

# We Should Study More Dead Russians

And spend less time studying the German way of war

by Maj Alfred B. Ruggles

In U.S. military academic circles, it is commonplace to study the feats of 20th century German contributions to tactics and combined arms warfare; however, this fixation with the accomplishments of “dead Germans” is misplaced. While perhaps overly simplistic, the reality is the Germans lost the two major wars of the 20th century, suffered the death of millions of their soldiers and civilians, and lost their sovereignty for approximately 44 years following World War II. In essence, U.S. military academics focus an inordinate amount of time on losers, which is akin to studying the 1990s-era New York Knicks instead of the Chicago Bulls. Meanwhile, the United States and NATO allies, after nearly 100 years of almost continuous conflict with the Russian Empire, are still confounded by Russian military practices, doctrine, and contributions

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to modern maneuver warfare. This article argues that U.S. PME academies should place a higher emphasis on examining Russian military accomplishments and contributions to military doctrine to better understand a relevant and formidable adversary. Furthermore, the examination of Russian contributions should be greater than that of German contributions for many reasons; however, none are more important than the fact that while Germany was utterly destroyed over 70 years ago, Russia proved geopolitically victorious in the 20th century and is a regional hegemon that continues to

win significant strategic exchanges with the West.

## German Contributions

Before proceeding, it is important to understand widely accepted German contributions to modern Western military doctrine. Firstly, in the early 20th century, the German military was the first to develop the contemporary idea of mission command—the concept that subordinate commanders should accomplish their objective in line with their higher commander’s intent, thus providing tactical commanders the ability to maneuver more rapidly than their micromanaged adversaries.<sup>1</sup> This concept was codified in *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, in 1989. Secondly, the German *Blitzkrieg*, at the onset of World War II, massed mechanized assaults, at decisive points and were augmented with tactical air support from the *Luftwaffe* to cre-



**Georgy Zhukov.** (Photo by Grigory Vayl.)



**Vasily Ivanovich Chuikov.** (Photo by Mil.ru.)



**Mikhail Tukhachevsky.** (Photo unknown 1937.)

ate a rapidly maneuverable combined arms force.<sup>2</sup> Employing these tactics, the German military devastated Poland and France in less than two months, respectively. However, it is important to remember despite these accomplishments, Germany also found itself mired in attrition-based trench warfare in World War I and ultimately emerged as a defeated nation. Furthermore, recall that Germany executed the *Blitzkrieg* against vastly outmatched Polish Forces simultaneously besieged by a Soviet invasion. In France, the Germans succeeded against a socioeconomically unstable nation that was politically irresolute to fight another war.<sup>3</sup> In other words, while Germany should be given credit for having the foresight to modernize and mechanize its forces in the 1930s, it employed these forces against frail and pacifistic adversaries in Europe. When the Germans finally met fully mobilized British, American, and Russian forces in 1943, they lost all of their territory and were destroyed as a nation state in less than two years. Moreover, the German experience in Russia can be prudently described as one of the most disastrous military endeavors in history. While many apologists claim tactical- and operational-level commanders were hindered by an increasingly unhinged Adolf Hitler, Hitler's mismanagement of his armed forces paled in comparison to Josef Stalin's terrible treatment of his military forces.<sup>4</sup> Clausewitz, you say? Recall that while educated in modern-day Germany, he spent formative years in Russia, observing their use of unconventional tactics to defeat Napoleon's 1812 offensive.<sup>5</sup> Yes, Germans formulated the modern concept of mission command and employed combined arms during two world wars; however, they failed to exploit their tactical victories for any strategic gain. To this day, Germany is a woefully circumscribed military power.

## Russian Contributions

*MCDP 1* describes maneuver warfare as a philosophy that

seeks to shatter the enemy's cohesion through a variety of rapid, focused, and unexpected actions which create a turbulent and rapidly deteriorating

situation with which the enemy cannot cope.<sup>6</sup>

While volumes of literature have been written about the eastern theater of World War II, the Battle for Stalingrad captures the essence of the Russians' operational ability to maneuver cognitively on land, in air, below the earth's surface, and in cyberspace. By the end of this monumental battle, the Soviets had conducted several unexpected operational turning movements against German forces. Soviet Forces also used the city's vast sewer systems to maneuver beneath and behind German soldiers, who were unwilling to condescend to maneuver in the sewers. Russian snipers wreaked psychological havoc on German forces.

## ... Russia seems politically and economically fragile ...

Also, Soviet radio operators jammed, interfered, or intercepted a significant quantity of German radio transmissions during the battle.<sup>7</sup> This battle represents a turning point in World War II, a decisive shift of operational expertise from Germany to Russia and the modern genesis of Russia as an operational and strategic powerhouse in military affairs.

Following World War II, and despite incessant economic mismanagement by political leaders, the Russian military occupied all of Eastern Europe, waged viscerally effective regional and global information warfare, and fielded armies unmatched by Western powers. While mindful of the Russian failure in Afghanistan, fast forward to the 21st century and we see a resurgent Russia that continues to confound western leaders. Its conduct of irregular and information warfare in Georgia was highly effective in using social media to target military forces and denying its opponent's ability to conduct basic command and control with denial of service attacks on information technology networks.<sup>8</sup> As we speak, Russia, although spend-

ing one-tenth of what the U.S. spends on defense,<sup>9</sup> occupies vast portions of Georgia and Ukraine, while western forces are helpless to counter its efforts. Russia is currently promoting the militarization of the Arctic, exploiting Syria's civil war for strategic gain, and surreptitiously violating the integrity of national elections in several nations. Ultimately, the Russian military and political apparatus is extremely effective at operational maneuver in all domains, especially while conducting irregular warfare and cyberwarfare operations. Meanwhile, American military scholars and future leaders continue to study the *Blitzkrieg* that Germans conducted against the Polish military 70 years ago.

## Solutions: Understanding Our Adversary

From an outside perspective, Russia seems politically and economically fragile; nevertheless, the 2017 *National Security Strategy* still described Russia as a near-peer adversary—one of four in the world.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, top-level political and military leaders opine that Russia presents the single greatest threat to the United States today.<sup>11</sup> The Russians have a long and rich history of military conquest spanning a millennium. The fact that Russia suffered so many, oftentimes self-induced, disasters during the 20th century and still emerged as a regional hegemon with global influence is all the more reason to study its tactical and operational military feats more seriously. While the Germans galvanized tactical brilliance, the Russians exploited German contributions and created the modern concept of operational-level maneuver and the “deep fight.”<sup>12</sup> Because of their operational approach toward achieving strategic ends, Russia completely vanquished German forces in World War II, helped turn the tide of the Korean War against the United States, facilitated a strategic defeat of the United States in Vietnam, operationally seized portions of Georgia and Ukraine, and still actively exploits the Syrian civil war and seriously threatens European sovereignty to this day.<sup>13</sup>

Effective immediately, resident PME curriculums should begin examining 20th century Russian military ac-

complishments, theory, and doctrine. A good place to start is the body of Russian military theorists purged by Stalin in the 1930s. They are the intellectuals who synthesized an operational approach to war.<sup>14</sup> A case study of the Battle for Stalingrad presents an opportunity to examine Russian maneuver warfare as the country fully mobilized in World War II and exploited all possible avenues to operationally shock the Germans. Russian efforts against the United States in the Korean and Vietnam War present an early case study of unconventional warfare.<sup>15</sup> Russian successes in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria all present relevant examples of their successful implementation of conventional and unconventional operations to achieve strategic aims.

## Conclusion

Every day spent focusing on “dead Germans” is one more day that could be better used to study “dead Russians” and Russians who are still alive and achieving operational victories. While early 20th century Germans provided novel building blocks for tactical excellence, they utterly failed to gain any strategic victories from their efforts. Meanwhile, the Russians present a force that predates Germany, have a long and illustrious military history, crushed German forces in World War II, built substantially upon basic German military tenets, codified operational maneuver, continue to gain geopolitical momentum, and will likely pose a formidable challenge to the United States and its allies for the foreseeable future. American military professionals must divest themselves of an incessant fixation on western, namely European, military accomplishments over the past two centuries and focus more on existential adversaries—adversaries that match or overmatch western forces in many warfighting domains. Failing to do so will continue to cultivate leaders unfamiliar with the most significant modern threats to the United States.

## Notes

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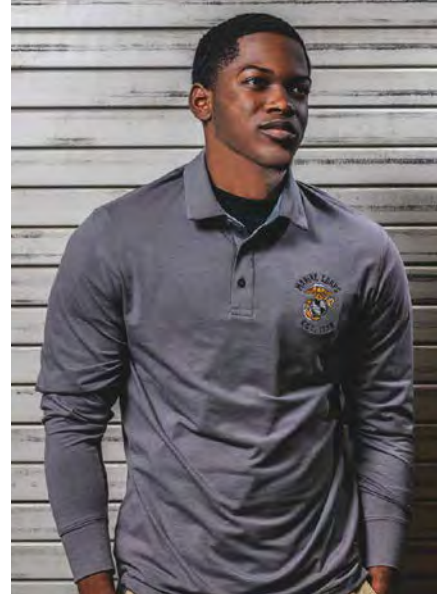
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