
The Round Tablette

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Welcome to the January session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. It seems only fitting in the cold Minnesota winter that we will be discussing the Soviet Union once again. Tonight's speaker is Bruce Menning, author of the upcoming *Russian Army and the First World War* and of the classic *Bayonets Before Bullets*. He will be speaking on the evolution of the Russian Army from the First World War to the eve of the Second.

The Russian Revolution swept away the Romanov dynasty and transformed many of the institutions of the the autocratic Tsarist government regime. There was a large amount of continuity between the old Imperial Army and the newly formed Red Army under the Bolshevik Commissar of War Leon Trotsky. In the Russian Civil War (1917–921), the Bolsheviks were hard pressed to simultaneously organize their dictatorship and communize every institution under their control (via “War Communism” enforced by the CHEKA, the first Soviet secret police agency), and field a revolutionary army fighting numerous enemies on many fronts. Despite their ideological antipathy towards former Tsarist officers and officials, Trotsky was forced by necessity to rely upon these politically suspect professionals to make an effective Red Army to fight the civil war against the “Whites” and its various external enemies across the vast landmass of Russia. It was never the completely new revolutionary force imagined by Lenin's ideology. As a result, the Red Army owed much of its doctrine, structure, and traditions to pre-Revolutionary norms.

Indeed, immediately after its victory in the civil war, the Red Army was tested by the brief but savage Polish-Soviet War (1919–1921). Following this, aside from some mopping up of die-hard anti-Bolsheviks in the hinterland the Red Army was mostly at peace in the late 1920s and 1930s. During this time, the Red Army evolved in many dramatically innovative directions – in doctrine, training, and technological fields, often with “aid” of German instructors and technicians.

In Germany, the severe restrictions on the Weimar Republic's *Reichswehr* prompted General Hans von Seeckt to make a mutually beneficial and highly secret agreement with the Soviet Union. German forces would train on Soviet soil with weapons and doctrines forbidden by the Allied powers. Part of the many very modern and forward looking practices of the Red Army will have derived from the exchange of ideas with the Germans. The use of air power, particularly in a tactical role, (including airborne infantry—“vertical envelopment”) new and radical ideas about armored warfare, and the idea of mobility dominating the future battlefield were pioneered by leaders of the Red Army such as Mikhail Tukhachevsky. Ironically, the architects of the German Blitzkrieg such as Heinz Guderian and Erich von Manstein might never have been as skilled in applying mobile warfare concepts had the German Army not secretly practiced armored warfare in the Soviet Union years before.

Marshal Tukhachevsky 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, and quickly rose through the ranks during the civil war and Polish-Soviet War finally becoming the Chief of Staff of the Red Army in 1925. He developed the Deep Operations doctrine that victory could be achieved through simultaneous corps- and army-size unit maneuvers and parallel attacks throughout the depths of the enemy's ground forces to induce catastrophic defensive failure. This doctrine relied upon aviation and the armor advances to produce a quick, efficient, and decisive victory. Deep Operations doctrine was banned by Stalin during the purge of the Red Army from 1937–38, and revived of necessity during the Second World War.

Stalin's fear of any institutional or personal rivals to his complete control of the Soviet Union led to both mass purges and to individual arrests, with “show trials” to drive home the lesson: do not oppose Stalin and the state. During the Great Purge of 1936–1938, having eliminated the Old Bolsheviks and followers of Trotsky from the Communist Party, Stalin moved against the only other institution that could possibly challenge his sole authority: the Red Army officer corps. Militarily, the effect of the Great Purge was to wipe out thousands of

If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

the most promising and gifted Soviet officers, be they experienced veterans or newly trained junior officers. The USSR replaced many of those imbued with Tukhachevsky's new ideas with unimaginative political yes-men who were cowed into total obedience to Stalin.

The Red Army's various deficiencies (in personnel, leadership, materiel, strategic and tactical doctrine) after the Purges was clearly demonstrated in the Winter War with Finland (1939–1940). Losing thousands of troops to freezing and spectacularly successful Finnish mobile defensive operations, the blundering Soviet behemoth only succeeded in securing a negotiated peace after losing approximately 200,000 men. The Red Army's abysmal performance against the vastly outnumbered Finns was specifically cited by Adolf Hitler to support his expectation of a rapid victory over the Communists when he launched Operation Barbarossa. The poor performance of the air force (and evidence of its poor training) prompted a purge from October 1940 to February 1942 that was extended after the Finnish War to army commanders and officers and to war industries. It was further expanded during the German thrust to Moscow. The initial Russian responses to the Nazi storm that descended on the Soviet Union in June 1941 was everything Hitler would have hoped for and Tuchachevsky had vainly tried to prevent. Independence of action being a sure ticket to the Gulag, Soviet troops would hesitate to act without clear orders, and too often were cutoff and overrun. As a result, in the first weeks, the Russians were often indecisive, demoralized, and timid, unlike their German counterparts.

When the German invasion, mired in "General winter's" mud, petered out before Moscow, the Soviets returned to Tukhachevsky's deep operations doctrine and adapted it. The Red Army Officer Corps during the Great Patriotic War (World War II to the rest of the world) proved to be flexible, responding 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 1930s. Decades after his death, Tukhachevsky was rehabilitated by the Soviet Union and honored for his contribution to victory in the Great Patriotic War and to Russia's military history.

Further Readings:

Bruce Menning, *Bullets before Bayonets* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Press, 1992)
A. A. Kokoshin, *Soviet Strategic Thought, 1917-1991* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).

Evan Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War, 1941-1945* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005).

Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

David M. Glantz and Jonathan House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995).

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

Announcements:

Vietnam War Roundtable - 20 Jan. 2020, *Return to Vietnam* - rldietrich@mnmilitarymuseum.org

Twin Cities Civil War Round Table - 21 Jan. 2020 - *Artists in Residence at Gettysburg* - www.tccwrt.com - info@tccwrt.com

St. Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - 27 Jan. 2020 - *Civil War Medicine* - 715-386-1268 - rossandhaines@comcast.net

Military History Book Club, Har Mar Barnes & Noble - 29 Jan. 2020 - Nolan, *Allure of Battle: A History of ... Wars... Won and Lost* - sdaubenspeck52@gmail.com

Civil War Symposium - 4 Apr. 2020 - info@tccwrt.com
Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345 - 320-616-6050 - <http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>

Minnesota Air Guard Museum - 612-713-2523 - www.mnangmuseum.org

8th AF Historical Society of MN, KC Hall Bloomington, Wednesdays at 1130 - <https://www.8thmn.org>.

Friends of Ft. Snelling - www.fortsnelling.org

World Without Genocide - 651-695-7621 - <http://www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/>

Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN - Air show - 20 June 2020 - 320-564-6644 - <http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>.

Wings of the North Airshow - Eden Prairie - 18-19 July 2020 - 952-746-6100 - www.wotn.org

Winston Churchill Book Club - lin.hopkins@hotmail.com

Alliance Francaise 612-332-0436 - www.afmsp.org -

Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - 651-338-2717 - crazyjer-ry45@hotmail.com

CAF - Commemorative Air Force - 651-455-6942 - www.cafmn.org

We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

Round Table Schedule 2020

11 Feb. Battle of Manila
10 Mar. OPERATION VARSITY
24 Mar. Bedel Smith
9 Apr. **THURSDAY** Tanks at Bataan
12 May Last Battle

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Tukachevsky



Seekt



Stalin