

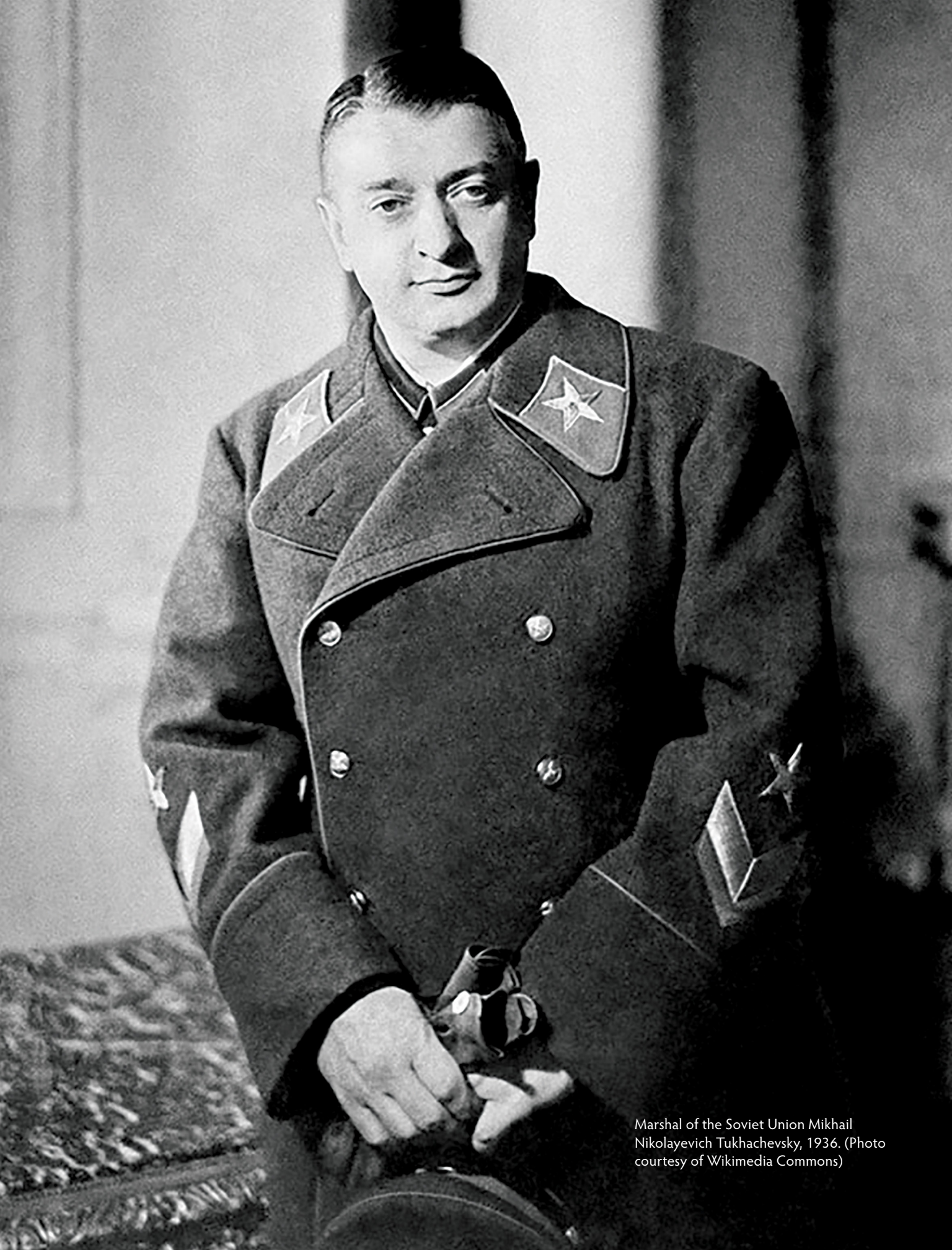
The Battle of Königgrätz on the morning of 3 July 1866. (Graphic courtesy of www.battlefieldanomalies.com)

A History of Operational Art

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Operational art is among the most noteworthy and controversial concepts in modern military thought. Operational art emerged out of the Soviet Union during the interwar era, and by the end of the twentieth century was an integral component of the doctrine of the major military powers. The theoretical construct of operational art combines characteristics of the tactical and strategic levels of war while providing

a linkage to make tactical actions serve strategic ends. Operational art ensures this harmony of effort by translating abstract strategic goals into mechanical terms that commanders can then accomplish. In this way, operational art serves as the “mediating, integrative synthesis standing between modern strategy and tactics” and “ensures that the arrangement of tactical actions is not random, but more importantly, that the device that



Marshal of the Soviet Union Mikhail Nikolayevich Tukhachevsky, 1936. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

always and everywhere unites the arrangement of tactical actions is the pursuit of the strategic objective, not some other factor.”¹ This article discusses the development of the concept of operational art in the Soviet Union, its eventual adoption by the U.S. Army, and contemporary debates about the utility of operational art.²

The Effect of a More Lethal, Longer-Range Battlefield

The massive growth in the size of armies that began with the French Revolution coupled with changes in the means of war—advances in transportation and in weaponry—led to changes in how armies fought. As the range of weaponry increased to the point that the enemy could be engaged as soon as his forces became visible, a critical change in the pace of battle emerged. Commanders saw the disappearance of the pause between the approach march and the battle. The two were now merged. An example of this can be seen in the Prussian defeat of the Austrians at Königgrätz in 1866. There was no interval between the Prussian approach march and their attack on the Austrians. The battle and the march were parts of an organic whole, with the needs of the battle dictating the organization and conduct of the march.³

These developments also meant that combat was no longer focused on a single point, as in Napoleon’s era; rather, armies deployed into lines of ever increasing length. These lateral dispositions resulted in the dispersal of effort as combat was distributed spatially along the increasingly broad line of contact between the armies. These developments ushered in “a new era in the evolution of military art—the epoch of linear strategy.”⁴ Despite the growth in the size of armies and the changes in the means for war, the fronts of the second half of the nineteenth century were not continuous. Instead, these fronts were broken and consisted of distinct points of contact between the two forces.⁵

The Wars of German Unification highlighted to military theorists the need for stronger linkage between strategy and tactics. In the wake of the Wars of German Unification, armies continued to expand because of their desire to reach a decisive outcome on the enemy’s flank. This lateral extension of the front was accompanied by an increase in its depth. This change in depth transformed how time was a factor in war because the greater the depth of a front, the longer it took the attacking force to fight its way through the defense and achieve its objectives.⁶

From at least Prussian Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke onward, commanders were tasked with not only directing but also linking distinct tactical actions to achieve their objectives. These actions were geographically, and increasingly temporally, separated from one another. This meant that “the planning and conduct of campaigns began to be based upon ‘chunks,’ or portions of the whole campaign. These portions came to be known as *operations* and eventually gave rise to *operational art*.”⁷ The ability to conduct a successful offensive against fronts of an operational scale was key to obtaining strategic objectives.⁸

The armies of the Great War were largely unable to achieve decisive offensive results on an operational scale. Tactical considerations were often allowed to dictate the terms of the operation. This meant that the main offensive thrust was often aimed at a point in the enemy’s line that could be easily pierced tactically, not “along an axis that promised operational results.”⁹ Further complicating the task of the attacker was that armies had become more resilient since the Wars of German Unification. The lethality of weaponry continued to increase, which resulted in a greater use of entrenchments and dispersion by armies in the field, giving an advantage for the defender. Additionally, means of transportation and supply continued to improve, which facilitated the ability of armies to continuously stay in the field.¹⁰

There was another factor that made it increasingly difficult for armies to achieve operational success. Armies continued to grow in size as they sought a decision on the enemy’s flank. However, by World War I, the lateral extension of armies had reached such extremes that it confronted strategy with the problem of a continuous front. The attacking army now had to pierce the enemy’s defensive front to achieve a breakthrough. Otherwise, the defenders could simply withdraw and regroup to either reestablish their defense or to counterattack.¹¹

Soviet Development of Operational Art

Whether operational art was first demonstrated by Napoleon as Robert M. Epstein maintains, or in the U.S. Civil War as James Schneider argues, is open for debate.¹² However, it is widely acknowledged that it was interwar Soviet military theorists who developed the theory of operational art. They were inspired by the Russian Revolution and guided by their experiences in the attritional struggles of the Great War, along with the

more maneuver-centric campaigns of the Russian Civil War (1917–1922) and Polish-Soviet War (1919–1921) to question military orthodoxy.¹³

An additional catalyst to this bold examination of the character of warfare was the recurring belief among the interwar Soviet leadership that the Soviet Union was under threat of attack from the encircling capitalist powers. By studying recent campaigns, trends in weapons development, and force structure requirements, these Soviet theorists sought to break the stalemate of positional warfare and restore mobility and maneuver to the battlefield. Soviet theorists, led by future Marshal of the Soviet Union Mikhail Tukhachevsky, rejected the emphasis placed on obtaining victory through a single decisive battle of annihilation. Their work led to a new conception of warfare that recognized that the accomplishment of strategic objectives could only be obtained through the cumulative operational success of successive operations. This focused the Soviet theorists on the intersection of strategy and tactics and led to the creation of a new area of military science *operativnoe iskusstvo*, or operational art.¹⁴

Following the Russian Civil War, the Soviets initially continued to view warfare largely through the traditionally accepted bifurcation of war into the realms of strategy and tactics. However, new, ill, or undefined terms such as “grand tactics” or “lower strategy” were also used

by some faculty of the Worker’s and Peasant’s Red Army (RKKA) Military Academy to describe the complexity of modern war. A. A. Svechin, in a series of lectures on strategy given at the academy in 1923 and 1924, proposed an intermediate category of war that he called operational art.¹⁵

Svechin defined operational art as the “totality of maneuvers and battles in a given part of a theater of military action directed toward the achievement

of the common goal, set as final in the given period of the campaign.”¹⁶ In this way strategy set the parameters for the conduct of operational art, which in turn served as the conceptual bridge between strategy and tactics. To put it another way, “battle is the means of the operation. Tactics are the material of operational art. The operation is the means of strategy, and operational art is the material of strategy.”¹⁷ Commanders were to use operational art to link together tactical successes into operational bounds designed to achieve a strategic goal.¹⁸

During the mid-1920s, N. E. Varfolomeev, the deputy head of the Department of Strategy, built upon Svechin’s work. Varfolomeev used strategy as the organizing framework for the war in its entirety and tactics as the employment of forces in the engagement, while operational art acted to integrate disparate tactical actions into a unified operation. Varfolomeev described the modern operation as “the totality of maneuvers and battles in a given sector of a [theater of military actions] which are directed toward the achievement of a common objective that has been set as final in a given period of the campaign. The conduct of an operation is not a matter of tactics. It has become the lot of operational art.”¹⁹ Working within this framework, Varfolomeev studied the employment of a deep pursuit to annihilate the enemy.²⁰

Varfolomeev theorized that it was not possible to achieve the annihilation of the enemy in the course of a single operation, and that it required the execution of successive operations into the enemy’s depth. Successful successive, deep operations necessitated “the zigzags of a whole series of operations successively developed one upon the other, logically connected and linked together by the common final objective.”²¹ This meant that the breakthrough must be integrated with the pursuit in depth along with the use of reserves to maintain the tempo of the offensive to prevent the enemy from reestablishing a coherent defense. Furthermore, Varfolomeev drew attention to the critical importance of logistics to operational art in combating operational exhaustion. Henceforth, Soviet theorists sought to better detail how to accomplish these operations in depth in order to formulate a practical theory of operational art.²²

Vladimir Triandafilov, chief of operations of the Red Army staff, was given the task of developing a useable theory of operational art. Triandafilov was the intellectual protégé of Mikhail Tukhachevsky. In

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1922, Tukhachevsky was appointed head of the RKKA Military Academy, where he lectured on operations during the recently concluded Russian Civil War. In February 1923, Tukhachevsky stated,

Since it is impossible, with the extended fronts of modern times, to destroy the enemy's army at a single blow, we are obliged to try to do this gradually by operations which will be more costly to the enemy than to ourselves. The more rapidly we pursue him, the less time we give him to organize his retreat after the battle, and the more we hasten the disintegration of his armed forces and make it impossible, or at all events difficult, for him to enter upon another general engagement. In short, a series of destructive operations conducted on logical principles and linked together by an uninterrupted pursuit may take the place of the decisive battle that was the form of engagement in the armies of the past, which fought on shorter fronts.²³

Under Tukhachevsky's tutelage, Triandafillov, in his 1929 book *The Nature of Operations of Modern Armies*, filled in the details to the theory of successive deep operations that had been outlined by Varfolomeev.²⁴ Successive operations were soon formally enshrined in Soviet operational art when Triandafillov and Tukhachevsky wrote the first official statement of Red Army doctrine—*Provisional Field Regulations 1929* (PU-29). These regulations guided how the Red Army would employ the future fruits of its embryonic mechanization program during the conduct of operations by waging a “deep battle” throughout the full depths of the enemy's defense.²⁵

After Triandafillov's 1931 death in an airplane crash, Tukhachevsky continued to expand upon the idea of deep battle in PU-33, *Temporary Instructions on the Organization of Deep Battle*. Tukhachevsky boldly sought to create one uninterrupted deep operation through the merger of several successive operations. The campaign and the operation would become a single entity through the linking of the initial and subsequent operations into a single unbroken operation that was extended both spatially and temporally so that it coincided with the campaign.²⁶

The integration of a series of operations into a single entity extended to campaign-like depths geared to serve a strategic end was a logical consequence of Soviet military thought and the opportunities afforded by the fielding of increasingly sophisticated military means—increasingly motorized and mechanized forces, improved tanks, and military avi-

ation. Tukhachevsky's “theory of deep operations represented a qualitative jump in the development of operational art, and it offered a total escape from the impasse of World War I positional warfare.”²⁷ The next edition of Red Army doctrine, PU-36, *Provisional Field Regulations for the Red Army* (1936) further developed the concept of deep operations and offered detailed instructions for its execution.²⁸

Georgii Isserson further advanced Soviet operational art with his *The Evolution of Operational Art*. Isserson was made an instructor at the Frunze Military Academy in 1929 and in his 1936 revision to his 1932 book “The golden age of military thinking in the 1920s and 1930s reached its full culmination.”²⁹ Isserson had also worked with Tukhachevsky on PU-36.



Gen. Alexander Andreyevich Svechin, Imperial Russian Army, 1923. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)



The single most coherent core of theoretical writings on operational art is still found among the Soviet writers.



Isserson maintained that “an operation is a weapon of strategy, while strategy is a weapon of politics.”³⁰ He argued that the major challenge to operational art was to link tactical actions so as to create “a highly efficient system coordinated purposefully and sequentially along the front and throughout the depths to bring about the enemy’s defeat.”³¹ Tactical actions were only a milestone en route to a larger objective and not the objective itself. He dismissed as a “useless fact” those tactical actions that did not lead to the obtainment of operational success.³²

In *The Evolution of Operational Art*, Isserson expanded upon Tukhachevsky’s theory of deep operations. According to Isserson, the problem confronting Soviet operational art was that the offensive had to defeat the enemy throughout the entirety of his defense, to operational depths. At the same time, this meant that the power of the offensive would dissipate as it advanced into the depths of the defense. Instead of advocating for a series of successive operations, he argued that a modern operation was a series of successive operations because the thickening of the defense meant that modern offensive efforts could not all occur at the same time or in the same place. He further extrapolated that a modern campaign consisted of a system of consecutive deep operations while “a system of consecutive deep campaigns—air, land and sea—integrated in space and time” were the component parts of modern war.³³

The lessons that the Soviets took from the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) called some to question the application of operational art through the Soviet theory of deep operations. But the lethal blow to Soviet theories of operational art came in 1937, the same year that the final edition of Triandafillov’s *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies* appeared. That was when Soviet leader Joseph Stalin began his purge of the officer corps of the Red Army during which “the cream of the crop of innovative military theorists, were purged and killed.”³⁴ Labeled a traitor and enemy of the people, Tukhachevsky was executed in 1937, followed by Svechin the next year. Varfolomeev died in prison. Comparatively, Isserson

was lucky; he was arrested in 1941 and spent the next fourteen years in a labor camp.³⁵

Not only were the theorists of operational art liquidated; their ideas were also now suspect on political-ideological grounds. Those officers who survived the purge were largely unable or unwilling to openly use the operational theories developed by Tukhachevsky and his confederates. The Red Army now possessed an operational theory and doctrine for its employment that was frozen by the Stalinization of military science, separated from its strategic context, and severed from its theoretical roots.³⁶

However, before these Soviet theorists were purged, they were able to enshrine their work into Soviet military theory and doctrine. While Red Army operations during the Second World War avoided references to the theory of deep operations, the work of these military thinkers clearly provided the theoretical template that undergirded Soviet operations. Early in the war, the lingering effects of the purges, Stalin’s poor strategic leadership, and changes in force structure handicapped the application of their ideas. Nevertheless, the Soviet 1941 winter counteroffensive in front of Moscow looked eerily similar to Triandafillov’s model of successive operations. As the war progressed, and Soviet commanders became more competent at handling large mechanized formations, Soviet operational art returned to the concept of deep operations that Tukhachevsky and Isserson outlined in PU-36. By the end of the war, Soviet operational art achieved the stunning successes that the prewar theorists had promised.³⁷

In the postwar era, Soviet military thought focused on the requirements of nuclear war. In the mid-1960s, following de-Stalinization, deep operations was resurrected and many of the theorists purged during the interwar era were rehabilitated. However, “Until *glasnost* and *perestroika*, an appreciation of the contributions of that period to military theory, as General-Colonel V. N. Lobov noted in 1989, were little known and poorly appreciated even within the Soviet Armed Forces.”³⁸ While these prophets may

not have been honored in their own land, their work found an appreciative audience in the U.S. Army. One professor at the U.S. Army's School of Advanced Military Studies wrote, "The single most coherent core of theoretical writings on operational art is still found among the Soviet writers."³⁹ The work of Tukhachevsky and his fellow travelers was fundamental to the doctrinal reform of the U.S. Army following the Vietnam War, which included the incorporation of operational art into U.S. Army doctrine and the acceptance of a doctrine—AirLand Battle—that bore an uncanny resemblance to deep operations.⁴⁰

The U.S. Army's Embrace of Operational Art

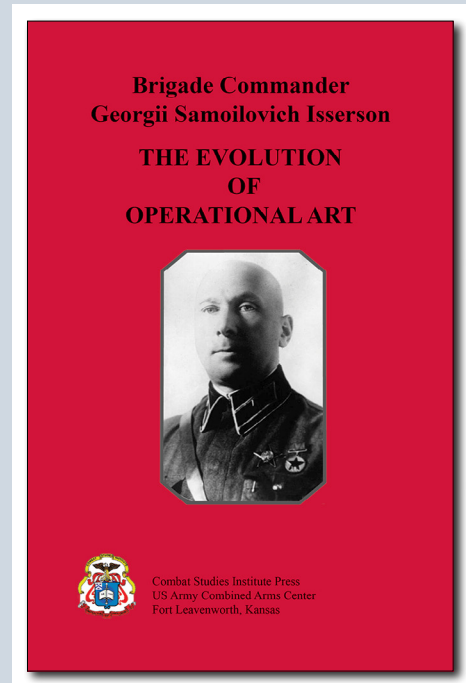
The U.S. Army was vaguely aware of advances made by the Soviets in military theory during the interwar era. However, the U.S. Army was contemptuous of them, particularly the concept of operational art. It was dismissed as a "mere pretension and an artificial creation imposed between tactics and strategy that had no content or merit"⁴¹ and was deemed to be "of limited utility. Its usefulness may have been high in a period of wars of the World War II type, but even then that is questionable."⁴² With the benefit of hindsight, these pronouncements seem ironic considering that, after looking to Tukhachevsky and his confederates for inspiration, the U.S. Army formally embraced operational art in 1980s.⁴³

In the wake of the Vietnam War, the U.S. Army refocused itself on its responsibility to defend NATO from the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact forces. This change in emphasis led to an attempt to formulate a doctrine suitable to the reemphasis on war in Europe. In 1976, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command published its first post-Vietnam vision of how to fight the Soviets in Europe in Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Active Defense*. This highly tactical doctrine sought to achieve victory through the amassing of uncoordinated tactical successes achieved through the attrition of the Soviet first echelon in force-on-force direct fire engagements while leaving Soviet follow-on echelons unscathed. Active Defense was an unsophisticated doctrine that was defensive and reactive in nature, and as such the Army rejected it. Just as importantly, Active Defense reinforced the tactical myopia of the U.S. Army and contributed to the growing disconnect between strategy and tactics.⁴⁴

In June 1979, U.S. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Edward C. "Shy" Meyer directed Gen. Donn Starry, commanding general of U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command to revise FM 100-5. The new chief of staff of

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Bruce Menning's translation of Georgii Samoilovich Isserson's 1936 treatise *The Evolution of Operational Art* is the best example available of the distillation of Soviet military thought before World War II. Isserson was one of the key Soviet military leaders able to envision the impact of new emerging technologies on the nature of modern war and incorporate such to change the way Soviet leadership thought about adapting the employment of forces in war to changed circumstances. His writings profoundly shaped the direction of U.S. doctrine development and remain salient today. The translation is available for download from the Army University Press at <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/combat-studies-institute/csi-books/OperationalArt.pdf>.



the Army wanted the focus of the doctrine to be at the brigade level while also addressing higher levels of command such as the corps and theater, unlike Active Defense, which focused almost exclusively on the company level. This order eventually led to the U.S. Army's acknowledgment of operational art. Meyer desired that the U.S. Army's operational concept possess a broader applicability than its current doctrine of Active Defense. He expressed this in a white paper issued in February 1980. In it, he laid out his belief that the Army must be able to meet threats that arose outside the NATO paradigm while not degrading the force's ability to accomplish its critical task of defending Europe.⁴⁵

Two midlevel officers, Lt. Col. Huba Wass de Czege and Lt. Col. L. Don Holder, played key roles in the writing of *AirLand Battle* and the acceptance of operational art by the U.S. Army. Holder was an armor officer who had previously taught history at the United States Military Academy. He commanded the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment during Desert Storm and rose to the rank of lieutenant general. Regarded as one

Soldiers of the 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, fix bayonets in a communication trench 1 July 1916 prior to the attack on Beaumont Hamel during the Battle of Albert in Somme, France. They are wearing "fighting order," with the haversack in place of the pack, and with the rolled groundsheet strapped to the belt below the mess-tin containing rations. The officer in the foreground (*right*) is wearing a lower-rank uniform to be less conspicuous. (Photo by Ernest Brooks, Imperial War Museums collection no. 1900-09; Q744)

of the best tacticians in the Army, Holder's realistic world view was a good counterweight to the romantic notions of Wass de Czege.

Huba Wass de Czege was born in Hungary to a prominent novelist. His father was forced to flee with his family to the United States in 1956. A Harvard educated infantry officer, Wass de Czege was highly critical of the Army's current doctrine and had begun to look outside the Army for fresh ideas, going so far as to invite retired Air Force Col. John Boyd to lecture at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. Wass de Czege became the leader of the Leavenworth writing team. These two officers overshadowed other

contributors to the doctrine's development and played a major role in both drafts of *AirLand Battle*.⁴⁶

The first step toward the formal acceptance of operational art by the U.S. Army was the inclusion of the operational level of war in Army doctrine. This was initially proposed by Edward Luttwak in an article published in *International Security* during the winter of 1980. The Army War College was another proponent of *AirLand Battle*'s inclusion of the operational level of war. After striking it in 1973, the *Bundeswehr* (German armed forces) was also deliberating the inclusion of the operational level in their doctrine. Starry had originally ensured the exclusion of the concept. The writing team believed that it was too advanced of a theoretical construct for the U.S. Army at large to comprehend. However, the operational level of war was eventually incorporated at the urging of Starry's successor, Gen. Glenn K. Otis. This decision had major effects on Army doctrine as it helped ensure that the new doctrine did not have the narrow tactical focus that characterized Active Defense and it set the conditions for the second edition of *AirLand Battle* to stress the essential nature of operational art to achieve victory.⁴⁷

The 1982 edition of FM 100-5 introduced the operational level of war into American military thought. Army doctrine now recognized three levels of war: strategic, operational, and tactical. Strategic goals were largely determined by the nation's political leadership. Tactics had previously been the exclusive focus of Army doctrine, now the Army's capstone doctrinal manual emphasized the operational level while subordinate manuals concerned themselves with tactical matters. Typically, operational warfare occurs between the tactical and strategic levels and addresses the employment of large formations (corps and armies) in conventional campaigns.⁴⁸

In the American Army of the period, the corps was the lowest echelon of command capable of self-sufficient and independent operations. The corps, which typically contained between two and five divisions, possessed its own logistics means and the redundancy of capabilities necessary to conduct protracted campaigns. Since the coordination of Army and Air Force assets occurred at the corps, *AirLand Battle* was fought at the operational level. Like the rest of the material in the new manual, operational level warfare was attentive to the principles of war. However, the writers noted that application of these timeless principles varied depending upon the echelon of command concerned. Instead of being primarily concerned

with tactical engagements, corps commanders had to plan and direct operations that furthered strategic objectives. *AirLand Battle* introduced these operations, called campaigns, into Army doctrine. Since commanders at the operational level were concerned with achieving strategic goals, their decisions about where, when, how, and even if to fight the enemy were of phenomenal importance.⁴⁹

The introduction of operational warfare in official Army doctrine preceded its instruction at both the Command and General Staff College and the Army War College. In order to educate the officer corps in this theoretical construct, the Army established the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) in 1983. Wass de Czege, who conceived SAMS, served as its first director. (Holder, a key figure in the writing of *AirLand Battle*, would later become the third director.) Lt. Col. Richard Sinnreich, the primary author of the 1986 revision of *AirLand Battle*, was the second director of the school. The officers at SAMS spent a considerable amount of their time analyzing campaigns through the prism of Clausewitzian theory. Col. David Glantz, a historian of the Soviet military, conducted seminars on the eastern front in the Second World War for the officers. The writings of Marshal of the Soviet Union Mikhail Tukhachevsky and Vladimir Triandafillov provided the basis for a significant portion of the study of operational art. In addition to providing the Army with a pool of officers trained in the employment of corps and echelons above corps, the 1986 revision of *AirLand Battle* was written at SAMS.⁵⁰

The 1986 edition of *AirLand Battle* refined and evolved the operational level of war into the more advanced concept of operational art. While the original statement of *AirLand Battle* introduced the operational level of war to the Army, it failed to adequately explain the concept. The Army wrote the 1986 revision of *AirLand Battle* in large part to rectify this shortcoming. In doing so, the Army placed itself ahead of the other services and the joint staff, who were forced to follow the Army's lead despite the still-broad direction given to operational-level commanders.⁵¹

In September 1984, Gen. William R. Richardson, the new commanding general of U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, informed Wass de Czege that *AirLand Battle* would undergo a revision. While the manual paid greater attention to low-intensity conflict and expanded the leeway given to commanders, this

edition left the basic doctrine of deep operations and the manual's emphasis on moral factors untouched and instead focused on refining the Army's position on operational-level warfare. The 1986 FM 100-5 is generally regarded within the Army and by defense commentators as the most crisp and lucid doctrine presented by the American military. Among the changes in the discussion of operational warfare, Wass de Czege sought to ensure that corps commanders would understand that theater priorities determined their allocation of scarce air assets. The formal recognition of an operational level of war evolved into the embrace of operational art. Operational art expanded upon the previous manual by acknowledging that the conduct of war at the operational level required greater creativity from commanders at that level. This creative process was needed during the act of campaign planning where commanders translated strategic goals into tactical objectives. In this manner, operational art was the centripetal force uniting competing strategic and tactical demands. The new FM 100-5 also gave a superior treatment to multiengagement operations and the conduct of campaigns. Interestingly, the American explanation of campaign and theater was made into almost an exact translation of the Soviet definition. Finally, concepts such as branches and sequels that would lead to the playbooks of the First Persian Gulf War were introduced to the U.S. Army's planning process.⁵²

Despite the attention historians give to the Israelis' supposed influence on AirLand Battle, (because of the amount of analysis devoted to the Yom Kippur War) and the Germans (because of the fascination exhibited by many officers with the Wehrmacht's performance in World War II along with the close working relationship with the Bundeswehr in the context of the NATO alliance), the most important and profound influence on AirLand Battle is often overlooked—that of Soviet military theory. The 1970s saw an increased study of Soviet military thought within the U.S. military, prompted in part by the publication of numerous translations of Soviet works by the U.S. Air Force. Another important influence was the scholarly examination of Soviet Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky's deep operations theory by scholars such as Richard Simpkin and John Erickson. This greater exposure to sophisticated Soviet doctrinal thought led to the Sovietization of American Army doctrine. AirLand Battle was very similar to deep operations. Developed

in the 1930s, Tukhachevsky's doctrine proposed that it was possible to attack the enemy throughout the depth of the battlefield through the use of self-contained and highly maneuverable forces that coordinated their actions with artillery and especially air support to cause the collapse of the enemy operational system and thus ensure his defeat. AirLand Battle reflected not just the study of Soviet operational concepts but their wholesale adoption by the U.S. Army.⁵³

Unlike its predecessor, the officer corps accepted AirLand Battle and believed that the Army's new capstone doctrine would bring victory on the battlefield. With AirLand Battle, the Army abandoned the belief that victory would be achieved through combat within a narrow band of territory along the forward line of own troops. This linear view of battle, with its most radical expression in Active Defense, gave way to a doctrine with a much more sophisticated conception of depth. This new American understanding of depth was born of the inability to surrender space for tactical gains, due to internal NATO political constraints, and an overdue detailed examination of the echeloned nature of the Soviet adversary. These factors caused AirLand Battle not only to abandon Active Defense's myopic focus on the close fight but also to obtain the needed depth by targeting enemy follow-on echelons. This reconceptualization of depth led to the adoption of Soviet theories of deep operations and the recognition of the significance of operational art.⁵⁴

Contemporary Debates

Operational art remains a central component of U.S. Army doctrine. However, operational art has not remained static since its introduction in the 1986 edition of FM 100-5; it has evolved in the course of armed conflict and in response to changes in technology. Despite operational art's acceptance in official doctrine, the concept has come under increasing criticism, which is unsurprising given the inability of the United States to conclude its wars with a favorable strategic outcome.⁵⁵

Critics charge that contemporary operational art as practiced by the U.S. Army has sidelined strategy through the creation of an "independent level of war, served by its own level of command and operating free from unwelcome interference from strategy."⁵⁶ They go on to claim that operational art is at fault for widening the gap between politics and strategy and for marginalizing the political leadership so that they are mere

“strategic sponsors.”⁵⁷ In contrast, contemporary operational art stresses the importance of understanding the applicable strategic context in its totality—policy objectives, enemy, terrain, etc.—in order to successfully gauge risk and thus determine whether one’s actions are suitable to the strategic objective being pursued. A far simpler answer to the charges that operational art has consumed strategy and led to the estrangement of the political leadership from the wars that are supposedly being waged on their behalf is that in recent wars there has been a litany of both poor operational artists and untalented or uninterested political leadership.⁵⁸

One strain of criticism regarding operational art conflates it with the operational level of war. Often the terms are used interchangeably to argue that operational art is a “false and unneeded link between strategy and tactics.”⁵⁹ By conflating the terms “operational art” and “operational level of war,” such critics show their lack of understanding of both concepts. The operational level of war is not “just an odd articulation of the need to be good at tactics.”⁶⁰ Instead, the operational level of war was developed in the European context as a means to address the “problems specific to the employment of large operationally durable formations in distributed operations in Europe.”⁶¹ Contemporary theorists of operational art contend that the operational level of war retards the proper application of operational art. This is because the operational level of war ignores the reciprocal relationship between policy, strategy, operational art, and tactics in favor of a fixed hierarchy in which every problem can be easily paired with a corresponding echelon of command.⁶²

In reality, operational art is not tied to any specific level of command. Instead, operational art is about the task of deliberately linking strategy and tactics through the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose to achieve a strategic goal. This problem is not confined to any single echelon of command and will vary depending on the context.⁶³

Other commenters argue that operational art “is inadequate to the demands of the contemporary operating environment” because of the concept’s origins as an answer to the problem of waging mass mechanized warfare within a continental setting that the Soviet Union faced.⁶⁴ Because Soviet theories for the application of operational art (i.e., deep operations) do not explicitly address contemporary challenges such as counterinsurgency or low-intensity conflict, these critics contend that

operational art is no longer a useful theoretical construct. However, “in a purely abstract sense, the specific tactical actions do not matter to operational art, only that they are arranged in time, space, and purpose to pursue the strategic objective.”⁶⁵ Or as Isserson so aptly stated, “It would be absurd to teach operational art as a kind of ready-made scheme or recipe. The very essence of operational art presupposes freedom of methods and forms which should be carefully chosen each time to fit a concrete situation.”⁶⁶ The critics ignore that the types of conflicts they cite as making operational art obsolete still challenge commanders with the requirement to sequence tactical actions, no matter how dispersed temporally and spatially, in pursuit of a strategic objective—in essence the same task that the Soviets developed operational art to address prior to the Second World War.⁶⁷

Many of those critical of U.S. conceptions of operational art come from the United Kingdom or Australia. They may have a point with regard to the utility of operational art to their unique strategic context. The United States, or even just the U.S. Army, employs military force on a scale that vastly dwarfs these nations. For small powers such as these, where one’s entire commitment to a conflict could be no more than a battalion, it is conceivable that their strategy and campaign may be very much the same. This difference in scale and thus complexity of commitment is also important to understanding the context in which such critics exist when they challenge whether a concept like operational art is relevant in the age of global communications and strategic corporals.⁶⁸

Despite these criticisms of operational art, the concept remains firmly embedded in the military doctrine of the major military powers. It is likely that the interwar Soviet military theorists who played key roles in this revolution in military thought, “General Svechin, G. Isserson, and Marshal Tukhachevskii would be at once impressed and flattered, sufficiently so even to overlook the protracted intrusion upon their copyright” by forces such as the U.S. Army.⁶⁹ Since this theoretical construct’s development in the interwar Soviet Union, subsequent theorists have continued to build upon their work by adapting operational art in response to changes in technology and to fit their specific strategic context. Operational art will continue to retain its utility as long as this adaptation continues since it offers a valuable tool to help commanders achieve their strategic objectives. ■

Notes

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2. Richard Swain, "Filling the Void: The Operational Art and the U.S. Army," in *The Operational Art: Developments in Theories of War*, ed. B. J. C. Mc Kercher and Michael Hennessy (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), 166; Tom Clancy with Gen. Fred Franks, *Into the Storm: A Study in Command* (New York: Berkley, 2004), 112 and 139; Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1997), 8 and 10; Ingo Trauschweizer, *The Cold War US Army: Building Deterrence for Limited War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 222.
3. Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 18–21; Brusino, "The Theory of Operational Art," 7; for a fuller discussion of the Austro-Prussian War, please see Geoffrey Wawro, *The Austro-Prussian War: Austria's War with Prussia and Italy in 1866* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
4. Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 18.
5. *Ibid.*, 18–20.
6. Brusino, "The Theory of Operational Art," 7; Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 19, 21, and 23.
7. James Schneider, introduction to *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, by V. K. Triandafillov, trans. William A. Burhans (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1994), XXXVI–XXXVII.
8. John Erickson, "The Development of Soviet Military Doctrine: The Significance of Operational Art and the Emergence of Deep Battle," in *The Origins of Contemporary Doctrine*, ed. John Gooch (Camberley, UK: Strategic and Combat Studies Institute, 1997), 81; Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 19 and 23.
9. *Ibid.*, 7–8.
10. Brusino, "The Theory of Operational Art," 11–12; Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 7–8.
11. Brusino, "The Theory of Operational Art," 11–12; Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 29–30; Schneider, introduction to *The Evolution of Operational Art*, VIII.
12. Robert Epstein, *Napoleon's Last Victory and the Emergence of Modern War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994); James Schneider, *The Structure of Strategic Revolution: Total War and the Roots of the Soviet Warfare State* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1994).
13. David Glantz, "Soviet Operational Art and Tactics in the 1930s" (paper presented at the American Military Institute Conference, 30–31 March 1990), 2 and 4, accessed 31 July 2018, <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a232954.pdf>; Schneider, introduction to *The Evolution of Operational Art*, IX.
14. Jacob Kipp, "Soviet Military Doctrine and the Origins of Operational Art, 1917-1936," in *Soviet Doctrine from Lenin to Gorbachev*, ed. William C. Frank Jr. and Philip S. Gillette (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1992), 108; Glantz, "Soviet Operational Art and Tactics in the 1930s," 1 and 2; David Glantz, "The Nature of Soviet Operational Art," *Parameters* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 4–5; Schneider, introduction to *The Evolution of Operational Art*, VIII; Jacob Kipp, "Mass, Mobility, and the Red Army's Road to Operational Art 1918-1936" (report, Soviet Army Studies Office, Combined Arms Center, Fort Leavenworth, KS, July 1987), 17, accessed 31 July 2018, <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a195053.pdf>.
15. Jacob Kipp, foreword to *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, XIV; Kipp, "Soviet Military Doctrine," 88.
16. Svechin, quoted in Kipp, "Soviet Military Doctrine," 108.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Kipp, "Soviet Military Doctrine," 88 and 108; Kipp, foreword to *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, XV; Aleksandr A. Svechin, *Strategy*, trans. Kent D. Lee (Minneapolis: East View, 1999), 68; Glantz, "The Nature of Soviet Operational Art," 5.
19. Varfolomeev, quoted in Kipp, "Soviet Military Doctrine," 88.
20. Schneider, introduction to *The Evolution of Operational Art*, XIII–XIV; Kipp, "Mass, Mobility, and the Red Army's Road to Operational Art 1918-1936," 18; Kipp, "Soviet Military Doctrine," 88.
21. Kipp, "Soviet Military Doctrine," 112.
22. Kipp, "Mass, Mobility, and the Red Army's Road to Operational Art 1918-1936," 19; Kipp, "Soviet Military Doctrine," 112.
23. Tukhachevsky quoted in Schneider, introduction to *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, XXX.
24. Schneider, introduction to *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, XXX; James Schneider, "V. K. Triandafillov, Military Theorist," *Journal of Soviet Military Studies* 1, no. 3 (1988): 289–90; Kipp, "Soviet Military Doctrine," 113; Kipp, "Mass, Mobility, and the Red Army's Road to Operational Art 1918-1936," 17 and 20; Erickson, "The Development of Soviet Military Doctrine," 88; Ammon Sella, "Red Army Doctrine and Training on the Eve of the Second World War," *Soviet Studies* 27, no. 2 (April 1975): 246.
25. Glantz, "Soviet Operational Art and Tactics in the 1930s," 5 and 11–12; Glantz, "The Nature of Soviet Operational Art," 6; Sella, "Red Army Doctrine and Training," 247–48; Kipp, "Mass, Mobility, and the Red Army's Road to Operational Art 1918-1936," 20; Richard Harrison, *The Russian Way of War: Operational Art, 1904-1940* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 186–94.
26. Schneider, "V. K. Triandafillov," 304; Schneider, introduction to *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, XLIV; Sella, "Red Army Doctrine and Training," 250; Schneider, introduction to *The Evolution of Operational Art*, XIV–XVI; Erickson, "The Development of Soviet Military Doctrine," 88; James Schneider, "Theoretical Implications of Operational Art," in *On Operational Art*, ed. Clayton Newell (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1994), 26–27; Glantz, "Soviet Operational Art and Tactics in the 1930s," 5; Glantz, "The Nature of Soviet Operational Art," 6; Walter Jacobs, "Tukhachevsky Rediscovered," *Military Review* 44, no. 8 (August 1964): 67.
27. Glantz, "Soviet Operational Art and Tactics in the 1930s," 12.
28. Erickson, "The Development of Soviet Military Doctrine," 92; Glantz, "Soviet Operational Art and Tactics in the 1930s," 12; Harrison, *The Russian Way of War*, 194–217.
29. Schneider, introduction to *The Evolution of Operational Art*, XIII.
30. Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 12.
31. *Ibid.*, 26.
32. *Ibid.*, 5, 12, 26, 35, 36, and 39.
33. Lt. Col. Thomas E. Hanson, foreword to *The Evolution of Operational Art*, III; Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 48 and 66; Schneider, introduction to *The Evolution of Operational Art*, XIII, XIV, XVI, XVIII, XIX, XX, and XXI; Richard Harrison, *Architect of Soviet Victory in World War II: The Life and Theories of G. S. Isserson* (Jefferson, NC: McFarLand, 2010), 114–17.

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35. Glantz, "The Nature of Soviet Operational Art," 6; Kipp, "Soviet Military Doctrine," 119; Kipp, foreword to *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, XXI.
36. Glantz, "Soviet Operational Art and Tactics in the 1930s," 20; Glantz, "The Nature of Soviet Operational Art," 7; Hanson, foreword to *The Evolution of Operational Art*, III; Kipp, "Soviet Military Doctrine," 119; Kipp, foreword to *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, XXI.
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38. Kipp, foreword to *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, XXI.
39. Schneider, "Theoretical Implications of Operational Art," 28.
40. Erickson, "The Development of Soviet Military Doctrine," 81 and 103; Schneider, "Theoretical Implications of Operational Art," 28; Kipp, "Soviet Military Doctrine," 119; Kipp, foreword to *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, XXI; Wilson C. Blythe Jr., "AirLand Battle the Development of a Doctrine" (master's thesis, Eastern Michigan University, 2010), accessed 29 August 2018, https://www.academia.edu/31847297/AirLand_Battle_The_Development_of_a_Doctrine.
41. Jacobs, "Tukhachevsky Rediscovered," 69.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.; Kipp, "Soviet Military Doctrine," 85; Kipp, foreword to *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, VIII.
44. Brusino, "The Theory of Operational Art," 8; Clayton R. Newell, "On Operational Art," in *On Operational Art*, 9, 10, and 14; Erickson, "The Development of Soviet Military Doctrine," 106; Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 1 July 1976 [now obsolete]); John Romjue, *From Active Defense to AirLand Battle: The Development of Army Doctrine, 1973-1982* (Fort Monroe, VA: Historical Office, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, 1984), 19; L. D. Holder, "Doctrinal Development 1975-85," *Military Review* 65, no. 5 (1985): 51; John L. Romjue, "AirLand Battle: The Historical Background," *Military Review* 66, no. 3 (1986): 53; Richard Lock-Pullan, "'An Inward Looking Time': The United States Army, 1973-1976," *Journal of Military History* 67, no. 2 (2003): 506.
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47. Romjue, *From Active Defense to AirLand Battle*, 61; Swain, "Filling the Void," 160, 161, and 163; Swain, "AirLand Battle," 383 and 387; Edward N. Luttwak, "The Operational Level of War," *International Security* 5, no. 3 (Winter, 1980-1981): 61-79; Trauschweizer, *The Cold War US Army*, 223; Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence*, 10.
48. Swain, "Filling the Void," 166; Clancy and Franks, *Into the Storm*, 112 and 139; Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence*, 8 and 10; Trauschweizer, *The Cold War US Army*, 222.
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51. Swain, "AirLand Battle," 387; Paul DeVries, "Maneuver and the Operational Level of War," *Military Review* 63, no. 2 (February 1983): 32.
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54. Swain, "Filling the Void," 162; Lock-Pullan, "How to Rethink War," 682-83; Swain, "AirLand Battle," 383; Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm*, 261; Trauschweizer, *The Cold War US Army*, 210.
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63. Brusino, "The Theory of Operational Art," 3, 5, 9, 15, and 16.
64. Kelly, "Where to for 'The Operational,'" 8.
65. Brusino, "The Theory of Operational Art," 5.
66. Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 5.
67. Kelly, "Where to for 'The Operational,'" 9; Brusino, "The Theory of Operational Art," 5, 12-14.
68. Kelly, "Where to for 'The Operational,'" 10.
69. Erickson, "The Development of Soviet Military Doctrine," 106.