

*Offense, Defence or the Worst of Both Worlds?
Soviet Strategy in May-June 1941*

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Getting the strategy right does not guarantee a successful outcome, but all other things being equal it certainly stacks the odds in favour of one. The Soviet Union was strategically prepared for war in June 1941, but poor operational-strategic deployment and operational and tactical failings allowed the Wehrmacht to achieve far more through operational and tactical competence than perhaps need have been the case. Nonetheless, despite poor operational-strategic deployment and operational and tactical inadequacies during Operation Barbarossa, the Red Army was able to survive the summer and autumn of 1941, after which a combination of improvements at the operational and tactical levels and superior resource mobilization stemming to a large extent from strategic planning made German victory increasingly improbable.

Soviet strategic planning and ideology were closely related. For the Soviet revolutionary project that stemmed from the October 1917 revolution there were ultimately two possible outcomes – worldwide revolution or capitalist defeat of the sole beacon for international communism.¹ For the ideologically committed the second was of course not an option for the revolutionary project as a whole – even if the Soviet Union was defeated and the doubters of 1917 who argued that revolution in Russia was premature were vindicated, it would only be a matter of time before revolution came.

¹ On Soviet international relations and military-economic planning from the October Revolution of 1917 to the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939 see “Lenin, Stalin and the West 1917-1939”, in Alexander Hill, *The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union, 1941-1945: A documentary reader* (London/New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 5-21.

Better of course that the Soviet Union was not crushed by capitalist powers. However, hopes of international revolution in 1917-1920 proved illusory – even attempts to transport revolution to Poland by force of arms in 1920 were undermined not only by the lack of support in Poland but by the military weakness of the Soviet republic. The uneasy truce with the capitalist world that followed the end of the Russian Civil War and associated foreign intervention left the Soviet Union very much defensively minded – differences between Stalin’s ‘socialism in one country’ and Trotsky’s ‘permanent revolution’ were more rhetorical than anything else. Political victory by either camp would probably have seen the Soviet Union push industrialization forward with an eye on defence, but with the option for the promotion of revolution through offensive action in appropriate international circumstances – circumstances that could be encouraged by the Soviet Union be that through the Comintern or otherwise.

The Five-Year Plans of 1928 onwards, launched by a Soviet Union now clearly led by Stalin but in which Stalin had not quashed all independent-minded figures in the leadership, were geared towards the long-term defence of the Soviet Union, with expectations that the expansion of heavy industry would precede the strengthening of the defence sector of the economy. That defence might mean offense in appropriate circumstances was not in question.² Certainly during the First-Five Year Plan and despite rhetoric to the contrary, future war remained an abstraction that only took form in propaganda, despite real underlying concerns about the threat posed by the capitalist world. However, with the rise of Hitler and emergence of Nazi Germany on the international stage concerns for Soviet security became far more immediate as the Soviet Union sought membership of the international diplomatic community and alliances with other capitalist powers in an attempt to prevent a war that threatened to take place at a time not of the Soviet Union’s choosing. Even before the Great Purges of 1936-8 Stalin had removed potential threats to his position such as Bukharin and Rykov from the leadership and indeed the Party – the Great Purges saw their deaths in an orgy of violence that from Stalin’s perspective was arguably related to the threat of war and the possibility of his position being destabilized by internal opposition.

² See for example a Gosplan strategic economic planning document of 1930 outlining different scenarios for future war, in Hill, *The Great Patriotic War*, pp. 10-11.

The failure of Soviet diplomacy in the pursuit of 'collective security' during the mid-late 1930s is well-documented – from the Soviet perspective the Nazi Soviet Pact was, it can be argued, intended to push Germany towards war with the Western powers which would be long and costly and give the Soviet Union plenty of time to ready herself for the inevitable showdown. The collapse of France in June 1940 was certainly more rapid than anticipated, and brought with it the realization that war with Nazi Germany might come sooner than had been feared – particularly if Britain also fell. The Soviet Union started to prepare with renewed vigour for war – but what sort of war? The ideal scenario was one in which the Soviet Union would undertake offensive operations from the outset having had the necessary time to ready herself for such an undertaking – if Germany should give her the time to do so. Enemy attack before the Soviet Union was ready could not be ruled out and therefore, despite offensive rhetoric, defensive preparations had to be undertaken, including the fortification of the new Soviet border after the territorial gains from September 1939 – June 1940. Such defensive preparations were not however prioritized.

Despite damage caused by the Great Purges, and the fact that Soviet planning and reorganization in the light of the Second World War to date was geared towards 'readiness' for war during 1942 at the earliest, in the summer of 1941 the Red Army was on paper a formidable force that had benefited from considerable and increasing Soviet investment in the defence sector throughout the 1930s. Yet on 22nd June 1941 German forces achieved tactical and operational surprise against the Soviet colossus and in a matter of days had destroyed the bulk of Soviet mechanized forces and airpower, despite the fact that during the spring of 1941 Soviet intelligence received information from diverse sources that could have been interpreted to indicate the likelihood of German attacks during the summer of 1941. This paper will continue by examining the decision making process, particularly in May 1941, that contributed to the lack of Soviet tactical and operational preparedness for events of the end of June 1941, in the broader context of an inopportune operational-strategic deployment.

It has already been noted that by the late 1930s Stalin had removed figures likely to speak out against him from the political leadership – and the same applied to the military. Figures such as Zhukov, Chief of Staff in May 1941, have quite possibly tended to exaggerate the extent to which they voiced and certainly persisted in voicing

opinions that ran contrary to Stalin's own expressed opinion – although Stalin would often only step in to debate between subordinates late in a discussion. In May 1941 Stalin was formally both head of the Party and state, having become Chairman of the government (*Sovnarkom*) on 6 May 1941. Stalin was undoubtedly the final arbiter in any decision making in the Soviet Union in May 1941, even if other figures could make policy proposals and even if Stalin chose to consult with them.

The first key issue here is the nature of intelligence available to Stalin and the Soviet leadership and how it was interpreted. During the spring of 1941 rich intelligence was being provided to the Soviet Union from a range of human sources including two key NKGB agents in Germany – “Starshina” at Luftwaffe headquarters and “Korsikanets” in the German economic ministry – along with “Ramsaia” in Tokyo. At the end of April 1941 “Starshina” could report and corroborate the fact that “the question of an attack by German against the Soviet Union has been firmly decided” – as reported by “Korsikanets” at the beginning of the month. Neither could provide firm dates, but could provide significant detail on German preparations in their respective spheres.³ Less useful at this stage was intelligence from Richard Sorge, working under the cover of being a German journalist, who relied on the German ambassador and military attaché in Tokyo for his information and was also unable to provide any idea of timing in reports prior to May and indeed evidence that Germany was actually firmly committed to an attack.⁴ The British and Winston Churchill himself provided Stalin with intelligence pointing to preparations for a German attack on the Soviet Union gleaned from Ultra – for example regarding the to-ing and fro-ing of German Panzer divisions between Rumania and southern Poland in response to events in Yugoslavia as communicated to the British ambassador to the Soviet Union, Cripps, on 3 April and relayed to Vishinsky and on to Stalin just over a fortnight later.⁵

³ A summary of reports by these two agents is provided in Kalendar' soobshchenii agentov Berlinskoi rezidenturi NKGB SSSR “Korsikantsa” i “Starshina” o podgotovke Germanii k voine s SSSR za period s 6 Sentiabria 1940 g. po 16 iyunia 1941 g., in V.P. Iampol'skii et al, *Organi gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti SSSR v Velikoi Otechestvennoi voine. Sbornik dokumentov. Tom I. Nakanune. Kniga vtoraiia (1 ianvaria – 21 iyunia 1941 g.)* (Moskva: A/O “Kniga i biznes”. 1995), pp. 286-296.

⁴ See Geoffrey Roberts, *Stalin's Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939-1953* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 67-8.

⁵ See Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War: The Grand Alliance* (New York: Bantam, 1950), pp. 302-6. For suggestion that this was indeed received by Stalin see notes on a conversation between the two of 15

The above intelligence could be far more easily dismissed as hearsay, opinion or provocation than the build up of German troops along the Soviet western border and increasingly rash and frequent incursions of Soviet territory and airspace by German agents and reconnaissance aircraft. Whilst on 20 March 1941 the head of the Reconnaissance Board of the General Staff General-Lieutenant Golikov could suggest that “rumours and documents noting the unavoidability of war this spring have to be considered disinformation coming from English [sic] and German intelligence”, by 5 May he was stating that “it is necessary to reckon with the further strengthening of the German concentration [of forces] against the Soviet Union...”, having noted the 103-107 divisions already concentrated against the Soviet Union.⁶ Increasingly frequent incursions by German reconnaissance aircraft over the Soviet border from late 1940 certainly did not go unnoticed.⁷

That Stalin received much of the above information is beyond question. In his memoirs Zhukov states that much of the information collated by Golikov was relayed to Stalin by Zhukov himself.⁸ Molotov’s post-war recollections to Chuev certainly suggest that Stalin was only too well aware of the short-term threat of war – Molotov certainly was. In a lengthy conversation with Chuev on the approaching war Molotov noted:

We are blamed because we ignored our intelligence. Yes, they warned us. But if we had heeded them, had given Hitler the slightest excuse, he would have attacked us earlier.

We knew the war was coming soon, that we were weaker than Germany, that we would have to retreat. ...

August 1942, in V.P. Naumov (ed.), *1941 god: V 2 kn. Kn.2* (Moskva: Mezhdunarodnii fond “Demokratiia”, 1998), p. 18 and note 10 below.

⁶ Doklad nachal’nika Razvedupravleniia Genshtaba... 20 marta 1941 g., in V.P. Naumov (ed.), *1941 god: V 2 kn. Kn.1* (Moskva: Mezhdunarodnii fond “Demokratiia”, 1998), p. 780 and Iz spetssoobscheniia razvedivatel’nogo upravleniia RKKa No. 660477 ss ... na 5 maia 1941 g., in V.P. Eroshin (ed.), *Organi gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti SSSR ... (1 ianvaria – 21 iunია 1941 g.)*, pp. 136-7.

⁷ For example, see Alexander Hill, *The Great Patriotic War*, p. 36.

⁸ G.K. Zhukov, *Vospominaniia i razmishleniia. V 3-x tomakh. T.2. – 12-e izdanie* (Moskva: AO “Izdatel’stvo “Novosti”, 1995), p. 358.

...We did everything to postpone the war. And we succeeded – for a year and ten months. We wished it could have been longer, of course. Stalin reckoned before the war that only in 1943 would we be able to meet the Germans as equals.

...I think we could not have relied on our intelligence. You have to listen to them, but you have to verify their information. Intelligence agents could push you in to such a dangerous position that you would never get out of it. ...

Some naïve people, philistines, have written in their reminiscences that intelligence agents spoke out, deserters from the enemy crossed the border...

You couldn't trust such reports. But if you were too distrustful you could easily go over to the other extreme.

When I was the Chairman of *Sovnarkom* I spent half a day reading intelligence reports. The only thing missing was the date of the invasion! And if we had trusted these reports [and gone on a war footing] the war could have started much earlier.⁹

On information from Churchill:

Yes, but could Churchill be trusted in this matter? He was interested in pushing us into a conflict with the Germans as quickly as possible, how could it be otherwise?¹⁰

Some of Molotov's testimony refers to intelligence received during early June 1941, but material available when Molotov was chairman of *Sovnarkom* refers to material prior to 6 May – the Soviet Union had plenty of warning.

⁹ Albert Resis (ed.), *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics: Conversations with Felix Chuev* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1993), p. 22

¹⁰ Resis (ed.), *Molotov Remembers*, p. 28

There is little doubt that Stalin, Molotov and others were not only aware of the long and indeed medium-term threat from Nazi Germany – but also the possibility of war in 1941 and were working towards the amassing of Soviet forces in the West and the strengthening of both offensive and to a lesser extent defensive capabilities. From long-term abstract preparation for war in the early 1930s the Soviet Union had been preparing for war in the medium term with specific reference to Germany since the middle of the decade. After German victories in France and the Low Countries the Soviet government had almost immediately shifted workers from in effect a five- to six-day working week, presumably with the defence of the Soviet Union in mind and the fulfillment of ambitious mobilization plans.¹¹ Stalin, the key decision-maker was by the beginning of May only too well aware of the immediate build up of German forces along the Soviet border. Ongoing preparation of the fortified border regions, now shifted westwards given new territory acquired by the Soviet Union since 1939, continued during the spring of 1941, but even if completed they would require troops to man them – and those troops would to a large extent be expected to be mobilized reservists. Stalin was willing to sanction the transfer of additional Soviet troops to the region in late April and early May from the Trans-Baikal and Far East Military Districts and to a lesser extent Urals and Siberian Districts respectively, with “large-scale wargames” in early June providing justification for the filling out of existing divisions and troops for the fortified regions.¹² Given that the bulk of troops for the fortified regions were not regulars and the fact that they were not a priority for more readily available resources, defensive preparations would have required a degree of mobilization that would obviously have been seen to be more than being about “wargames” – which was deemed provocative. So the strengthening of Soviet forces in the region, to take place without undue provocation, was satisfied through a gradual shifting of readily available units and formations to the region, fleshed out through partial mobilization, that started prior to and continued after May 1941. Soviet forces in the region were echeloned, with the second not to have been in a viable position to support the first perhaps being explained by the desire to avoid provocation, but also an overestimation of Soviet transport and logistical capabilities in the region.

¹¹ See the order to that effect of 25 June 1940, in Hill, *The Great Patriotic War*, p. 28.

¹² David Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus: The Red Army on the Eve of World War* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1998), p. 10 and pp. 102-3, and noted in the TASS communiqué of 13 June (see note 25).

Despite the fact that full mobilization was not actually ordered until 22nd June 1941 after the German attack had begun and despite Stalin's determination to forestall war by appeasing Germany, during May 1941 Stalin not only sanctioned partial mobilization but also at least considered acting upon available intelligence and ordering Red Army forces in position in the border region to strike preemptively against Germany and her allies. Plans for a pre-emptive strike against German forces massing on the Soviet border were produced for 15 May 1941. Even in the full version of Zhukov's memoirs, first published in heavily edited form in 1969, there is no mention of Soviet plans for a pre-emptive strike against German forces, despite the fact that Zhukov, as Chief of Staff, was at least joint author of Soviet plans for such a strike, along with Commissar for Defence Timoshenko. The plan involved the destruction of "principal forces of the German army" through hitting German forces south east of Warsaw before ideally moving on to encircle German forces of Army Groups Centre and North through the seizure of Poland and East Prussia.¹³

The plan for a pre-emptive strike of 15 May 1941 seems to have been part of wider shift in Soviet policy towards getting the country ready for war in the short-medium term that took place abortively in May 1941. Evidence of this shift includes a speech Stalin gave to graduating commanders on 5 May in which he is reported to have said:

The policy of peace is a good thing. We have up to now, up to this time, carried out a line – defence – up to the time when we have re-equipped our army, up until the time we have supplied the army with the modern means of battle. And now, when our army has been reconstructed, has been amply supplied [*nasitili*] with equipment for modern battle, when we have become stronger, now it is necessary to go from defence to offence [*ot oboroni k nastupleniiu*].

Defending our country, we must act offensively. From defence to go to a military doctrine of offensive actions. We must transform our training, our propaganda, our agitation, our press in an offensive spirit. The Red Army is a modern army and the modern army is an offensive army.¹⁴

¹³ Much of the document is available in Hill, *The Great Patriotic War*, pp. 29-34.

¹⁴ Hill, *The Great Patriotic War*, p. 29.

There is also evidence of a planned shift in Soviet propaganda against Germany.¹⁵ The Soviet ambassador to Britain, Maiskii, was apparently convinced of preparations for war in the near future in the Soviet Union, noting on 6 May 1941 that Stalin's 'appointment' as head of *Sovnarkom* on 6 May as well as already being General Secretary of the Party was a signal that 'the danger of war is getting closer to our borders'.¹⁶

David Glantz has certainly shown how in terms of unit strengths and supplies Soviet forces were in no position for offensive operations in May 1941.¹⁷ The second Soviet echelon was hardly positioned to exploit any successes by the first. Molotov certainly suggested that Stalin believed that the Soviet Union would not be ready for "to meet the Germans as equals" until 1943.¹⁸ The reorganization and expansion of the Red Army under MP-41 for the beginning of 1942 was certainly progressing less rapidly than might have been deemed desirable in May 1941, and Soviet mechanized units destroyed in the fighting in the border regions in June-July 1941 were often hopelessly understrength – even if the Red Army had ample tanks for a more modest number of formations. MP-41 allocated a total of 6.5 million men out of a total of 7.85 to the Western region of the Soviet Union – where by 22 June 1941 manpower strength in the region had reached only 2,901,000 men.¹⁹

With Soviet forces neither equipped nor suitably deployed for offensive operations, one might have assumed an operational-strategic defensive stance would be appropriate. However, despite analysis of the war in the West, according to Zhukov Soviet operational planning of the spring of 1941 assumed a period of fighting in border regions before the commitment of principal forces, giving the Soviet Union ample time to rectify its bizarre or unrealistic deployment of the spring and early summer of 1941 should war actually start with German attack.²⁰ Broader Soviet operational planning

¹⁵ See V.A. Nevezhin, 'The Pact with Germany and the Idea of an 'Offensive War'', in *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Volume 8, Number 4 (December 1995), pp. 809-843.

¹⁶ A.O. Chubar'ian (ed.), *Ivan Mikhailovich Maiskii. Dnevnik diplomata. London 1934-1943: v 2 kn. Kn.2, ch.1: 4 sentiabria 1939 – 21 iyunia 1941 goda* (Moskva: Nauka, 2009), p. 387.

¹⁷ Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, Sections 5-8.

¹⁸ Resis (ed.), *Molotov Remembers*, p. 22.

¹⁹ Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, p.101. On targets for MP-41, see Hill, *The Great Patriotic War*, p. 38.

²⁰ Zhukov, *Vospominaniia i razmishleniia*, p. 354.

might have assumed a period of fighting on the border that would give the Red Army time to deploy, but the 15 May war plan states that:

Bearing in mind, that at the current moment Germany holds her army in a fully mobilized state, with fully-deployed rear-area services, she has the potential to anticipate our deployment and deliver a surprise blow.²¹

Despite the growing threat of German attack, as long as German forces didn't actually attack the door was always open to explaining away the increasingly impressive evidence of impending German attack on the basis that it would not be rational for Germany to attack now – be it that a two-front war would be folly or that Soviet supplies to Nazi Germany were an additional reason not to attack – why attack to seize what you were getting anyway? This ignoring of the ideological dimension to the German invasion is ironic where the Soviet Union is concerned.

It is unclear to what extent warnings of impending German attack were persistently presented to Stalin – even if they were they may actually have contributed to Stalin's unwillingness to accept the reality of the short-term threat after a decision had been taken not to take offensive action. According to Zhukov's purported postwar testimony, Stalin had "in fairly sharp terms" rejected the concept of a pre-emptive strike before the plans were actually provided to him.²² Whilst Stalin was not questioned by a psychologist on the matter at the time or subsequently – it can be suggested on the basis of Soviet policy that was clearly dominated by Stalin that Stalin was perhaps engaging in some sort of "cognitive dissonance" regarding the threat of German attack in the short-term.²³ Soviet appeasement of Germany, that was even more blatant in late May and in to June than prior to May, took many forms beyond the supply of war materials to Germany – many detrimental to the Soviet military position. According to Zhukov's memoirs Stalin went as far as approving a request for German teams looking for the graves of German soldiers killed during the First World War at the end of May 1941 – apparently much to Zhukov and Timoshenko's surprise and consternation.²⁴ The

²¹ Hill, *The Great Patriotic War*, p. 31.

²² V.A. Zolotarev et al, *Velikaia Otechestvoennaia voina. 1941-1945. Voенно-istoricheskie ocherki. Kniga pervaiia. Surovie ispitaniia* (Moskva: Nauka, 1998), p. 118.

²³ See, for the initial formulation of the concept, L. Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Chicago, IL: Stanford University Press, 1957).

²⁴ Zhukov, *Vospominaniia i razmishleniia*, pp. 346-7.

infamous TASS denial of aggressive Soviet intentions of 13 June 1941 and a note by Stalin on intelligence from the agent “Starshina” at Luftwaffe Headquarters of 16 June claiming that “Starshina” was “not a ‘source’, but a disinformant” suggest an increasing desperation on Stalin’s part with the scenario Stalin wanted increasingly seeming divorced from reality.²⁵ The stark reality of German invasion apparently hit Stalin hard after the fall of Minsk on 28 June 1941, by which point much of the first Soviet echelon facing the Germany Army Groups Centre and North had been destroyed or faced imprisonment.²⁶

The Soviet Union was able to focus unprecedented resources on ‘defence’ (broadly defined) during the 1930s – led by a small decision-making elite headed by Stalin that systematically neutralized and then destroyed even potential opposition during the second half of the 1920s and 1930s. Whilst the First Five-Year Plan was certainly not focused exclusively on defence (and nor could it be given the need for broader heavy-industrial development first), by the Third the Soviet Union was committing an ever increasing share of resources explicitly to it. The material well-being of the bulk of the Soviet population (and particularly the peasantry) was not a priority even if the regime did not want to be seen to be ignoring the needs of the worker in particular as the abolition of bread rationing in 1934 shows (where afterwards bread was effectively rationed by price). By the mid-1930s Soviet military, diplomatic and economic policy were being co-ordinated to meet Soviet defence needs – with diplomatic policy being geared towards buying time for a strengthening of Soviet military power that ultimately would through offensive action be able to sweep the German and broader capitalist opposition in Europe aside – securing the revolution and advancing the revolutionary cause. Foreign attack, that had been used as a motivational tool during the late 1920s, became an increasingly real threat from the during the late 1930s, although in embroiling Germany in a war in the West that had not been won by the beginning of 1941 the Nazi-Soviet Pact had apparently bought the Soviet Union time to prepare for war on its terms.

²⁵ For the TASS article of 13 June 1941 see Hill, pp. 26-7. For Stalin’s remarks on ‘Starshina’, see V.N. Khaustov, V.P. Naumov and N.S. Plotnikova, *Lubianka. Stalin i NKVD-NKGB-GUKP “Smersh”. 1939-mart 1946* (Moskva: Mezhdunarodnii fond “Demokratiia”, 2006), p. 287.

²⁶ A shock apparently leading to a brief period of withdrawal from active leadership of the Soviet war effort. See Hill, *The Great Patriotic War*, pp. 47-8.

When assessing Soviet strategic policy in May 1941 – the decision not to act on intelligence reports and to continue gradual preparations for a war to take place at the earliest in 1942 or 1943 - there can be little doubt that this policy with associated ramifications at the operational and tactical levels had extremely negative consequences for the Red Army in late June and July 1941.

At the tactical level – where tactical might be deemed as involving the movement and direction of forces, typically at the unit level in battle - the desire not to provoke or give Germany an excuse for aggression prevented troops along the border from being at an appropriate and indeed elementary level of readiness with predictable consequences.²⁷ In addition, the supply situation – for example the availability of fuel and ammunition – hampered units at both tactical and operational levels.

At the operational level – where operational is deemed to be moving beyond the tactical in terms of both time and space to involve the co-ordination of both the movement and engagements of units and formations with a view to a specific outcome – forward Soviet troops deployments were not suitable for the defence and lacked depth – with the second echelon not being in a position to support the first. That it wasn't may however actually have saved the second echelon from the fate of much of the first. Whilst it is difficult to argue that the first echelon whittled down German strength in anything like proportion to the significance of losses for the Soviet Union, the second fared better.

Other than continuing preparations for a Soviet offensive war at some point in the future, the other key option available to Soviet leaders in May 1941 was a pre-emptive strike against German forces. Given that many Soviet units and formations were undermanned and equipped and poorly supplied certainly would have limited the efficacy of any offensive action prior to the German attack. That the first echelon might have achieved more in this context than it actually did is debatable – the Soviet offensive in the Khar'kov region in May 1942 pre-empted Operation 'Blau' in the south and arguably assisted the German offensive – without the same logistical difficulties that would have been faced in late May 1941. A more defensive operational (and more broadly operational-strategic) deployment with appropriate levels of readiness would

²⁷ For example the prevention of frontline units from being able to provide standing elementary anti-tank defence. See Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, p. 248.

no doubt have maximized the impact of the first Soviet echelon. Such an operational deployment would of course have been the product of a different strategic policy not predicated on war starting in earnest with Soviet offensive operations. A defensive strategy, as had been adopted prior to the Great Purges, would however have been difficult to justify by 1941 where both the purges and the continued success of the Five-Year Plans under Stalin's leadership were supposed to have made the Soviet Union stronger.

As for the strategic level, defined here as typically involving the movement and direction of multiple formations and possibly a sequence of operations, and likely or intended to have impact on the opponent's ability to continue the war or in a defensive context for a power staying in the war, it is more difficult to argue that Soviet policy was a failure on all levels. The forward deployment strategy based on the assumption of the Soviet Union getting in the first blow was a failure in that it didn't, but movement towards such a position, be it the gradual redeployment and mobilization of Soviet troops to the West prior to June 1941 and build up of reserves highlighted the weaknesses in German strategy when attrition started to take its toll on the Wehrmacht during the late summer and in to the autumn. Here long-term Soviet strategic policy – preparing the Soviet Union for war against Germany since the mid-1930s - gave the Soviet Union the capacity to survive the impact of operational and tactical weaknesses early in the war with what amounted to an attritional strategy through fighting for territory (and not Fabian as sometimes assumed in the popular literature – space was certainly not intentionally given up for battlefield advantage) against a strategically poorly prepared opponent.

Arguably, Stalin and the Soviet leadership were not incorrect to identify that it was folly for Nazi Germany to engage in a two-front war – particularly where Germany was so poorly prepared for a protracted war in June 1941. Had Germany waited however the Soviet Union would most likely have grown relatively stronger – the chips were arguably significantly stacked against Germany from the outset given long-term Soviet preparations for war, and it is remarkable that relative operational and tactical effectiveness took Germany as far as it did. Army Group Centre suffered significant losses and delay in the Smolensk region during the summer of 1941 after having destroyed the bulk of the Soviet first echelon on that sector of the front in late June. A

Soviet defensive operational-strategic stance combined with operational and tactical readiness, even of only part of the forces available given the supply situation, would probably have allowed a far greater number of Red Army troops to make a useful contribution to whittling down German strength than was the case during the disasters that befell Soviet forces on the borders in June and early July 1941.