic and, above all, political significance for Germany, which will inevitably affect the entire further course of the struggle against Germany.” However, a major downside was that Soviet offensives on this front will meet “strong resistance” and “the introduction of significant forces” by Germany. Second, the “difficult natural conditions of East Prussia make it extremely difficult to conduct offensive

operations.” The planners feared “that the struggle on this front may lead to protracted battles that will bind our main forces and not give the desired and quick effect, which in turn will accelerate the inevitable entry of the Balkan countries into the war against us” (September 1940 Plan, 241–45).

By comparison, the “only if serious drawback” of prioritizing the Southwestern axis was the limited “capacity of the railways in the southwest” which meant that “the concentration of the main forces of the front armies can be completed *only thirty days* after the start of mobilization” (344) delaying the start of the general offensive [emphasis added]. This crucial assessment was never reconciled with the German style of war since 1939 that eliminated an initial mobilization and concentration period before the engagement of the main forces. Failing to update their assumptions while ignoring the potentially fatal consequence of a German surprise attack when Soviet forces were still mobilizing and concentrating, the *genshtabisty* painted a rosy picture of their expected success achieving overambitious objectives still beyond their combat skills. In cooperation with a left-flank army from the Western Front, the forces of the South-Western Front were to “inflict a decisive defeat” on enemy groupings in “Lublin-Sandomierz and reach the Vistula river.” From there, future strikes would be “in the general direction of Kielce, Krakow and along the Tilitza river and the upper course of the Oder river” (September 1940 Plan, 241).

After this provisional plan was formalized on September 18, 1940, a firm decision followed a meeting of Timoshenko, Meretskov and Stalin on October 5 (Bobilev 1995; Gorkov 1993, 29–39). A memo was sent by the generals to Stalin to confirm the change in the deployment of the main force to the southern sector where offensive operations were considered more feasible.¹⁴ Timoshenko and Meretskov also requested approval for an increase in the organizational strength of motorized rifle divisions, tank divisions, an additional 100 aviation regiments, including the formation of new mechanized corps to strengthen the main grouping in the southwest (1941 *God.*, 1, doc. no. 124: 288–90). Significantly, the official revised document noted that the proposed measures would be carried out incrementally, with new units in place by May 1, 1941 and the full provision of capabilities by October 1, 1941.¹⁵ These measures were approved by the Politburo on October 16 (Kudriashov 2018, 1, doc. no. 1.55: 358–59).

Although some sources contend that Stalin initiated the change to the southern variant, a more persuasive reconstruction points to the leading roles of the generals who reinforced a view germinating in Stalin’s intelligence briefings that Hitler would need resources to prosecute a protracted war. The combined effect seems to have encouraged the dictator to jettison the more likely Clausewitzian approach that Shaposhnikov had embraced, in which

Germany would follow the shortest and fastest path to Moscow (Bobilev 2000; Zakharov 2005, 420–21; Kudriashov and Ekshtut 2021).

ZHUKOV SOLIDIFIES THE PRIMACY OF THE OFFENSIVE AS CHIEF OF THE GENERAL STAFF

The emphasis on planning for Soviet offensives on more favorable terrain from the southwestern axis solidified when Zhukov replaced Meretskov in February 1941. Zhukov’s appointment followed his forceful speech on offensive operations at the December 1940 Command Conference of senior military leaders, which Stalin presided over, and starring role in the Winter war games that following January, whose results were assessed in the Kremlin.¹⁶ The war games are significant both for what they revealed and what remained hidden. They were heavily scripted, detailed exercises on maps stage-managed by the General Staff, seemingly more to prove than test prevailing preferences, such as shifting the focus of the Soviet counter-offensives to the South from north of the Pripyat.

Significantly, in both games the Westerners (Blue) were the attackers while the Easterners (Red) were defenders, though the games fast forwarded after the initial attacks to focus on the counter-offensives. Predictably the Eastern Red side came out in a superior position in both games, rapidly going on to the counteroffensive after Blue started the war. In the northern sector, as expected, the Eastern counter-offensive encountered more difficult terrain and advanced at a slower pace than in the south/southwest, where the Red counter-offensive led by Zhukov rapidly pushed the enemy back to the border, and then shifted military operations west of it to a depth of 90–120 kilometers, reaching the right flank of the front of the Vistula and Dunajec rivers.¹⁷

The most striking characteristic of the operational exercises on maps was their complete neglect—unlike similar games conducted by the *Wehrmacht*—of the initial period of the war. Isserson (disgraced in Finland) had considered such questions in his 1940 book on *Novye formy bor’by* [*New Forms of Combat*], which characterized the opening stage of the German-Polish War as a “new phenomenon,” where “war is no longer declared” but “simply is begun by previously mobilized forces” (29–30). This question was raised at the December 1940 High Command conference that preceded the games by Lt. Gen. P. S. Klenov, chief of staff of the Baltic MD, who criticized Isserson’s book, asserting that its “hasty conclusions” based on the German invasion of Poland with prepared, fully deployed forces of 1.5 million men, thereby eliminating the “initial period of war” are “premature” (Roberts 1995, 1311–12). Likewise, Zhukov’s speech lauding offense dismissed France as

too weak to provide lessons for the USSR, while Timoshenko acknowledged German mastery of modern combined arms operations, but insisted that maneuver warfare needed to be developed alongside heavy concentrations for the breakthrough, as demonstrated in the Soviet Winter War against Finland (Zolotarev 1993, 339–40).

Zhukov's arrival as Chief also coincided with the General Staff's completion of MP-41, the mobilization plan for 1941 ("Mobilizatsionnyi plan na 1941 God"), which replaced the previous mobilization plan of November 1937. Delivered by Zhukov and Defense Commissar Timoshenko to the political leadership in February, the report reviewed the re-equipment plans for the Soviet armed forces and options for MP-41 which included both open and hidden mobilization. Replete with painstaking tables of data gathered by the directorates of the defense commissariat, the report was both forward-looking and typical of the grandiose unrealistic style of Soviet projects. It clearly showed that the huge and growing army was strong on paper; but it was expected that formations would remain significantly understrength, at low readiness, and devoid of the most modern armaments until 1942 at the earliest. It also drew on new intelligence information that showed Germany was concentrating more divisions on the western borders; up to 120 were projected by May.¹⁸

Sweeping in scope, the report was nonetheless an unrealistic, over-ambitious projection of the future wartime strength of the Red Army for 300 fully equipped divisions with no fewer than sixty tank divisions and thirty motorized divisions, grouped into thirty-three mechanized corps and 333 aviation regiments.¹⁹ Such immense claims on national resources, however, were then beyond the capacity of the defense industry to deliver. Document after document followed from the senior military leadership to the Kremlin reporting production shortfalls and grossly understrength projections into 1942, especially for the T-34 medium tank and aircraft (RGANI f. 3, op. 50 d. 262, "TsK KPSS, Politbiuro 'Osobaia Papka'"; *1941 God*; Kudriashov 2018, 1). One quarter of the reported strength of the Red Army on June 22 was "in the process of formation," and the majority of the mechanized corps and divisions were still being stood up and trained (Mawdsley 2003, 829; Zakharov 2005). The reorganization of the armed forces fostered incautious miscalculations about the availability of formations, with "catastrophic consequences" (Zakharov 1989, 227, 229; Zolotarev 1998, 83).

THE MARCH 1941 WAR PLAN

Zhukov was just six weeks at his post, when Vasilevskii produced a heavily marked-up "working" operational war plan on March 11, 1941.²⁰ This

iteration of the deployment plan bolstered the rationale for the Southern variant and priority the military leaders placed on the Kiev Military District in allocating resources. Germany was now (erroneously) expected to "most likely deploy its main forces in the south-east" to strike Berdichev and Kiev so as to seize Ukraine (March 1941 Deployment Plan, 6).

The March 1941 Deployment Plan otherwise parallels the September 1940 plan approved the previous October for conducting offensive operations along the Southwestern axis. The planners deemed "the most advantageous deployment of our main forces to the south of the Pripiat' River" is to be in position to "inflict powerful blows against Lublin, Radom, and Krakow, setting for themselves the first strategic objective: to defeat the main German forces and in the very first stage of the war, cut off Germany from the Balkan countries, and decisively influence the Balkan states in the question of their participation in the war against us" (March 1941 Deployment Plan, 16–17). After destroying the main concentration of German forces in the area of Lublin-Radom-Sandomierz and Kraków, Soviet forces were to cross the Vistula, seize Kraków and Warsaw, advance to a front of Warsaw, Łódź, Kreuzburg, Opole" [on the Oder River]. Then "depending on the situation, the subsequent strategic objective for the main forces of the Red Army" is the "development of the operation through Poznań to Berlin or action to the south-west towards Prague and Vienna or a strike to the north towards Toruń and Danzig with the objective of bypassing East Prussia" (17–18). More specifically, the Southwestern front was tasked with conducting operations on the front of Kielce, Krakow (with Łódź, Kreuzburg, Opole crossed out),²¹ "cutting Germany from the support of its allies while simultaneously firmly securing the border with Hungary and Romania" (16–18, 27–28).

Shaposhnikov had been correct in recognizing the greater threat to Moscow, "from the point of view of a Soviet *defender*," was an attack that ran through the northern axis from East Prussia and northern Poland into Belorussia. The invader would have better lines of communication, better rail and road routes enabling efficient concentration of forces. These advantages explain why Germany mounted its main attack in this sector in 1941. However, a "Soviet *attacker*" would avoid the difficult terrain of East Prussia, which complicates the conduct of offensive operations.²² As Soviet planners noted, the attacker would want to avoid his main forces being tied down in "long-drawn out battles" which would "not give the necessary rapid result."²³ Preoccupied with offense, the General Staff calculated that attacking from Ukraine into southern Poland could exploit better terrain and an opportunity to outflank the *Wehrmacht* in central Poland, while also blocking German forces from access to critical economic bases and the Balkan countries from being drawn into the German camp (*ibid*).

Both the October 1940 and the March 1941 plans were also based on the same dangerous faulty assumption that counted on having the luxury of time (roughly between 15–20 and up to 30 days in various sectors) to mobilize and concentrate the forces before transitioning to general operations. Just as importantly they underscored the priority on offensive over defensive actions.

Throughout 1940 into the spring 1941, the General Staff repeatedly reassessed and incrementally updated its operational and mobilization plans. Germany and its Balkan allies were deemed the most important threat in a possible two front war that included Japan, but the General Staff acknowledged its lack of concrete intelligence on the German war plan. Beyond misidentifying the likely German *Schwerpunkt*, the General Staff's painstaking process failed to update its core assumptions, in particular its grievous error about the initial period of war. The false assumption of available time to mobilize before the main fight was as puzzling as it was disastrous.

Urged by military leaders, Stalin conceded to some measures to increase readiness. The three front (army group) headquarters started to form on the basis of the Military Districts—the Northwestern, Western, and Southwestern Army Groups. Between 25 March and 5 April 1941, 394,000 twenty-year-olds were secretly called up. Some preparations were directly oriented towards offensive operations. In April 1941, five airborne corps were established, 20,000 parachutes ordered, and the design of troop-carrying gliders prioritized. Responding to Zhukov's persistent requests, Stalin moved to establish increases in large armored formations in the shape of fifteen mechanized corps. Some nine mechanized corps had been ordered set up after the fall of France in July 1940; another twenty began formation in February 1941 in conjunction with the General Staff's report. Yet the generals persistently failed to operationally adjust, sticking to plans to position the best capabilities in forward positions. This deployment posture opened the door to rapid encirclement by fully mobilized German formations.²⁴

PERCEIVED ADVANTAGES OF PREEMPTION

In May, four armies of the high command reserve were ordered to begin movement from the interior to the Western and Kiev Special MDs. On Wednesday, 14 May, the western border MDs were sent orders to prepare plans for "covering zones." A sense of urgency now gripped military leaders that is evident in their proposal to begin implementation of the plans to "cover," namely prepare the border areas for the initial engagements. This necessitated their final drafting by June 1 and essentially meant the start of mobilization.

According to Vasilevskii, interviewed after the war, ample evidence pointed to German plans for a military attack.²⁵ The generals had started to fear "first mover" advantages by Germany, evidently without appreciating that the threat was imminent or fully understanding the storm of steel that was about to engulf the Red Army. A surprise attack by *experienced and fully mobilized* German forces using modern weapons, unlike in the First World War, would be able to exploit breakthroughs to an extraordinarily lethal degree (See Rokossovskii 1999; Bialer 1969; and also Biddle 2004).

The last known iteration of the operational war plan developed by the General Staff and the one in place when the war started (Gor'kov 1993, 29–45; see also, Gor'kov 1995). was completed in May (probably May 15) as another handwritten report officially from Timoshenko and Zhukov to Stalin on "Considerations [*Soobrazheniia*] on the plan of strategic deployment of the Soviet Armed Forces in the event of war with Germany and its allies [hereafter: May 1941 "Soobrazheniia"]."²⁶ It is likely that Timoshenko and Zhukov briefed Stalin on the plan during one of their meetings that month though this cannot be confirmed. As war clouds gathered, Stalin met in his Kremlin office roughly weekly with the defense commissar and chief of the General Staff, but there are only logs of visitors who were present and for how long, not minutes of what was discussed in such meetings (Korotkov et al. 1996).

The illusion of the Soviet Union's ample time horizon to fulfill the mobilization plan was now shattered. The General Staff sought to get the current forces ready and brought into position. Even more important, the war planners now finally acknowledged the unreality of their assumption that both Germany and the Soviet Union would mobilize and concentrate their forces gradually according to the old scheme, over ten–fifteen days and even longer in some sectors. The May 1941 "Soobrazheniia" requested that Stalin "at the appropriate time [*svoevremennno*] permit the . . . carrying out of hidden mobilization and hidden concentration in the first instance of all armies of the high command reserve and of aviation forces" (l. 15).

The May 1941 "Soobrazheniia" acknowledged for the first time that the main enemy, Nazi Germany, kept its army completely mobilized, with its rear areas deployed. It concluded that "in these conditions, it has the possibility to preempt [*imeet vozmozhnost' predupredit'* (underlined in the text)] Soviet forces in the deployment and delivery of a sudden blow" [*v razvertivani i nanesti vnezapnyi udar*] (May 1941 "Soobrazheniia," l. 3). The military leadership believed that in no case should the initiative be given to the German command [*ni v koem sluchae ne davat' initsiativy deistvii Germanskomu komandovaniiu*]. Thus, breaking from past formal plans that specified only counter-offensives, the May plan proposed "to preempt the enemy in

deployment and attack the German army at the moment when it will be in the stage of deployment and will not have time to organize the front and interaction of the combat arms” [*upredit’ protivnika v razvertyvanii i atakovat’ germanskuiu armiiu v tot moment, kogda ona budet nakhodit’sia v stadii razvertyvaniia i ne uspeet eshche organizovat’ front i vzaimodeistviie rodov voisk*] (May 1941 “Soobrazheniia,” l. 3–4).

Under this proposed *future* war plan, a massive Soviet force²⁷ was to launch a surprise attack against the 180 (out of 284 reported) German divisions expected to be deployed against the USSR. Corresponding to the formal text, Zhukov later described it as a “pre-emptive blow” (*predupreditel’nyi udar*), in an interview in the 1960s (Anfilov 1995; Bobylev 2000). The targets were largely consistent with the previous plans. The objective was to deliver two strikes: the main one—on Krakow, Katowice and the other—on Warsaw, Dembrzyn, reaching the Łódź-Oppeln line by the thirtieth day of the operation.

Although the military leadership sought to begin mobilization as soon as possible, the timing of the proposed preemptive strike was left uncertain and not coordinated with the intelligence reports pouring in to Stalin warning of an imminent attack (ROSARKHIV). Some historians maintain the USSR was preparing for a July offensive, but the planning does not concretely support such contentions.²⁸ The military buildup would still be underway into 1942; fuel and other supplies had not yet arrived by June 22. Some long-term defensive preparations were also planned for 1942, but the offensives retained the priority.

Given that Operation Barbarossa aimed to destroy the Soviet army in Western Russia, it is clear that by June 22 both combatants had developed operational plans to achieve the immediate strategic objectives of the war by offensive strikes during the initial period. The difference is that the *Wehrmacht*, unlike the Red Army, was at a high level of readiness and preparedness. Equally important, the *genshtabisty*’s recommendation for a preemptive strike contradicted Stalin’s war avoidance diplomatic policy on the eve of the war; and he appears to have firmly rebuffed it.

In the view of an experts’ group drawing lessons after the war, the moment to carry out the May 15 plan had already been lost (Nelasov et al., 1992). The circumstances indicated that the deployment of the *Wehrmacht* to attack the Soviet Union was already basically completed, and thus Germany had preempted the Soviet Armed Forces in the deployment of their troops. In this view, it was necessary to have earlier taken drastic measures to repel the impending German assault and to ensure the strategic deployment of the Red Army under these conditions.

DEFENSIVE LINES

The May 1941 “Soobrazheniia” also specified supplementary plans for “Covering the Concentration and Deployment.” This version proposed to speed up the construction and equipping of three defensive lines: (1) on the current border (so-called Molotov line, reflecting the territorial annexations to the west); (2) on the line of the old 1939 border (the so-called Stalin Line that had been partly dismantled to build the fortified region along the new frontier); and (3) to begin construction of a new rear line Ostashkov-Pochep [140 miles west of Moscow].²⁹ This new attention to defense was not only too little too late, but also neglected weaknesses in the existing system and the entrenched offensive bias (Denisova and Tumash 2007). Great importance was also attached to the widespread use of strategic reserves, but these were not planned for use in the crucial initial period (Zakharov 1989).

CONCLUSION

When the Germans attacked on June 22, the plan to forward deploy Red Army forces—expecting defensive border operations would be manageable before transitioning to counter-offensives by the main forces—immediately was revealed as the most grievous error all along the enormous 1,800-mile front from the Baltic to the Black Sea, but especially in the Western Army Group sector whose forces included the 17th Mechanized Corps, the best equipped in the Red Army with 1,022 tanks (including 352 T-34 and KV modern variants). The Western Army Group formations were supposed to support the over-ambitious plan for offensive operations into southern Poland led by the larger Southwestern front. However, three of the Western front’s four armies and three of the four mechanized corps were jammed into the Belostok salient (125 miles wide and 80 miles deep) with exposed flanks facing the main German force, Army Group Center. It took only a week for the Germans to execute a double encirclement trapping or destroying some 30 Red Army divisions. The losses were staggering and on the seventh day, the High Command lost communications with the Western Army Group, pushing Zhukov to tears and a despondent Stalin to retreat to his dacha.³⁰

The Great Patriotic War was won in part because the Soviet manpower advantage and industrial capacity allowed the formation of new armies to replace the pre-war army, but nowhere near in time to implement the flawed war plans or avert a costly disorderly retreat. The rout of the Soviet Western Front armies threatened to spiral into a potentially unrecoverable defeat. The chaos spread into western Ukraine where initial Soviet counter-thrusts

bolstered by a 6:1 advantage over the Germans in tanks and a 2:1 advantage in aircraft (Zolotarev 1998, 155) could not prevent the Red Army's greatest single military disaster, the loss of Kiev. In desperation, on November 17, Stalin fatefully ordered a scorched earth policy, just as Alexander had done to help stop Napoleon's advance into Russia, except the tsar actually understood the necessity of defense to weaken the French army and allow development of well-organized counter-offensives.³¹

NOTES

1. According to Zhukov, Stalin had a grasp of strategy but at the outset of the war "a poor understanding of operational art" and failed to grasp tactics (Simonov 1987). See also Volkogonov 1989.

2. Seweryn Bialer's contribution was to find the gems from the memoir literature then available and bring them and his insights to a Western audience. Bialer's passion to continue this historical work to his last days is one I share, but sadly was unaware of before his passing.

3. The defensive dimension of Soviet political-military doctrine related to major war. It did not prevent Soviet armed aggression against Finland, the Baltic states, or other *faits accomplis* and annexations of borderland territories before 1941.

4. The same points are made in a text issued by the General Staff academy for official use (Iminov 1989, 3–4).

5. After the Finnish war this was the assessment of both the Finns and the Germans. See Horst Boog, Jürgen Förster, et al. 1983, 236 on the German assessment of the supposed elite Soviet tank force. "[B]ecause of inadequate combat training and training in co-operation with other branches, it was incapable of conducting a modern war of movement. . . ." The German general staff concluded that the Red Army was "in quantity a gigantic military instrument," but "the Russian 'mass' is no match for an army with modern equipment and superior leadership." Finland's Field Marshal Mannerheim (1953) similarly reflected that the Red Army might be a "determined fighting machine" but the Russians were inefficient in combat and over-relied on their immense brute power.

6. According to the noted military theorist G.S. Isserson, "To speak about army [level] defense on an operational scale . . . was somehow considered improper and antithetical to our offensive doctrine . . . [However] one could adhere to an offensive doctrine and [still] have a theoretically sound defense . . . [just as] . . . one could, in fact, adhere to a defensive doctrine and neglect the careful consideration of defensive questions on an operational scale, as the French did" (Isserson 1965, 57).

7. A full discussion of the evidence is beyond the scope of this chapter. See Roberts (in progress), Koktin 2018, and on Stalin's encouragement of Hitler to retain benefits from the Pact, see the June 14 TASS Communique in *1941 God*, 2, doc. no. 551, 361; Kudriashov and Ekshtut 2021.

8. The troops were instructed "not to succumb to any provocative actions that could cause major complications." Timoshenko and Zhukov left Stalin's office at 22 hours 20 minutes. The directive was sent for encryption at 23 hours 45 minutes, and then to the command of the military districts at 0 hours 30 minutes. "Proekt sekret-nogo postanovleniia Politbiuro TsK VKP(b) 21 iunია 1941 g." 'Osobaia Papka,' APRF re-catalogued in RGANI f. 3. op. 50. d. 263. l. 3–5.

9. Some of the pre-1941 Soviet war plans were excerpted in the 1990s in the journal *Voenna-Istoricheskii Zhurnal* (ViZh) and in the two-volume collection of 686 documents from nine Russian archives: *1941 God: Sbornik dokumentov* 1998 [hereafter: *1941 God*]. Select pre-1939 plans were accessible to this author in RGVA (formerly TsGASA) and post-1939 as partial typescripts. Now additional portions of the secret 1940–1941 war plans have become accessible. However, the extensive materials that comprise the complete collections of 1940–1941 plans housed at TsAMO remain off limits to Western scholars.

10. Zakharov (1989, 219–24) charts how key posts in the General Staff, beginning in the summer of 1940, were gradually taken up by champions of the Southwest direction whose prior association was with the Kiev group of senior officers. Besides Timoshenko, Zhukov and Vatutin, the deputy chief of staff of the Kiev MD, Major General G. K. Malandin was transferred to the post of chief of the Operations Directorate of the General Staff. These officers "continued to attach more importance to the South-West direction" which "was more familiar, thoroughly studied" but this orientation also made it "impossible" to correctly evaluate impending events.

11. "Soobrazheniia ob osnovakh strategicheskogo razvertyvaniia Vooruzhennykh Sil SSSR na Zapade i na Vostoke na 1940 i 1941 gody." *1941 God*, 1, doc. no. 95: 181–93. The previous month in July Shaposhnikov and Timoshenko sent up a memorandum [Dokladnaia zapiska] previewing the August "Soobrazheniia" with the same title. Rosarkhiv. TsAMO. F. 16a. Op. 2951. D. 239. L. 1–37.

12. Vasilevskii 1988, 1: 102; Bialer 1969, 132; Balandin 2005, 317–23. Shaposhnikov was a former tsarist military specialist who headed the Red Army Staff (1928–1931) and author of many studies including a three-volume tome on the General Staff as the "Brain of the Army," which Stalin pored through. He survived the purges as one of Stalin's most respected, non-charismatic technical experts, although his advice was sometimes ignored (Rzheshhevskii 1993, 217–30).

13. Strategic Deployment Plan, 18 Sept. 1940, *1941 God*, 1, doc. No. 117: 236–253 (hereafter: September 1940 Plan).

14. Dokladnaia zapiska narkoma oborony SSSR S.K. Timoshenko i nachalnika Genshtaba Krasnoi armii K.A. Meretskova v TsK VKP(b) o vyvodakh otnositel'no strategicheskogo razvertyvaniia Vooruzhennykh sil SSSR na 1941 g., 14 oktiabria 1940 g. Rosarkhiv. TSAMO, f. 16a. op. 2951. d. 242. l. 84–90.

15. Zapiska Timoshenko and Meretskova o provedenii organizatsionnykh meropriiatii, APRF, F. 3, Op. 50, D. 262. L. 117–23. Re-catalogued in RGANI, and reprinted in Kudriashov 2018, 1, doc. no. 1. 54: 355–58.

16. Documents for the conferences and war games are in RGVA, f. 4, op. 18, d. 55–60; and RGVA, f. 37977, op. 5, d. 564, 566, 568, 570, 572; and RGASPI f. 558. op. 11. d. 437. See also Zolotarev 1993.

17. Ibid. For the most reliable memoir account, see Kazakov 1971, 57–58. Bialer had one of the first excerpts in *Stalin's Generals*.

18. According to the General Staff, Germany concentrated up to 76 divisions (including 6 tank and 7 motorized) in March and by May—up to 120 divisions (including 13 tank and 12 motorized). Projections were that a German coalition in this theater could have up to 284 divisions against the Soviet Union. TsAMO, f. 16A, op. 2951, d. 237, l. 3.

19. Zhukov and Timoshenko memo to Stalin and Molotov, 12 Feb. 1941, *1941 God*, 1: 607–40; Draft Sovnarkom decree, 12 Feb. 1941, *ibid.*, 641–50; Zakharov 1989, 226–30; Mawdsley 2003, 827–30.

20. Recently Rosarkhiv made available the document including its important previously missing section V: “The Foundations of Our Strategic Deployment in the West.” Dokladnaia zapiska narkoma oborony SSSR S.K. Timoshenko i nachalnika Genshtaba Krasnoi armii G.K. Zhukova v TsK VKP(b) s utochnennym planom strategicheskogo razvertyvaniia voozuzhennykh sil SSSR na Zapade i Vostoke v 1941 g. 11 marta 1941. Rosarkhiv. TsAMO, f. 28 (16a), op. 17 (2951), d. 18 (241), l. 1–55 (Hereafter: March 1941 Deployment Plan). Handwritten by Vasilevskii with numerous changes by both Vasilevskii and Vatutin, this document (like some other plans) is not signed by Timoshenko or Zhukov. It was also Stalin’s practice not to sign such documents.

21. Vatutin made many handwritten edits on the document. Highly regarded among *Genshtabisty*, he “spent whole nights ‘conjuring over cards,’ developing various options” (Kudriashov and Ekshtut 2021) but apparently never questioned the fundamental operational errors discussed here.

22. This contrast comes from two of the most informed historians: Mawdsley 2003, 822 and Bobylev 1995, 2000. Mawdsley (2003, 830) challenges Vasilevskii’s account which misconstrues the timing of the decision to prioritize the southern variant (Vasilevskii 1989, 1: 112–13).

23. March 1941 Deployment Plan; 15–18; September 1940 Strategic Deployment Plan, *1941 God*, 1: 245; Mawdsley 2003, 822–23.

24. That was exactly the Wehrmacht assessment. See Halder 1988, 446. Subsequently, German generals recognized the costs to their side from Russian mass and unending geography.

25. Vasilevskii interview, Kumanev, 1999, 232–33. The topic of extensive intelligence warnings is beyond the scope of this chapter.

26. “Zapiska narkoma oborony SSSR S.K. Timoshenko i nachalnika Genshtaba Krasnoi armii G.K. Zhukova I.V. Stalinu s predlozheniami po planu strategicheskogo razvertyvaniia Voozuzhennykh sil SSSR na sluchai voiny s Germaniei i ee soiuznikami [15 maia 1941 g.] Rosarkhiv.” TsAMO, f. 28 (16a), op. 17 (2951), d. 14 (237) l. 1–15.

27. The General Staff constantly updated the details on strategic deployment while still facing shortfalls in capabilities. By mid-June 1941, it was envisaged to deploy the first strategic echelon, consisting of four fronts (189 divisions and two brigades, which is more than 60 percent of all formations of the Red Army). TsAMO, f. 16A, op. 2951, d. 259, l. 1–17, d. 262, l. 1–135.

28. Mawdsley and Bobylev disagree on whether a mid-July attack was the guiding idea. Note also a separate debate over a “12–6” handwritten notation on the back of the May 15 text and whether this was added later after the war to suggest the preemptive attack should start on June 12. See Kudriashov and Ekshtut 2021.

29. Construction of new fortified regions in 1942 on the border with Hungary was also proposed (May 1941 “Soobrazheniia”).

30. Mikoian 1999 and Korotkov et al. eds. 1996, 51–54. The Germans also surrounded the fortress at Brest on the first day, though some of the defenders struggled to hold on for about a month when Soviet formations had already been pushed 300 miles to the east (Mawdsley 2015, 63).

31. STAVKA Order No. 428 by Stalin and Shaposhnikov, November 17, 1941, TsAMO, f. 208, op. 2524, d. 1, l. 257–58.

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APRF: Russian Presidential Archive.

AVPRF: Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation.

RGANI: Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (former TsKhSD).

RGASPI: Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (former RTsKhIDNI, central party archive).

RGVA: Russian State Military Archive (former TsGASA, central state archive of Soviet military).

Rosarkhiv: Federal Archive Agency documentary collections and exhibits.

TsAMO: Central Archive of the Ministry of Defense.

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