

How to Fight the Russians

by Colonel Richard D. Hooker, Jr., USA, Ret.



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Preface

The U.S. Army has not faced a great power in high-intensity warfare in many decades. Especially considering the capabilities of the Russian military, the U.S. must rebalance after many years of counter-insurgency; it faces real disabilities in field artillery, air defense and electronic warfare (EW). On the plus side, when compared to Russian forces, U.S. Army units are typically close to full strength, with better training, excellent equipment and a superior ability to synchronize.

Russian warfighting approaches are based on centuries of practical experience, but above all on World War II, in which the Russian army lost 13 million soldiers and came away with hard-won lessons. Current Russian military characteristics include an emphasis on offensive capabilities, reliance on excellent artillery, utilization of advanced close air support and development of EW capabilities that overmatch those of the United States.

For American Soldiers, camouflage, dispersion and deception will be critical. Mission orders, clear and intelligent commander's intent and confident juniors, able and willing to act decisively on their own initiative, will carry the day. Above all, leaders must be aggressive, even pugnacious. In the end, preparing Soldiers for high-intensity combat may be commanders' most important task.

How to Fight the Russians

Introduction

Tactical commanders today lead Soldiers in an Army that is refocusing on high-intensity, major theater war and great-power competition. The Russian Federation is the most dangerous opponent. Though a far cry from the Red Army of the Cold War, today's Russian military is a formidable opponent that deserves respect. It is combat-hardened, well-equipped and offensively-minded. As professional leaders of combat troops, commanders must study this opponent and prepare accordingly for a difficult but winnable fight.

How Russia Fights

Russian doctrine and warfighting approaches are based on centuries of history and practical experience, but above all on World War II, or, as it is called in Russia, the "Great Patriotic War." The Soviet Union lost 13 million soldiers in that war and came away with hard-won lessons. Although Russian tactics have evolved since then, they still retain many key features from that time.

Offensive Operations

Even on the defensive, Russian commanders are taught to attack. The Russian army is built for offense—it has no light infantry; all formations, even its airborne divisions, are armored or mechanized. Russian commanders at all levels will attack resolutely and with determination. Speed, momentum and violence of action will characterize the Russian way of war.¹

Russian ground forces are typically organized into combined-arms armies (there is one tank army in the current force structure), analogous to a U.S. corps.² Though not as standardized as they were in the Soviet era, they usually include two or more maneuver divisions and separate brigades (brigades are similar to regiments but are independent with some additional support units). The army will normally provide supporting artillery, missile, air defense, reconnaissance, electronic warfare (EW), engineering, logistics, NBC (nuclear, biological and chemical) and signal brigades or battalions.³

Ground Systems

Russia's principal ground maneuver systems are the main battle tank and the infantry fighting vehicle. These come in a number of variants, but all share common characteristics. All Russian tanks have a 125mm smoothbore main gun, a three-man crew and an autoloader. All have been upgraded with more advanced composite armor, fire control systems and thermal sights. The standard tank is the T-72B3, a modernized version of the legacy T-72. About 1,000 are fielded in active Russian tank units. The T-90A, which evolved from the T-72, is the most modern and capable tank found in the Russian inventory; there are about 350 currently fielded, though only one tank brigade in the 1st Guards Tank Army (1GTA) is so equipped.⁴ The T-80U, while comparable in capability, is found primarily in the 4th Guards Tank Division; there are about 450 in the current Russian tank fleet. While these models are both modern and dangerous, they are not considered the equal of the best western tanks.⁵

The standard Russian infantry fighting vehicle (IFV) remains the BMP-2, a Soviet legacy system with some upgrades. Some units are equipped with the BMP-3. The BMP is a fast, mobile and well-armed tracked vehicle with a low profile, but it sacrifices protection compared to western IFVs. Some Russian motor rifle units are equipped with the wheeled BTR-80, an improved legacy system analogous to the Stryker. Like the BMP, the modern BTR-series IFVs are armed with a 30mm cannon. Russian airborne or VDV (*vozdushno-desantnye voyska*, i.e., air landing forces) units are equipped with the BMD-4, a smaller variant of the BMP that can be airdropped or heli-borne. Both the BMP-2 and BMD-4 carry a 30mm cannon and anti-tank missile launchers. In addition, the BMP-3 and BMD-4 mount the 2A70 low-velocity 100mm rifled gun.⁶

Artillery

Compared to western militaries, which retain many cheaper light infantry formations, the speed, mobility and firepower found in Russian maneuver forces reflects the Russian emphasis on tempo. Russian ground forces will take risks to gain and maintain momentum and the initiative. Unlike the U.S. Army, they will not apportion fires and other resources "fairly"; commanders and units that are succeeding in breakthrough operations will be given priority of fires and other support to exploit success, while others must do without. The idea here is to push hard to crack and overcome resistance and to keep moving, causing a cascading collapse of the defense.

Above all, the Russians rely on fires. Their approach is to "maneuver to position fires"—quite different from the United States, which seeks to employ fires to enable decisive maneuver.⁷ Russian maneuver brigades contain not one but three artillery battalions: two self-propelled howitzer battalions and one multiple rocket launcher (MRL) battalion.⁸ These are backed up by independent artillery brigades (containing tubed, rocket and missile battalions). Frequently, "organic" artillery units may be pooled as ad hoc "artillery groups" to facilitate massing of fires.

In recent years, the Russian army has fielded tactical drones with great success to assist with locating and targeting enemy formations. While the Russian military has few large platforms like the U.S. MQ-9 Reaper, it is liberally supplied with smaller systems that support tactical fires. Commonly used systems include the Orlan-10 and Forpost, as well as commercially available variants. These were used with devastating effect in the Donbas, where entire Ukrainian units were virtually wiped out.⁹

In general, Russian artillery has greater range than comparable western systems and exists in much greater numbers. The standard Russian howitzer is the self-propelled 152mm 2S3,

another legacy system found in most Russian maneuver brigades or regiments. (Airborne units are equipped with the 2S31 Vena 120mm self-propelled mortar as well as the dated D-30 122mm towed howitzer.) High-priority, first-line units are equipped with the 2S19 Msta-S howitzer, which has a higher rate of fire and greater range than its U.S. counterpart, the M109 Paladin.¹⁰ The MRL battalion is commonly equipped with the venerable BM-21 Grad system, an area-fire system with a range of up to 45km. Artillery brigades found at higher levels feature larger systems, such as 240mm self-propelled (SP) mortars (2S4), 202mm SP howitzers (2S7M), 220mm rocket launchers (9P140) and 300mm rocket launchers (BM-30 Smersh and 9A52-4 Tornado-S). These assets are used to weight the main effort in the offense and to disrupt or destroy deeper, high-value targets. The SS-26 Iskander short-ranged ballistic missile is an army-level asset not pushed down to artillery groups but retained for employment by the army commander.¹¹ While the Russian army does possess rocket-assisted and precision-guided artillery munitions, due to their high cost they are less frequently employed than conventional munitions.

The U.S. Army has not faced this kind of artillery threat since World War II. Defending formations that are not armored and well dug-in risk destruction. U.S. and coalition counter-fires will be critical to success. Tactical commanders should be well aware that Russian artillery has a greater range and is present in great mass. Our tactics, techniques and procedures must account for Russian fires superiority; higher-level tactical and operational commanders must plan for suppression of enemy fires as a high priority. Success will require a true combined-arms approach that incorporates fires, maneuver, effective engineer support, superior command and control (C2), deception and accurate intelligence preparation and targeting.

Close Air Support

Attack helicopters represent another serious threat. These come in different types, but all are heavily-armed and armored and can fly and fight at night and in bad weather. Russian attack helicopters are not organic to army brigades and divisions; they belong to the Russian Air Force. Each military district is assigned one army aviation brigade (88 aircraft) and each combined-arms army or tank army is usually supported by one army aviation regiment (66 aircraft). These would be augmented by the Western Military District's 6th Air Force and its three squadrons of SU-35 fighter ground attack jets, or some 54 high-performance combat aircraft.¹² The standard attack helicopter is the two-seater MI-28 Havoc, armed with a 30mm chain gun and anti-tank missiles or rockets. The KA-52 Hokum, a single-seat attack helicopter, is similarly equipped. Significantly, Russian attack helicopters are not armed with "fire and forget" anti-tank missiles, like the AH64-D Apache Longbow's AGM-114L Hellfire missile. However, Russia is fielding an advanced air-to-air missile, the R-74M, that will enable Russian attack helicopters to engage enemy helicopters. Attack helicopters will most likely be used en masse to weight the main effort and orient on enemy tank formations.¹³

Electronic Warfare

EW represents another Russian capability that overmatches U.S. capabilities.¹⁴ Russian EW aims to disrupt enemy C2 while protecting its own. EW units are found at every level, from the EW company found in every maneuver brigade to the EW brigades found at army level. (Two of the Russian army's five EW brigades are located in the Western Military District.) Russian planners have correctly identified American reliance on secure satellite communications and navigation systems.¹⁵ (Russia will likely also conduct offensive cyber operations, but not principally against tactical formations.) Following the end of the Cold War,

and with the advent of frequency-hopping communications, the U.S. Army largely neglected EW. Today, however, tactical commanders must be acutely aware of the EW threat. Russian forces can jam U.S. radio-electronic communications, locate and target emitters, disrupt GPS systems and degrade precision-guided munitions and artillery proximity fuses.¹⁶ The United States must relearn old practices and develop new ones. In the 1980s, conducting operations under radio-listening silence, remoting and directional antennas, use of field telephones and communications wire, use of flares and frequent command post (CP) displacement were all standard. They should be again. In the future, U.S. forces cannot afford to over-rely on an electro-magnetic spectrum that can be denied at critical times in an operation or campaign. The American military must aggressively seek out and target Russian EW systems that seek to deny effective C2, both with precision fires and with non-lethal fires from its own EW assets; Russia is far ahead in this regard.

Air Defense

Airpower is the crown jewel in the U.S. military arsenal, and Russia commits major resources to air defense accordingly. While the U.S. Army stripped air defense units out of the division following 9/11, Russian units feature effective air defense at every level. Tactical air defense units employ various man-portable, shoulder-fired systems, such as the 9K36 Strela-3 (SA-14 Gremlin), 9K310 Igla-1 (SA-16 Gimlet), 9K38 Igla (SA-18 Grouse) and 9K338 Igla-S (SA-24 Grinch). A new, state-of-the-art system, the 9K333 Verba (Willow) is currently being fielded. Unlike the United States, Russia never moved away from reliance on guns for air defense; many exist today, from the venerable ZSU-23-4 of Soviet times to modern systems, such as the Tunguska M-1 with twin 30mm cannons. At the operational level, fixed and mobile air defense systems—above all, the S-400 Triumpf—pose a dangerous threat to U.S. fixed-wing aircraft out to ranges of 400km and altitudes above 60,000 feet. Tactical ground commanders must assume they will fight inside a Russian air defense envelope that will not be degraded except at great cost and expense. This means that responsive close air support (CAS) cannot be assumed, especially early in the campaign.¹⁷

The Russian military is not, however, ten feet tall. Many of its soldiers are short-term conscripts. Russian training is likely not up to U.S. standards, and much of Russian equipment is less capable than that of U.S. forces. Russian NCOs are also less experienced, and, while Russian commanders are more flexible and innovative than in the past, U.S. emphasis on mission command and preparation at combat training centers provides an edge. When confronting the Russian military in high-intensity conflict, much will depend on successful theater strategy and campaign design, but in the end the performance of U.S. tactical units will matter as much as anything.

In the following scenario, you are a U.S. Army tactical commander tasked to defend against a Russian intervention in the Baltic States. How might the battle unfold?

The Warfight

Setting the Scene

In this fictional scenario, you command an armored brigade combat team, forward deployed to Poland. Following a sudden and massive build-up of Russian forces in the Western Military District, you receive orders to move into Lithuania to defend the capital, Vilnius, in case Russian forces should cross the border. The movement through the famous Suwalki Gap toward the border is fraught with tension, but the Russians do not fire on Polish territory, fearing to

add Poland's four heavy divisions to the forces arrayed against them. In five days, you are in position, have linked up with your Lithuanian counterparts and have conducted initial reconnaissance and planning. Your mission is to defend in place to protect the capital; you elect to cover the eastern and southern approaches to the city, focusing on the A3 and A15 motorways, both high speed avenues of approach, along with secondary routes represented by two-lane highways 101, 103 and 202. The Lithuanian "Iron Wolf" brigade, a mechanized formation, defends the northern approaches, augmented by a German-led NATO Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) battalion with Leopard II tanks and Marder IFVs. A reserve infantry brigade strong-points the city itself. Fortunately, the road networks will not permit an attacker to bypass the capital very easily. Your available forces and lack of time to prepare do not permit a defense in depth—yours must be an active defense.

Your brigade is complete, with 90 M1A3 tanks, 150 M2-series Bradley Fighting Vehicles (BFVs) and 18 M109A7 Paladin self-propelled howitzers. You have also been given one battery of six MLRS (multiple launch rocket system) launchers. A Division Tactical Command Post led by a one star accompanied you to provide C2 as well as liaison with the Lithuanians. You will be supported by 16 AH-64-D attack helicopters from your divisional combat aviation brigade. You have been told that in seven days you may be reinforced by the 2d Cavalry Regiment (the Stryker brigade based in Germany). But, for now, you must hold until relieved.

You face the Russian 4th Guards Tank Division, spearheading the 1GTA, whose mission is to take Vilnius rapidly, then link up with Russian forces in Kaliningrad. 4th Tank is task-organized with two tank regiments and two attached airborne regiments in BMDs, some 186 tanks and 248 IFVs. (Although it is a front-line formation, 4th Tank can muster only two of its three tank regiments and two motor rifle battalions in the first 30 days, hence the addition of supporting airborne units.) 4th Tank represents 1GTA's main effort; its attack is weighted accordingly with reinforcing fires, engineers and other enablers. The supporting effort is an attack to the north by 2d Guards Motor Rifle Division to seize the Latvian capital, Riga. If successful, this will cut off all three of the Baltic States. (6th Combined Arms Army, which has only two assigned maneuver brigades, but is supported by powerful army-level artillery and an airborne division, has attacked Estonia.) An early loss of the national capital knocks Lithuania out of the war before NATO reinforcements can arrive, weakening the NATO Alliance. The stakes are high. You are directed to accept decisive engagement if necessary to accomplish your mission.¹⁸

You and your Soldiers still hope that the Russian deployment is another snap exercise intended to intimidate NATO, but, 72 hours after you arrive, the Russians cross the Byelorussian border and the war is on. You have spent a professional lifetime preparing for this moment. What is your plan?

Given the broad front you must defend and the limited time to dig in, you elect to conduct a mobile defense, oriented on mounted avenues of approach. You are fortunate to be assigned a U.S.-trained Lithuanian major as a liaison officer, with two captains and a small signal element. You tell your commanders that staying in one location for too long will likely bring down massive artillery concentrations that they would not be able to survive—constant movement and relocation are essential. The brigade cavalry squadron deploys in front to screen, oriented on all company and battalion-sized avenues of approach. You allocate one tank company to reinforce the cavalry for the counter-reconnaissance fight. Its principal tasks are to provide early



warning, to force the enemy main body to deploy, to kill enemy reconnaissance assets and to identify the enemy’s main effort. Your main effort is astride the A3 east-west highway in the center of your sector, oriented along the north-south Route 106, where you position a reinforced battalion task force with two tank companies, three Bradley companies and one combat engineer company.

Your second battalion defends the southern avenue of approach on your right, astride the A15 motorway, with two tank companies, two Bradley companies and two engineer platoons. You decide to accept risk on the left flank, where the third battalion will defend along Routes 101 and 103 with one tank company, one Bradley company and one engineer platoon. As the brigade reserve, you retain control of one tank company (returned from the cavalry squadron for the main battle) and the Apaches. Once the enemy main body enters the main battle area, the cavalry squadron will reposition to screen the right flank, as you are worried about that seam. Your mission statement reads: “The Brigade Combat Team defends in sector D Day, H Hour to secure the capital and defeat 4th Guards Tank Division, the enemy main effort.” In a face-to-face orders group, you tell your commanders:

“My desired endstate is to stop 4th Tank outside the capital. The focus of effort is the fight to block the enemy’s main avenue of approach astride the A3 motorway. The enemy may jam us, so be prepared to fight without radios. If out of comms, use your best judgment within this intent; counterattack aggressively and remember: don’t stay in one place too long. Do not neglect smaller roads and trails in your planning, as the enemy will use any means to keep moving. We must hold out for at least seven days, until 2d Cavalry arrives. I define success as no penetration of our rear boundary by a larger than company-sized force, with 4th Tank at no more than 50 percent combat strength and culminating.”

Privately, you tell the general, “Air superiority or not, we will need CAS to win. The Air Force may take losses, but so will we. We’re all in this together!”

You direct your commanders to conduct such engineer preparation as time will allow, with a focus on dropping any bridges and overpasses in their sectors. Your staff identifies locations

where the terrain limits bypassing obstacles on main routes and you focus your obstacle plan there. Your brigade engineer alerts your orders group that secondary routes and logging trails through forested areas should be obstructed with abatis and mines. You know that the direct support artillery battalion is a precious asset that will be targeted for destruction early on; therefore, you tell its commander to move his batteries regularly, avoid obvious firing positions, stay off the radio and make maximum use of camouflage. Your intent is not to use artillery to chip away at the enemy, but reserve its fires for high-value targets to be attacked with all guns and launchers; they will fight dispersed, but will always be able to mass fires on specific targets. Your fire support officer reminds you that you may not receive a resupply of artillery ammunition for at least a week, so each round is precious.

Back in Poland, you weren't able to exercise very much with your Lithuanian counterparts, but their presence in your operations center is now proving invaluable. They are in touch with their special forces and local reserve units, who will operate to your front to help with targeting and to attack soft targets—particularly Russian fuel and ammunition vehicles. Each host nation reserve battalion will be supported by a U.S. Special Forces A Detachment of 12 officers and NCOs from the 1st Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group, providing secure voice and data connectivity as well as trained JTACS to bring in available CAS. 10th Group also provides a small SOCCE (special operations command and control element) to help you coordinate your operations with the special forces detachments.

The Battle Begins

So much for the plan. Now, it is time to fight. As your units move into position, streams of civilian refugees pour to the rear, desperate to avoid the coming destruction. On the evening of the third day, the cavalry squadron makes contact with elements of 1GTA's 96th reconnaissance brigade, followed some hours later by 4th Tank's divisional reconnaissance battalion. Concerned about giving away too much too early, you refuse calls for artillery support and, after a spirited counter reconnaissance fight, you direct the cavalry to fall back on the main body. Enemy reconnaissance is mostly stripped away once it enters the main battle area, but not before it identifies your main effort. The good news is that the cavalry squadron is still at 80 percent strength. Signals intelligence and ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) reporting confirm that 4th Tank's main effort appears to be along the A3.

On the afternoon of the fourth day all hell breaks loose. More than 100 T-80U tanks appear, preceded by massive preparatory fires from six tube and rocket artillery battalions. The fires appear to be pre-planned. While much impacts without damage, the shock effect is still tremendous. You elect not to fire counter-battery, as you are far outgunned, and giving away the location of the direct support (DS) battalion may lead to its loss altogether. Better to wait for the right moment. You begin to sense a loss of control as Russian barrage jamming disrupts all radio nets. Behind the tanks, scores of BMPs roll forward, firing on the move. To your north and south, fragmentary reports of BMDs tell you that 4th Tank's attached airborne regiments are attempting to advance on secondary routes. Intermittently, you pick up reports of attack helicopters, a grave concern as you lack organic air defense. You force yourself to remember that you have a good plan and that your commanders know their business. What are the decisions that only you can make?

As you expected, enemy EW is frustrating your ability to "see" the battle—you cannot communicate reliably with your units. You decide to move forward to the 1st Battalion CP,

directing the brigade reserve to follow close behind. You are accompanied by the DS artillery battalion commander. On arrival, the 1st Battalion commander reports the loss of eight tanks and six BFVs. His read is that he is fighting both of 4th Tank's tank regiments. He believes he has stalled the lead regiment with heavy losses, but the second is moving up with engineer assets to breach his obstacles across the A3. (Slow and no-go terrain limits maneuver room off road.) Running low on tank ammunition and unable to refuel in the heavy fighting, he is not sure he can hold—particularly with no artillery or CAS.

Given the intense EW environment, you have dispatched staff officers to your flanking battalions; they now return to report in person. Your liaison officers also provide helpful updates from their stay-behind forces. In the south, your 2d battalion is heavily engaged with what appears to be an airborne regiment and one tank company. They are holding well. In the north, an airborne regiment with a motor rifle company and tank company attached is trying to run your boundary with Iron Wolf, but it appears to be contained.

You sense that this is the decisive point in the battle. 4th Tank is on a timetable, and it will be relentless. That can be an opportunity if it masses. The lack of significant enemy tanks on the right and left suggests that his intent is to break through in the center. Sixty minutes later, supported by massed artillery and attack helicopters, 4th Tank breaches your complex obstacles and begins to move through the breach. Now is the time to deliver your Sunday punch. All of your artillery and your 16 Apaches, as well as the brigade reserve, are committed to crush 4th Tank's advance.

Against all odds, your Air Force air liaison officer succeeds in bringing in six A-10s, which execute well. The overall effect of this combined arms approach is devastating, and 4th Tank's two tank regiments draw off, badly hurt, leaving scores of burning tanks and IFVs. You don't know it at the time, but 4th Tank's commanding general was killed as he pushed forward to press the attack. Badly hurt and leaderless, 4th Tank is done for the moment. For now, you've won.

The cost has been high. Your executive officer (XO) reports the loss of an entire artillery battery and four AH-64's. The enemy's attack helicopters and targeting drones have hurt the brigade badly in the absence of effective air defense, although the MLRS battery is in good shape. The 3d battalion's operations center, despite constantly repositioning, has been wiped out. Across the brigade, you are down to 52 tanks and 61 IFVs, although some can be recovered and returned to the fight. Your 1st Battalion in particular has been severely hit and is down to 50 percent strength in tanks and IFVs. Five company commanders across the brigade have been killed. Ammunition is low in all units and you work feverishly to resupply and refuel in the midst of casualty evacuation. While you have dealt a heavy blow to 1GTA's lead echelon, you sense that the fight is far from over.

Planning for Round Two

At this point, the general arrives in person. He congratulates you for your stout defense before dropping the bad news:

“We have disrupted 1GTA's timetable and they are in danger of falling behind in the race to link up with the Kaliningrad garrison and cut off the Baltic States. So far, they are not crossing into Polish territory—I guess they don't want to tangle with the Poles' four divisions. The Latvians up north are fighting hard against 1GTA's supporting effort. The Air Force is pulling out all the stops to take down the integrated air defense at K'grad, but, frankly, they are taking

losses. According to intercepts, the Russians still think they can break through here. We expect them to double down.”

“I want you to reconstitute as best you can. Cross level where you need to, push your reconnaissance back out, reseed your minefields, resupply and refuel and get ready to fight again. We have intel that 1GTA is committing the army reserve right here. That means the 6th Independent Tank Brigade, supported by another strong artillery brigade. 6th Tank has a motor rifle battalion and two tank regiments; its third is still filling out with reservists back at Minsk. They’ll be here soon. I don’t have much to give you, but we are picking up one airborne infantry battalion, just arrived from Italy. Think about how you want to use them. Good luck!”

While the XO works to resupply the brigade, you huddle with your deputy commanding officer and operations officer (S3). They agree that the enemy is most likely to try again to push through in the center. The brigade intelligence officer (S2) warns that the southern route, though difficult for tanks because of the lack of east-west roads, is a danger; there is no friendly unit to tie in with on your right.

You elect again to defend in the center as your main effort for the next fight. Pulling one tank company from the 2d Battalion and the tank company from the cavalry squadron, you add two tank companies to 1st Battalion. Concerned about the south, you narrow 2d Battalion’s sector to focus on the A15 avenue of approach and give the cavalry squadron the mission to guard your right flank out to Route 203. Betting that Iron Wolf and its attached eFP battalion can hold the north, you strengthen your left flank by giving the airborne battalion the sector blocking Route 103—this narrows your small 3d Battalion’s sector, allowing it to focus on the Route 101 avenue of approach. One tank company and the Apaches will constitute the brigade reserve.

At this point, the 1st Battalion commander takes you aside: “Sir, this Russian artillery is just chewing us up, and, without counter-battery fires, we’re in bad shape. I expect his fire plan to be heavy, but pre-planned. The last thing he expects is for us to attack. If we do, we’ll wrong-foot him, disrupt his fires and upset his scheme of maneuver. What do you think, boss?”

You take a moment to ponder. The idea has merit. It is high-risk, but potentially high-payoff. It is unlikely that the enemy will expect such an aggressive defense, given the pounding he inflicted today. Drawing on more than 20 years of intuition, you decide to go with your gut. “I like it. Tell me more.”

The 1st Battalion S3 walks you through the plan. Two tank companies, overwatched by two Bradley companies with their TOW II (tube-launched, optically-tracked, wire-guided missiles) anti-tank launchers, will defend along the north-south Route 106 as before. They will take on the lead tank battalion. Two tank companies, each with attached combat engineers and a Bradley platoon, will infiltrate the wooded terrain north and south of the A3, forward of the main line of resistance. On order, they will attack the flanks of the advancing 6th Tank Brigade, expected to be in march column, from close range. With luck, 6th Tank will attack into a three-sided ambush. The focus of effort will be on the trail tank battalion, where the enemy command group should be traveling.

Round Two

You approve the plan, and, just before first light, 6th Tank enters the main battle area, its two tank battalions in column as they move up. You have managed to partially reconstitute the obstacles blocking the A3, and the lead enemy battalion deploys to breach. Division reports that

one airborne regiment with 6th Tank's motor rifle battalion is working its way toward the A15. As battle is joined, enemy jamming again drowns out all radio communications. (You thank the gods of war that you trained hard to fight without GPS or radio communications.) Your commanders must fight largely on their own, guided by your intent. At 3,500 meters, your tanks in the main battle area begin to engage, shooting and moving. Your artillery joins in, with the MLRS battery (assisted by your tactical unmanned aerial vehicles and stopping only to shoot) doing great damage to several enemy tubed artillery battalions. Still, Russian artillery is ferocious, backed up by army-level reinforcing fires. On his own initiative, knowing that remaining in place will likely be fatal, the 1st Battalion commander orders all tank units to close the range and attack. At this point, you release the brigade reserve to help weight his counterattack. As at Kursk in World War II, melee combat between scores of tanks ensues. Your Apaches inflict heavy losses, launching more than a hundred Hellfire missiles at maximum range before moving up to fight with their 30mm chain guns. Here, superior U.S. tank gunnery carries the day. Attacking out of the woods, the flanking tank companies catch the trailing enemy battalion by surprise and quickly chop it to pieces, taking out the brigade commander and command group.

The fight on both flanks is tougher than expected. In the north, the addition of the airborne battalion pays off in spades. Bailed on the first day, the Russian airborne regiment is back, supported by surviving tanks from the 4th Tank Division. Although unable to maneuver in the face of the enemy's speedy BMD-4's, the paratroopers disappear into the ground like moles and fight obstinately. Helped by their narrow sector, their Javelin, Carl Gustav and AT-4 anti-tank systems do real damage, overwatched by the airborne anti-armor company with its TOW IIs. To offset Russian artillery, the airborne gets in close to the enemy, almost relishing the chance to fight toe-to-toe against Russian airborne troops. It is much the same with your 3d battalion, still licking its wounds from the day before. With only two small companies of tanks and Bradleys and some engineers, they know that a breakthrough in their sector may dislocate the brigade's defense altogether. A smaller frontage to defend compensates for yesterday's losses. Well dug in, they defend stubbornly.

The Russian effort in the south is serious, but it lacks the power and resolution that you see in the center and north, perhaps due to a lack of tanks and supporting artillery (almost all of which seems focused on the enemy's main effort on the A3). Your 2d Battalion and cavalry squadron have their hands full, but they cope well, sending no requests for support throughout the battle.

By mid-morning, 6th Tank is soundly defeated. Supporting attacks by Russian airborne troops in the north (again supported by remnants of 4th Tank Division) are once again repulsed, while the 2d Battalion and the cavalry squadron beat back the enemy's push from the south. Some "leakers" manage to get through, but the defense holds. Enemy CAS and attack helicopters continue to strike, and you see no friendly CAS today. Another artillery section is destroyed, leaving you with only ten tubes. Six Apaches are damaged or destroyed, leaving only six flyable airframes. You are down to 40 tanks and 48 BFVs.

You are saddened to learn of the death of your 1st Battalion commander, killed fighting in his tank. (Later, he will be decorated posthumously with the Distinguished Service Cross.) Overall, your brigade has come through this ordeal damaged, but still on its feet. In the next days, some of your wounded will return to duty, and some of your tanks and BFVs will be repaired. But for weeks to come, you will be a far cry from the proud brigade that began the fight only days ago. Your brigade fought against great odds and took a terrific pounding, but it did not break.

Aftermath

Unfortunately, the lack of U.S. or NATO heavy forces farther north saw the Estonians and Latvians, despite heroic resistance, overwhelmed. In the rear, a terrific battle is underway to reduce the Kaliningrad exclave, led by two Polish divisions and the U.S. eFP battalion based in Poland, as well as most of NATO's available airpower. As the advance party of the Stryker brigade arrives, you are told that the rest of your division should be on the ground in 2–3 weeks. That bodes well for holding onto Lithuanian territory, although the Russians are also adding strength. Meanwhile, U.S. Army Europe is moving heaven and earth to replace your losses and push ammunition, fuel, replacements and spare parts up to you. In 60–90 days, NATO may be strong enough to recover lost ground up north, but that is well above your pay grade. For now, you refit, reconstitute, resupply and patrol aggressively. More fighting lies ahead. You have taken IGTA's best punch and shattered its best units. You and your troopers have done the Army and your country proud.

Conclusion

There is much to ponder in this fictional scenario. The U.S. Army has not faced a great power in high-intensity warfare in many decades. It has not yet rebalanced after many years of counter-insurgency, and faces real disabilities in field artillery, air defense and EW, especially in the early phases of conflict before division and corps enablers can arrive. On the plus side, U.S. Army units are typically close to full strength, with better training, excellent equipment and a superior ability to synchronize. Fully professional, the Army is led by officers with significant combat experience and the best noncommissioned officers in the world.

Thinking commanders will prepare to fight under heavy artillery fires, with severely degraded C2 and, at least initially, without air supremacy. Camouflage, dispersion and deception will be critical. Mission orders, clear and intelligent commander's intent and confident juniors, able and willing to act decisively on their own initiative, will carry the day. Above all, leaders must be aggressive, even pugnacious. Although the U.S. Army may face a firepower deficit against the Russians, it will not face a quality deficit.

In the end, preparing Soldiers for high-intensity combat may be commanders' most important task. Boiled down, the mission is simple: to kill the enemy and to take and hold ground. Combat against the Russians will be fierce, on a scale not seen since World War II and Korea. It is time to steel our Soldiers' hearts against the test to come.

Notes

- ¹ Scott Boston and Dara Massicot, *The Russian Way of Warfare: A Primer* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2017), 9.
- ² The “corps” does exist in the Russian army but is typically a headquarters with several independent brigades (but not divisions) under command, as with the 11th Corps in Kaliningrad.
- ³ Charles Bartles, “Russian Force Structure for the Conduct of Large-Scale Operations,” *Military Intelligence*, January 2019, 55.
- ⁴ Tim Ripley, “Baltic States Face Uneven Threat from Russia’s Western Military District,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, 10 October 2019, 11.
- ⁵ This discussion of Russian tank technology is taken from Andrew Radin et al., *The Future of the Russian Military* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2019), 77–79.
- ⁶ The BMP-2 carries a 30mm cannon, 7.62mm coaxial machine gun and anti-tank missiles. The BMP-3 is armed with the 100mm 2A70 low-velocity rifled cannon, a 30mm cannon and three 7.62mm machine guns. The 2A70 can fire high explosive fragmentation rounds or laser guided anti-tank missiles, the former at a rate of 10–12 rounds per minute to a range of 7000m. Eight AT-10 anti-tank guided missiles are carried. BMP variants have a crew of three and can carry seven troops. See Lester Grau and Charles Bartles, *The Russian Way of War: Force Structure, Tactics and Modernization of the Russian Ground Forces*, U.S. Army Foreign Military Studies Office, 2016, 218–220, and Charlie Gau, “Meet Russia’s BMP-3M Infantry Fighting Vehicle,” *The National Interest*, 9 March 2019.
- ⁷ See Phillip A. Petersen et al., *Baltic Security Net Assessment* (Tartu, Estonia: The Potomac Foundation, 2018), 165; Charles Dick, “Russian Ground Forces Posture Towards the West,” *Chatham House: The Royal Institute of International Affairs*, April 2019, 8–9.
- ⁸ Howitzer battalions are typically equipped with 18 2S3 152mm systems, with a range of 18.5 km. The Multiple Rocket Launcher battalions in maneuver regiments and brigades are usually equipped with the BM-21, but approximately 100 280mm BM-30 Smerch systems are currently fielded with a range of 90 km. See Radin et al., *The Future of the Russian Military*, 91–100.
- ⁹ The Orlan-10 is a catapult-launched reconnaissance unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) with a range of 140 km and an endurance of 16 hours. With a top speed of 150 km/h and a maximum altitude of 16,404 feet, it can carry a 6 kg payload, typically a gyro-stabilized day TV camera and/or an infrared (IR) sensor. The Forpost has a maximum range of 250 km from the ground control station, with a maximum endurance of 16 hours. Its top speed is 204 km/h, with a maximum altitude of 20,669 feet. It can carry a 100 kg payload, which can include day TV camera, IR imager and laser rangefinder. In July 2014, a single fire mission by Russian artillery aided by tactical UAVs destroyed two Ukrainian mechanized battalions in a few minutes in what became known as the Battle of Zelenopillya; Sydney J. Freedberg, “Russian Drone Threat: Army Seeks Ukraine Lessons,” *Breaking Defense*, 14 October 2015.
- ¹⁰ About 800 2S3 systems are currently fielded in the active force, with about 450 2S19s. See Radin et al., *The Future of the Russian Military*, 96.
- ¹¹ Charles Bartles, “Russian Force Structure for the Conduct of Large-Scale Operations,” 59.
- ¹² “Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations,” *Defense Intelligence Agency*, 2017, 59.
- ¹³ Grau and Bartles, *The Russian Way of War*, 386.

- ¹⁴ See Andrew H. Boyd, *Satellite and Ground Communication Systems: Space and Electronic Warfare Threats to the United States Army*, Land Warfare Paper No. 115, Association of the United States Army, November 2017.
- ¹⁵ Bryan Clark, Whitney M. McNamara and Timothy A. Walton, “Winning the Invisible War: Gaining an Enduring U.S. Advantage in the Electromagnetic Spectrum,” *Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments*, 20 November 2019.
- ¹⁶ Russian electronic warfare brigades are equipped with the Leer-3 and Murmansk-BN systems, which can jam C3 emissions throughout the entire theater of operations. Maneuver brigade EW companies field the Borisoglebsk-2 and Rtut-BM systems for tactical jamming at shorter ranges. See Radin et al., *The Future of the Russian Military*, 193.
- ¹⁷ Missile Defense Project, “Russian Air and Missile Defense,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 14 June 2018; Grau and Bartles, *The Russian Way of War*, 255–271.
- ¹⁸ The Russian order of battle described here is taken from “Military Posture: Ground Forces Order of Battle,” *Georgetown University Institute for the Study of War*, March 2018, and from Igor Sutyagin and Justin Bronk, “Russia’s New Ground Forces,” *Routledge Whitehall Papers*, August 2017.



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