

Russian Tactics by John D Salt (c 2009)

John Curry makes some thought-provoking points in his article "Why Russian Tactics Work on the Table-Top". Among the elements he identifies as distinctively Russian are simple plans, concentration of force, application of massive artillery fires, rapid advance to close quarters, bypassing isolated resistance to thrust into the enemy depth, and switching the main effort to reinforce success. This seems to me to be a fairly good sketch of the Russian way of war, and to embody principles that should hold up well both in real life and on the wargames table.

It seems to me that there are also aspects of the Russian approach to tactics that do not show up so well on the table-top, and perhaps some places where they do better than they should. Is John's table-top success because the Russian approach is best, or because it is artificially favoured by biases in conventional wargaming rules?

Concentration of force is a generally accepted principle. Its value is commonly supposed to be demonstrated mathematically by Lanchester's square law - Russophiles might point out that Osipov published the same result independently at about the same time as Lanchester. Yet historical analysis almost invariably fails to get a good fit between real loss-exchange rates and the Lanchester-Osipov square law. Concentration of force also usually implies concentration of targets, and against modern weapons that is a bad thing. The crude "line up and charge" tactics that produce success on the tabletop seem less likely to work in real life. I think there are three reasons for this: wargames rules habitually underestimate the extreme difficulty of visually acquiring a defender who is trying to stay concealed, do not sufficiently reward shooters for engaging targets clumped together, and tend to make fire on the move or from the short halt (as Russian armoured tactics favour) unduly effective. I always used to enjoy, in SPI's "Firefight", attacking with a full armoured battalion of 31 T-62s, which was easily capable of grinding down a US defence of a dozen TOW vehicles or a complete company of M60s. Very Lanchesterian (or Osipovian), but hardly likely to happen in real life. The distortions in "Firefight" were easy to see. Fire from the short halt was over half as effective as fire from the full halt, and you got to move two-thirds of your normal movement allowance, making it clearly preferable in game terms to proper fire and movement. Target acquisition was automatic when an enemy moved or fired in line-of-sight, which I think rather underestimates the difficulty of spotting a tank jockeying on a crest-line a mile away while you are driving cross-country and the scenery is lurching up and down in your vision devices. Finally, in "Firefight" - designed at the behest of the US Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) - a lot of the minor terrain that should have obstructed line-of-sight was removed, so that Jim Dunnigan once proposed an updated edition with maps including "all the terrain the Army says isn't there". This was doubtless supposed to show the US Army's long-range weapons to best advantage, but opening out the lines of sight in this way means that any defender who fires will, against a sufficiently numerous attacker, immediately be subject to crushing return fire. Ironically, a game intended to train US soldiers in their new (in 1976) "overwatch" tactics tended to show rather that the Russian approach was superior.

Of course, in a game from the 1970s, the Russians were always attacking, and a principle of combat modelling enunciated by my old friend Paul Syms is that simplifications in combat models tend to favour the attacker. One might think that any given simplification is likely to

benefit attacker or defender with equal probability, but it turns out that this is not so. Complexity generally makes it hard to do things; the simplifications present in wargames mean that things are easier to do than they should really be. It is typically the attacker's job to change the present situation, and the defender's to keep it the same. Changing the present situation necessitates "doing things", and if it were so difficult to do anything that the situation never changed, the defender would happily sit doing nothing and claim victory by default. Therefore, simplifications tend to work against the defender and in favour of the attacker.

There are also factors disregarded in most wargames that are a crucial part of the Russian approach to tactics. The Russians have been masters of deception ever since Prince Potyomkin constructed fake villages for Catherine the Great, a fact acknowledged by the frequent use of the Russian term "maskirovka" (???????????) by Western military commentators. It is very hard to deceive anyone on the wargames table when all the toys are visible. Likewise, there tends to be little representation of another area of Russian mastery, reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance. Among my old wargaming circle of friends from school days, a traditional British Army adage has been amended to "Time spent in reconnaissance is always wasted", because on the wargames table it almost always is. John Curry's own frisbee-flinging lawn game on the subject provides a magnificent exception, and had Russians in it, too. Ian Drury seemed to be trying to give recce its proper weight in "The Defence of the Knuston Box", but admits that he eventually "gave up and put the toys on the table".

The Russian emphasis on march security and counter-recce in fact militates against concentration. Look at the order of march of a combined-arms rifle battalion, ostensibly marching in "road column", and you will see that about a third of its strength is devoted to advance, flank and rear guards. The Russians learnt the need for this in a hard school, having suffered heavy losses to the Wehrmacht in early mobile actions because of poor march security. Putting all your forces into one hulking great column may seem an attractive way to move a high concentration of force fast, but it is also a good way to lose it all in short order if you drive into an enemy killing zone. Few wargames show the full magnitude of this effect, players being given not only a miraculous ability to locate the enemy, but also instantaneous communications to get troops to react suitably to unexpected changes of circumstances.

Another Russian obsession is the maintenance of a reserve. Keeping part of your strength out of battle is another thing that acts against concentration of force, but it is a necessary safeguard against the surprises the future might hold, few of which are reflected in the closed world of the tabletop battle. A reserve gives a commander flexibility. This is not flexibility in the NATO/Auftragstaktik sense of delegated responsibility entitling junior commanders to go about satisfying their commander's intent in original ways. It is flexibility for the big boss, not his underlings, that gives him the options he needs to deal with the unexpected, whether in the form of unexpected threat or unexpected success. John mentions committing his reserve to a successful axis of advance, rather than reinforcing failure. One of the distinctive features of the Russian approach in WW2 - commented on by British observers at the time - was their ability, at the operational level, to make rapid switches of the main effort that were hard to follow. This contrasts with the Germanic approach of choosing a Schwerpunkt and ensuring that the breakthrough happens there; the Russians were happy to accept a breakthrough wherever it came, and exploit it accordingly. Another reason for making frequent switches of main effort

was that the transport infrastructure of Eastern Europe would not support the logistical effort required to maintain a single point of main effort for a long time. And, of course, such rapid switches can be used to deceive the enemy.

In order to support potential switches of main effort, and in order to provide the senior commander with flexibility while retaining central control, the Russians made great use of decision-point planning. Rather than make a plan that projects a single sequence if events into the future, planners would allow for multiple branches into different possible futures. British Army planning is supposedly done in this style now, but it is worth remembering that at the start of WW2 it was a principle of planning in the British Army that no alternate courses of action were to be permitted - according to Tom Wintringham, who thought it silly, it was believed that doing so would confuse the soldiers. The need to allow for a multitude of possibilites means that Russian planning is, contrary to John Curry's wargaming practice, very slow, because it must be very thorough. The long time needed for preparation means there is a long time for secrets to leak, so during WW2 - I do not know about current practice - the Russians kept one master set of orders, with no copies, which was passed around for different staff cells to work on. This evidently made things take even longer, as many jobs had to be done in series rather than in parallel. There is supposedly a Russian proverb that says "It takes us a long time to get saddled up, but once we are up, we go like stink". That is the point here, that once the lengthy period of planning is over, the execution will be so swift as to leave the enemy incapable of effective reply. Richard Simpkin (either in "Deep Battle" or "Race to the Swift", perhaps in both) said that the desired effect of lightning-fast execution is referred to as "physical surprise" - that is, once the operation starts, the enemy may know what is going on, but the disposition of his forces and the tyranny of time and distance mean that it is too late for him to do anything about it. Notice the contrast in attitude between this devotion to lengthy preparation and Patton's "A good plan violently executed now is better than a perfect plan executed next week", and the Israeli habit of refusing to plan in detail because they expect commanders to make things up as they go along. At some risk of racial sterotyping, one might contrast the Western demand for instant military gratification ("Do it now!") with the more patient Eastern approach, as exemplified by the Viet Cong planning principle of "one slow and four quick" (slow planning, followed by rapid approach, attack, mop-up and withdrawal). It would be good to see these contrasting styles of command - both of which can work in the right circumstances - pitted against each other on the wargames table. To do this would require more emphasis on planning and command control than most rules bother with; it would also, I think, need a different set of rules for each side.

Another distinctively Russian strength is the ability to make very rapid obstacle crossings, both by improvised means and, certainly in Cold War times, with their magnificent engineer bridging equipment, some of which was so good it was copied directly by the Americans. Of course, fewer rivers are obstacles if your main battle tanks are Military Load Class 40 instead of 60, something which may explain the recent fad for "deployable medium-weight capability", and the Russians have always emphasised river-amphibious capability for as many of their armoured vehicles as possible, whereas the British Army has blown hot and cold about it over the years, and currently can't be bothered. Jokes about the Arab failure to mimic Soviet success aside, this is one area where the Egyptian Army at least seem to have been apt pupils; they surprised the world in 1973 with their crossing of the Suez Canal, a pretty impressive obstacle from the field engineering point of view, even if the Bar-Lev line was held in negligible strength. Again, it

would be nice to see more of this sort of thing on the wargames table, but since SPI's "Siege Quad" I think wargamers have paid relatively little attention to the problems of breaching and crossing obstacles, preferring the free-wheeling mobile fights in open country that are, in reality, quite a small part of military operations.

So, staggering to some sort of conclusion to these ramblings, it seems to me that much that is distinctive about Russian tactics cannot be shown in the typical tabletop battle, as the players are typically too well-informed, too easily able to make up a plan as they go along, and too little embangled by obstacles of all sorts. The massed charge into a killing zone, while it might be thought of as "Russian" tactics (and probably was, in 1941), is rewarded when it shouldn't be, as attacking toy soldiers are not sufficiently penalised for being unable to see or shoot the defenders, nor for presenting a massed target. Then again, while an enterprising wargamer might be happy to try to defend against attackers who outnumber him three or four to one, dealing with the sorts of force ratios demanded by Soviet norms in a breakthrough sector - ten to one or more - would fall into the "theatre of cruelty" category of wargame, and probably involve too much suffering even for Rob Doel's taste.

The things I have discussed about different national ways of command are really more applicable at the operational or grand-tactical than the minor tactical level which is usually represented in tabletop wargames. Russian military art is I think shown to much better advantage at the operational rather than the tactical level - after all, it was the Russians (specifically, Triandafillov) who practically invented the operational level of war. To some extent, too, Western tactics these days have become a lot more like the Russian, with plans using multiple decision points, aggressive reconnaissance, and, in theory if not in fact, an emphasis on high tempo. One can date this to the days of Desert Saber/Operation Granby, when the US and British Armies, having trained for decades for a defensive mission to stop Red tanks rolling over West Germany, suddenly found themselves in need of an offensive doctrine - and so used the one they were most familiar with, as they had trained against it for years. So, having spent decades trying to emulate the tactics the Germans used to lose WW2, we switched to copying the Russians almost as soon as they lost the Cold War. Fortunately, it worked, and not just on the table-top.