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Headquarters Comment: The Special Collection article which is noted in footnotes on pages 4, 6, and 13 was written by Colonel-General N. Pavloyskiy, and was disseminated as It may be of interest to note that the footnote on page 6 refers to the intermediate version of the three known versions of Military Thought.

Some Questions in the Preparation and Conduct of Initial
Offensive Operations

by

Colonel-General A. Babadzhanyan

The constant quantitative and qualitative growth of missile weapons and the increase in the quantity of nuclear warheads allotted for the execution of an operation are causing continuous changes in the methods of combat operations of ground troops. These changes are now occurring so rapidly that, at times, that which only several months ago was new and progressive becomes obsolescent and ceases to correspond to the requirements of the day. Specifically, the methods of execution of the offensive operations of the initial period of a nuclear/missile war have undergone such a rapid development. The purpose of this article, which is on the order of a response to a number of articles published in previous issues of the Special Collection, is to examine some of the questions in the preparation and conduct of initial offensive operations.

As is well known, a nuclear/missile war will be of an exceptionally decisive nature. The availability of modern, powerful combat weapons permits even an enemy who is being defeated and is close to destruction to deliver telling thermonuclear strikes against the deep rear area and groupings of the armed forces holding the upper hand. In order to fully deprive the enemy of any opportunity to use nuclear weapons, it is not enough to deliver strategic massed nuclear strikes against his territory. No nuclear strikes can guarantee the complete destruction of all the enemy's weapons of nuclear attack or eliminate his capability to deliver strikes.

The fulfilment of this mission can be guaranteed only by the swiftest capture and occupation of enemy territory. By this very means can our country be made completely secure from strikes by the enemy's ground nuclear weapons and the enemy deprived of bases for his submarine and surface missile-carrying fleet which can still operate on the ocean for a certain period of time after the land forces are destroyed.

For the quickest capture of enemy territory (of course, that territory the seizure of which will not require the organization of landing operations across the ocean), it is necessary to carry out a decisive strategic offensive throughout the entire depth of the theaters. In this regard, under no conditions of a situation can one front be slow in shifting to the offensive, or alternate the latter with defense in all or the greater part of its zone of operations. We emphasize that, immediately at the beginning of combat operations, all fronts, without exception, must shift to the offensive on the axes where the seizure of enemy territory is possible and necessary. A shift to the defensive on such axes is not permissible. The troops of the front must shift to the offensive regardless of their condition, even after undergoing enemy nuclear strikes.

In connection with this, in our opinion there must be a change in the point of view regarding the nature of the combat operations of ground troops in the case when the enemy pre-empts us in operations. Previously, we considered that, under these conditions, a front must shift to the defensive in order to repulse an enemy attack. Now, it is necessary to consider that, even in this situation, a front with all available forces will immediately shift to the offensive, which, most probably, will assume the nature of a meeting engagement.

The next question is of great practical interest. What will be the duration and the depth of the first strategic offensive operation directed at attaining the immediate strategic goals of a war?

By looking at a map, it can be seen that the goals of a strategic offensive on the European continent can be defined as the destruction of the armed forces of the aggressor countries located there and reaching the seacoasts of the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. In terms of depth, this consists on various strategic axes of from 600 to 800 km (Southwestern Theater of Military Operations--TVD) and from 1200 to 2000 km (Western TVD).

According to modern views, the average speed of an offensive can reach 100 km per day. It is also considered that, in a system of strategic offensive, the offensive operations of formations must follow one after the other without operational pauses. Consequently, the tasks of a strategic offensive in the theaters being examined can be fulfilled within 10 to 20 24-hour periods. If adjustments

are made in their time periods to account for mountainous conditions, for delays in forcing wide water barriers (for example, straits), and for obstacle zones of radioactive contamination, then it will take more than 20 24-hour periods. It is possible that these time periods will even comprise the duration of the initial period of war.

How many subsequent front offensive operations will it be necessary to carry out on the two above-indicated basic theaters in the initial period of a war?

According to existing opinions, the depth of an offensive operation of a front can be from 500 to 600¹ up to 800 to 1000 km². We consider that the second opinion corresponds to a greater degree to the conditions of the initial period of a nuclear/missile war.

The depth of a front offensive operation is determined by the range of operations of the weapons of destruction, by the maneuver capabilities of the troops, by the capability for uninterrupted supply of material, and by the depth of the enemy's operational formation. In the past war, as a practical matter, the range of the front bomber aircraft was about 300 km; the rear services could, uninterruptedly, support the advancing troops to a distance of not more than 250 to 300 km from the area where they were initially based; the depth of the operational formation of the enemy's group of armies was 200 to 250 km. All this determined the depth of a front offensive operation as 250 to 300 km.

The offensive operations of the concluding stage of World War II occupied a special place in their scope, when a significant quantity of tank and mechanized large units and formations, which sharply increased the mobility of troops, appeared in the composition of our ground troops. For example, the depth of the Vistula-Oder offensive operation was more than 500 km, and the depth of the Manchurian offensive operation was 600 to 800 km. The scope of these operations, achieved in 1945 when the troops did not have those weapons of

1. Special Collection of Articles of the Journal "Military Thought", First Issue, 1961.

2. "Modern War", published by the Military Academy of the General Staff, 1960, page 194.

destruction or those maneuvering capabilities which modern ground troops have, shows that the proposed depth of a modern front offensive operation of 1000 km is not fantastic.

Even now the weapons of a front and the means of reinforcing a front can ensure the destruction of the enemy to a depth of up to 500 km. The question of supplying the front with missiles possessing a great range of fire is in the stage of practical resolution. In addition, missile troops of strategic designation will undoubtedly be used in the front zone during the initial period of a war.

In comparison with the past war, the depth of the enemy operational formation has, at present, also increased. Certain elements of the enemy's operational missile rear services are located at a distance of up to 1000 km from the front line.

The only thing that still causes one to doubt the reality of assigning a mission of such depth to a front is the limited capabilities of the operational rear services. The fact is that the capabilities of the rear services have not undergone any substantial changes during the past several years and, to some degree, have even decreased, if one considers the probable destruction of railroads and the mass destruction of motor vehicle roads. Decisive measures are necessary to increase the capabilities of the rear services for delivering material, in the first place, providing the rear services with units and large units of aircraft, helicopters, and motor vehicles with large load capacities, and the extensive introduction of pipeline transport. Only in this case can the rear services ensure the execution of deep and swift offensive operations.

Thus, it will be necessary to carry out 1 or 2 successive front offensive operations in order to attain the immediate strategic goals in Europe: one operation on the Southwestern TVD and two on the Western TVD.

At the present time, various opinions exist as to how the strategic offensive will be executed organizationally.

The authors of the book Modern War, believe that in the system of operations in ground theaters the first position will be given to front operations, not to the operations of groups of fronts as it was in the past war.

In the article "The Question of the Theory of the Operation of a Group of Fronts",¹ Colonel S. Kozlov considers it necessary to create high commands in all TVD's and to subordinate to them not only front formations but also the other types of armed forces operating in a given TVD (missile troops, the Navy, long-range aviation, and troops of the PVO of the Country).

A compromise is expressed in the point of view presented by Colonel-General N. Pavlovskiy² that offensive operations in the initial period of a war can be executed by fronts and groups of fronts.

Let us examine this question. During the years of World War II, beginning with the Soviet Army counteroffensive near Moscow (December 1941 to April 1942), all the main offensive operations were carried out, as a rule, not by separate fronts but by the united efforts of several fronts. Usually, the goals of an offensive operation on a strategic axis were achieved by the efforts of 2 or 3 fronts. The conditions of the past war required this, when an enormous density of weapons and a superiority of no less than 2 or 3 times over the enemy were needed for a breakthrough of defenses. The efforts of several fronts were usually concentrated on such a strategic or operational axis, the geographic conditions of which provided the capability for close operational coordination among the fronts.

In the conduct of a nuclear/missile war, a concentration of enormous masses of personnel and equipment is not required to carry out an offensive. Even now the density of troops has sharply decreased, while the zones of offensive formations have increased 1.5 to 2 times. All of this indicates that under modern conditions the efforts of one front are sufficient for those axes where in the past war it was necessary to concentrate the efforts of several fronts.

Consequently, the troops of one front will now operate, as a rule, on each of the strategic or important operational axes. It is our view that under these conditions the combining of several fronts into a group is not advisable, if only because operational coordination

1. Collection of Articles of the Journal "Military Thought" No. 2/52/, 1960.

2. Special Collection of Articles of the Journal "Military Thought" First Issue, 1961.

between fronts operating on independent strategic or important operational axes is not always possible, or is almost impossible. The General Headquarters (Stavka) will organize strategic coordination between the fronts, or rather, implement strategic coordination of the efforts of strategic nuclear/missile weapons with the operations of the fronts.

On the basis of the above, we conclude that in a nuclear/missile war the main role in attaining the goals of armed combat in theaters will belong not to the operations of a group of fronts, but to the system of simultaneous and successive front operations. This does not preclude, of course, the conduct of operations by a group of fronts at individual stages of a strategic offensive operation on axes where operational coordination of several fronts is feasible.

In our view, the limited number of fronts in a nuclear/missile war also makes the formation of TVD commands inadvisable. It is known that, at the beginning of World War II, the number of fronts was limited (five fronts) and corresponded exactly to the number of strategic axes which existed at the time (Northern, Northwestern, Western, Southwestern, and Southern). Under these conditions the fronts fulfilled not only operational, but also strategic missions.

The commands of three axes were created in July 1941, the Northwestern, the Western, and the Southwestern; they were called upon to carry out the operational-strategic direction of the fronts (which generally numbered from 5 to 11 at various periods). The complexity and the intensity of the situation at the fronts of war frequently forced the General Headquarters of the Supreme High Command to directly control the fronts, bypassing the commands of the axes, thereby making them useless. As is known, after existing for about one year altogether, these commands were abolished.

In conducting a nuclear/missile war the number of fronts on the indicated axes will be less than in the past war. The conditions for military operations will become still more complex. The maneuverability of troops and the mobility of the front line will increase by several times. All this provides a basis for considering the creation of commands of axes or of TVD's in a future war inadvisable.

In our opinion, the formation of TVD commands is possible only in remote theaters where the control of the armed forces will be difficult for the General Headquarters, for example, in the Far East (as it was in the past war) or on other continents when our troops arrive there.

However, granting the possibility of creating strategic commands in remote TVD, it is not possible to agree with the proposal that the naval forces operating in the waters adjoining the theater should be subordinated to these commands. The mission of supporting ground forces is secondary for the naval forces, in comparison with the missions of blockading enemy countries and of disrupting enemy ocean and sea intercontinental transport, which missions are frequently carried out in remote ocean areas or even on other oceans. For the fulfillment of these missions, a broad strategic maneuver by submarine forces is required. The subordination of all naval forces to the TVD command could thus fetter and limit the Navy's capability of fulfilling its main missions. Of course, the part of the naval forces which will be operating in support of the troops of a TVD (the destruction of enemy strike missile-carrying and aircraft-carrier naval forces, the disruption of enemy amphibious landing operations, the participation in amphibious landing operations of TVD troops, etc.) must be subordinated to the TVD command.

The thought expressed by some authors of articles concerning the creation of operational-strategic commands in our theaters of military operations was undoubtedly influenced to some degree by the presence of such control elements on the territories of the countries of the imperialist coalition. However, such an analogy is not justified here. The fact of the matter is that the American Joint Staff in essence controls the armies of the countries which comprise the imperialist coalition. But the Americans are not in a position to effect centralized control of all the armed forces that make up the coalition and which are dispersed on almost all the continents of the world. Therefore, they formed intermediate control elements, commands of the TVD.

Under our conditions, when theaters of military operations are located on two continents (Europe and Asia) and are connected by land borders with well-established means of communications and supply, it will hardly be necessary to form such an intermediate command as a TVD command.

Several words on the initial offensive operations of fronts. These operations can begin under various conditions of a situation. The shifting of fronts to an offensive can be preceded by a threatening period. It will take place if a war starts after a significant intensification of tension in the relations between the principal countries of the imperialist coalition and those of the Socialist Camp, and when it becomes clear that the political relations of the two camps will inevitably bring on a military conflict. The threatening period can also take place when a world war starts through involvement of the principal countries in the course of a local war in one of the areas of the world.

War can also be started by a surprise enemy strike, when there will be no threatening period. The most characteristic version of a surprise attack can be the delivery by the probable aggressor of a mass thermonuclear strike against the socialist countries under the guise of carrying out large training exercises.

A surprise attack is the most advantageous method of starting a war. It may be assumed that war will be unleashed by a surprise attack, if the imperialists decide on this. Therefore, in the practical activity of our armed forces and in their operational and combat training, it is necessary to embark decisively on a course for the preparation of troops for the entry into a war which is not preceded by a threatening period. If the armed forces are ready to begin military operations when there is no threatening period, then they will always be able to do so when there is a threatening period.

An important situational condition, under which fronts can begin their initial offensive operations, is the location of the troops of a front in relation to the enemy before the start of military operations. A front (group of forces) which, prior to the start of military operations, is located directly on the border beyond which the countries of the imperialist coalition are located, will come into contact with the ground enemy immediately. However, a front located at a distance from this border at the start of military operations can shift to the offensive only after reaching the line of contact between the aggressor troops and the armies of countries friendly to us.

In all cases, the troops of a front will shift to a decisive offensive immediately after a counterstrike or after a strike to frustrate a surprise enemy attack. A counterstrike, or a strike to frustrate an enemy attack, will be carried out on the basis of the decision of the higher party and government leaders of the country; the main role in carrying it out will be played by the missile troops of strategic designation. It is understood that government leaders will also make the decision for the front troops to shift to a decisive offensive.

There is a wide-spread point of view that front nuclear/missile weapons must also participate in a counterstrike to frustrate a surprise enemy attack, which are measures of the Supreme High Command. In our opinion, the front weapons will not be in a position to participate in a counterstrike or in the first nuclear strike for the following reasons:

--the nuclear/missile weapons of a considerable number of the fronts, which are located at a distance from the borders adjacent to the enemy prior to the start of military operations, cannot be used because of the comparatively short range of the operations;

--the nuclear/missile weapons of these fronts, even those directly in the border zone, will not be able to participate in immediate operations, because considerable time (up to several hours, and, under certain conditions, up to several days) will be required to bring them up to combat condition (basically, for the assembly and checking of missiles and warheads).

In addition to the above, it is necessary to take into account the following consideration. In an offensive operation, the planned transport of missiles, special charges, and missile fuel will be greatly hampered because of the mass destruction of communication lines and the destruction of certain depots which had become known to the enemy. Therefore, it is not advisable to expend a significant amount of the nuclear/missile weapons of a front at the very beginning of an operation. They should be saved for subsequent use in the course of an operation and in completing it.

The extensive use of nuclear/missile weapons compels a new approach to solving the problem of the combat composition of a front. In the past war, the combat composition of a front was determined by the necessity of creating a twofold or threefold (and sometimes even more) superiority of forces and weapons over the enemy on the axes of strikes.

Under modern conditions, the criterion for determining the composition of a front is its capability to inflict destruction on an opposing enemy grouping with nuclear weapons and to complete its rout with motorized rifle, tank, and airborne large units. Figuratively speaking, one can say that combined-arms and tank large units will now play the role of a "broom" by means of which the front's offensive zone will be cleared of the remaining enemy troops after they are routed by nuclear weapons. Under conditions when, as the result of nuclear strikes, the correlation of forces can rapidly and sharply change in favor of the side that has executed them, an offensive operation of a front can be carried out successfully even when the initial correlation of forces and weapons was equal.

The combat composition of a front in an initial operation will depend on the method of unleashing the war.

If a war starts by a surprise enemy attack, the front will then be forced to start combat operations with a limited number of large units in constant readiness. During the course of an operation, the front will be reinforced by fully mobilized large units and by large units in constant readiness arriving from the zone of interior (in accordance with the plan for the strategic deployment of the ground troops).

If, however, military operations develop after a threatening period, then the first front operation can start with a larger number of troops: large units in constant readiness and those fully mobilized. In all cases, it is necessary to consider that the approach of troops from the zone of interior can be frustrated or delayed by the enemy by means of direct strikes against these large units and also by the destruction of communication routes.

Missile large units and units are the skeleton of the operational formation of a front, without which the conduct of combat operations under modern conditions is impossible. Therefore, in a border district (group of forces), the composition of the missile troops must be such as is necessary for achievement of the objectives of the first operation. In addition, the composition of the missile troops and their supply of ammunition must compensate for the shortage of combined-arms and tank large units when these are put out of action on the field of battle or when their arrival from the zone of interior is disrupted or delayed.

Let us dwell briefly on the methods of operations of the troops of a front in initial offensive operations.

The following factors will exert an influence on the methods of conducting initial offensive operations: the limited number of front troops; disorganization of the enemy's governmental control and the control of his armed forces, and, consequently, the isolation of the enemy's troops and the putting out of action of entire elements of his operational formation; the enemy's lack of prepared and occupied lines of defense; and the existence of large areas of radioactive contamination.

The above-listed factors create favorable conditions for an offensive by several strike groupings on axes. An offensive on separate axes ensures the splintering of the enemy front and a dispersal of his attention and efforts. At the same time, an offensive on axes is much more complicated than an offensive which is carried out with close lateral contact between units, large units, and even armies. During an offensive on axes, each grouping will be in a difficult situation and will have to operate independently with its flanks, and even its rear area, exposed. In view of this, the significance of preparing our command cadres for such operations becomes clear.

In the years of World War II, an offensive was conducted on a solid front in close combat formations, with a methodical breakthrough of enemy positions and defense zones. Actually, combat operations were conducted in the zone of effective fire of the infantry and artillery weapons, i.e., in a zone 10 to 15 km on both sides from the line of contact, if one does not consider sporadic aerial strikes against the depth. Under these conditions, the effect of fire against the enemy was exploited immediately. Close coordination in timing and location was executed between the fire weapons, the infantry, and tanks.

Under modern conditions, the sharply increased capabilities of fire weapons have led them to a contradiction with the capabilities of the infantry and tanks. The infantry and tanks have become incapable of immediately exploiting the effect of nuclear/missile strikes against the entire depth of a defending enemy. To ensure rapid seizure of the entire depth of the enemy defenses by active

combat operations and to achieve the objectives of the operation in the shortest period of time, it is necessary to increase sharply the rate of the offensive which, by the Directive of the Minister of Defense for Operational Training for 1961, was ordered to be increased to 100 km per 24-hour period. This is a very high rate. It is sufficient to state that the distance covered in a 24-hour period in the execution of a march consists of 180 to 250 km, i.e., only two times greater than the distance which must be covered by attacking troops in a 24-hour period.

In planning an operation, is it possible to guarantee that a rate of, say 100 km per day, will be sustained every day? Certainly not. There will be days in an operation when troops will be able to advance only negligibly, days when they will not move at all, and, possibly, days when they will even fall back. We are speaking of those days when front troops will be repulsing enemy counterstrikes, conducting meeting engagements with the enemy, forcing water barriers, and overcoming substantial zones of radioactive contamination and mountain passes. Consequently, on the other days of the operation, the rate of advance must be such so as to compensate for the days of slow or of no rate of advance, i.e., it must approach the speed of executing a march.

In the offensive operations of the past war, the most decisive results were achieved by encircling the enemy operational groupings and subsequently annihilating and capturing them. However, at the end of the war, especially in the Vistula-Oder operation, the ineffectiveness of encirclement as a form of conducting an operation had already become obvious. Those enemy groupings around which a solid ring of encirclement was not closed turned into so-called "roaming pockets" and quickly ceased to exist. But those enemy groupings that were encircled by our troops (for example, the Poznan and the Schneidemuhl groupings) continued to fight while surrounded until the end of the war, diverting a substantial number of our troops to them.

We cannot agree with the statement¹ that in a modern war encirclement and destruction of large enemy groupings can be employed along with the delivery of swift, deep strikes on separate axes.

1. Special Collection of Articles of the Journal "Military Thought", First Issue, 1961.

Under the conditions of highly maneuvering combat operations, it will be inadvisable to encircle a large enemy grouping which is dispersed over a large area. The limited number of troops in a front will not permit the creation of inner and outer fronts of encirclement and the conduct of methodical combat for the purpose of contracting a ring of encirclement, breaking up the encircled grouping, and destroying it piecemeal. Such operations threaten loss of the rate of the offensive and, possibly, even its frustration. It is much more advisable to use small forces to intercept the main routes of retreat of an enveloped enemy and subsequently destroy him with nuclear/missile weapons. In this, the main body of the front troops must move forward without delay and without glancing back at the encircled enemy grouping.

In the most general terms, this is how we visualize the initial offensive operations of the initial period of a war. Undoubtedly, some of the problems we have examined require further consideration and critical analysis.