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Research Survey No. 5

Standing Fast: German Defensive Doctrine on the Russian Front During World War II

Prewar to March 1943

by Major Timothy A. Wray



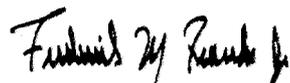
FOREWORD

In this *Research Survey*, Major Timothy A. Wray provides an excellent survey of the intricacies of employing defensive tactics against a powerful opponent. Using after-action reports, unit war diaries, and other primary materials, Major Wray analyzes the doctrine and tactics that the Germans used on the Eastern Front during World War II.

At the end of World War I, the Germans adopted the elastic defense in depth and continued to use it as their basic doctrine through the end of World War II. However, because of limitations caused by difficult terrain, severe weather, manpower and supply shortages, Soviet tactics, and Hitler's order to stand fast, German commanders were unable to implement the Elastic Defense in its true form. Even so, innovative and resourceful unit commanders were able to adapt to the harsh realities of combat and improvise defensive methods that saved the German armies from complete annihilation.

U.S. Army unit commanders on the future battlefield, while battling a motivated and aggressive force, will also face hard battlefield conditions. Therefore, these commanders, in applying the AirLand Battle tenets of initiative, depth, agility, and synchronization, will have to demonstrate the same type of innovativeness and resourcefulness as the Germans did in Russia. To operate on the AirLand Battlefield, U.S. soldiers must depend on sound doctrine and the ability to execute it intelligently. All Army officers will benefit from Major Wray's new and vital assessment of how German doctrine was modified by the test of war.

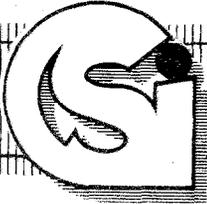
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INTRODUCTION

Correctly foreseeing the nature of a future war is the most critical problem confronting military leaders in peacetime. Effective investments in training, equipment, and weaponry depend on the accuracy with which leaders can, in effect, predict the future. To aid them in their predictions, strategists often attempt to isolate relevant lessons from recent wars to guide them in their decision making.

Within the past several years, Western military analysts have paid new attention to the German Army's defensive battles in Russia during World War II. Much of this interest has had a strongly utilitarian flavor, with writers brandishing Eastern Front examples in support of various doctrinal theories. Unfortunately, however, the general historical understanding of the German war against the Soviet Union is rather limited, and the use of examples from German operations in Russia too often shows a lack of perception either for specific situations or for the "big picture."¹ This lack of insight into German experiences on the Russian Front stems from two historiographical problems.

First, although the Russo-German War was, in fact, the greatest land campaign in World War II, it has remained very much "the forgotten war" to most Western historians and military leaders. In contrast to the rich literature covering the actions of the Western Allies during World War II, few good English-language histories of the war between Russia and Germany exist. Consequently, the existing general histories of this conflict are frequently anecdotal and lack the depth of understanding necessary to allow meaningful analysis.²

Second, the shallow knowledge of Western analysts is often based as much on myth as on fact. A major reason for this is that Western knowledge of the Russo-German War has been unduly influenced by the popular memoirs of several prominent German military leaders. While interesting and even instructive to a point, these memoirs suffer from the prejudices, lapses, and wishful remembering common to all memoirs and, therefore, form a precarious foundation on which to build a useful analysis. For example, even though Heinz Guderian's *Panzer Leader* and F. W. von Mellenthin's *Panzer Battles* regularly appear on U.S. Army professional reading lists and contain interesting insights into German military operations, each book paints a somewhat distorted picture of the German war against Russia. These distortions are the result of outright exaggeration and misrepresentation (as is common in Guderian's work) or the omission of important qualifying data and contextual background (as is more often the case in Mellenthin's book).

Particularly misunderstood are the general methods by which the German Army conducted defensive operations against the Soviets. Various Western

writers have mistakenly generalized the German defensive system as being a "strongpoint line" backed by powerful mobile reserves or occasionally even a "mobile defense."³ Likewise, the myth persists that "on a tactical level . . . the Germans consistently stopped the Red Army's local offensive[s]."⁴ The strategic defeat of Hitler's armies in Russia is commonly regarded as having been done in spite of this permanent German tactical ascendancy and accomplished by a Red Army that remained throughout the war "a sluggish instrument that depended on numbers of men and tanks to achieve victories."⁵ The widespread belief in these myths hampers contemporary analysts in their search for historical lessons and fails to do justice either to the Germans' complex and difficult defensive problems or to the Soviets' tactical skill and adaptability.

This research survey attempts to avoid the common myths about German defensive battles in Russia by relying extensively on primary sources—German after-action reports, unit war diaries, doctrinal manuals, training pamphlets, and various other military memoranda—to reconstruct the actual doctrinal basis for German operations. As will be seen, this archival material, which goes beyond that previously available, provides additional important information about German methods and, in some cases, amends or qualifies the post-war remembrances of German military memoirists. Such memoirs are, of course, invaluable for establishing the state of mind of some of the actors in those historical events and have been used where necessary.

In tracing the development of German defensive doctrine used against the Soviet Red Army, this research survey spans the period from Germany's prewar doctrinal development, which established the initial framework for the defensive battles against the Soviets, through the spring of 1943, when tremendous changes in the overall strategic picture altered the basic nature of the German war against Russia.

In addition to discussing doctrinal methods, this research survey also probes the constraints and circumstances that shaped German battlefield practices. It shows how the evolution of German defensive doctrine was greatly affected by considerations other than mere tactical efficiency. The weather and terrain in Russia, as well as the changes in the strength, leadership, training proficiency, and steadfastness of German units, influenced German defensive methods. Also, battlefield methods were warped by Adolf Hitler's personal interference, as the German dictator periodically ordered the application of his own tactical nostrums.

During the first two years of combat in Russia, the Germans implemented substantial changes to the doctrinal defensive methods described in their prewar manuals. Although these improvisations changed details of the German defensive technique, they remained generally true to the fundamental principles of their doctrine. Therefore, the German experiences on the Eastern Front reveal the detailed evolution of their tactical system and the simplicity and adaptability of the basic German defensive concepts.

Of particular interest to modern readers is the fact that so many of the problems faced by German armies are analogous to problems confronting NATO forces today. In the defense, the German Army on the Eastern Front was hamstrung by a number of political and territorial imperatives that re-

stricted strategic flexibility. German defensive operations were hobbled not only by allies of varying style and ability, but also by large differences in the training, mobility, composition, and combat power of German units as well. The Red Army battled by the Germans in World War II bears a strong resemblance to the current Soviet Army (and its Warsaw Pact siblings) in doctrine, command style, and strategic philosophy. Finally, of course, the German Army fought against an adversary whose preponderance in men and materiel was absolute. While it did not "fight outnumbered and win" by achieving final victory, the German Army waged its defensive battles in Russia with sufficient skill, tenacity, and resourcefulness to merit close scrutiny.
