

# Soviet Operational Art

## Narratives on Manchuria, 1945

by Johan Elg

### Resumé

Ett narrativ – en berättelse – utgör en viktig del i hur genomförda militära operationer beskrivs. Dessa berättelser används inom militärteori där olika former av krigföring debatteras, som t ex det väsentliga begreppet operationskonst. Den tyska operationskonsten under det andra världskriget är ett exempel. I den ständigt pågående utvecklingen av militära doktriner kan lämpligheten att anamma särskilda begrepp, eller rent av kompletta paketslösningar, ifrågasättas. Detta återspeglas i militärteoretiska debatter huruvida vissa operationskonster är mer framgångsrika än andra. T ex, den sovjetiska operationskonsten, som förfinades under det andra världskriget, anförs ofta som en synnerlig effektiv form av militär krigföring. Möjligen den allra högsta formen. Syftet med denna text är att bidra till denna debatt genom att granska ett historiskt exempel på sovjetisk operationskonst. Detta görs genom att två berättelser ställs i polemik mot varandra. Det utvalda fallet avser det sovjetiska anfallet på Japan (Manchuriet) i augusti 1945. Vid sidan av det välkända sovjetiska narrativet, som beskriver det lyckade blixtkriget i dess perfektion, ställs det japanska narrativet, som istället betonar fördröjningsstrid samt den japanska kapitulationsprocessen. Resultatet innebär främst ett inlägg i debatten om vad som kan anses vara framgångsrikt, eller bristfälligt, i den så omtalade sovjetiska operationskonsten.

REMARKABLY LITTLE HAS been written about the Soviet military operation that began on 9 August 1945. This operation, named as the *Manchurian Strategic Offensive Operation* by the Soviet Union, and *August Storm* by the US Army historian and author Lieutenant Colonel David Glantz, is commonly portrayed as an illustrative example of Soviet operational art at its very best. The operation and its outcome are heralded as the true example of perfecting Soviet military theory and conduct of operational art.<sup>1</sup>

As this military operation took place almost seventy years ago one might ask why this matters today. Perhaps one of most explicit reasons is that the tradition of Soviet operational art has been transferred not

only to today's Russia but to other nations' armed forces with an emphasis on 'deep battle' and 'manoeuvre warfare'. Such phrases are part of any curriculum in military theory and thus contribute to contemporary doctrinal developments. Furthermore, the very issue of the Soviet intervention in East Asia in 1945 is still contagious today, especially since no formal peace treaty exists between Japan and the Soviet Union due to the ongoing territorial dispute regarding several islands in the Kuriles.

The purpose of this text is to argue that the Soviet military offensive into the territory of Manchuria in 1945 was not as successful as is commonly portrayed. With my background in both professional and hobby wargaming, I am particularly focused

on the issue that wars and battles are to be considered adversarial, in which both sides fight in order to defeat the opponent in accordance with their strategic goals. In this context, it is of interest to note that there is relatively little written on the Japanese preparations and their operational plans, thereby reducing the Japanese side to what can be described as passive extras in a Soviet-only narrative. Rather than basing the arguments on the operational level regarding both sides, the Soviet-dominated narrative is unbalanced since it focuses only on the Soviet military actions at operational and tactical levels and their presumed effect; a Japanese capitulation at the strategic level.

There are two existing narratives on the Soviet military operations in Manchuria in 1945. The above-mentioned Soviet-dominated narrative infers that Soviet operational art is extraordinary. Another narrative, from primarily Japanese sources, offers a different story by highlighting the Japanese defensive operations and the crucial issue regarding the timing of the Japanese surrender procedure. In this text, both narratives will be contemplated in order to offer a more balanced view of the military operations in Manchuria from August 9 in 1945. In short, was the Soviet military operation a resounding success with the application of Soviet operational art against a well prepared adversary or was it a mediocre effort launched in haste to defeat an already defeated enemy? In other words, was it one of the most notable land-grabs in history?

The basic foundation within this text is to compare two different narratives to see what differs and why. A narrative can be defined as a story within a certain discourse.<sup>2</sup> This text will focus on identifying the central aspects of this story by using the writ-

ten sources that constitute the base of the discourse regarding this military operation and its reference to Soviet operational art. By doing so, the text offers a criticism of a well-established narrative. It is common for any narrative to start with a problematic condition or setting – in this particular case the large Japanese army formation of Kantogun facing the Soviet military forces in the Far East. The continuing plot then deals with how to overcome this situation. Here similarities can be seen with induction – an event followed by an explanation – since A happened B must therefore be valid. For example, a rapid Soviet victory in Manchuria in August 1945 was due to the successful application of Soviet operational art by the destruction of Kantogun, which in turn led to the fulfilment of Soviet strategic goals in eastern Asia. Here, the problem of induction clearly appears. In short, a pronounced causal relationship needs to be justified deductively in order to be considered valid.

The historical example of the massive attack by the Red Army with three fronts into Manchuria on August 9, 1945, is often quoted as a great example of the successful application of Soviet operational art. Indeed, the Soviet military offensive is articulated as a *blitzkrieg*. However, the most quoted source on this military campaign overwhelmingly uses Soviet sources.<sup>3</sup> There are a few existing sources which consider both sides. In one of these the conclusion is that the nature of fighting is portrayed differently by both sides in order to enhance their own achievements.<sup>4</sup> The problem of a Soviet-only or Soviet-dominated narrative arises when more general work on operational art, especially in an educational and training framework for officers, enlists those sources and avoids mentioning that this view is in fact rather one-sided.

A somewhat similar approach regarding criticism of a narrative can be seen in Niklas Zetterling's critique of the accuracy of Soviet sources, for example, regarding the battle of Kursk in July 1943. Zetterling argues that exaggeration of Soviet sources makes it very questionable to assess the value of Soviet operational art. His conclusion is that it is especially questionable to rely on Soviet sources only in order to assess Soviet operations during the Second World War.<sup>5</sup> With this perspective in mind, the written sources of the Soviet-dominated narrative are problematic. The foremost example is the literature from Glantz and primarily his initial work.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, sources from a Japanese perspective have their own critics on reliability, for example the change of Japanese perceptions due to shifting realities such as the beginning of the Cold War, the outbreak of the Korean War and the Japanese utter dependence on the US for providing military security. Thus both narratives can – and should – be scrutinized and questioned. Regarding Manchuria in 1945, the question of validity is compounded by the fact that the Soviet narrative dominates the Japanese one.

This text will leave it to the reader to contemplate whether or not the Soviet operation was successful, and – more importantly – look again at what military performance we believed the Soviet Union was capable of during the Cold War. In fact, the Soviet operation in Manchuria, as described by sources regarding the operation from a Soviet perspective, elevates the status of Soviet operational art. This is reinforced by the fact that there exist comparably few non-Soviet sources written on this operation. The point that this text will make is, when considering the Japanese perspective, this rosy picture of a Soviet

military operation can be questioned. This is not a specific argument; it is a general argument that extends to all military operations and concerns the need of taking into account the narratives from both sides.

This text will include a brief overview of Soviet operational art before moving on to the description of the Soviet military operation and the Japanese military responses. This text will not provide a detailed description of the entire operations and every tactical battle and engagement. Indeed, that would entail merging the two different narratives into one. Instead, the aim is to present an overview with the most important details from both narratives such as each side's operational plan, the general advance (when and where) and what thus did, or did not work, according to the operational plans. Such information is usually supported in both narratives and thus, the validity of the detailed action becomes much stronger since it is easier to establish where a major unit was located and what concrete orders were given, rather than what certain people may have thought at that time. What will be included and presented in this text are the major inconsistencies between sources, some of which clearly indicate a problem with the narrative of successful Soviet operational art in Manchuria in 1945. The purpose is not to deny historical facts, it is merely to put them into a new perspective by including both sides and putting both operations – the Soviet *offensive* and the Japanese *defensive* – into the arguably most vital contextual standpoint, namely the Japanese surrender timeline.

The process of the Japanese national surrender is of particular interest. As a matter of fact, it is of central importance since when a nation has officially surrendered, its regular armed forces will no longer be

capable of any further significant military resistance by reason of the chain-of-command as well as moral factors. Furthermore, a large military force can only be sustained by mobilizing a country's resource base. If the will, or capacity, to sustain this major need disappears, the army will in fact also do so. Thus the only remaining option for fanatical individuals is either suicide or the establishment of guerrilla warfare.

The major literature sources on the Soviet perspective used in this text are "*Lightning War*" in *Manchuria* by Lilita Dzirkals<sup>7</sup> and *August Storm* by David Glantz.<sup>8</sup> The Japanese perspective on the operations is mainly covered by the Japanese Monographs no. 154 and no. 155<sup>9</sup> published by the US Army in the 1950s, as well as a volume in the Japanese official military historical series of the Second World War, *Senshi Soshō*, published in 1974.<sup>10</sup> The latter is not translated into English.

One note on translation issues before moving to the first part. The Japanese military forces in Manchuria will be referred to as Kantogun as this is the proper Japanese name of that military formation, rather than the anglicized 'Kwantung army'. Kantogun means the Army of the Kanto area, the plains where Tokyo is located. It is also obviously the term used in all Japanese sources. On the other hand, the area of Manchuria will not be referred to as the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo since only a handful of countries ever recognized that state.

## The dominating Soviet narrative

The Soviet Red Army suffered huge losses by the German Wehrmacht on the eastern front and it was in the end, a willingness to accept and replace those huge losses in

personnel and equipment that led to victory. Studies have indicated that Soviet operational art was not particularly successful. Indeed, both Germany and the Western allies had reached a far higher level in this regard, especially regarding co-ordination of ground, naval and air efforts.<sup>11</sup> However, the school that emphasized the success of Soviet operational art has often referred to the Soviet military operation into Manchuria as a prime example of this, which can be seen as a reaction to the post-war promotion of German applications of operational art during the Second World War. Indeed, one of the foremost western sources on the Manchurian campaign explicitly aimed at promoting the Soviet military as a very competent military force, thus exposing a 'German bias'. The specific quote below indicates this aim:

(...) Westerners seem to think that only geography, climate, and sheer numbers negated German military skill and competence on the eastern front, a view that relegates Soviet military accomplishment to oblivion. (...) These impressions reflect a distinct German bias in the analyses of operations (...) This Western misconception perverts history, and that perversion, in turn, wraps contemporary attitudes and thus current assessment of Soviet military capability – past, present and future.<sup>12</sup>

With Glantz as the primary source on the Soviet Manchurian operation this school can be described as being contrary to those who have promoted the German application of operational art. The Manchurian operation, 'August Storm', is thus put forward as a brilliant example of Soviet military success. This achievement is then linked to a specific Soviet form of operational art, namely the conception of 'deep battle' with large mechanized armies penetrating deep

into enemy territory supported by airborne assaults. The Soviet military operation in Manchuria is thus seen as the application; a ‘crowning example of the so-called operational art and deep battle tactics’ which destroyed ‘Japan’s last remaining field army of any significance – the Kwantung army’.<sup>13</sup> Besides the elevation of Soviet operational art, this quote disregards the fact that the Japanese army in August 1945 was concentrated on the Japanese home islands rather than in Manchuria.<sup>14</sup>

Clearly, one view of the Soviet military operation in Manchuria is to designate it as *the* textbook application of operational art and in particular the Soviet concept of ‘deep battle’. Such concepts were promoted by the Soviet marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky in the 1920s and later became official doctrine in the 1930s. The narrative is then that this was finally driven to perfection in the closing stages of the Second World War. The example of Manchuria is put forward as the *one*, and perhaps *only*, proper model of the application of Soviet operational art.<sup>15</sup>

Post-war, further development of Soviet doctrine was related to the operation in Manchuria.<sup>16</sup> Or, at least this was a common perception in the west. In texts from the mid-1980s, studies of the Soviet activities in Manchuria were held as proof of the Soviet army’s capability in the field of offensive operational arts, including the use of a so-called operational manoeuvre group (OMG) operating deep behind the enemy front line. This view of ‘the Far East campaign as an instructive model for modern military operations’ did, however, not surface in Soviet military publications until 1960. This happened co-incidentally at the same time when Sino-Soviet relations were becoming increasingly antagonistic.<sup>17</sup> In other words, there are indications

of Soviet attempts to promote its military posture and capacity by referring to a successful Soviet offensive military operation with relatively minor losses in East Asia. This might have been aimed at intimidating China, but it was also put in a European and NATO-context as Manchuria 1945 was perceived as ‘the best model and classic example of modern Soviet tactics’.<sup>18</sup>

Today, this view of a refined and potent Soviet war machine firmly embedded in sophisticated operational art is very much the product of the Soviet-dominating narrative on Manchuria in 1945. The perceived success in Manchuria in 1945 constitutes its validation. Since there are similarities to current doctrine, for example on ‘manoeuvre’ warfare, this means that the Soviet operation is considered, at least in the US, as a ‘relevant learning tool for today’s professional military’.<sup>19</sup>

The problem with the Soviet-only narrative is that it links the strategic result of the specific case of Manchuria with the successful application of Soviet operational art. One of the authors who has surveyed various Soviet sources explicitly cautions that ‘Japanese accounts of the war greatly discount Soviet claims regarding the intensity of the armed hostilities.’<sup>20</sup> From this, a counter-argument can be constructed, which, as its core, contends that the outcome in Manchuria had little to do with a supposedly successful application of Soviet operational art. To investigate this counter-argument, the following chapters will consider the Japanese narrative and specifically the hypothesis that the Kantogun resisted the Soviet offensive according to its operational plan until the Japanese surrender. In other words, the counter-argument will claim that the Kantogun was not caught in a pincer movement and destroyed by the application of Soviet operational art.

## Soviet operational art

Traditional Soviet operational art can be traced to the development of the concept of ‘deep battle’ of the 1920s. Those thoughts were influenced by lessons from the Russian civil war with an emphasis on manoeuvre rather than positional warfare. Furthermore, the experiences from the war with Poland in 1920 influenced Mikhail Tukhachevsky to consider various means of achieving shock. His solution was the ‘deep operation’, to achieve an early decisive success causing the annihilation – ‘the decisive defeat’ – of the enemy’s military forces.<sup>21</sup> In his review of Soviet operational art, Glantz focuses on the Soviet development of the concept of ‘deep battle’ by combined arms: tanks, artillery, infantry and aviation. This concept was further refined into ‘deep mobile operations’.<sup>22</sup>

Generally, a Soviet military operation consists of a core element: the confrontation. This covers all combat activities by military units. The aim of the confrontation is to fulfil the operational or strategic goals within an allotted time period.<sup>23</sup> The perhaps foremost principle in Soviet operational art is the concept of causing surprise at all levels; using various means to conceal one’s intentions. This is known as *Maskirovka*; the art of securing success in battle with a multitude of actions to confuse the enemy regarding positions and combat effectiveness regarding units, objects and plans.<sup>24</sup> The achievement of surprise will cause confusion in the enemy chain of command, which is essential for a rapid victory. Examples of other principles are: the importance of speed (manoeuvre) and the conduct of simultaneous attacks in the enemy’s entire territory.<sup>25</sup>

Soviet operational art in 1945 was about a series of operations or battles conducted

either simultaneously or successively within the framework of a single command (Front) with a single operational and/or strategic goal. The actual term ‘deep battle’ was, however, avoided for political reasons.<sup>26</sup> For the empirical parts below, the application of Soviet operational art in the case of Manchuria in 1945 will be covered in three aspects: the amount of *surprise*, the importance of *speed* (relative to the enemy’s) and finally simultaneous attacks all over the territory (*deep operations*).

## The general situation before 9 August 1945: the Soviet Union

The transfer of Soviet troops and military equipment from the European theatre began in May 1945. 750,000 personnel and large numbers of weapons and vehicles were transferred by railway to the Far East. Units were selected for their previous wartime experiences. For example, the 5<sup>th</sup> Army which had assaulted the fortress of Königsberg was to attack the Japanese fortified regions in eastern Manchuria. The 6th Guards Tank Army, with combat experience from the Carpathian Mountains, was tasked to attack through the Grand Khingan Mountains of western Manchuria.<sup>27</sup> The reinforcements doubled the Soviet strength from 40 to around 80 divisions in the Far East Command. The main strategic goal for the Soviet Union was to capture the territory promised at the Yalta Conference in February 1945. Entering the war against Japan had, however, been contemplated from late 1943.<sup>28</sup>

On 9 August, when the Soviet Union made a declaration of war on the Empire of Japan, the Soviet Far East Command had the following forces under its command; to the west and northwest of Manchuria was

	TOTAL	Trans-Baikal Front	2 <sup>nd</sup> Far Eastern Front	1 <sup>st</sup> Far Eastern Front
Manpower	1,577,725	645,040	337,096	586,589
Guns/mortars	27,086	9,668	5,988	11,430
Rocket launchers	1,171	583	72	516
Tanks/SP guns	5,556	2,416	1,280	1,860
Aircraft	3,721	1,324	1,260	1,137
ARMIES	12 (+3 Air)	5	3	4
Rifle Divisions	72	30	11	31
Tank Divisions	2	2	0	0
Tank Brigades	30	10	8	12
Mot/Mech Bdes	12	8	2	2
Cavalry Divisions	6	5	0	1

*Soviet Far East Command in August 1945.*<sup>29</sup>

the Trans-Baikal Front, to the northeast was the 2<sup>nd</sup> Far Eastern Front, while the 1<sup>st</sup> Far Eastern Front was to the east.

The Soviet operational plan was designed to shock the enemy into a state of paralysis. It was therefore deemed paramount to conduct the build-up as secretly as possible in order to mislead the enemy as to when an attack would be made. Simultaneous attacks were to be launched in order to encircle the main enemy forces in a huge pincer movement. The enemy's military centre of gravity was considered to be the Kantogun and its destruction would lead to Japan's surrender.<sup>30</sup> Since the military geography of Manchuria can be described as an up-turned horseshoe, with mountain ranges in the west, north and east, and a huge plain in between where the main cities are located, the Soviet Union organized three fronts to attack on separate axes from the west, north and east. In other words, the whole attack into Manchuria was to be a gigantic encirclement – a strategic Cannae – of the Kantogun. The timing of the attack was essential, lest the enemy might fall back in-

to the central cities and/or the mountains along the border with Korea. By pinning down enemy forces, the Kantogun would be forced to defend along the entire border in forward positions.

A noteworthy part of the operation was the 6th Guards Tank Army, previously in Czechoslovakia as the war in Europe ended. It was transferred to the Trans Baikal Front and was to drive through the western Grand Khingan Mountains chain and then descend upon major population centres such as Mukden and Changchun in the central plain. It was in essence *an*, if not *the*, explicit implementation of the concept of a deep mobile operation.

## The general situation before 9 August 1945: Japan

As the war at this late stage was manifestly developing unsatisfactorily for the Japanese Empire, many army units were transferred from Manchuria to the Japanese home island during 1945. By April 1945, no fewer than 16 divisions had been transferred

	TOTAL	3 <sup>rd</sup> Area Army	4 <sup>th</sup> Army	1 <sup>st</sup> Area Army
Manpower	713,000	180,971	95,464	222,157
Guns/mortars	5,360			
Rocket launchers	0			
Tanks/SP guns	1,155			
Aircraft	1,800			
ARMIES	5 (+1 Air)	2	1	2
Divisions	24	8	3	10
Brigades	9	4	4	1
Tank Brigades	2	2	0	0

*Japanese Kantogun in August 1945.*<sup>33</sup>

from Manchuria to the home islands.<sup>31</sup> The forces transferred were to some extent replaced by a call-up of Japanese nationals in Manchuria for newly raised units, some of which were lacking weapons.<sup>32</sup>

On 9 August, Kantogun consisted of the following forces as seen in the above chart. However, of its 24 divisions only six were formed prior to January 1945.<sup>34</sup> The 3<sup>rd</sup> Area Army with its two subordinate armies was deployed in the western and central part of Manchuria. The 4<sup>th</sup> Army was deployed in the northern part while the 1<sup>st</sup> Area Army, with its two subordinate armies, was deployed in the eastern part. Auxiliary forces, included in the total manpower, were the Manchukuoan Army (170,000) and the Inner-Mongolian Forces (44,000). The auxiliary's fighting capabilities ranged from average to unreliable. Immediately after the outbreak of war and effectively on 10 August, the Japanese Imperial General Headquarters in Tokyo assigned 34<sup>th</sup> Army and 17<sup>th</sup> Area Army, both in the Korean peninsula, to Kantogun.

A new operational plan was formally adopted on 4 June 1945. The holding operational plan, which had envisaged de-

fending the border regions, was changed to a delaying operational plan. This was in view of the Soviet build-up and the concurrent Japanese withdrawal of forces from Manchuria to the home islands. The plan stipulated that a Soviet attack would be delayed. A final stand was planned to be made in a redoubt near the Korean border. This was the major difference of the holding plan, i.e., no major units were to make a last-ditch stand at a position.<sup>35</sup> Instead, they were to withdraw to a new position. The objectives of the new operational plans were, regarding for example the 3<sup>rd</sup> Area Army, to harass the enemy, to avoid a major engagement and to withdraw to the Tunghua area – the redoubt – where a decisive stand would be made. This meant that a great number of preparations were necessary, such as constructing defensive positions and troop barracks in the planned redoubt area.

Kantogun estimated that the Soviet invasion would begin before winter, but not earlier than September. Another estimate was that the delaying operation would delay the Soviet forces from reaching the redoubt area for only one month, due to the



lack of ammunition and fuel.<sup>36</sup> The war began on 9 August, which meant that construction and preparation in the redoubt area was far from complete.<sup>37</sup> For example, in the 1<sup>st</sup> Area Army around 50 % of specified ammunition dumps had been established in the redoubt area.<sup>38</sup>

There was Japanese disagreement about this new operational plan. By withdrawing from major cities such as Hsinking (Changchun) and Mukden more than one million Japanese civilians would have to be abandoned. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Area Army Commander was thus in favour of making the last stand in the large cities rather than further east in the unprepared positions in the Tunghua area.<sup>39</sup> As the planned Tunghua redoubt was on the very border to Korea it meant that the operational plan effectively pronounced the defence of Manchuria impossible. Indeed, the primary mission of the Kantogun was explicitly changed to ‘defending the Japanese territory of Korea’.<sup>40</sup> This is clearly seen in the orders issued by Imperial General Headquarters when hostilities commenced:

The principles to be followed in these operations are: The Kantogun will direct its major operation against the Soviet Union in such a manner so as to defend the Japanese territory of Korea; meanwhile, a minimum number of troops required to check a US invasion will be stationed in the South Korea area.<sup>41</sup>

Before moving on to the third part regarding the actual fighting, it is noteworthy to compare the two sides regarding their plans. First and foremost, the Soviet forces were trying to encircle the enemy by a huge pincer movement. The Japanese plan can be seen as a counteraction to this, but only if their forces were capable of delaying and withdrawing, rather than be enveloped and

overrun in the border areas. The order was to conduct a delaying fighting withdrawal to a final stand, not in the populous centre of Manchuria, but in a redoubt position in the mountainous border region between Manchuria and Korea.

## The Soviet attack into Manchuria on 9 August 1945

Let us begin this part by looking at the force ratio from the attacker’s (the Soviet Union) perspective:

Manpower	2.2	1,577,725 vs. 713,000
Guns/mortars	5.0	27,086 vs. 5,360
Tanks/SP guns	4.8	5,556 vs. 1,155
Aircraft	2.0	3,721 vs. 1,800

*Manpower (including Japanese auxiliary forces; the ratio decreases to 1.7 if Japanese forces in Korea are included).*

Divisions ( <i>including Brigades</i> )	2.8	92 vs. 33
Tank Brigades	15.0	30 vs. 2

*Field units (not including Japanese auxiliary forces).*

Since many Japanese field units were far from fully trained or equipped the ratio was in fact far higher than the above numbers indicate. A general estimate would actually increase the ratio by at least a factor of two, taking into account the status of manning levels, available weapons, level of training and quality (regarding armoured vehicles and artillery). In the 1<sup>st</sup> Area Army, combat effectiveness of divisions and brigades were estimated to be in the range from 55 % to 10 %. There were supposedly only 100 rounds per rifle and 5-600

rounds per artillery piece.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, most available Japanese aircraft were for training purposes. Overall, the Soviets had a clear advantage both in numbers as well as quality regarding the involved military forces.

Based on the correlation and ratio of numbers and quality, the outcome of the military operation can hardly be in doubt. This is, however, not something that is emphasized in much of the written material on Manchuria 1945. Instead of numbers, it is the Soviet doctrine and its capability of conducting operational art using sound tactics that is emphasized:

The outcome and even the pace of Operation AUGUST STORM was not surprising when one conducts a comparative analysis of each side's capabilities in terms of battlefield operational functions. This superiority was a result of the Soviets' doctrine -- emphasizing such aspects as combined arms forces, task-organization of units, and deep attack objectives -- combined with superior intelligence and command and control, and fuelled by a competent logistics system.<sup>43</sup>

A detailed investigation of actual facts from sources from both sides shows a different picture. In fact, one should be inherently suspicious about any rosy description of a military operation. Mistakes and frictions do occur in all military activity against an opponent. What is completely missing from the above quote is actually what the Japanese were going to do about their inferiority in numbers. This question has perhaps been too easily dismissed by scholars, which has painted the Japanese military activities in Manchuria as involving fanatical hold-outs with a '16<sup>th</sup> century samurai attitude'.<sup>44</sup>

The following is the Japanese narrative regarding the general situation and the situations in the west, north and east. As the war began on 9 August the Japanese delaying plan was put into effect. Prior disagreement on its implementation, however, meant that it was disrupted almost immediately. The Commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Area Army was in open disagreement. He preferred not to withdraw from the large cities along the main railway line Mukden-Hsinking. This was due to large numbers of Japanese civilians in this area, and also because of the incomplete preparations of the redoubt position.

The Commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Area Army thus 'illegally' ordered one of his two subordinate commands (44<sup>th</sup> Army) to immediately fall back from the western border rather than to delay the enemy. Faced with this 'fait accompli' Kantogun, in order to avoid confusion, chose not to interfere. However, when the 3<sup>rd</sup> Area Army Commander also ordered his 30<sup>th</sup> Army to move forward from the redoubt area in order to concentrate all available forces in the area of the main railway line for a counter-attack against an enemy advancing beyond their logistical capabilities, the entire operational plan was at risk. As a direct consequence, and as a ripple effect, Kantogun ordered the 4<sup>th</sup> Army to withdraw from northern Manchuria and replace 30<sup>th</sup> Army in the redoubt area.

Thus, the situation on the Japanese side was very much aggravated by the Commanders' (3<sup>rd</sup> Area Army and Kantogun) different opinions on where the last stand was to be made, taking into account actual facts on the ground. However, on 14 August, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Area Commander relented and declared that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Area Army would no longer wage the decisive battle in the cities and would plan for a withdrawal ac-

ording to what the operational plan envisaged.<sup>45</sup> The same afternoon, the Manchurian News Agency reported that an important broadcast was to be made the following day. As the imperial broadcast of surrender, the Imperial Rescript, was made on 15 August, active combat operations ceased. A formal order to Kantogun to terminate active offensive operations was, however, not delivered until 17 August by the Imperial General Headquarters. It is thus possible to argue, as no formal orders had arrived, that the war continued on. However, the actual understanding was that the war was over, which can be seen in the Kantogun staff conference late on 16 August, where the Chief of Staff declared, in tears, that disobeying the Imperial Rescript was tantamount to treason.<sup>46</sup>

Western Manchuria: when war began the Japanese divisions and brigade units near the front went into action in accordance with the operational plan. The 107<sup>th</sup> Division was, however, bypassed to the south by strong advancing Soviet forces, which disrupted the division's subsequent withdrawal to the east. The 107<sup>th</sup> Division then reverted to being a harassing force behind enemy lines by launching regimental-sized raids.<sup>47</sup> However, and this is supported by both narratives, there was no further major fighting since the 6th Guards Tank Army was unable to continue the advance towards the central cities due to a lack of fuel. Forward detachments did reach Mukden and Changchun (Hsinking) on 21 August – a full six days after the surrender broadcast. Further movement by the 6th Guards Tank Army to Port Arthur was in fact conducted by railway using commandeered trains from the Japanese.<sup>48</sup> In other words, the huge armour pincer that was to descend from the Great Khingan Mountain

chain into the central plains had in fact run out of fuel well before its targets.

In the north, the Soviets tried to take the fortified city of Hailar in a *coup de main* with the 205<sup>th</sup> Tank Brigade. However, the Japanese 80<sup>th</sup> Brigade (deemed to have an effective strength of 15 % of a Japanese division of 1941<sup>49</sup>) proved effective enough to force the Red Army to actually withdraw the 205<sup>th</sup> Tank Brigade from the city. Furthermore, the Japanese 119<sup>th</sup> Division managed to complete its withdrawal from Hailar to the east, an ordered and pre-planned re-deployment, to a blocking position in the mountain passes. In short: the Japanese opposition by the 4<sup>th</sup> Army 'severely hindered the Soviet advance'.<sup>50</sup>

It was in the east where most of the heavy fighting occurred. The Japanese 1<sup>st</sup> Area Army made a fighting withdrawal to the west and southwest as planned. The attacking Soviet ground forces advanced quickly; however, no clean breakthrough was established before the Japanese surrender. The difficult terrain, rains, effective rear-guard Japanese resistance and skilfully blown bridges in the face of tank-heavy vanguards proved to be obstacles, which made it impossible to pursue the withdrawing Japanese.<sup>51</sup> A major set-piece defensive battle was fought by the Japanese 126<sup>th</sup> and 135<sup>th</sup> Divisions, both of which had fallen back to new positions anchored at Mutanchiang, from 13 August to 16 August. The battle ended when the two Japanese divisions were ordered by the 1<sup>st</sup> Area Army Commander to disengage and withdraw to the west and southwest, leaving behind one regiment which did not receive the withdrawal order.<sup>52</sup> It later suffered heavy casualties.<sup>53</sup> Rather remarkably, the two Japanese divisions, with supposedly no more than 30 artillery pieces together, held off two Soviet field armies

(5<sup>th</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> Red Banner) for four days. The date of 16 August is also past the surrender broadcast, but we will leave that fact for the final analysis.

Soviet sources do recognize severe shortcomings in their own logistical planning. The available supply transports were too few to cope with the demand. The road conditions were poor and, together with the rainy weather, caused severe delays in re-supply operations. Estimates of fuel requirements were proved to be totally wrong. This severely affected the 6th Guards Tank Army in western Manchuria. This mobile army which was to operate deep behind enemy lines as an operational manoeuvre group (OMG) was in fact out of fuel already on the third day of the operation. It had to be re-supplied with emergency air transportation of fuel. One peculiar fact is that the Soviet logistical planning relied heavily on the unrealistic assumption of using enemy railroads for troop and supply transports in Manchuria.<sup>54</sup> This raises serious questions of the quality of the Soviet logistical planning. Another explanation is that the Soviet attack actually began before all necessary logistical preparations were in place. However, by launching an attack at an early stage it probably contributed to the creation of surprise.

Three facts, which are more often than not, left out of a description of the Soviet campaign:

- As for the advance and occupation following 15 August, rear-area troops sometimes took control of towns before the actual arrival of regular troops.<sup>55</sup> This suggests the characteristics of the later part of the operation (after the Japanese surrender).
- The Soviet airborne landings (50-400 men) took place after the Japanese had

begun surrendering. This fact seems to have more or less disappeared in later Soviet sources and has instead been replaced with claims that airborne landings ‘disorganized enemy troop command’.<sup>56</sup>

- It is only briefly mentioned in Soviet sources that the main reason for Soviet success was the poor state of the Japanese defences. Instead, Soviet planning and execution, ‘well-organized supply’ and superior equipment are mainly credited for the Soviet victory.<sup>57</sup>

One final note before the analysis; as can be seen in the chart below, the estimated Japanese actual losses are allegedly quite low, concerning the amount of soldiers and weaponry involved.<sup>58</sup> This indicates adherence to the Japanese operational plan regarding the avoidance of major battles and instead conducting a fighting withdrawal to the Manchurian-Korean border area for the final stand in the mountainous terrain. Notably, most combat casualties supposedly occurred in the 1<sup>st</sup> Area Army (particularly its 5<sup>th</sup> Army) where the Soviet made considerable progress, thus forcing the Japanese to commit to a defensive battle at Mutanchiang.

In the zone of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Area Army, where the Commander initially chose to go against the operational plan and proclaim the area between Mukden and Hsinking as the decisive battle area, only one division (the 107<sup>th</sup>), out of a total of nine divisions, was actually in major combat before the surrender. In other words, it is far from clear-cut that the Kantogun was defeated due to direct military actions on the battlefield. This, of course, leaves the argument that it was a ‘deep battle’, where the speed of advance caused surprise effects, which in turn caused psychological

	TOTAL	3 <sup>rd</sup> Area Army	4 <sup>th</sup> Army	1 <sup>st</sup> Area Army
Manpower	713,000	180,971	95,464	222,157
KIA (no.)	21,389	1,984	3,440	14,508
KIA ( %)	2,9 %	1,1 %	3,6 %	6,5 %

*Japanese KIA (EST.).*<sup>59</sup>

effects in the Japanese command & control structure. The consequences due to the refusal of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Area Army to follow plans may be seen as such effects. It caused, as ripple effects, new re-deployment orders which ‘were neither coherent nor realistic’ for the 4<sup>th</sup> Army.<sup>60</sup> However, the event that arguably caused the most decisive psychological effect on the Kantogun was the Japanese Emperor’s surrender broadcast on 15 August.

## Analysis: a critique of a narrative

The narrative that has been criticized in this text is about the perception of the Soviet offensive in Manchuria 1945. A major view, promoted by Soviet and some American sources, is that the Soviet operation was nothing less than a graduation ceremony of the Red Army and thus a blue print for future operations. This narrative can be described as the view on the successful application of Soviet operational art. Another view, primarily supported by Japanese sources, offers a different perspective by highlighting the defensive operations conducted by the Japanese and also the crucial issue regarding the timing of the Japanese surrender procedure at the same time. The Japanese surrender was decided upon on 14 August and the Japanese Emperor’s surrender proclamation was then broadcast on 15 August. The impact

of this on the Japanese operation is downplayed by the view on successful Soviet operational art.

In short, was the Soviet military operation a resounding success of the application of Soviet operational art against a well-prepared foe or was it a mediocre effort launched to defeat an already defeated enemy? Looking at the concept of Soviet operational art, three factors have been identified as especially important to conclude whether or not it was a success. Firstly, the amount of surprise, secondly the importance of speed relative to the Japanese operation and thirdly, the conduct of deep operations.

Regarding surprise, it was achieved at all levels: the strategic, the operational and the tactical level. Still, tactical events on the ground, such as successful Japanese withdrawals and skilful defence, especially by the Japanese 4<sup>th</sup> Army, indicate that the effects of the surprise declined rapidly at least at the tactical level. Operationally, the Soviet attack began about one month before it was estimated to begin by the Japanese intelligence branch. This meant that the operational plan of the Kantogun was disrupted as the training of newly raised units and the build-up of supplies and field fortifications in the planned redoubt area were incomplete. Strategically, the Japanese leadership in Tokyo was taken by surprise and was deeply concerned by the Soviet declaration of war as this dra-

matically changed their strategic outlook. In other words, the declaration of war and the commencement of hostilities in themselves, caused the Japanese leadership to re-evaluate their attempt to reach a negotiated peace rather than to accept the Potsdam Proclamation out-right. In this sense, at the strategic level, the news of the Soviet attack was ‘a greater shock than the use of the nuclear bomb’ on Hiroshima.<sup>61</sup>

When it comes to speed it must be said that the Japanese side, despite being taken by surprise, was actually sometimes ahead of the Soviets regarding tactical dispositions and rapid re-deployments. This can be seen in the re-deployment of divisions, saving those for later battles. It is noteworthy that the 119<sup>th</sup> Division managed to re-deploy in time from Hailar and thus block the advance in the north. In the east, the Japanese managed to re-deploy a great number of troops ahead of the Soviets. On the other hand, in the west, the Japanese 107<sup>th</sup> Division was effectively cut off from its withdrawal route by the Soviet advance.

Since the Japanese generally did follow their delaying operational plan, with the exception of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Area Army, it can be argued that the Soviet military formations did not manage to conduct ‘deep operations’. The main committed force for the ‘deep battle’ was arguably the capable and well equipped Soviet 6th Guards Tank Army, which at the time of surrender on 15 August was out of fuel, well to the west of the Mukden-Hsinking area. Here the lack, miscalculation or neglect of Soviet logistical preparation was a major factor.

The Soviet Union achieved a successful strategic surprise. The Japanese government and the Japanese high command generally assumed that a Soviet declaration of war and subsequent attack would not

take place before September, or possibly as late as early 1946. This was arguably the product of wishful thinking, coupled with a flawed logistical analysis of Soviet capabilities and military build-up. Perhaps, it is necessary to re-evaluate the military strengths and weaknesses of the Soviet military. The strength was the will to launch a strategic attack by successfully masking the exact timing. One might argue that the attack was prematurely launched before logistical preparations had been completed. Also, as has been shown above, the Red Army had some difficulties in the actual fighting even though it was against a numerically and qualitatively inferior enemy force. As the Japanese were in the process of surrendering more or less during the entire operation, it would be incorrect to claim that the application of Soviet operational art was the primary cause – in fact, it had little to do with the final outcome.

An alternative explanation is that the Japanese surrender procedure was the main reason behind the end of the fighting. The Soviet invasion meant that the last hope for the Japanese government to negotiate an end to the war had vanished. There was no longer any alternative than to unconditionally accept the Potsdam Proclamation (with the implicit preservation of the Emperor, since the Japanese people were to decide their own future governmental system).<sup>62</sup> As can be seen below, as soon as the surrender broadcast (Imperial Rescript) was made, the chain of command was overridden and various units stood down and ceased operations;

August 15. The Imperial Rescript on ceasefire was received at noon. Upon receipt of the Imperial Rescript ending the war at noon of the 15th, the attacks were suspended and the forces, maintaining

strict watch for the purposes of self-defence, waited in readiness. Subsequent attacks and the projected special attack of the 5th Air Training Unit suspended at 2400 hours.<sup>63</sup>

Shortly after 1500 hours, the [123<sup>rd</sup>] division received a message from Fourth Army stating: "Listen respectfully to the important broadcast at noon of the 15th." As that hour had already passed we missed the broadcast. At about 1700 hours, however, the division was notified by the Kwantung Army Special Intelligence Unit that Japan's surrender had been broadcast. This news shocked the division commander and his staff. In consideration of the morale of troops, division headquarters withheld announcing the news until confirmation could be obtained. After the report was confirmed from radio broadcasts emanating from various parts of the world, division headquarters assembled all unit commanders at 2000 hours, announced Japan's unconditional surrender, and passed on instructions prepared by the division commander exhorting all personnel to avoid any rash acts.<sup>64</sup>

The above actions of the 123<sup>rd</sup> Division are noteworthy since its parent Headquarters, the 4<sup>th</sup> Army, 'took no steps to end hostilities' as it had not received formal ceasefire orders from the Kantogun. This indicates that although there was a delay in the formal ceasefire order, sub-units were able to receive radio broadcast that the war was over and take action. There were, nonetheless, difficulties in notifying minor and isolated units regarding the ceasefire and surrender orders.<sup>65</sup> The bypassed and isolated 107<sup>th</sup> Division, which continued to fight as a raiding force, was apparently unable to receive radio signals. After Soviet demands, a Japanese officer was flown to the vicinity of the division in order to stop the fighting.<sup>66</sup> On 17 August, several orders and

directives were received by the Kantogun concerning the termination of active offensive operations (dated 15 August), to cease all hostilities (dated 16 August) and to surrender arms and equipment to the Soviet Union (also dated 16 August).<sup>67</sup>

The Japanese Emperor Hirohito's official surrender speech was recorded on 14 August in Tokyo and was broadcast on public radio on 15 August. Although this in itself was not a formal order to the Japanese army and navy to cease military actions, it was certainly a sovereign ruling that was hard to ignore. As can be found in Admiral Ugaki Matome's diary, he clearly reflects upon the surrender broadcast. Since the formal order to cease military operations had still not been sent out (it was sent out on 17 August) he found it possible to mount a final *tokkotai* sortie with the purpose of killing himself. In his written motivation of this final sortie, it is clear that he considered the war to be over and military operations were to be stopped.<sup>68</sup> Technically he did not violate a formal order by launching this final sortie, but in the end, it was all about a technicality – the war was considered to be over. This insight was hardly the solitary opinion of Admiral Ugaki.

Indeed, it goes without saying that most of the Japanese, military and civilians, realized as soon as they received the radio broadcast that the war was over, and that all military offensive actions were to be suspended. With this in mind, we can take a closer look at the Soviet military operation in conjunction with the Japanese surrender timeline. This indicates that the Soviet military success is related to the fact that the Japanese military more or less ceased military operations. From this perspective, the Soviet strategic operation into Manchuria can be designated more of an administra-

tive occupation (or rather a strategic land-grab) rather than an excellent application of operational art against a formidable enemy army.

It may be argued that the portrayal of Soviet operational art as being successful in the case of Manchuria is part of a false narrative, regarding the capability of the Red Army. This would primarily serve Soviet interests, but also western interests, by rating the capacity of the Soviet Union as much better than in reality. In fact, during the Cold War, the US had a vested interest in portraying the Soviet Union as a capable military force in wargaming scenarios, analyses and exercises.<sup>69</sup> The Soviet-dominated narrative relies on Soviet sources mainly published in the late 1960s, i.e. in conjunction with the rising Sino-Soviet border tension. As a matter of fact, one of the earliest US sources on the campaign clearly conveys this coincidence and offers a thoughtful warning to later studies.<sup>70</sup> Unfortunately, this assessment that the Soviet Union was distorting the historical records in order to intimate China has not made it into later studies. Indeed, Soviet propaganda and western (primarily US) interests in portraying the Soviet ground forces as a capable foe seem to have played hand in hand.

Subsequent Soviet naval landing operations to seize the Kurile Islands in late August/early September 1945 were marked with haste and thus affected by lack of preparation and poor execution. Those operations succeeded, but only because the Japanese were in the process of surrendering. The Japanese 91<sup>st</sup> Division was actually winning the battle on the northern Kurile island of Shimushu causing thousands of Soviet casualties until the order to surrender and cease all combat operations got through.<sup>71</sup> The territorial question of

the Southern Kurile Islands (the 'Northern Territories' claimed by Japan) remains unsolved to this day, thus blocking a final peace treaty between Japan and Russia.

## Conclusion

This text has revealed gaps in the argument that the successful outcome of the Soviet offensive into Manchuria in 1945 was due to the successful application of Soviet operational art. The destruction of the Japanese military forces (the Kantogun) in Manchuria did not occur on the battlefield. It came about in an organized way through a formal surrender and collections of weapons, in conjunction with an administrative occupation by the Soviet forces after a brief military campaign.

By considering the progress of advance by the Soviet military forces versus the Japanese counter-moves, it can be concluded in this text that the Soviet military offensive did not in itself achieve a military collapse of the Japanese forces. The Japanese delaying operational plan in itself made it difficult to destroy their units in set-piece battles near the border. On the other hand, the Soviet declaration of war and subsequent invasion probably contributed to a quicker Japanese surrender at the strategic level. It certainly contributed to the securing of areas Stalin wanted to control. Still, it can be argued that this result would have been achieved regardless, since demarcation lines had been agreed upon by the US and the Soviet Union at the Yalta Conference. However, the suspicious attitude of Stalin made the military operation imperative as this was the only way Stalin could be certain that specific territories were to be handed over. In other words, the Soviet military operation did in that sense, achieve its strategic objective. Or at



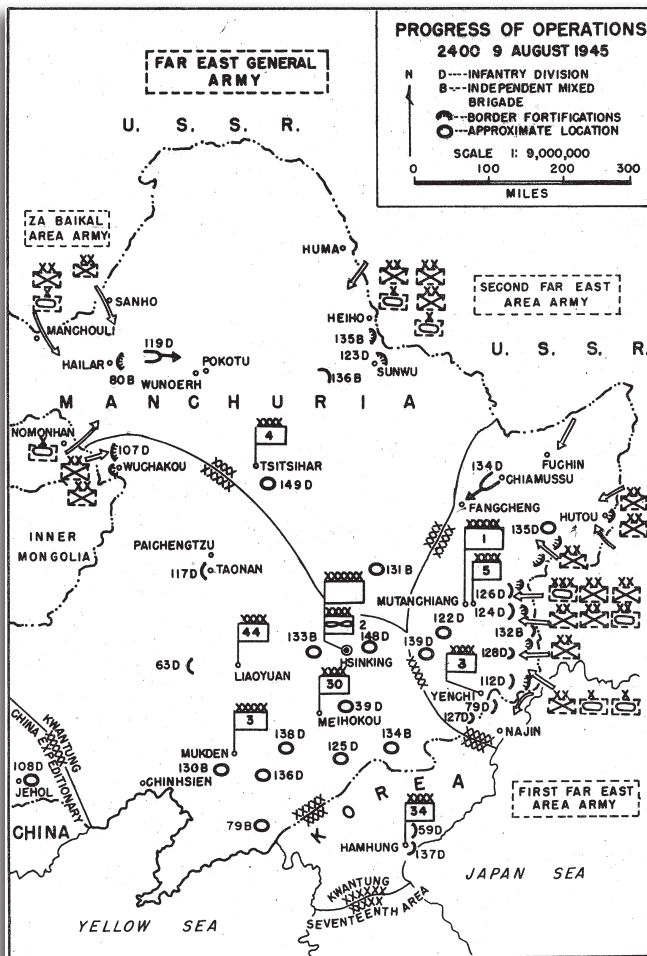
least most of it, since the Soviet Union did not occupy parts of the northern Japanese home island Hokkaido, which they allegedly had plans to do.

One may argue that the Soviet military operation was an example of a successful *blitzkrieg*; a speedy military campaign that achieved its strategic objective. The problem is that this constitutes a false narrative by ignoring the context of the ending of the Second World War and the Great East Asian War. The contextual surrender process of Japan belongs at the very centre of an analysis on Manchuria in 1945.

The Soviet military operation thus, did not in itself achieve the strategic objective on the ground. The Red Army's rather unexceptional showing on the battlefield, when the state of the opponent's forces is taken into consideration, raises doubts about the argument that promotes the Soviet military operation into Manchuria as an example of successful Soviet operational art. On the other hand, the actual declaration of war and the immediate assumption of a full-scale armed invasion were decisive. In reviewing the military capability of the Soviet Union and even today's Russia, one

should look further into what did succeed; the achievement of surprise due to Japanese wishful thinking foremost at the strategic (political and military) level, to a lesser extent on the operational and tactical levels and the shocks that were generated.

The author is a Major and a PhD Candidate in War Studies of the Swedish National Defence College seconded to King's College London.



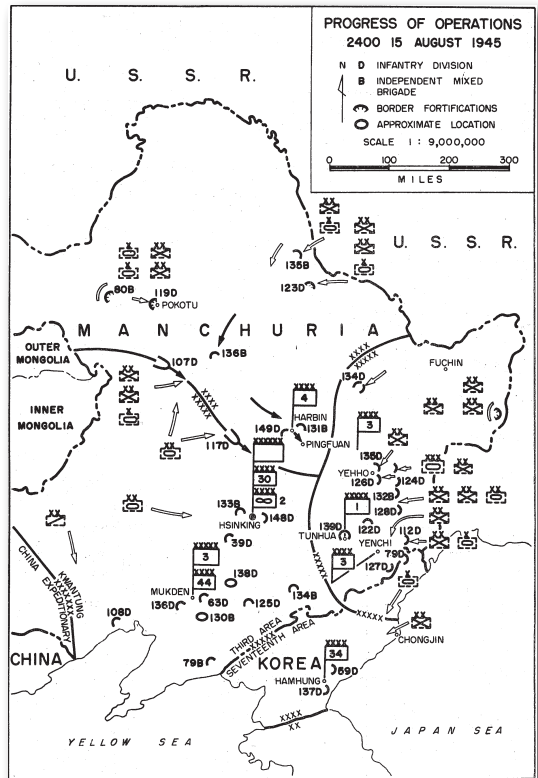
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