
The Round Tablette

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Welcome to the January edition of the Harold C. Deutsch World War II Roundtable. It seems only fitting in the cold Minnesota winter that we will be discussing the Soviet Union once again. Tonight's guest speaker is Roger Reese who is the author of many books on the World War II Soviet military and Russian war veterans. The focus of tonight's discussion will be on the Soviet military leadership.

While the Russian Revolution swept away the Romanov dynasty and the autocratic government, there was a large amount of continuity between the old Imperial army and the newly formed Red Army. While the Bolsheviks were suspicious of standing armies they realized that one was needed. During the first years of the new forces, ex-Tsarist officers, non-commissioned officers and idealists were recruited. As Roger Reese noted in *Red Commanders*, the Russian Imperial military legacy transcended the revolution. The former Tsarist officers helped to secure the Soviet state through civil war and the Polish-Soviet War in the early 1920's.

The greatest of these former Tsarist officers was Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, who had a storied military career beginning as a lieutenant in a Tsarist Guard unit. Although of noble birth, he joined the Communist party during the revolution.

Because of his great military skills he rose through the ranks quickly during the civil war and Polish-Soviet War finally becoming the Chief of Staff of the Red Army in 1925. Tukhachevsky developed the Deep Operations doctrine using his experiences in the Russian Civil war and the Polish –Soviet Conflict. This doctrine proposed that victory could be achieved through simultaneous corps- and army – size unit maneuvers and simultaneous parallel attacks throughout the depths of the enemy's ground forces to induce catastrophic defensive failure. The deep battle doctrine also relied upon aviation and the armor advances in the hope that maneuver warfare offered a quick, efficient, and decisive victory. The Red Army's Deep Operations doctrine was first expressed in 1929, but was banned during the Red Army purges of the 1930's only to be revived during the Second World War.

During the Great Purge of 1937 – 1939 the Red Army lost many leading officers including Tukhachevsky to execution. The official objective of the purges was to cleanse the Red Army of unreliable political elements, but proved most useful in settling personal vendettas and eliminating potential rivals. Tukhachevsky and other high ranking officers also had information on Stalin's ineptitude as a military commander during the Polish-Soviet War, something the dictator did not want made public. Thus, by the German invasion in June 1941, the Red Army officer corps had little experience leading army size units into combat. Historians still debate the overall effect of the Army purges, whether the Red Army would have been so soundly defeated by the Germans in 1941 without the decimation of the officer corps.

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When the Red Army finally halted the German invasion, they returned once again to Tukhachevsky's deep operations doctrine and adapted it to suit its needs in war. The Red Army Officer Corps during the Great Patriotic War (World War II to the rest of the world) proved flexible to changing situations on the battlefield. Learning as they conquered, the Soviet military perfected the effective use of armor and aviation as they slowly pushed the German forces backward toward Berlin. By mid-1943 Red Army operations were equal with what had been theorized in the early 1930's.

As for the Soviet Union's greatest soldier in the Great Patriotic War, that would be Georgii Konstantinovich Zhukov. He was born a peasant and began his career as a conscript in the Russian Imperial Army. His peasant status helped him during the Revolution and he rose quickly in the ranks. Zhukov survived the Red Army purges of the 1930's but that did not prevent him from clashing with Stalin. Even so, Zhukov thrived as a leader not only in the defense of Leningrad, but also the defense of Stalingrad, the Battle of Kursk, and the final drive to Berlin.

As the formative experience for the Soviet Union and the Red Army, the Great Patriotic War provided a testing ground for new military ideas since virtually every type of combat, weather, and terrain were used. The Soviet Military leadership maintained a flexible response to the rapidly changing dynamics of the battlefield. Ultimately, the Great Patriotic War proved to be was a turning point not only in Russian History but in world history.

Further Readings on tonight's topic:

John Erickson, *The Soviet High Command, 1918-1941* (London: Macmillan, 1965)

David Glantz, *Colossus Reborn: The Red Army at War, 1941-1943* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2005)

Mary Habeck, *Storm of Steel: The Development of Armor Doctrine in Germany and the Soviet Union, 1919-1939* (Cornell University Press, 2003)

Catherine Merrydale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945* (New York: Macmillan, 2006)

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

Roger R. Reese, *The Soviet Military Experience: A History of the Soviet Army, 1917 – 1991* (New York: Routledge, 2000)

Roger R. Reese, *Red Commanders: A Social History of the Soviet Army Officer Corps, 1918-1991* (Lawrence KS: University of Kansas Press, 2005)

Sally W. Stoecker, *Marshal Tukhachevsky and the Politics of Military Innovation* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998)

Georgii Zhukov, *The Memoirs of Marshal Zhukov* (Moscow: Olma Press, 2002)

Round Table Schedule 2010

11 February 10	Role of Bombers in WW2
11 March 10	New Guinea Campaign
8 April 10	Invasion of Anzio
13 May 10	Flying the Hump

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