



# Soviet operative art and its teachings in contemporary operations

Earth Thought Notebooks

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**Soviet operative art is a current of thought, developed in the 1930s in the Soviet Union, which defines itself as a discipline of war art that aims to inscribe tactical actions in a strategic purpose and give them meaning. Relatively unknown, this thinking on the art of operative art nevertheless constituted a significant doctrinal change and revealed its effectiveness during the Second World War. This article presents the various current applications of operative art and shows the extent to which the Soviet approach remains relevant in the conduct of operations despite the evolution of the frameworks of action.**

The success and celebrity of Operation Overlord still helps to overshadow Operation Bagration, even though it surpasses it in its proportions and results. From 23 June to 10 July 1944, while the Allied troops were continuing the landing in Normandy, the Red Army destroyed the Wehrmacht's Central Army Group in Belarus, allowing the crossing of the Vistula at Sandomir and finally access to Berlin. Twenty-eight of the best German divisions destroyed - five times more than in the Battle of Normandy! - Six hundred thousand soldiers killed or taken prisoner, an advance of the front of six hundred kilometres: Bagration is truly an operative masterpiece. Yet this military success remains largely unknown, and thus highlights a tendency to neglect the Soviet experience. In the field of doctrine as well, it is particularly relevant to draw all the lessons from Russian military thought, and more particularly from the concept of operative art, of which Bagration is an example of application.

Operative art was theorized in the 1930s in the Soviet Union based on the lessons of both the First World War and the Russian Civil War. It is defined as a discipline in the art of warfare that aims to translate strategy into operations, which are broken down into tactical actions. This doctrinal reflection effectively enabled the Soviets to overcome the blockage of tactical manoeuvre observed during the First World War. Now, as Western nations struggle to transform their tactical successes into strategic victories, would not its re-reading remain virtuous for contemporary operations?

The Soviets have developed a relevant and innovative doctrinal thinking in the field of

operations, some of whose timeless and pragmatic lessons can usefully be applied or adapted to contemporary operations.

In order to present the extent to which operative art remains relevant, we must first define the key notions of this Soviet doctrine, then show its various contemporary applications, before understanding its richness and development axes.

## **The heart of operative art**

The operative art is the fruit of an intellectual ferment within the Red Army from 1926 to 1936 around numerous officers, at the forefront of which are Svietchine, Triandafilov, Isserson or Toukhatchevski. It is presented as a new warrior discipline whose fundamental notions are the creation of an operative shock, the need to think of the enemy as a system and the conduct of sequential and in-depth operations.

The search for the operative shock must take precedence over the search for the decisive battle; this idea is both primordial and innovative in the art of operative warfare. Hoping for a strategic victory in a single tactical action has become a mistake. Indeed, the power of the material made possible by the industrial revolution, the volume of the conscript armies and the immensity of the fronts on which they are deployed no longer allow the classic sequence of the tryptic breakthrough, encirclement and destruction that was still foreseen in the Schlieffen plan for German breakthrough in 1914. However, in the absence of a single battle of annihilation that had become impossible to achieve, the focus on destruction, which was often considered to be the only way of achieving the goal, was no longer feasible. often wrongly considered as a finality, leads to frozen confrontations whose decision - when it can still be made - is the result only of reciprocal attrition. Fustiating this sterile primacy of tactical destruction, the Soviets insist on the need to aim at the disorganization of the enemy and its complete disarticulation; this is the meaning of *udar*, or operative shock.

Bringing an operative shock to the enemy requires thinking of it as a system. A key contribution of the operative art, the notion of system describes all the constituent elements of the enemy that interact with each other in a complex way in order to achieve the same goal. These elements cannot be counted and are extremely varied: the different combat units, the levels of command, the logistical and industrial capacities, the political power, the layout of the terrain, etc. Neutralising tactical units alone is not relevant because they can be regenerated fairly easily. To stun the enemy, the operative shock must on the contrary undermine the very coherence of the enemy system and aim to paralyse it by dissociating and neutralising its various elements. The system then loses all synergy and collapses. To do this, the cutting of the enemy system must be done both in a horizontal dimension - physically separating the units from each other - and in a vertical dimension - destroying the link between the front and the rear.

To succeed in this operational shock despite both the complexity of the enemy systems and the depth of the battlefield, a natural geographical concern for the Soviets, sequential and in-depth operations are required. Varfolomeev described in 1936 with great clarity the principle of sequence: "Victory is achieved by a whole series of operations chained together, developing consecutively the one after the other, logically linked to each other,

united by a common final goal, each reaching limited, intermediate goals". The depth of each of these operations is necessary to allow the operational sequence to first pierce the enemy's device, then to exploit it as far as possible despite the immensity of the theatres of confrontation.

Historically, the art of operation thus differs singularly from the exclusive search for destruction - inherited in part from a misunderstanding of Clausewitzian thought - and introduces the notion of a shock on the opposing system. Today, however, operative art is the subject of varied interpretations or applications in Western thought, which it is important to present.

### **Difficult Western transpositions**

Western thinkers have not abandoned the study of operative art, even if this craze is finally very recent. The limited access to original Soviet sources has long biased the understanding of Russian operative concepts. Consequently, their transposition in Europe has consequently emptied them of their essence. It has turned them either into a level of joint cooperation, a reserved domain of the political military leader, or a revolutionary discipline capable of resolving modern strategic difficulties. These three approaches are at best simplistic, at least misleading.

The first approach to the art of operative art consists in considering it only as a mode of implementation of large joint units. This approach intends to retranscribe the model of the Soviet front, historically constituted from 1941 onwards. These fronts, equipped with land and air units, conduct combined operations on the scale of their theatre of operations in application of the Russian operational conceptions of the Second World War. By a reductive amalgam between the idea and its modality of application, Western military theorists have made operative art a simple concept of joint cooperation. This conception completely forgets the finality of operative art - the dismantling of the enemy system - and focuses only on the replication of a possible means of its implementation. It freezes the expression of operative art by reserving this expression to a single military level: operative art equals joint staff. For all that, it in no way guarantees the production of operative effects on the enemy system; joint cooperation can only produce effects of destruction, therefore merely tactical effects, which distorts the constituted operative tool. The mere identification of the operative art at a level of joint coordination therefore fails to transcribe the effect of dismantling that the operative art intends to achieve.

The second approach to operational art, the most commonly described in organizations, is that of a level of responsibility independent of the tactical - subordinate - and strategic - superior levels. This pyramid of responsibilities responds to a natural tendency in organizations. It sanctifies the operative art into the level of exercising a so-called military "core business", in which the political level is not legitimate to interfere. This vision is a form of response to the trend towards the political invasion of the sphere of operations. However, it in itself carries with it a second distortion of the principles of operatika, that of a continuum of effects, from their political expression to their military declination. By dividing the art of warfare into hierarchical strata (strategic, operative, tactical), the operative level artificially breaks the logic of continuous translation of strategic objectives into sequences of tactical operations. It is ultimately reduced to a level of geographical and joint implementation of military actions alone and not to the framework of exercising

a discipline. This operational level, although it can meet the needs of military organisation, does not therefore transcribe the principles of Russian operational art, or even constitutes an antinomy of it.

These two approaches, which led to the NATO formalisation of the operative level, are often retained today as a sign of a lack of understanding of *operatika*. This vision irrigates the thinking of several authors, nourished by the abundance of documents from the Soviet military archives, who see in the correct implementation of the operative art the unique key to the victories and superiority of the Red Army from 1943 onwards. The temptation is therefore great to establish operative art as a panacea for strategic victory that Western forces seem unable to achieve despite the overwhelming tactical superiority at their disposal. One should beware of any elaboration of doctrinaire "magical thinking" and read past successes as the result of operative art alone. While operative art can be conceived as a discipline on an equal footing with tactics and strategy, it cannot operate without either, nor can it exist as an independent discipline transcending modern military constraints. Indeed, it can only be deployed within the framework of a clearly defined, realistic and achievable strategy. The ability to generate such a strategic framework remains a weakness of Western nations. Russia, on the other hand, has maintained a real constancy in its strategic ambitions and consistency in achieving them, as demonstrated by its commitment in Syria. The primacy accorded to domestic policy deadlines, the omnipresence and fleeting nature of the information reported in the media tend to lead to military commitments decided according to emotional, short-term and versatile logics, not underpinned by assumed and lasting strategic stakes. If this shortcoming is not corrected, the scope of operative art will remain limited.

To limit oneself to the sole definition of a joint organisational level to transcribe the contributions of Russian operative art or to await a new military revolution from it is therefore a distortion of the aims pursued by Russian theorists. It is necessary, following their example, to reflect on the application of operative principles in the modern strategic context in order to give back to the operative art its full interest.

### **The need to rethink the contribution of operative art to modern operations**

Indeed, the principles of operative shock, systemic analysis of the enemy and sequenced operations, which are the basis of a whole area of Russian operative art, remain useful for thinking about modern confrontations, provided that the current blockages are overcome. Indeed, the concepts of in-depth operations have been developed to the point of obsolescence, and effects-based operations have not made it possible to overcome the blockages that have been observed. It is now necessary to rethink the operating principles for modern operations.

Western military thinking has so far focused almost entirely on the development of operations in depth during interstate industrial conflict. It has focused on the use of high technology to identify, understand and strike in the depths of the enemy's defence system. This led, via Warden circle theory, to the Airlandbattle doctrine. The American army then integrates for the first time the art of operations in its doctrine: Replacing the concept of active defense, which thought to destroy Soviet forces in a single decisive battle in Central Europe, the concept provides for the combination of defensive ground actions and strikes in the depth of the battlefield prior to conducting a series of

coordinated offensives. The principles of sequences of operations and deep strikes aimed at destroying the coherence of the enemy's system of organisation are thus found in the concept. If this doctrine appears to be an attractive and relevant translation of the operational principles, its application reaches its peak and its point of decline during Operation Desert Storm. It has been outdated since the operations in the Balkans and in more recent operations, as it was confronted with two pitfalls: the disappearance of the state framework of conflict, disrupting the identification of the enemy's organisational system, and the primacy of destruction chosen by American forces in their effects-based approach. The sequence of operations in depth thus becomes a sum of destruction where volume takes precedence over efficiency, and which struggles to identify the key targets of the enemy system and neutralise them.

Pursuing this logic of disruption of the enemy system, the effects-based approach, or EBO, was developed to paralyse the enemy forces at all levels of the conflict through the synergistic use of available means. OBA focuses on the production of effects that contribute to the achievement of the desired end effect defined at the strategic level, using the minimum force necessary and taking advantage of technological advances, particularly in the field of precision weapons and means of communication. The effects approach requires thinking in "systems" terms in order to be able to relate the effects at a given level to the achievement of higher-level objectives. Despite interesting conceptual underpinnings, its application has not restored the effectiveness of Western forces, nor has it increased their ability to win strategically. The growing importance of targeting and target-setting in the effects approach tends to reduce the concept to a mere "extension of the field of destruction", which reduces its operative scope to a mere "grand tactic", unable to achieve the political objectives defined by the strategic level: this fact, like the failure of the concept of operations in depth, thus consecrates a failure of the operative art as currently conceived.

Renewing the operative art requires a new application of the original principles in the light of the current strategic context: the fight against an asymmetrical enemy diluted in the depth of the areas of operations and over long periods of time. It is then important to rethink the operative shock: unlike at the beginning of the 20th century, the modern problem is no longer to break through a consistent and continuous enemy device, but to create the operative shock in the face of a void, on an enemy fleeing and diluted in the middle. It is no longer a question of breaking through, but of forcing the enemy's concentration on a point on which to recreate the operative shock. In this framework, disappointment no longer aims at generating a weakness to be exploited, but at generating in the enemy the illusion of strength to commit him to gather and concentrate his means within reach of our forces.

We must then rethink the approach to depth: the geographical depth of an asset in a symmetrical framework becomes a constraint. The vastness of the zones of action, combined with the small numbers of troops that can be committed by European nations, only works in favour of the adversary. Since the application of the concept of fulgurating is unsuitable for mitigating the effects of this constraint, it may be useful to reflect on the recreation of depth through the temporal dimension. By durably occupying its obligatory crossing points, its parking areas, one creates potentialities allowing the cutting up and the deconstructing of the enemy system.

Finally, we must rethink the action on the enemy system: while the irregular enemy is increasingly breaking down the barriers between military, political and civil structures,



closely associating economic, military and social activities within the structures of a proto-EState, the construction of a continuous sequence of coherent operations aimed at destructuring and cutting up its system comes up against an organ-pipe approach rigorously separating civil and military responsibilities. A return to a single civil-military command at theatre level, entrusted to a form of "general resident", would allow the recreation of a coherent and comprehensive continuum of operations.

In conclusion, the diversity of thinking on the art of operations and its evolution, from its original thinkers to its current applications or criticisms, is significant. It is also natural insofar as operative art is not the work of a single person, but a current of thought spread over time.

Beyond this diversity, discovering or rereading Soviet operative art remains in the end undeniably enriching. Not only do certain elements of Russian thought retain all their relevance in the face of contemporary strategic challenges, but the thinking as a whole - even the most dated ideas - also feeds operational thinking and contributes indirectly to the effectiveness of our weapons.

The exhortation to free and original thinking is, in fact, the main legacy to be preserved from this current of Soviet officers: confronting doctrine with one's own experience, encouraging reasoned debate (and it has been lively in the Soviet Union!) in order to criticise and enrich this doctrine, this is an absolute necessity for those who wish to take on responsibilities in the conduct of operations.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Richard W. Harrison, in "The Russian Way of War, Operational Art, 1904 - 1940", University Press of Kansas, 2001, p 157.

<sup>2</sup> In seminar "Operative Art", EMIA-FE, Paris, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> To give a trivial example, it is confusing the car with the idea of travel.

<sup>4</sup> Operative art.

<sup>5</sup> One thinks in particular of the study of the giant operations of the Red Army: Uranus, Mars, Jupiter, Bagration, or Kovel-Lublin.

<sup>6</sup> The 1986 edition of the FM100-5 manual defines the operational art as follows: "The use of military forces to achieve strategic objectives in a theatre or theatres of operations, through the design, organization and conduct of campaigns and major operations".

<sup>7</sup> It is these principles that underpinned the design principles of Operation Desert Storm .

<sup>8</sup> On this subject, see Joseph Henrotin, "Latechnologie militaire en question, le cas américain", Paris, Économica 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Effect based operations, effects based operations.

<sup>10</sup> During the air campaign of Operation Desert Storm, the focus of the attack on the anti-aircraft defences was not on the defence batteries, but on the command CPs in order to disorganise and paralyse the opposing defence system.

<sup>11</sup> The Soviet school of thought attaches great importance to the maskirovka, which it elevates to the rank of the principle of war as Foch could do with surprise. The maskirovka combines diversions, deception operations and intoxication of enemy sensors , and is employed at all levels of operations. See V.N. Lobov, "The ruse of war", 1992.

<sup>12]</sup> Barkhane is deployed over an area as vast as Western Europe.

<sup>13]</sup> In the image of Generals Lyautey and Pennequin, commanding in a theatre of civil and military action.

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A graduate of the 180th course of the Military Academy of Modena, Commander CONTE is a senior officer of the Italian Army. He spent the first part of his career in the Electronic Warfare Regiment as a section leader, unit commander and head of the logistics office. After the staff course, he served at the military academy as company commander of officer cadets. Currently assigned to the Defence Staff in Rome, he is, since 7 March 2016, a trainee at the CSIA. He has participated in five operations abroad, in Iraq, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Lebanon and Western Sahara.

Saint-cyrien of the promotion "General de Galbert", Battalion Commander WATRIN carried out his first part of his career in the 1st Rifle Regiment as section chief, deputy officer then unit commander, during which he was projected four times. Assigned to LMIS from 2013 to 2015, he serves as PEGP Officer. He is, since September 1, 2015, a trainee at CSIA.

Saint-cyrien of the "General Béthouart" promotion, the THOMAS Battalion Chief of Staff has spent the first part of his career in the 2nd foreign parachute regiment. After a period as a unit commander in Saint-Cyr, he served as an officer dealing with the staff of the special operations command. He has been a trainee at the Joint Superior Course since the summer of 2015.

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