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DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF MILITARY HISTORY
WASHINGTON 25, D.C.

MS # P-082

MANUSCRIPT DATA SHEET

- I. Author: Wagener
- II. Title of Report: Study of Tactics Employed in the Russian Campaign

Originally prepared for Headquarters, European Command,
Office of the Chief Historian.

MS P-082

-1-

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8 December 1950

Commentary on Wagener's "Study of Combat Tactics
Employed in the Russian Campaign"

The study deals with a report which the late Generaloberst [General] Hube personally submitted to Hitler in April 1944. In view of the Russian superiority it was Hube's aim to persuade Hitler to give up his stubborn ideas of rigid defense in favor of flexibility.

From a historical point of view, this report contains, at best, one interesting fact, namely that by spring 1944 the folly of Hitler's strategy was so clearly evident to the fighting forces, that one army commander in the field found it necessary to act on his own and present this problem to Hitler, after OKH and the army groups had not succeeded in making themselves heard. It is also interesting to note that the author was naive enough to believe that he might be able to impress Hitler with theoretical arguments.

The theoretical arguments are of no military value. Although they are correct in substance, they contain nothing but well-known German doctrine on delaying tactics. These tactics are intended to afford the numerically weaker side a chance to avoid defeat and save manpower by making the most of area and mobility, in order to employ the forces elsewhere for a decisive offensive.

II The author makes but little mention of Russian tactics, and the few facts which he states are generally known.

(signed) Franz Halder
General

Study of Tactics Employed in the Russian Campaign

-1- (A report of First Panzer Army, written in April 1944, and submitted to Hitler in person by General Hube the night before he was killed in a plane crash.)

1. General

After we had lost the initiative in the East in 1943 in spite of launching one major offensive and many counterattacks, we were compelled to change over to defensive operations along the entire front. We took up defensive positions and tried to hold whatever terrain was still in our hands. The preservation of our fighting strength was only a secondary objective.

Against the incessant Russian attacks along the entire front throughout the year, the field forces almost invariably were given the same order: tactical and strategic defense, holding at any cost, without taking into consideration the situation of the adjacent unit.

In that way we intended to bring about position warfare -- although we lacked improved defensive positions -- and tried to wear down the enemy with purely defensive tactics. However, in spite of all efforts, the front did not become stabilized, and although all orders called for defense, loss of ground continued to be unavoidable; the enemy forced us to make extensive withdrawals. In retrospect this procedure was called elastic defense. The fact that the withdrawals were effected under pressure and in most cases too late, and, not having been planned, resulted in considerable loss of equipment, filled the troops with a feeling of bitterness, and all the more so, since each time they broke out of an encirclement, it was referred to as a victory. The lowered combat efficiency became apparent in the subsequent battles, and the execution of defensive operations became more and more difficult in view of the weakened units.

-2-

Even isolated counterattacks did not change the situation. To be sure, they were frequently successful, owing to the fact that after each penetration or breakthrough the enemy found himself in open terrain and without artillery support, and was inferior to us, as usual. However, in view of our policy of rigid defense, the superior number of attacking forces dictated time and place of commitment of our available strategic reserves, with the result that we could not gain the initiative; our forces were constantly tied down in the front lines and had no chance to disengage in time, in order to prepare counterattacks. If we had withdrawn in time from areas which subsequently were lost anyhow, we might have been able to make available large forces in good condition to regain lost ground and at the same time destroy the enemy forces.

The overall results of defensive tactics were the following: Considerable loss of ground, heavy casualties, large losses of equipment, and overtaxing of the troops. On the other hand, we gained time, decimated the enemy, and maintained a continuous front. The Russians had not succeeded in achieving any strategic breakthrough in spite of gaining a large amount of territory; the final decision, which they were obviously trying to bring about at any cost in 1943, had been postponed.

-3- Thus, defensive tactics had not produced any better results than delaying tactics; the same results could have been attained at a lower cost if delaying tactics had been planned carefully.

Purely defensive tactics had failed.

2. Reasons for the Failure of Defensive Tactics

- a. Superiority of the Russian artillery and their heavy concentrations on our inadequate positions;
- b. Our numerical inferiority, lack of reserves, inability to echelon our forces in depth, and overtaxing of the troops because of lack of replacements;

000534

MS P-082

-4-

c. Insufficient artillery and ammunition;

d. The fact that the rigid, dogmatic orders, issued to the entire Eastern front, called for defensive tactics without taking into consideration local conditions or the time element; frequently these orders could not be executed owing to insufficient combat strength, weapons, and ammunition, and the inadequacy of fortified positions; such orders were rescinded too late or not at all, which finally undermined not only the authority of the order but also the confidence which the troops placed in their commanders.

3. The Enemy

The enemy attacked incessantly, without any marked main effort but with rapidly changing objectives along a wide front. It seemed to be the aim of the Russians to prevent development of position warfare, to interfere with any stabilization of our front through constant spoiling attacks, and to contain our forces to prevent a balance of strength. If instead they had endeavored to achieve a strategic breakthrough, they would have needed a large-scale concentration of forces; no doubt they could have successfully achieved such a concentration.

Our defensive positions and our tactics were of advantage to the enemy's strongest and most effective weapon, his artillery.

Time and again our forces, withdrawing for short distances only, had to organize their defenses hastily. That enabled the enemy to advance quickly, and to move his supplies and communications speedily. He did not have to operate in open terrain, hampered by inadequate communications, his greatest weakness. Despite his considerable advance, he had thus avoided the danger of stretching his lines too far from the base of operations, a danger which generally threatens the success of any offensive.

The enemy will keep on using the same tactics and continue his incessant attacks along the entire front. It remains to be seen whether or not he will in the future concentrate his forces to a greater extent than heretofore and perhaps develop marked strategic concentrations.

Most likely, the enemy will continue his tactics of launching spoiling attacks on a wide front, because he will be aware of the fact that he is at a
-5- disadvantage in mobile warfare after a breakthrough.

The numerically superior enemy can endure the wear and tear of combat longer than we can; no doubt that will make it possible for him to continue launching numerous attacks simultaneously on a wide front. The Russians are not pressed for time and need not make any daring decisions; if they are consistently victorious, they will be able to calculate when the time for the final blow has arrived.

The Russians will continue to rely on their artillery and will make their plans accordingly. In the future their air superiority will be an additional factor.

We will play into the enemy's hands if we continue to use defensive tactics and expose our forces to his numerical superiority and his artillery, without seeking an opportunity to engage him in mobile warfare, his greatest weakness.

4. Our Alternatives

Annihilation of the enemy forces remains the objective. All other considerations are of secondary importance. Above all, defense, loss, and gain of territory should only be secondary objectives, nothing more than means to achieve the purpose of annihilation. When ground is given up voluntarily and in time, it is regained frequently after a successful battle.

The enemy cannot be annihilated by purely defensive tactics, mere endurance, and rigid holding of ground. Although this will wear him down, experience

000536

MS P-082

-6-

-6- has shown that the defender's strength is spent in equal measure. Consequently, the numerically superior Russians, who are also strong in other respects and whose political convictions are difficult to undermine, will be able to hold out longer than we can.

Defensive tactics without prepared positions, in the face of superior enemy artillery, are doomed to complete failure.

If it is absolutely essential to maintain temporary or isolated defensive positions -- in other words, if position warfare is desired -- it will be necessary at least to meet its requirements and make provisions accordingly. Whenever the top leaders ask for the impossible, when orders call for nothing but bravery, and reliance is placed exclusively on valor, usually an error of omission is involved. The top leaders are supposed to provide troops with the means for executing their mission, and to coordinate strength, weapons, and combat methods. Otherwise, orders which cannot be carried out produce not only failure, but destroy the confidence of the troops. Confidence is an indispensable element of strength; lack of confidence leads to a feeling of resignation. Anyone who is too often directly affected by failures will begin to question his absolute devotion. Moreover, in view of the power of present-day offensive weapons, the value of a stationary front has become questionable.

-7- Even in an "East Wall", inferior forces will hardly be able to bring about the development of position warfare, such as existed during World War I due to a balance of the opposing forces.

It might be possible for some time -- particularly while we are still fighting on enemy territory -- to employ delaying tactics which are usually employed by forces fighting under the handicap of terrain or time. During the last few months they have resulted in maximum success. However, delaying action is nothing

000537

MS P-082

-7-

but a fight to gain time, although admittedly it is the cheapest method. In addition, one can use it to retain the initiative, but not to bring about a decision.

Consequently, we must again begin to employ offensive tactics. Any other hopes and expectations have no meaning for the soldier. Gaining time, holding ground, and wearing down the enemy have a meaning only as long as they are related to a subsequent attack, "the shining sword of retaliation". It is advisable to check whether at this time sufficient forces are available, either to attack the enemy's most vulnerable point, or to assemble forces in the rear for the purpose of crushing the enemy by means of a counterattack, after he breaks through in open terrain. Such a counterattack should not be launched in order to support our defense at any one point, but to defeat the enemy; consequently, it must be launched wherever the command believes conditions to be most favorable. If such action exposes other sectors to danger, it will be necessary at those points to fight a delaying action, or if need be, to fall back. If we continue to counterattack only at points dictated by enemy action, the reserves will be used up and will never be able to strike a decisive blow.

-8-

Should our strength and supplies be inadequate for an attack or a decisive counterattack, or if we have to consider the West as a second major area of operations, then we will be compelled to continue fighting delaying actions in order to preserve our fighting strength and the continuity of the front, and to gain the time required to prepare attacks or counterattacks. In view of the supply situation, the preservation of a continuous front has become a necessity, which, unfortunately, can hardly be disregarded.

Defensive and delaying tactics are the proper combat methods until we have the opportunity to launch attacks or counterattacks; when such attacks are carried out, delaying tactics may continue at secondary fronts.

Judging by the experience of the last few months, successful execution of such operations is based on the conditions outlined below:

a. Defensive Tactics

We should again make it an inflexible rule to employ defensive tactics (such as holding out to the last man, disregarding losses, making a suicide stand) only in exceptional cases, or where such tactics will be confined to a certain locality or time period. Whenever defensive tactics become absolutely necessary, the troops must be provided with a chance for survival by being given improved positions, weapons, and ammunition, and by echeloning in depth, as well as provisions for local reserves. Each defensive operation must have at least a -9- chance of success. At the same time, the troops must be told clearly what is at stake. The reasons must be stated in the order.

Provisions must be made for relief of the holding forces. The Russians employ a sensible setup, whereby an unarmed relief unit takes over the sector together with the weapons and equipment of the unit on the line.

We must remember that defensive tactics play into the hands of the Russians, that they place us at the mercy of their artillery which is their forte, and that the enemy probably will be able to endure the wear and tear of defensive combat for a longer period than we can.

Construction of field fortifications constitutes the most important prerequisite for a successful defense.

b. Delaying Tactics

We will probably continue using delaying tactics for some time. A large concentration of forces for the purpose of attack or defense necessitates weakening of forces elsewhere.

Delaying action is the method employed by an inferior force because it requires less depth, necessitates less construction of positions, and permits

000539

MS P-082

-9-

economical utilization of manpower; finally, it allows the defender to gain time, and to maintain continuity of the front, which is so often jeopardized by orders calling for rigid defense. By employing delaying tactics it is possible for the defender to thwart the enemy's plans, and to escape the effects of enemy artillery by making partial withdrawals as soon as it opens fire. By making additional with-

-10- drawals, the defender might succeed in luring the enemy into open terrain, where he is at a disadvantage and where he can be crushed by a counterattack with tactical reserves. Finally, under present conditions all mobile warfare sooner or later is hampered by the shortcomings of motorization and the expenditure of ammunition; therefore, the defender, by rapidly effecting additional withdrawals, might induce the attacker to exert his maximum effort and then, exploiting his subsequent weakening, might annihilate him with tactical reserves. During such a war of movement, the forces which are moving orderly along their lines of communication and their fuel and ammunition depots without being under pressure, have the advantage over the attacking and pursuing forces which have been moving away from their supply bases and consequently may become practically defenseless.

Flexibility, and if need be, decreased motorization, assume greater importance for delaying tactics.

Reserves (particularly small armored detachments), increase of artillery, and additional ammunition supply, are as vital for delaying tactics as they are for static defense.

Delaying tactics cannot be controlled by a central command. They require more responsibility on the part of the intermediate and lower commands, as well as special training of officers and men.

Concise written directives which outline the aims of the top echelon and specify what is at stake, yet allow for sufficient latitude in the

-11- execution of a mission, and for safety's sake might denote the maximum extent of

000546

MS P-082

-10-

any withdrawal, will again bring out the superiority of the lower command echelon and strengthen the confidence of the frontline soldiers in the higher echelon. If the hands of the lower echelons are no longer tied, they will again exercise real leadership -- in other words, bring about local superiority, develop points of main effort, and execute their missions by using appropriate tactics.

Delaying action and counterattack offer a chance to achieve decisive victories in the east.

(signed) Wagoner