MOBILE GROUPS: PROLOGUE TO OMG

by

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The aim of Soviet military operations is the destruction of the enemy. This destruction is to be accomplished by developing tactical into operational and subsequently strategic success. Like most arts, this rather simple objective belies the technical difficulties of structure and execution. With significant changes in the past few years, the Soviet armed forces have exhibited a surprising degree of flexibility and innovativeness in their force structure and fighting doctrine. In particular, the identification of the operational maneuver group (OMG) has been the focus of great speculation in the Western press.[1] While some articles have acknowledged Soviet mobile group operations of World War II, most have failed to present a full appreciation for the basis that mobile group operations represent to current Soviet military planners on OMGs. Concurrent with Western writings on the OMG, Soviet military publications, in a chacteristically direct usage of their historical studies, are defining the lessons of mobile group operations for applicability to OMGs.[2] While World War II mobile groups operated in a comparatively simple environment—tanks sought to dominate the battlefield and aviation gave rudimentary support—a similar concept on today's battlefield would be dependent upon past lessons fused with modern technology and operational objectives. A closer scrutiny of mobile group operations on the eastern front may more sharply define our expectations in the structure, composition, and use of contemporary OMGs, for the OMG story cannot begin without the mobile group experience.

Before looking at the Soviet use of mobile groups on the eastern front, it is necessary to review the doctrinal context within which mobile groups developed. Soviet military research between the world wars concluded that in World War I the breakthrough of the tactical defense zone in most cases did not lead to great operational success. Failure generally resulted from two basic causes. First, forces and equipment that could achieve high attack tempo were unavailable. Tanks and aircraft had shown their potential when used in small numbers. Their technical reliability, however, did not suit them to participate in high-speed, deep attacks. Second, the lack of improvements in breakthrough techniques and the unskillful coordination of separate arms, especially infantry and artillery, did not resolve the problem of breaking through an enemy defense to its entire depth.

Based on a rigorous analysis of World War I in his book *The Character of Contemporary Army Operations*, V. K. Triandofillov, Chief of Operations in the Red Army Staff, developed the concept of a mass mechanized army which could be employed deep into the battlefield. The Soviets' new, mechanized-based offensive doctrine began to take shape in the field service regulations of the late 1920s. Soviet military theoreticians reached the conclusion that successful offensive operations would require not only a decisive penetration of the enemy defenses, but also a rapid transfer of the main efforts of the attacker to the enemy's operational depth for the purpose of developing the offensive. Tank and mechanized forces

would play the key role in performing the second mission.

Throughout the 1930s under the watchful eye of the youthful Marshal Tukhachevsky, the Soviets applied these theories through tactical maneuvers into force structural changes. As a result, by 1936 the Soviets had created four mechanized corps. The production of tanks and vehicles necessary to implement these theories became an integral part of the Soviets' first five-year plans.

On the eve of World War II, after the purge of the Soviet officer corps and the confusing experiences of the Spanish Civil War, occupation of eastern Poland, and war with Finland, the Soviets temporarily dismantled the mechanized corps. Only in late December 1940, based on General Zhukov's experience at Khalkin Gol on the Mongolian-Manchurian border and observations of the German success in France, did the Soviets reverse their regressive trend and begin rebuilding a mechanized force capable of fulfilling a deep-battle concept. It was a reorganization caught mid-stride by the German invasion of June 1941.

During the four years of fighting on the eastern front, the Soviets gradually applied their theory of deep combat operations. They solved the World War I problem of penetrating defenses by employing massed artillery fire and air strikes to support infantry making the initial penetration. Mobile groups followed on the most important axes with the objective of rapidly developing the attack to the whole depth of German defenses. Soviet experience convinced them that the decisive condition for complete destruction of the enemy was achieving a high attack tempo, for even short halts gave the enemy breathing space to maneuver or counterattack.[3] The Germans conditioned the Soviets well by their ability to react literally overnight to Soviet maneuver.

The basic mission of mobile groups was to develop the tactical success. They were committed through gaps, at boundaries, or from the flank of the first-echelon units, primarily along successful axes. The axis for committing second-echelon units into battle varied according to the situation. An important difference between mobile groups and second echelons was that mobile groups had specific missions and were committed to battle at or near the beginning of the operation in order to develop the attack swiftly in depth, while the second echelon was usually used after the immediate objective was secured.[4]

Experience showed that successful offensives required not only a decisive breach of the German defense but also a swift shift of the attacker's main effort into the enemy's operational depth for the purpose of developing the offensive. The key role in achieving the latter objective was played by the tank armies, cavalry-mechanized groups, and tank or mechanized corps, which were the mobile groups of the armies and fronts.[5]

Under the scrutiny of the Soviet Supreme High Command, the Soviets closely studied the experiences of the tank armies and corps actions in all operations and generalized that experience. These experiences were distilled in the form of High Command orders and directives issued with important instructions for use of tank troops by armies and fronts.[6]

Initially, fronts and armies did not possess large armored units. Front mobile groups consisted of cavalry and infantry formations supported by small tank battalions or brigades. This followed experience gained in the war with Finland when units like mobile groups were created with tank brigades reinforced by rifle battalions and sappers.[7] These groupings, however, had insufficient combat power to develop success to a great depth.

Coincidentally with the three periods of the war were three organizational phases which Soviet armored forces went through.[8] During the first phase, from July 1941 to early 1942, large tank units were pared down to smaller ones (brigades, regiments, battalions) for easier command and control of the limited number of available tanks. In the 1942 winter battles around Moscow, Soviet forces were unable to surround large enemy groupings and press home the deeper attack. Without large tank formations in the front and army organization, the Soviets concluded

that the important task of developing the tactical success to the operational depth could not be fully achieved.

In the second phase of the war, from April 1942 to the end of the year, the Soviets formed tank and mechanized corps and, concurrently, their first tank armies. However, the tank and mechanized corps lacked an armored infantry, and the tank armies were formed from diverse infantry, cavalry, and tank units. Meanwhile, Soviet combat practice was also refining their offensive techniques. On main assault axes the Soviets began using large tank formations with the primary mission of assisting infantry forces in the breakthrough and development of the attack. The Soviets considered tanks primarily an offensive resource.

Initial offensive experiences with the newly formed 5th Tank Army at Voronezh in July 1942 showed the disparity in combat capabilities and mobility among the army's rifle divisions, tanks, and cavalry corps. Such a mobile group composition proved too awkward and unwieldy to control. The need to counter the considerable tank capabilities of the Germans spurred the Soviet effort to develop even larger and better-balanced tank units.

In the third phase of development, from 1943 to the end of the war, the Soviets refined the organization and improved the composition of tank formations. In 1944, improvements in the firepower and maneuverability of tank corps increased their tactical independence. These improvements resulted in the creation of real capabilities for inflicting deep strikes against the Germans and for conducting combat operations with a higher momentum than before.[9]

By the end of the war, Soviet tank armies were composed of two or three tank or mechanized corps. The basic trend was toward increased firepower, greater unit autonomy, higher mobility and maneuverability, and more easily controlled regiments, brigades, and corps. These were the characteristics necessary for successful mobile group operations.

The main operational objectives of mobile groups were to inflict deep strikes in order to scatter and destroy the units, to complete a tactical encirclement of the main enemy groups, to hold off enemy concentrations of tactical and sometimes strategic reserves, and to occupy and hold important objectives and lines until the approach of infantry units.

Successful operations by front and army mobile groups in developing the attack to the operational depth depended greatly on the circumstances of their commitment to battle, on close cooperation with other ground forces and air support, and on firm troop control. Ideally, the basic method for developing a breakthrough was to have mobile groups begin their combat operation only after the infantry divisions had broken through the Germans' main defensive zone. In most Soviet operations, however, mobile groups were committed on the first day of the battle within the German tactical defense zone. Mobile group tank strengths proved necessary to assist infantry units in creating a breach in the main defense zone. Only in isolated instances did the Soviets commit mobile groups to battle after the first-echelon armies had already broken through the entire tactical defense zone. Usually, mobile groups were not intended for the breakthrough but rather for their specific mission.[10] The commitment of the mobile groups to action on the first day was one of the decisive moments in the front or army attack.

Operations of separate tank or mechanized corps acting as army mobile groups on the first day of the commitment to the breakthrough advanced from 15 to 50 kilometers. If the German defense was more

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deeply echeloned, the advance was held to 15 to 25 kilometers; if not deeply echeloned, the advance could be 35 kilometers or more.[11]

Mobile groups typically operated separately from the main forces of the front when they carried out their combat missions. Throughout the war the organizational structures of the tank and mechanized formations that comprised the mobile groups were improved to ensure their combat independence and survivability when operating deep. The major lesson the Soviets learned was that separate mobile groups could be established and could function independently during operations when separated for long periods from the main attack forces.[12]

Mobile groups used concentration and assembly areas prior to commitment to combat. While corps-sized mobile groups used concentration areas 25 to 150 kilometers from the line of contact, on an average concentration areas were 50 to 70 kilometers to the rear.[13] Concentration areas less than 50 kilometers from the Germans were hard to conceal and hindered immediate redeployment to new or unanticipated axes. Areas more than 100 kilometers distant resulted in excessive expenditures in combat vehicles because of routine equipment malfunction on long-route marches before combat operations.

Army-sized mobile groups used combined concentration and assembly areas which were usually situated outside population centers in natural cover and concealment. Assembly areas were designated for the transfer of mobile groups in the direction of impending operations, and they provided concealment as close as possible to the line of contact. Such assembly areas were 20 to 40 kilometers from the line of contact for tank armies, 10 to 20 kilometers for corps.

Mobile group units were configured in assembly areas for ease of movement to a line of commitment without further regrouping. For its move to commitment, each corps was given two routes within a zone of 8 to 20 kilometers for tank armies, 6 to 8 kilometers for mobile corps.

Mobile group formations usually consisted of two echelons, artillery groups, and a reserve, depending on the situation and mission. In corps-sized mobile groups at least two brigades (usually tank) and a large portion of the support weapons were assigned to the first echelon and designated to achieve the immediate mission. The corps second echelon reinforced the attack for deep exploitation, repelled German counterattacks, and consolidated success. Reserves, in battalion to brigade size, dealt with unexpected German tank attacks on the mobile group's flanks and rear, and exploited and consolidated offensive success.

The reconnaissance elements of first-echelon brigades began the advance on their respective axes. Behind the reconnaissance followed movement support detachments, which began necessary obstacle-clearing on the movement routes for their parent brigades.

Upon approaching the line of commitment, forward detachments in the form of reinforced tank or mechanized brigades usually were deployed into combat formation and cooperated with the infantry units' attacks. Facilitators of battle, these forward detachments generally activated the offensive and immediately influenced the depth of the operation while in some measure disorganizing the defense. Having assisted in breaking down the resistance in the main defensive zone, the forward detachments rushed on to the second defensive zone in order to break through it on the march.

If the mobile groups had to complete the breakthrough of the enemy tactical defensive zone after the infantry units engaged the main German defensive zone, then in this case only the forward detachments or part of the mobile group's first-echelon forces were called upon to seize the second German defensive line. Only in those instances did the combat actions in breaching the second defensive zone of the Germans take on a drawn-out nature.

Forward detachments, usually a tank brigade, had the specific mission to seize and hold important tactical or operational objectives, disrupt German defenses in depth, and partially prevent maneuvering of enemy operational reserves.[14]

Under favorable conditions, the mobile groups were committed to the battle after the first-echelon armies had already penetrated the entire German tactical defense zone and sometimes even into the rear area. Most often this occurred on the second through the fifth day of the operation at a depth of 15 to 35 kilometers from the forward edge of the battle area and sometimes even farther. Such a method of commitment to battle was called a "clean" breakthrough.

If the mobile groups were committed to a clean breakthrough, they usually advanced from the assembly areas to the line of commitment with the forward detachments of the first-echelon units in front of them. The mobile group main force moved behind the lead units in route columns and, after passing through the entire tactical defense zone of the Germans, overtook the infantry and rushed into the operational depth. Sometimes only the forward detachments of the mobile groups deployed into the battle formations when overtaking the infantry.

Aviation formations selected to support the combat actions of the mobile groups became operationally subordinate to the commander of the mobile groups with the beginning of commitment to battle. To coordinate the actions of ground attack aircraft, the commander of the supporting air division was located in the mobile group command post and had communications with both the airfield and aircraft that were airborne. In the first-echelon brigades and forward detachments were air army personnel who would guide aircraft to specific targets. Mobile groups seized serviceable airfields on which supporting aircraft could be quickly relocated in order to keep air support in the immediate vicinity of the mobile groups.[15] Air strikes combined with artillery fires cleared the path along which the mobile groups operated.

After completing the breakthrough of the German defense, the most characteristic missions of mobile groups operating in the operational depth were to engage German reserves, preempt subsequent defensive lines, cross water obstacles, fight to hold key terrain, pursue withdrawing German forces, and seize important installations or facilities.[16]

Once through the tactical defense zone, the mobile groups' main mission was the defeat of the Germans' operational reserve.[17] Advancing at high rates in the operational depth well ahead of the friendly first echelons seemed to attract German reserves. Mobile groups would immediately encounter reserves rushed to close the breakthrough and intended to prevent the advance by holding them within the limits of the tactical defense zone. Impressed by the Soviet speed in exploiting even the smallest penetration, the Germans were forced to make every possible effort to immediately seal off penetrations, however small their own counterattack force.[18]

Combat actions against attacking reserves took the form of meeting engagements. These engagements would develop in broad zones of 20 to 60 kilometers and last from one to three days.[19]

The Soviet researchers concluded that in the course of fighting in the tactical defense zone the Germans, as a rule, used all of their closest operational reserves and for the next several days were practically unable to offer any serious resistance to the offensive of the mobile groups.[20] The Germans then rushed to bring the reserves from a strategic depth into the offensive zones of the mobile groups and by counterattacks or by occupying defensive positions delayed further advances by Soviet mobile forces.

The Soviets noted that the conditions for fighting German reserves in the beginning and at the end of an operation differed substantially. Fighting German reserves during commitment to battle, although it did affect the future course of the operation, nevertheless usually was fought jointly with the first-echelon units and in cooperation with aviation. Mobile group combat vehicles and equipment were close to established strengths, and they usually achieved a force ratio in Soviet favor.

Conditions for fighting German reserves in the closing phase of an operation differed completely. Then, mobile groups had expended a considerable part of their forces and

weapons and were deficient in supplies and fighting vehicles. Moreover, they operated a great distance from the main forces of the fronts and sometimes without air support. While in the first phase of the operation Soviet mobile groups fought German reserves by direct offensive actions, in the closing phases fresh German reserves frequently forced mobile groups onto the defensive after brief meeting engagements.

The mobile groups' ability to develop the success was directly dependent on their adeptness to overcome rear defensive lines and water obstacles quickly. After completing the breakthrough of the Germans' tactical defense zone and the defeat of their immediate operational reserves, the mobile groups turned to pursuit of the retreating German troops. An important requirement during pursuit was a high offensive momentum. Tempo was the nexus between tactical capabilities and operational possibilities. Soviet studies showed that the tempo in the operational depth largely relied upon the skillful and dynamic actions of forward detachments.

Forward detachments rushed into the depth of enemy defenses, slipped into the rear of their retreating groups, captured bridges and river crossings, cut off the retreat of the enemy troops, and also forestalled their occupying defenses at earlier prepared lines.

In the event the mobile group encountered major German strongpoints, they tried not to engage them but to bypass these points to maintain momentum and move even deeper.

The German defenses in the operational depth usually were characterized by an insufficiently developed fire plan, hastily organized and spread units, and poorly used terrain marked by incomplete engineer preparations of barriers and obstacles. Against these hastily occupied defenses, the mobile group broke through on the move or with a short artillery preparation when an attack on the move was unsuccessful. In the latter case, the breakthrough's failure was often attributable to mobile group commanders waiting for the arrival of additional support, usually artillery. By hesitating they lost the element of surprise, and the Germans had time to consolidate and improve their defense. "Achieving dependable artillery support of the operations of tank armies in operational depth," noted a senior Soviet doctrine writer, "required the creation of a sufficient quantity of fast moving artillery . . . . [T]o the very end of the war this was not done."[21] A number of mobile group operations successfully breached defenses in the operational depth on the move without massed artillery by substituting the firepower of the tank cannons and the support of air strikes.

Organizing and preparing breakthroughs on the move was done during the approach to the defensive line. The mobile group's offensive zone width varied and depended on the availability of men and equipment, the German grouping, the nature of the defense, and terrain conditions. Correlating these factors allowed Soviet commanders to concentrate their main efforts. During attacks, mobile groups often were not superior overall to German forces. However, concentrating men and equipment on the main axis, the Soviets achieved a considerable local superiority.

The simultaneous breakthrough of German defenses in several sectors proved to be quite effective. Large Soviet offensives often used a multiple of mobile groups advancing along parallel axes. Constant cooperation between the neighboring mobile groups was accomplished through mutual awareness of missions and the constant exchange of information. Such a method of attack did not allow the Germans to maneuver their forces and enabled the Soviets to split, isolate, and destroy the defenders in a short time. Such a breakthrough technique increased the difficulty for the defenders to detect the main strike axis and gave them little opportunity for organized resistance. Additionally, spreading mobile groups avoided a large concentration of men and equipment, which lowered losses from German ground attack aircraft.

In engagements for defended built-up areas, mobile group momentum decreased sharply and many times stopped entirely.

Therefore, the mobile groups tried to bypass built-up areas and attempted to cut off and encircle German garrisons for subsequent destruction by following infantry units. While it was advisable to go around German centers of resistance, the Soviets did take into consideration whether more time would be spent bypassing one than it would take to deploy and organize an engagement to overcome it.

Whether centers of resistance were bypassed by mobile groups in the operational depth also depended on the nature of their mission. In the course of some operations the Germans blocked the path of mobile groups with an organized defense on a wide front, occupying it with individual strongpoints. In these situations, mobile groups were forced to deal with the German resistance, breach the defense, and then resume their freedom of operational maneuver.

Quite often mobile groups were forced to cross several water obstacles during an operation. In fact, though, tank armies had insufficient river crossing equipment. What was assigned to them often lagged behind because it lacked comparative cross-country mobility. Thus one of the basic missions of the forward detachments was to seize river crossings, which made possible a more rapid crossing by the mobile groups.[22] Success depended on reconnaissance in order to determine the number of bridges and fords. Forward detachments were given the mission of seizing identified crossing points. While artillery moved forward as fast as possible, aviation support had the mission of isolating the crossing sector from German reserves and establishing air supremacy in the crossing area.

In the course of offensive operations, successful night operations were conducted by forward detachments of mobile groups. Regrouping and marches by the mobile groups were done mainly at night. This enabled them for a certain amount of time to conceal from the Germans the plan of the Soviet command and sharply reduced losses from German air strikes.

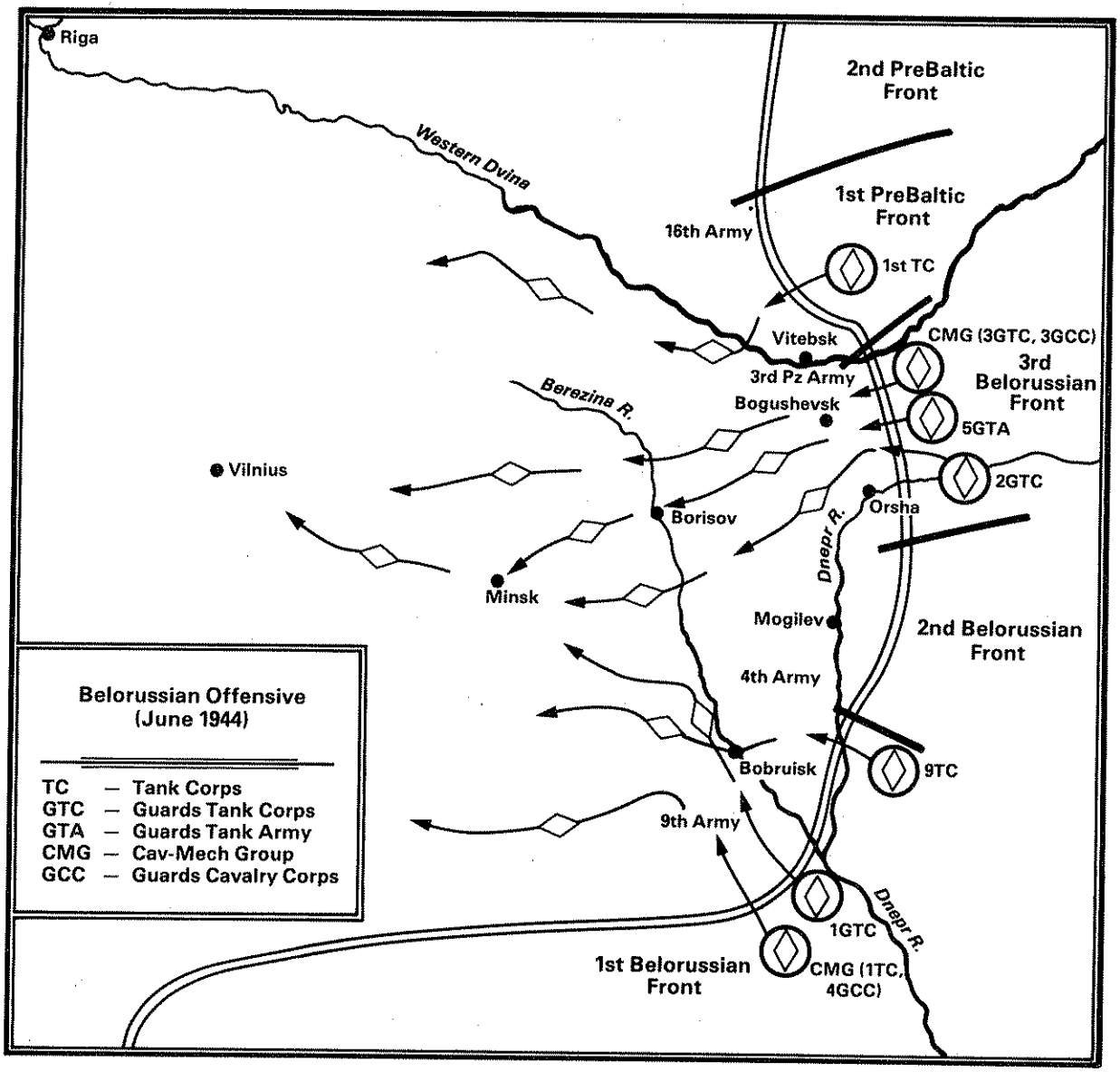
The Soviet Belorussian operation of 23 June to 29 August 1944, depicted on the accompanying map, is a good example of extensive and multiple uses of mobile groups by armies and fronts. In an effort to complement the Allied invasion of Normandy, the Soviets planned a major operation with the objective to destroy the German Army Group Center and parts of Army Groups North and Northern Ukraine.

The tank armies and mechanized corps (the latter were included in the cavalry-mechanized groups [CMG]) were used primarily as front mobile groups. In the Third Belorussian Front, two mobile groups were organized: the 5th Guards Tank Army and a CMG (III Guards Cavalry and III Guards Mechanized Corps). In the First Belorussian Front, two mobile groups were also established: 2nd Tank Army and the second CMG (IV Guards Cavalry and I Mechanized Corps). The Second Belorussian Front's mobile group consisted of two tank brigades, a rifle division, and a self-propelled artillery regiment. An exception, the I Tank Corps, was assigned as the front mobile group for the First PreBaltic Front.

The separate tank corps (with the exception of the I Tank Corps, First PreBaltic Front) were employed as mobile groups for combined arms armies advancing in the fronts' main sectors. The II Guards Tank Corps comprised the mobile group of the 11th Guards Army; the IX Tank Corps did the same in the 3rd Army; I Guards Tank Corps, in the 65th Army; and XI Tank Corps, for the 8th Guards Army.

A unique employment of the mobile groups in the Belorussian operation was that separate tank corps, as army mobile groups, were used for completing the breakthrough of the tactical defense zone and for supporting the commitment of the front mobile groups, tank armies, and CMGs. The Soviets planned the successive commitment of the mobile groups to battle. For example, the II Guards Tank Corps, 11th Guards Army mobile group, was to be committed to battle on the first day of the operation, while on the fourth day in the same sector the 5th Guards Tank Army, the mobile group of the front, was to be committed.

The commitment to battle of the mobile groups of the armies and fronts was a crucial and difficult stage. This was marked by a



number of essential features determined by the overall plan of the operation, by the nature of the German defenses, and by the terrain conditions. Depending upon the developing situation, the commitment to battle of the follow-up echelon was carried out on different axes and frequently in a manner quite unlike what was envisaged in the plans of the army and front operations. For example, the 5th Guards Tank Army was to be committed to battle according to the first variation, that is, on the Orsha-Borisov axis; but this was canceled as the Germans put up stubborn resistance to the troops of the 11th Guards and 31st armies. The 5th Guards Tank Army was regrouped to the left wing of the 3rd Belorussian Front and committed to battle on the Bogushev-Borisov axis, where a CMG had been committed two days previously. Having caught up with the rifle formations at a depth of 30 kilometers from the previous forward edge, the tank army began to rapidly pursue the Germans and came out in the direction previously planned for it.[23]

The Soviet forces broke through the German defenses simultaneously in six sectors, encircled and destroyed German

forces in the areas of Vitebsk and Bobruisk, destroyed German units in Orsha and Mogilev, and then encircled and destroyed the main forces of Army Group Center in the area of Minsk. Soviet forces achieved the liberation of Belorussia, seized parts of Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland, and forced the Narev and Vistula rivers, having advanced 550 to 600 kilometers and in some sectors 1000 kilometers.

Soviet conclusions on the experiences of mobile group combat operations within the operational depth ascribe their achievements to swift, decisive, and continuous day and night action and to the use of wide maneuvers when carrying out combat missions. The high momentum of mobile group attacks was achieved mainly through their aggressive use of forward detachments. They accomplished decisive action by avoiding drawn-out engagements and battles for major strongpoints unless necessary. By maintaining continuous operations they attempted to enter the Germans' rear area and to intercept their main lines of communications as quickly as possible.

As the Soviets refined their employment of mobile groups during the second and third periods of the war on the eastern front, many aspects of the combat and service support for these groups were continuously improved in capabilities and numbers.

A significant area relevant to OMG employment today was the organization and employment of air defense for mobile groups. Through the course of the war the primary trend was a greater density of ground antiaircraft fire under a centralized control and closer cooperation with fighter aviation support.[24] Antiaircraft artillery groups were formed and organized to protect the mobile groups from assembly areas through the breakthrough and into the operational depth. Fighter aviation from the front air armies flew counter air protection to cover the mobile groups throughout the operation against German air strikes.

Soviet studies of air defense support to mobile groups identified the following apparent needs: a highly mobile, armored antiaircraft weapon system that had cross-country and adverse weather capabilities; an organized system of reconnaissance for enemy air, using mobile radars in the course of the operation; and a centralized control of air defense personnel and weapons in repelling enemy air raids.[25]

Rear services for mobile groups proved to be the most difficult of organizations and operations to support.[26] Mobile groups consumed large quantities of fuel and ammunition: "According to World War II experience the average daily fuel and ammunition requirement of a tank army of medium strength was 600-700 tons. To satisfy this requirement it was necessary to provide, for a distance of 200-300 kilometers, 270-300 trucks with loads."[27] The front transports delivered comparatively little fuel to the mobile groups. Mobile groups were forced to organize their own supplies for the entire offensive operation, frequently reducing their rate of advance.[28]

Attempts were undertaken by the fronts to supply mobile groups by air transports, but the small number of available air transports carried an insignificant amount. One notable success was the major air resupply of forward detachments of the 6th Guards Tank Army during the Manchurian campaign in August 1945.

Local food resources were widely foraged to reserve the precious cargo space for the more critical ammunition and fuel. The nature and amount of work related to road traffic support necessitated having such road units as a bridge-building company, traffic control platoon, road platoon, and security platoon.

Mobile groups used all forms of transport to evacuate sick and wounded. When roads were lacking or Germans cut the lines of communications to the rear, sick and wounded were left at temporarily organized hospitals near inhabited areas until the arrival of the front-line forces.

Because of the high rate of advance and the great distances from the main forces of the fronts, the importance for autonomy in rear services for mobile groups increased. A recent review of Soviet mobile group experiences concluded, "A profound and creative study of the question related to rear

services support for mobile groups in the course of the last war will aid in successfully solving today's problems in developing organic and operational rear services."[29] Such is the Soviet advice for what may be assessed as the Achilles' heel for OMGs.

The mobile groups' operational tempo and distance from friendly front lines significantly influenced maintenance support. Combined arms armies did not have organic repair facilities until 1944 and were unable to provide support to mobile groups. Tank corps did not receive organic maintenance units until 1942, when they began to include two mobile repair bases for medium repair on tanks and motor vehicles.

Maintenance support for mobile groups was organized for three stages in an operation: preparation, movement to the line of commitment, and operations in the operational depth.[30] The Soviets brought units to full strength in the preparation phase and attempted to maintain that level in movement to commitment. The third stage, mobile group maintenance support at the operational depth, was of course more problematic. Studies showed the average daily breakdown rate of tanks and self-propelled assault guns in corps-sized mobile groups to be 8 to 10 percent from start to combat, and in two to three days of battle they lost up to 50 percent of the tanks.[31]

The basic method was to repair equipment directly in the forward unit areas. Repair and recovery groups of the tank battalions deployed behind the battle formations of the battalions while the maintenance support companies of brigades and corps deployed behind the first-echelon brigades. Maintenance observation posts were organized for checking tanks and summoning repair equipment to damaged vehicles in the tank battalions. Brigade maintenance teams repaired directly at the place where equipment broke down. Vehicles requiring labor-intensive repairs were evacuated to the corps assembly point for damaged vehicles. When rates of advance were high (40 to 50 kilometers) or limited recovery capabilities existed, corps did not organize the assembly points. Maintenance support for corp mobile groups was based on organic resources located at the rear command post.

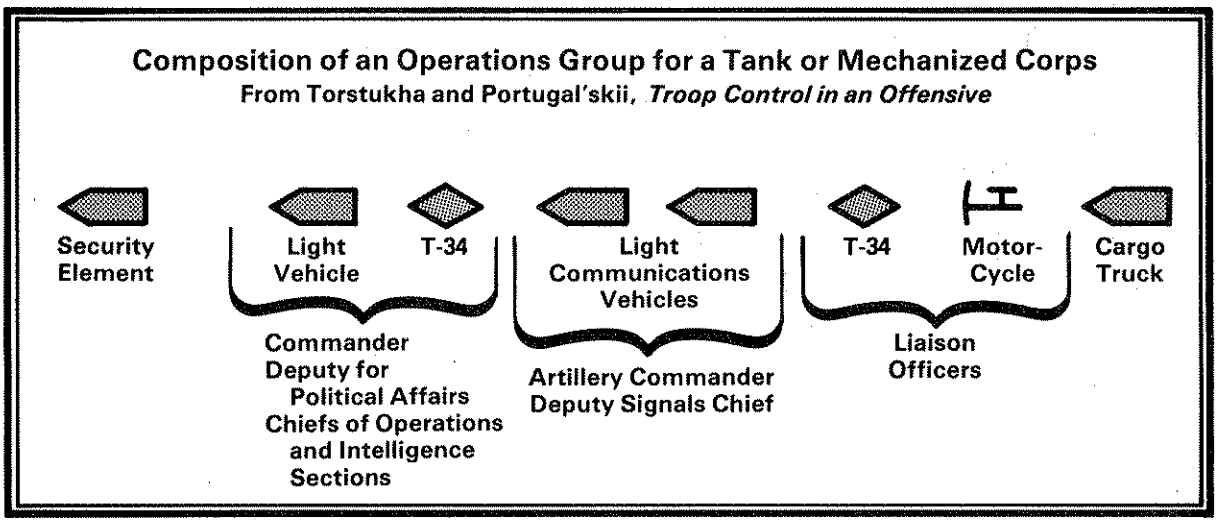
For corps-sized mobile groups, army and front maintenance resources were used to repair combat vehicles on the line of commitment to a breakthrough to ensure the complete moving of tank and mechanized corps' organic repair and recovery units into the operational depth.

The quality of maintenance support also was affected by the supply of spare parts and materials. Centralized supply from army and front depots depended on ground transport lines; when these lines were broken, maintenance units had to use parts and assemblies from vehicles that would not be repaired. Mobile group experience showed that corps-sized mobile groups operating in the operational depth usually received 40 to 50 percent and sometimes all of their parts and assemblies from irretrievably lost equipment.[32] German General von Manteuffal thought Soviet salvage and repair services performed extraordinary feats. He therefore issued orders that incapacitated tanks were to be set on fire.[33]

Another area of World War II mobile group experience that bears significantly on OMG operations today is command and control. A command post (CP) system was established that included in the first echelon of an army (or corps) mobile group a main command post and a rear command post. During operations, operational groups headed by the army or corps commander often were established to accomplish the role of a forward CP.[34] Small in size, operational groups were assigned staff officers with communications means to direct the army and corps staffs in accordance with the commander's instructions.

During the course of an army-sized mobile group operation, the forward CP was located six to ten kilometers from the line of contact; the main, 15 to 25 kilometers. The rear CP was located 25 to 30 kilometers behind the corresponding rear CPs of subordinate corps.[35]

Army-sized mobile groups changed CP locations by leap-frogging, rear CP to the main, main CP to the forward. These shifts



were done at night during the least active periods of combat. By the middle of 1944, the established practice was to work out a special plan for the movement of the CPs. Shifting the CPs depended on the tempo and the conduct of the attack. Forward CPs moved once, twice, or even more times a day; main CPs usually moved once a day; and rear CPs moved once in two or three days.[36]

A corps-sized operation was very mobile. For example, Soviet analysts computed that the IX Tank Corps during the Vistula-Oder operation halted 20 to 30 minutes for every one to five hours of movement. The speed of set-ups and tear-downs of CPs depended largely on staff teamwork and quick preparation of communications and equipment: corps CPs averaged 40 to 60 minutes.[37]

When distances were too great for available radios and made dependable direction and control impossible, the Soviets turned to mobile means, such as communications planes. In these circumstances, forward CPs were frequently established.[38]

During rapid rates of advance, commanders issued short combat orders by radio and laision officers carried duplicate messages. Sometimes at the end of the day, subordinate commanders and their chiefs of arms and services would meet in the main CP. They would summarize the day's combat operations, adopt decisions for the following day, and assign the combat missions.

The primary purpose for mobile groups was to rapidly shift the focus of combat to the rear area and thereby maintain a high rate of advance; today's OMGs have the same purpose. The importance of this dimension in operational-level warfare was succinctly described by the well-known Soviet front commander Marshal I. S. Konev, who wrote in his memoirs: "Thus the whole orderly system of the enemy's defenses which envisaged an appropriate sequence of committing the reserves to action, was disorganized. And this was very important, because precisely such a disruption of the integrity of the enemy's forces and of the system of their control is a sine qua non for successfully developing an operation to great depth."

With a vast reservoir of mobile group operational experience from World War II, it is no surprise that Soviet military analysts have turned to it for guidance. For the Soviets, the Marxist-Leninist imperative is to solve problems of military science on the basis of the methodology of dialectical and historical materialism.

In the body of available historical data, the Soviets believe they have the basis for operational analysis that can adapt the previous concept to the modern battlefield. With rigorous study in the areas of operational doctrine, logistical and fire support, and command and control, they will have considered critical mobile group problems

relevant to successful OMG operations. Their adaptations also will incorporate an understanding of the effects of technology and its influence to the full depth of the enemy defenses with strikes by missiles, aviation, long-range artillery, and airborne and air-mobile assaults. How the Soviets define and refine combat entities within the context of their historical experience will shape the force structure, equipment composition, and employment of OMGs. Now, the OMG story begins.

NOTES

1. See C. N. Donnelly, "The Soviet Operational Manoevre Group: A New Challenge for NATO," *International Defense Review*, 15 (No. 9, 1982), 1177-86; C. J. Dick, "Soviet Operational Manoevre Groups: A Closer Look," *International Defense Review*, 16 (No. 6, 1983), 669-776; John G. Hines and Phillip A. Peterson, "The Warsaw Strategic Offensive: The OMG in Context," *International Defense Review*, 16 (No. 10, 1983); Chris Bellamy, "Antecedents of the Modern Soviet Operational Manoevre Group (OMG)," *RUSI*, 129 (September 1984); Michael Ruehle, "The Soviet Operational Maneuver Group: Is the Threat Lost in a Terminological Quarrel?" *Armed Forces Journal*, 122 (August 1984); Henry S. Shields, "Why the OMG?" *Military Review*, 65 (November 1985), 4-13.

2. G. Chernykh, "On the Employment of the 6th Guards Tank Army in the First Echelon of a Front," *Voyenno Istoricheskii Zhurnal* (*Vizh*) (No. 3, 1981), pp. 66-69; N. Kireyev, "From the Experience of the Employment of Forward Detachments of Tank (Mechanized) Corps," *Vizh* (No. 9, 1982), pp. 20-27; I. Krupchenko, "Methods of Developing Success at Operational Depth by the Forces of Tank Armies, Tank and Mechanized Corps," *Vizh* (No. 7, 1981), pp. 12-20; V. Odintsov and V. Ovsyannikov, "Rear Support for Mobile Groups," *Vizh* (No. 3, 1983), pp. 43-49; I. Tormozov and V. Tokarskii, "The Organization of Air Defense for Mobile Groups of Armies and Fronts During Offensive Operations of the Second and Third Period of the War," *Vizh* (No. 4, 1983), pp. 21-27; A. Krupchenko, "Technical Support of Tank and Mechanized Corps Operations as Mobile Groups," *Vizh* (No. 6, 1982), pp. 27-33; see also for major studies of armored forces: O. A. Losik, *Formation and Combat Use of Soviet Tank Troops During the Years of the Great Patriotic War* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1979) and A. I. Radzievsky, *Tank Strike* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1977).

3. A. I. Radzievsky, *Tactics by Combat Example (Division)* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1976), p. 71.

4. I. Krupchenko, p. 12.

5. Ibid., p. 12.

6. Losik, p. 118.

7. P. A. Rotmistrov, *Steel Guard* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1984), p. 45.

8. Soviet recent historiography, which calls the fighting between the Soviets and the Germans the Great Patriotic War, has divided the war on the eastern front into three periods. The first period, 22 June 1941 to 18 November 1942, is the strategic defense. The second period, 19 November 1942 to the end of 1943, is the basic turning point in the course of the war. The third period, January 1944 to 9 May 1945, is the defeat of the German forces and the liberation of occupied European countries.

9. Losik, p. 72.

10. Ibid., p. 120.

11. Ibid., p. 122.

12. P. Kurochkin, "Operations of Tank Armies in Operational Depth," *Voyennaya mysl'* (November 1964), trans. in *Selected Readings From Military Thought 1963-1973*, comp. Joseph D. Douglass, Jr., and Amoretta Hoeber, published under the auspices of the US Air Force (Washington: GPO, 1982), p. 65.

13. Losik, p. 123.

14. Modern battle missions for forward detachments could include the above missions with the addition of destruction of the enemy's nuclear delivery systems, small advancing enemy reserves, and air defense groups. In the April 1965 issue of *Voyennaya mysl'*, General Vorob'yev noted that it would be reasonable to adopt the term "Operational Forward Detachments." Both the old and new concept is to dispatch the detachments with the "desire to increase the speed of the advance and to increase the depth of simultaneous action against defenders on important axes." I. Vorob'yev, "Forward Detachments in Offensive Operations and Battles," *Voyennaya mysl'* (April 1965), trans. in *Selected Readings From Military Thought 1963-1973*, pp. 97-98, 101.

15. Losik, p. 141.

16. I. Krupchenko, p. 13.

17. Kurochkin, p. 75.

18. Department of the Army Pamphlet 20-233, *German Defense Tactics Against Russian Breakthroughs*, October 1951, p. 32.

19. I. Krupchenko, p. 16.

20. Losik, p. 137.

21. Kurochkin, p. 79.

22. Ibid., p. 74.

23. O. A. Losik, "Application of Armored and Mechanized forces in the Belorussian Operation," *Vizh* (No. 6, 1984), pp. 22-23.

24. I. Tormozov, p. 27.

25. Ibid., p. 27.

26. V. Odintsov, p. 43.

27. Kurochkin, p. 80.

28. V. Odintsov, p. 43.

29. Ibid., p. 49.

30. A. Krupchenko, p. 28.

31. Ibid., p. 31.

32. Ibid., p. 33.

33. B. H. Liddell Hart, *The Other Side of the Hill* (London: Cassell, 1951), p. 333.

34. I. Krupchenko, p. 18.

35. Radzievsky, *Tank Strike*, p. 205.

36. Ibid., p. 208.

37. P. P. Torstukha, R. M. Portugal'skii, *Troop Control in an Offensive* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1981), p. 178.

38. Kurochkin, p. 80.