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# **The Soviet General Staff: Managing Change in Military Doctrine**



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**A Research Paper**

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*SOV 86-10014JX*

*March 1986*

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# **The Soviet General Staff: Managing Change in Military Doctrine**



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**A Research Paper**

This paper was prepared by   
the Office of Soviet Analysis. Comments and queries  
are welcome and may be directed to the Chief,  
European Assessments Division, SOVA, 



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**The Soviet General Staff:  
Managing Change in  
Military Doctrine**

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**Key Judgments**

*Information available  
as of 1 March 1986  
was used in this report.*

The Soviet General Staff determines the content of Soviet military doctrine and has developed a highly structured system for review and revision when needed. It also actively enforces compliance with doctrine throughout the armed forces. Acting for the political and military leadership, the General Staff decides which aspects of doctrine require examination and who will carry out the review. The steps through which changes in doctrine are developed and implemented include:

- *Military science plans.* The General Staff prepares a five-year military science plan for the armed forces. This serves as a basis for five-year plans in the main staff of each branch of the armed forces, the military academies, groups of forces, military districts, and fleets. The plans direct research on the nature of warfare, force organization and capabilities, planning and conduct of military operations, and the doctrine and forces of prospective enemies. They set objectives for all areas of military science research and assign specific tasks to the military science organs of staffs at various levels of command and to military academies, schools, and scientific research institutes. The General Staff reviews each of these plans annually. It also prepares a five-year plan for the Warsaw Pact that is based on the plan for the Soviet armed forces.
- *Military exercises.* The Soviets implement various aspects of their military science plans during exercises, which they sometimes term "experimental" or "special" if a new concept or weapons system is being tested. Moreover, they use exercises to continue testing the validity of their current doctrine. Military science research groups are formed for many exercises to obtain information, analyze it, and make recommendations to the General Staff.
- *Military regulations.* These are compiled by General Staff officers and combine combat and exercise experience with the ideas of military theorists. Soviet writings and human sources assert that regulations are valid statements of doctrine, reflect actual force organization and capabilities, and constitute a code of laws governing the employment of all the branches of the armed forces in wartime. The *Manual for the Conduct of Operations* dictates how fronts, fleets, armies, and probably corps are to plan and execute their operations; the *Field Service Regulations* and various other combat regulations and manuals indicate how divisions and their subordinate units are to fight.

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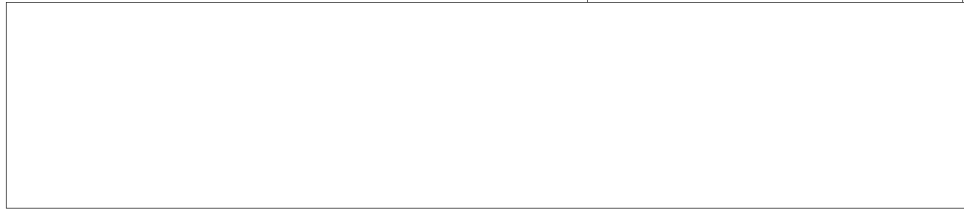
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From a detailed examination of Soviet regulations and authoritative writings, it is apparent that the primary factor that prompts the General Staff to change doctrine is the technology—either in hand or emergent—of the weapons and equipment used to wage war.

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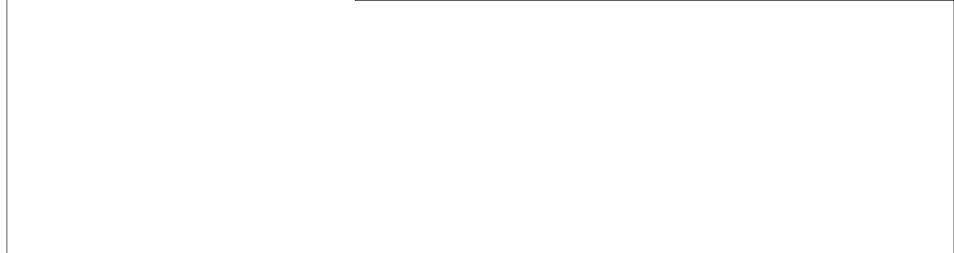


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Their system affords the Soviets distinct advantages as well as disadvantages. The General Staff can exercise practical authority in doctrinal matters, not just provide guidance. This helps to ensure the compatibility of doctrine with the force development process, in which the General Staff also plays the primary role.

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**The Soviet General Staff:  
Managing Change in  
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**The Importance of Soviet Military Doctrine**

Soviet military doctrine (*voyennaya doktrina*) governs the planning for and conduct of military operations. It is based on the principles of Soviet military science and approved by the highest Soviet civilian and military command authorities—in peacetime, the Politburo, Defense Council, and Collegium of the Ministry of Defense—and therefore has the status of state policy.<sup>1</sup> This process provides a Marxist-Leninist content that imbues Soviet military doctrine with a political and moral authority not found in Western concepts of doctrine, and makes it by definition both “scientific” and officially sanctioned. It is also, according to the Soviets, totally consistent with their Marxist-Leninist world view and the political policies of the Soviet Communist Party and state. We judge it is the major factor in determining how the Soviet armed forces are to be used in battle. 

The term *voyennaya doktrina* is routinely translated as military doctrine but in many instances “national security policy” would be a more accurate translation of the Soviet meaning. *Voyennaya doktrina* encompasses the preparations for and the nature and objectives of a future war, as well as the methods of fighting it. Only the last would commonly be found in a Western definition of military doctrine. 


The Soviets view Western concepts of doctrine as encompassing only what they define as the military-technical component of doctrine—the planning and conduct of combat operations. The military-technical component is unstable, changes as conditions change, and is contingent on the level of the technical and industrial base of the nation. From the Soviet perspective, Western concepts lack the sociopolitical component of doctrine that in Soviet doctrine is both stable and deterministic because of its foundation in Marxist-Leninist theory. 

<sup>1</sup> In wartime, these authorities would be transformed into national command organs like the State Defense Committee and Supreme High Command formed during World War II. 

**Role of the General Staff**

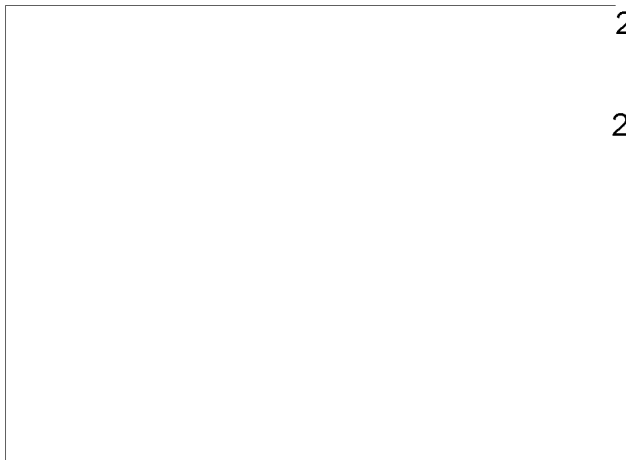
The Soviet General Staff determines the content of military doctrine by actively controlling the process by which doctrine is revised and promulgated in new military regulations:

- It determines the content of military science plans in the armed forces, which serves as the basis for developing changes in doctrine.
- It establishes commissions to review current regulations and make changes in their contents.
- It controls the flow of information presented to the Soviet national command authorities, thereby assuring that all doctrine approved accords with the views of the General Staff.

As the executive agent of the Supreme High Command, the General Staff also enforces compliance with doctrine. General Staff officers have the primary responsibility for drafting Soviet war plans, at least down to division level, and the General Staff would exercise operational control of the armed forces in wartime. Thus, it can ensure that operations are both planned and conducted according to doctrine. 


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<sup>2</sup> A front is a joint-forces command roughly equivalent to a NATO army group and its associated tactical air force. 

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**Soviet Military Theory**

The following definitions of the principles of Soviet military theory have been drawn from authoritative military writings:

Military doctrine is the official state view on the nature of war, the likely opponents in a war, the structure of the armed forces, the use of the armed forces in combat, and the preparation of the country for war. It is based on the principles of Soviet military science and, in turn, provides general guidance for military science research. It has two elements, sociopolitical and military-technical. The first establishes the Marxist-Leninist context in which warfare occurs; the second guides the planning and conduct of combat operations. 


Military science concerns the laws and nature of armed conflict and the military preparations by the country and armed forces for war. Its most important component is military art, or how a war is fought, and is composed of: (1) strategy—the planning and conduct of war as a whole, the training of the armed forces, and the support of combat operations; (2) operational art—the planning and conduct of operations by large forces; and (3) tactics—the preparation and conduct of a battle. 

Military scientific research is divided into four general areas:

- *Military-political: The study of the military-theoretical tenets of Marxism-Leninism and the application of these principles to research on military issues.*
- *Military-theoretical: The investigation of the basic problems of military science and art, especially the preparation of the armed forces for combat, their conduct in battle, and their logistic support.*
- *Military-technical: The development of new and improvement of existing weapons and equipment and the testing of their effectiveness and compatibility.*
- *Military-historical: The examination of principles and trends in the evolution of military art, and the study of the experience of past wars and their application to the present and future.* 

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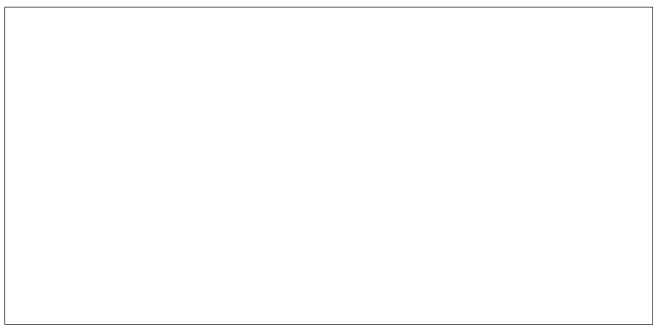
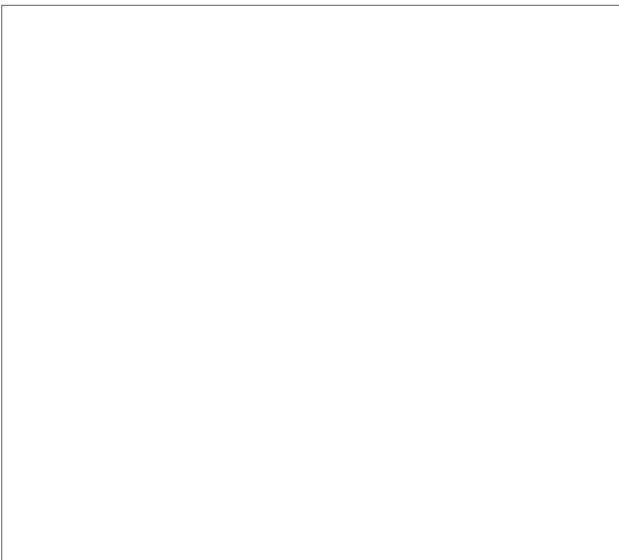
Military scientific work includes the synthesis of research and experience and the introduction of new principles into regulations; the development of mathematical models of operations and battles and the use of these in "forecasting" the results of combat; the preparation of military science publications; and the conduct of military science conferences. 

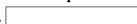
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<sup>3</sup> The Soviets use three types of orders: *prikaz*, *direktiv*, and *ukazaniye*. The first is a simple, direct order from a commander to his subordinates and carries neither explanation nor justification. Only the commander and his chief of staff may issue *prikazy*. A *direktiv* is an order that contains a brief explanation according to a standard format. *Direktivy* are routinely issued by the staff in the name of the commander. An *ukazaniye* is a detailed explanation of an order drafted by an appropriate staff officer. 

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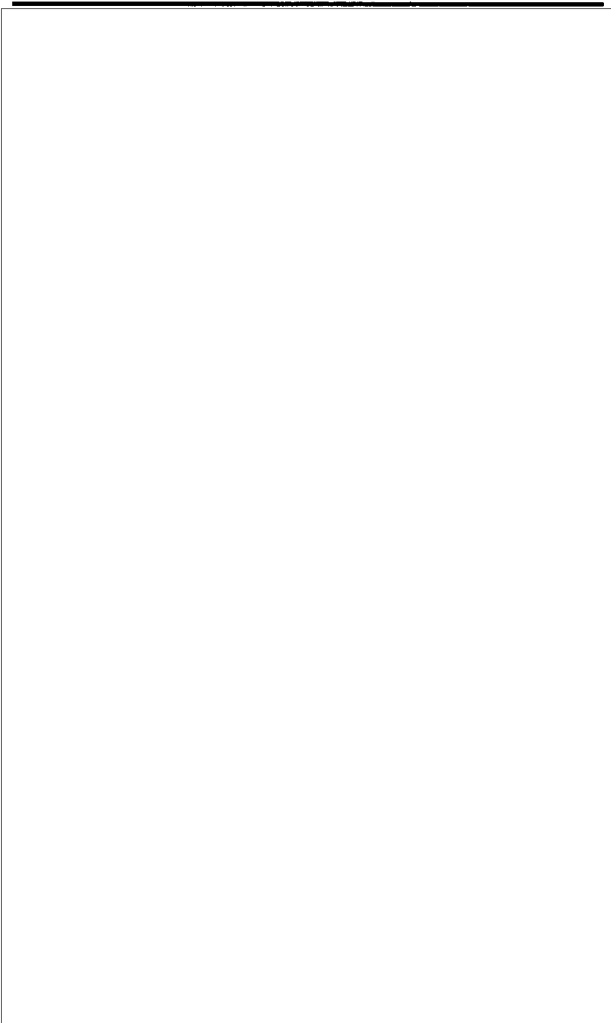


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Command (TRADOC) and its Command and General Staff College. Moreover, the field manual describing the Air-Land Battle doctrine, *Operations* (FM 100-5)—unlike equivalent Soviet manuals—is an unclassified publication. The doctrines of the US Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps also are the products of their respective war and staff colleges and training and operational commands. The US Government has no officially approved state doctrine in the Soviet sense, except for general statements of policy or strategic concepts. [Redacted]

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The US Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), unlike the Soviet General Staff, do not establish (or even approve) doctrine for the individual services. Nor does the JCS maintain operational control of the US armed forces, although by law the Chiefs are responsible for their “strategic direction.” The commanders of the respective regional and functional unified and specified commands exercise operational control on behalf of US national command authorities, the President, and Secretary of Defense. The JCS, however, serves as the principal military adviser to the President, Secretary of Defense, and National Security Council. It also establishes doctrine for joint operations and training, prepares plans for strategic operations, and reviews the plans of the unified and specified commands. This enables the Chiefs to exert influence over the planning of military operations, although not necessarily over their execution. [Redacted]

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Therefore, the Joint Chiefs lack the General Staff’s authority to promulgate doctrine and impose it on the various services. The US armed forces plan and fight by employing several distinct doctrines, although these are compatible in many respects. Furthermore, US commanders traditionally have interpreted military doctrine in a creative manner, frequently using it mainly as a guide and departing from it as the situation dictates. Unlike his US counterpart, a Soviet officer incurs significant risks if he departs from the regulations. [Redacted]

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**Comparison With US Doctrine**

In contrast to the Soviets, each branch of the US armed forces develops its own “doctrine.” The US Army’s new Air-Land Battle doctrine, for example, is a product of the Army’s Training and Doctrine

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**Key Factors Affecting Change in Soviet Doctrine**

Authoritative Soviet writings state that the most important factors affecting the principles of operational art and tactics are the:

- *Nature of the operational environment.* The methods for conducting an operation can vary drastically if it occurs in an urban area, on the steppes, in the desert or mountains, in a tropical climate, or at sea.
- *Degree of mobility of the forces and their ability to maneuver.* Forces that are mobile, such as motorized rifle or self-propelled artillery units, can maneuver on the battlefield more rapidly than forces that are less mobile, thereby improving their capability to avoid destruction and achieve combat objectives.
- *Firepower of the forces.* This, too, can vary drastically depending on the number of weapons available and whether conventional or nuclear weapons are employed.

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

<sup>6</sup> An unclassified study sponsored by the Office of Soviet Analysis supports the conclusions in this paper regarding the factors leading to change in Soviet doctrine. The study, entitled *Historical Analysis of the Use of Mobile Forces by the USSR*, was done by the Center for Strategic Technology, Texas A&M University. [Redacted]

[Redacted]



**Figure 2. Joseph Stalin**

Newsweek ©

*As chief of the Soviet wartime national command authorities—the State Defense Committee and the Supreme High Command—Stalin played the dominant role in determining military doctrine. He personally reviewed regulations and manuals submitted to the Stavka of the Supreme High Command by the General Staff. His five “permanent operating factors” formed the basis of Soviet military thought until his death in 1953. These factors were the (1) stability of the rear, (2) morale of the army, (3) quantity and quality of divisions, (4) quantity and quality of armament, and (5) organizing ability of command personnel.*

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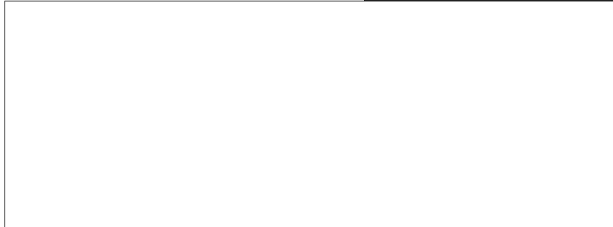
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Authoritative military writings also consistently emphasize the importance for military doctrine of such factors as Soviet national policy, enemy policy and doctrine, geography, and combat experience, whether Soviet or that of another state. [Redacted]



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**The Historical Experience**

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Although many changes in doctrine, [Redacted]

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[Redacted] have been evolutionary, the Soviets consider those caused by the development of nuclear

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Figure 3. Mikhail Frunze Peoples Commissar of Military and Naval Affairs (1925) Chief of the Staff of the Workers and Peasants Red Army (1924-25)

Mikhail Frunze was a prominent military theorist during the early years of the Soviet state. His numerous books and articles on military affairs, which he analyzed according to the principles of Marxism-Leninism, helped lay the foundation of Soviet doctrine. Frunze was an army and front commander during the Russian Civil War, and he has been referred to as the "Soviet Clausewitz."



Figure 4. MSU Mikhail N. Tukhachevskiy Chief of the Staff of the Workers and Peasants Red Army (1925-28)

Marshal Tukhachevskiy was one of the founders of Soviet military thought. He believed that doctrine is driven primarily by technology. He was a prominent member of the commissions that drafted the 1925, 1929, and 1936 Field Service Regulations. Tukhachevskiy was a chief proponent of the combined-arms "deep operation" of the 1930s that was the precursor of today's "strategic operation," which is to be conducted by all branches of the armed forces to the depth of a theater of military operations.

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warheads, ballistic missiles, computers, and modern communications to be revolutionary.

nearly 300 kilometers into the enemy rear.<sup>8</sup> Faulty force organization and a shortage of modern equipment, however, contributed to the Soviet inability to implement this doctrine in the months following the Nazi invasion.

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Some historical examples will illustrate how the various factors, particularly technology, have altered doctrine as stipulated by General Staff officers in the regulations or reflected in authoritative Soviet military writings:<sup>7</sup>

- The 1936 FSRs codified V. K. Triandafilov's theory of the "deep operation," in which aircraft, tanks, and motorized infantry in concert were to strike

- Several versions of the FSRs, incorporating the latest combat experience, were drafted during World War II. Considerable emphasis was placed on the employment of new armored forces (including the T-34 medium and KV and JS heavy tanks),

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<sup>8</sup> The Soviets were not the only proponents of such theories. Capt. B. H. Liddell-Hart, Gen. Heinz Guderian, Col. Charles de Gaulle, and others advocated the employment of combined arms, with emphasis on the support of armored operations. These theories were adopted initially by the Germans and became common practice during World War II.

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often as "mobile groups" used to complete or exploit the breakthrough of enemy defenses. The lessons of the war were subsequently "confirmed" in the 1948 FSRs.

- Manuals on the conduct of nuclear warfare were issued for the first time in 1954 for at least the operational and tactical levels of command.
- A discussion of conventional and nuclear operations was combined for the first time in the 1959 FSRs. These also incorporated organizational changes already in effect in the Ground Forces, notably the abolition of rifle corps and the establishment of motorized rifle divisions during the mid-1950s. The Soviets instituted these changes to reflect the complete mechanization of the Ground Forces and to facilitate effective troop control.
- The 1963 FSRs emphasized the primary role of nuclear weapons in combat. This almost certainly was in response to the deployment of improved delivery systems— [Redacted]

[Redacted]

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These changes in doctrine have included major reappraisals of the way the Soviets view nuclear warfare.

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Soviet writings assert that the major impetus for changes in doctrine during the last two decades has been the introduction of improved nuclear and conventional weapon systems, as well as an increase in their numbers. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] These weapons included the FROG-7 rocket, BMP infantry combat vehicle, 122-mm self-propelled howitzer, and tanks equipped with antinuclear

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**Figure 5. MSU Boris M. Shaposhnikov**  
*Chief of the Staff of the Workers and Peasants Red Army (1928-31)*  
*Chief of the Soviet General Staff (1937-40, 1941-42)*

*Marshal Shaposhnikov was a military historian, theorist, and author of the classic on military leadership, The Brain of the Army. He was an advocate of a strong General Staff "corresponding to the direction of war and preparation for it." In 1941 he was reputed to have organized the Stavka of the Supreme High Command and to have planned the defense of Moscow from the Germans. Stalin and Foreign Minister V. M. Molotov attended his lectures at the General Staff Academy during the 1930s.*

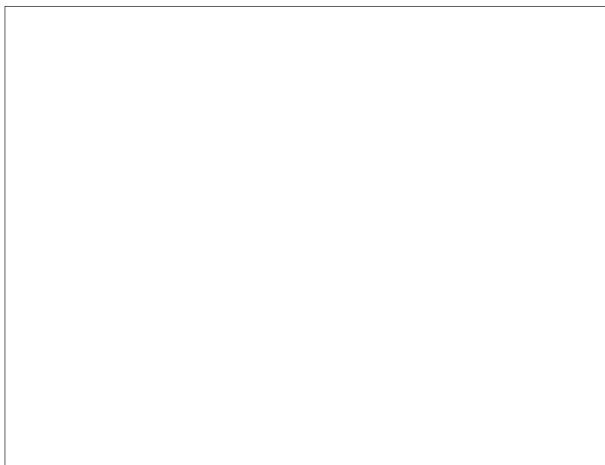
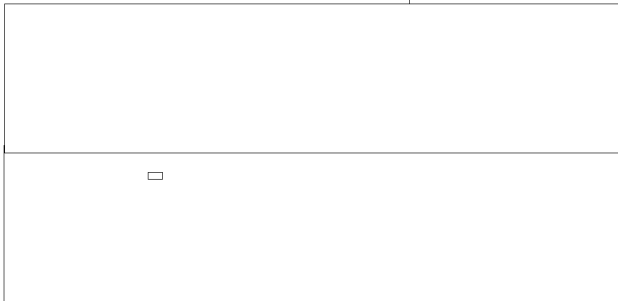


**Figure 6. MSU Georgiy K. Zhukov**  
*Chief of the Soviet General Staff (1941)*  
*Deputy Supreme Commander in Chief of the Soviet Armed Forces (1942-45)*  
*Minister of Defense (1955-57)*

*Marshal Zhukov was the most celebrated soldier in Soviet history and the primary executor of military doctrine during World War II. His campaigns against the Japanese and Germans also led to substantial changes in doctrine, military science, and the Field Service Regulations. Zhukov was an advocate of modernization throughout the Soviet armed forces while Minister of Defense. Khrushchev feared his popularity and dismissed him from the Politburo and Defense Ministry.*

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protective devices and better armor. The increase in firepower and the greater range, accuracy, and mobility of these weapons were expected to improve the overall operational effectiveness of the Ground Forces in conventional or nuclear combat.



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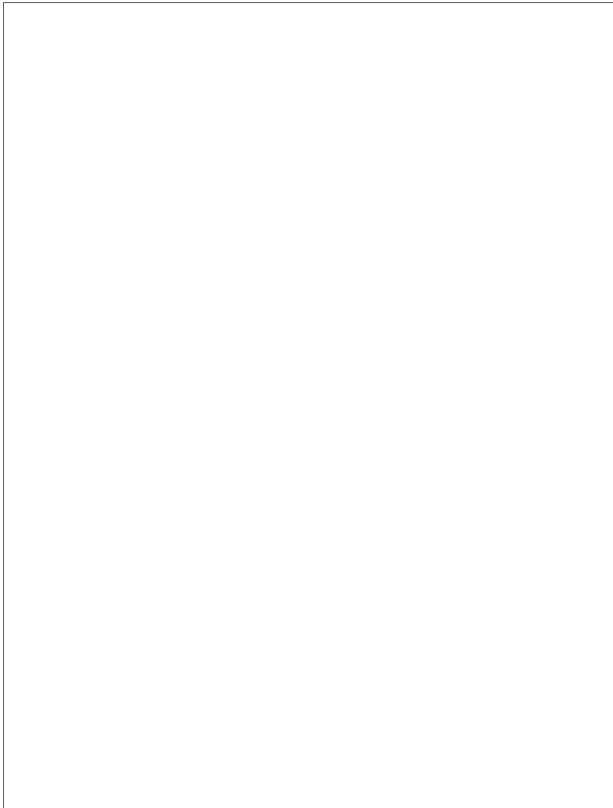
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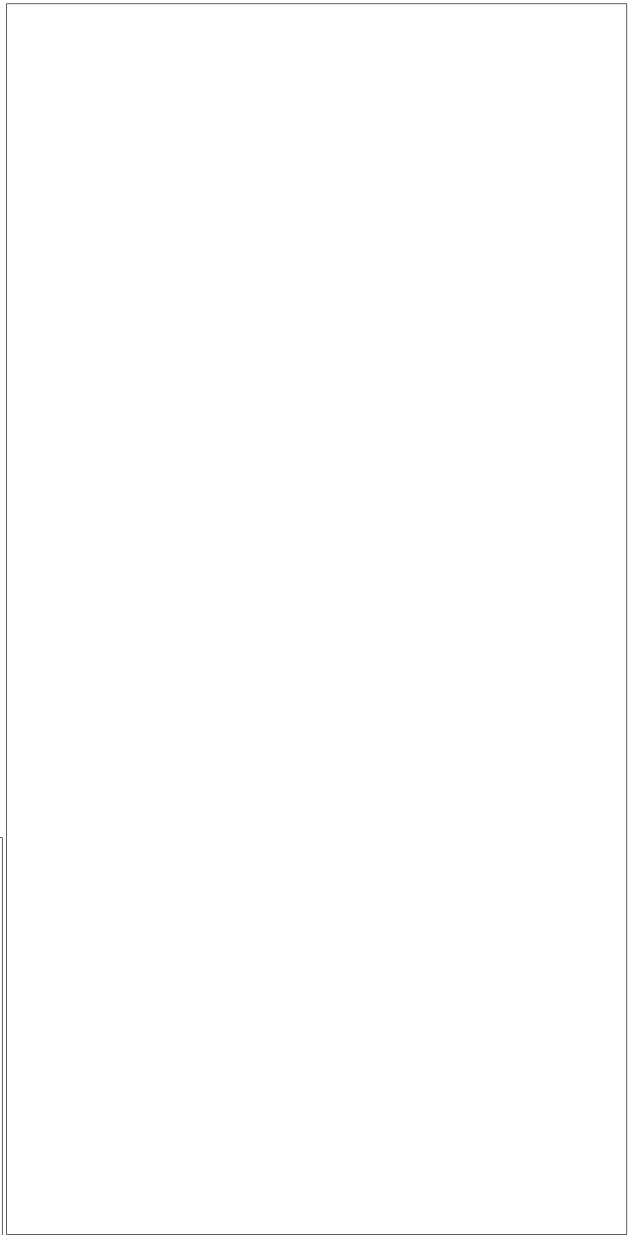


These developments indicate that the Soviets are instituting new principles of operational art and tactics—that is, the General Staff is revising some aspects of Soviet doctrine, at least for joint operations. They are attempting to establish provisions for the employment of their forces that will (1) take advantage of technical advancements, (2) respond to the capabilities and perceived intentions of their prospective enemies, and (3) allow them to operate more effectively on the battlefield of the future. [Redacted]

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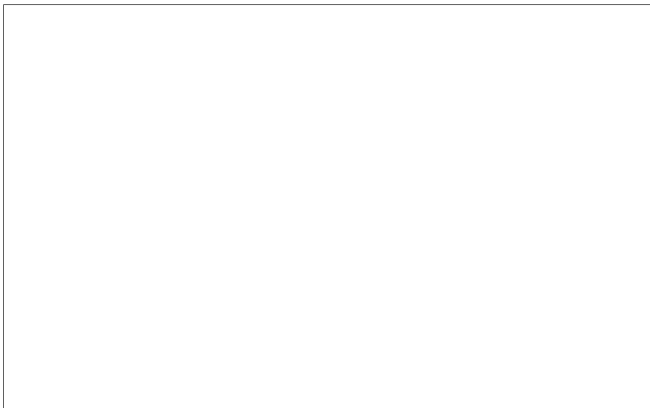
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**Recent Developments**

During the 1980s the Soviets have been instituting major changes in their command structure and the organization of their armed forces. These changes have included the activation of three new theater high commands, the reorganization of Soviet air and air defense forces, and the experimentation with the operational maneuver group (OMG) concept.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the Soviets continue to introduce new weapons and equipment and experiment with the structure and employment of their forces. [Redacted]



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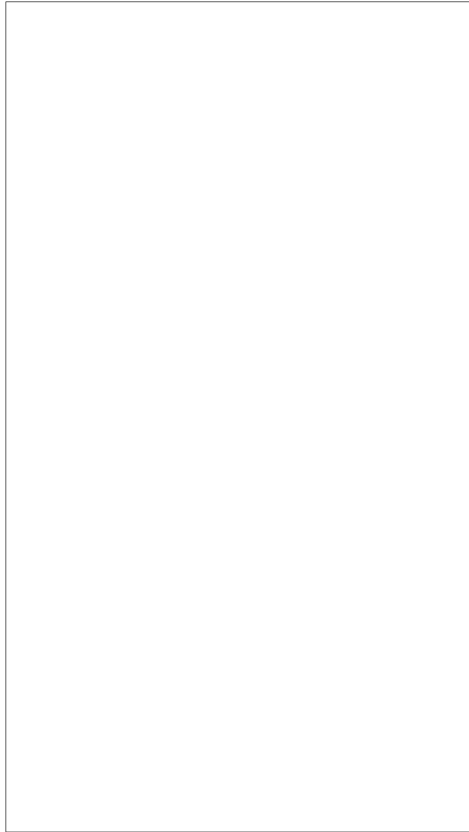
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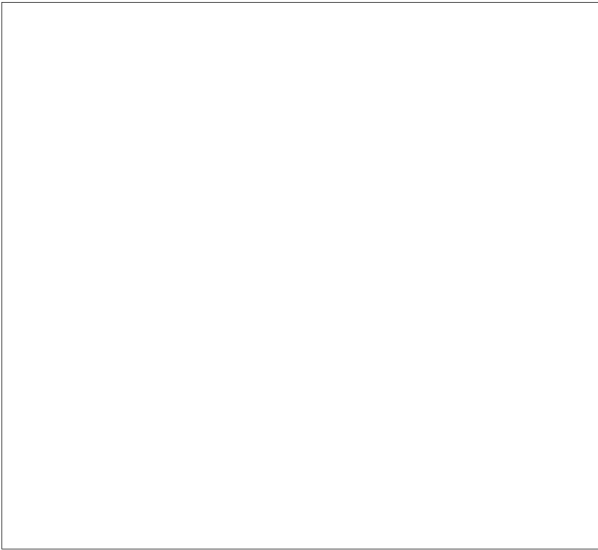
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*Figure 7. Army Gen. Sergey M. Shtemenko  
Chief of the Soviet General Staff (1948-52)  
General Shtemenko was Chief of the Operations  
Directorate of the General Staff during World  
War II. His books, The Soviet General Staff  
at War and The Last Six Months, describe  
how the Soviet high command functioned. As  
a proponent of "scientific" methods,  
he defined the role of the General Staff in  
formulating military doctrine.* [Redacted]



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Lessons learned in Afghanistan probably have also encouraged General Staff planners to make appropriate changes in the regulations. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] (Since the sociopolitical element of Soviet doctrine rejects the concept of antipartisan activity, the Soviets typically resolve this dilemma by declaring their partisan opponents to be bandits or mercenaries.) Presumably, revisions growing out of the Afghan experience would include provisions on the use of helicopters, the conduct of intelligence operations, and other activities essential to antipartisan warfare. [Redacted]

The Falklands conflict also appears to have impressed the Soviets with the necessity of controlling the air in modern naval combat and the threat posed to surface ships from antiship cruise missiles. These lessons, too, may have led to changes in doctrine and, as a recent report indicates, helped convince the Soviets that they should proceed with the construction of an aircraft carrier capable of supporting conventional takeoff and landing aircraft. [Redacted]

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**Figure 10. MSU Vasilii D. Sokolovskiy**  
**Chief of the Soviet General Staff (1952-60)**  
Marshal Sokolovskiy was best known for his book *Military Strategy*, which appeared in three editions during the 1960s. It discusses the changes in technology and forces over time and their impact on military art and doctrine. Sokolovskiy was chief of staff to Marshal Georgiy Zhukov during the Battle of Moscow, 1941-42.

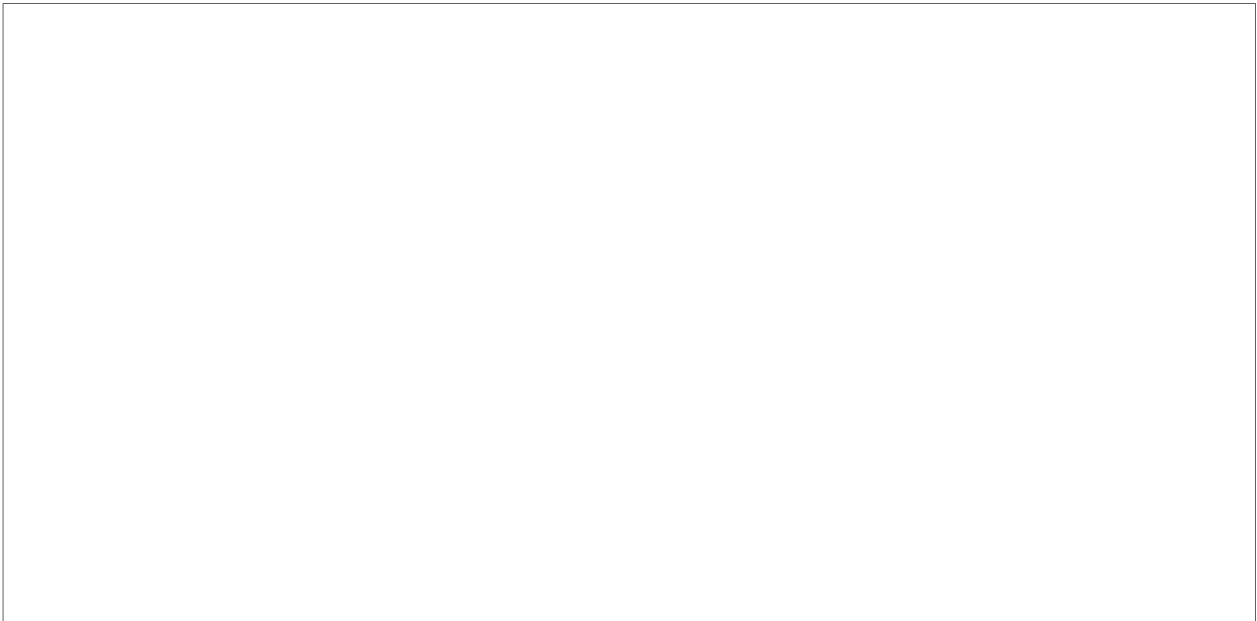


**Figure 11. MSU Matvey V. Zakharov**  
**Chief of the Soviet General Staff**  
**(1960-63, 1964-71)**  
Marshal Zakharov was a staunch advocate of modernization throughout the Soviet armed forces. He believed that the "revolution in military affairs" had radically altered the nature of warfare and that military science and doctrine must keep pace with technological developments. Zakharov was chief of staff of an army, various fronts, and the High Command of the Northwestern Theater of Military Operations during World War II.

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**Military Regulations—A Code of Laws**

The Peoples Commissariat of Defense proceeds on the assumption that a manual is not an order effective only for a brief period. A manual of regulations is a code of laws governing the Red Army for years. Therefore, before a manual is issued it should be carefully checked, and comrades from the front should be called in to assist. It was in this way that the *Infantry Field Manual* was issued. And the same procedure should have been used in submitting these manuals for approval so as not to make mistakes and so that, later on, military personnel would not be groundlessly punished for violating defective regulations . . . .

Joseph Stalin

*quoted in The Last Six Months by Army General Shtemenko.*

The 1944 *Ground-Attack Aviation Combat Operations Manual* required that each pilot always maintain his position in the overall formation, and leaving formation was viewed as a *criminal offense*. [Emphasis added.]

Marshal of Aviation Nikolay Skomorokhov

*Tactics in Combat Examples: The Aviation Regiment (Voyenizdat, 1985, JPRS-UMA-85-028-L, 18 December 1985).*

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

**The East Europeans**

Coordination with the East Europeans in military science work is managed through five-year and annual Warsaw Pact military science plans. Like the Soviet plans, these are—at least primarily—the responsibility of Soviet General Staff officers, who prepare the Pact plans while serving on the staff of the Combined Armed Forces (CAF).

[Redacted]

East European exercises are conducted within the context of the Warsaw Pact five-year and annual military science plans, thus ensuring that they will focus on issues of interest to the Soviets.

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Figure 12. Soviet T-34 tanks and infantry during World War II.

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Figure 13. Soviet helicopter and tank operations in Afghanistan.

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- The current or imminent introduction of new weapons and equipment into both Soviet strategic and theater forces requires that all the relevant regulations be updated to reflect new force capabilities. Among these new systems are the T-80 tank, the SS-21 and SS-23 SSMs, the MIG-29 Fulcrum and SU-27 Flanker tactical fighters, several new classes of general purpose submarines and ships, and the SS-X-24 and SS-25 intercontinental ballistic missiles.<sup>20</sup>

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Figure 14. MSU Dmitriy F. Ustinov Minister of Defense (1976-84) As Minister of Defense, Marshal Ustinov championed modern management techniques for the Soviet armed forces. He was a strong advocate of adopting new technologies.

[Redacted]

Conclusions

The Soviet system for reviewing doctrine and instituting necessary changes succeeds in organizing a process with disparate elements in a coherent way. The system responds to developments in technology, events, combat experience, and changing perceptions of the enemy. It also produces doctrine that is evolutionary in most respects.

[Redacted]

[Redacted] although the nature of war has changed, Soviet perceptions of its objectives have not. Many of the principles of operational art and tactics, even in the 1980s, bear a striking resemblance to those of World War II. Still, modern nuclear and conventional weapons can destroy the enemy in a manner that has revolutionized warfare, and Soviet doctrine has changed to take the destructive power of these weapons into account.

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

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New US and NATO technologies and capabilities clearly influence Soviet doctrine more than any changes in Western doctrine, which are afforded much less emphasis in Soviet writings [Redacted] This may be explained, at least in part, by the Soviet view of our doctrine as lacking a "scientific" basis. The Soviets recognize no Western military science equivalent to their own and contend that the sociopolitical elements of Western doctrine, as a reflection of capitalism, are not scientific in the Marxist-Leninist sense of the term. [Redacted]

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Implications

[Redacted]

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Soviet views on the importance of doctrine and regulations, in contrast to those of the US military, indicate that Soviet commanders would be less inclined to improvise in battle than their US counterparts. This does not mean that the Soviets would be unable to adjust or that they would not act because it was not in the regulations. Rather, Soviet actions probably would be more predictable because of the rigid fashion in which regulations are to be interpreted. The historical record strongly suggests that this

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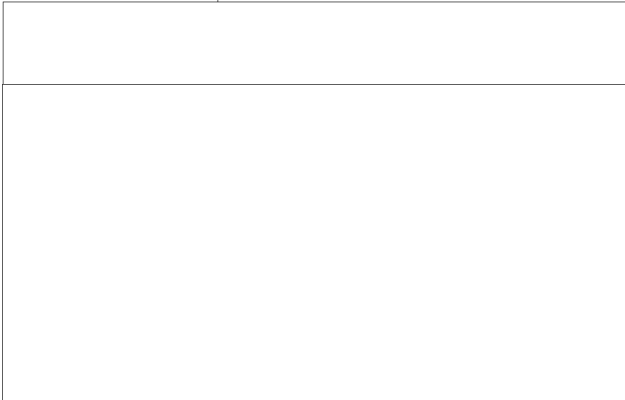
**Figure 15. MSU Nikolay V. Ogarkov**  
**Chief of the Soviet General Staff (1977-84)**  
*Marshal Ogarkov is known for his expertise in science and technology and his views advocating their incorporation in military doctrine. He is author of Always in Readiness To Defend the Homeland, the recently published History Teaches Vigilance, and numerous articles discussing the development of military thought and the Soviet armed forces. Ogarkov is now Commander in Chief of Forces of the Western Theater of Military Operations.*



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would be the case.



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These themes have become more prominent in military writings [Redacted] as Soviet theater nuclear capabilities have grown. The Soviets may see their improved capabilities as providing a more effective deterrent against NATO's use of nuclear weapons. The Soviets, nonetheless, are continuing to improve the capability of their forces to conduct operations at all levels of intensity, whether conventional or nuclear. [Redacted]

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**Outlook**

For years, the Soviets clearly believed that a war between the Pact and NATO would almost certainly include the large-scale use of nuclear weapons by both sides, even if only conventional weapons or limited nuclear strikes occurred at the outset. The Soviets sought to develop the forces and the concepts for their employment that, under conditions of nuclear warfare, would afford them the best possible chance of achieving their combat objectives. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

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Several factors suggest that a major shift in doctrine is in progress, one that may be more fundamental than the revision of some of the principles for joint and combined operations. The development of new battlefield technologies—especially precision-guided munitions—and the introduction of operational maneuver groups, reconnaissance strike complexes, and integrated fire tactics indicate a substantial Soviet interest in keeping combat in Europe at the conventional level. [Redacted]

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