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ARCHITECT OF SOVIET VICTORY IN WORLD WAR II

The Life and Theories
of G.S. Isserson



RICHARD W. HARRISON

Foreword by David M. Glantz

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Front cover: Division Commander Isserson, ca. 1939 (courtesy Russian
State Military Archives); Soviet flag, Red Army pin ©2010 Shutterstock;
background map shows the opposing sides' plans for a strategic-level
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For my son, Michael

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Note on Transliteration and Place Names

No system of transliteration from the Cyrillic alphabet to English is perfect, and some are worse than others. For this work, I have adopted the transliteration method employed by the U.S. Library of Congress, with a few notable exceptions. The latter include those names (e.g., Maxim Gorky, Yalta, etc.), the spelling of which has become so thoroughly established that to change them would only confuse the reader. Others include those first and last names beginning with the Cyrillic letter *е* and *я* (e.g., Yegorov, Yevgenii, Yaroslavskii), as the system does not do justice to the actual pronunciation of these words. I have elected to transliterate them, respectively as *Ye* and *Ya*, which are closer in sound to the original. These same letters, when they appear elsewhere in a word, are translated according to the Library of Congress system.

The correct spelling of place names presents a separate problem, particularly as many locales changed hands repeatedly during the years covered by this book, followed by a change in the city's name. For such cases, I have adopted the method of introducing the city or town by the name commonly used at the time in the narrative, followed by its current name in parentheses; for example, Königsberg (Kaliningrad).

Foreword

by David M. Glantz

The appearance of Richard W. Harrison's *Architect of Soviet Victory in World War II: The Life and Theories of G. S. Isserson* marks an important step forward in our understanding of the interwar Red Army. In fact, careful study of the military theoretician's significant contributions to military thought applies not only to the Red and Soviet Armies, in general, but even to the nascent army of the current Russian Federation as well. For too long, we in the West have had to make do with accounts of this period often reflecting official points of view. Now, thanks to Harrison's detailed study, we are provided with an in-depth look at the development of the army's military theory through the works of one of its most brilliant thinkers — Colonel Georgii Samoilovich Isserson.

For his efforts, Dr. Harrison has marshaled an impressive array of sources, the most significant of which are Isserson's own theoretical works, both open and classified. These works, almost all of which are completely unknown in the West, reveal that, by the middle of the 1930s, the Red Army possessed a sophisticated theory of waging war at the operational level through the conduct of deep operations by exploiting operational maneuver, theories which, when finally implemented in wartime, would stand it is good stead during the bitter struggle with Hitler's Nazi Germany. Unfortunately, the Soviet Union's political leadership squandered this advantage in the military purges of 1937–38, forcing the army to relearn these basic principles later at a far more terrible price. And even though this skilled theorist was not fated to take part in World War II, the seeds he had sown among a generation of student officers contributed to the eventual victory.

Also highlighted here are Isserson's equally important, although less well-known, contributions to the Red Army's tactical development, as expressed in the theory of the deep battle. Especially revealing to the reader will be his account of the strategic and historical debates that roiled the army not only during the turbulent interwar years but also in the Cold War years after Stalin's death in 1953.

While the focus throughout remains the development of Isserson's theoretical views, Harrison also devotes significant time and thought to examining the man behind the ideas — the new Soviet man — weaving this into the narrative in such a way to lighten the weighty analysis of profoundly important military thought. Here, the author presents a portrait of a brilliant but troubled man as he sought to advance his theories during a politically

treacherous time. Relying heavily on a variety of hitherto classified sources and interviews with those who knew and worked with Isserson, Harrison describes his subject's military career and his often-difficult relations with fellow officers, colleagues, and friends. And while the author is unstinting in his admiration of Isserson's contributions to military theory, he is no less relentless in revealing his monumental character flaws, which brought so much unhappiness to both him and those around him.

In the ongoing struggle to piece together the tortured history of the Red Army, this book is a welcome addition to the growing body of post-Soviet work on the subject. While it restores Isserson to his rightful place among the panoply of important Russian military theorists such as Aleksandr Svechin, Vladimir Triandafillov, and Mikhail Tukhachevsky, it also provides an indispensable context for understanding not only how and why military theory and the armed forces developed in Soviet times but also in today's Russian Federation. Certain to be of interest even to the general reader, this book is a must read for those intent on understanding Soviet and Russian military thought.

David M. Glantz • Carlisle, Pennsylvania

David M. Glantz, a retired colonel in the U.S. Army and a graduate of the Virginia Military Institute, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the Army's Command and General Staff and War Colleges, is the editor of the *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* and the author of many books and articles on the Soviet army in peace and war.

Preface

The subject of this biography, Georgii Samoilovich Isserson, first came to my attention several years ago, while I was working on a doctoral dissertation on the development of Russian-Soviet operational art. It quickly became apparent that Isserson was easily the army's leading theorist in the field of operational art during the 1930s and the man most responsible for the theory of the "deep operation," which became the basis for the Red Army's enormous offensive operations during World War II. This made Isserson, by extension, one of the architects of the Soviet victory, although he was not destined to take part in the great conflict for which he had prepared so long.

However, the more I learned about Isserson the more I was amazed at how his enormous contribution to the development of his country's military theory has barely been mentioned, or passed over entirely. And while numerous biographies of Soviet-era commanders have appeared over the years in both Russian and English, Isserson has somehow never rated the historian's attention, and more than 30 years after his death we still lack a full-scale treatment of his life and work. Seen in this light, this book may be viewed as a piece of historical justification, an attempt to do honor to a man who, despite his many personal flaws, was instrumental in forging his country's victory in war, but, who for reasons peculiar to the system he served, has been unfairly neglected by historians at home and abroad. And although Isserson's role as a military intellectual is more than sufficient to merit a detailed study, his personal tragedy adds a particular element of pathos to a story that demands to be told.

The reasons behind this neglect of Isserson's reputation are several. One explanation lies in the very nature of the Soviet system, which tended to play down an individual's contribution in favor of a more collective approach, which was deemed to represent the broad-based progressive development of a particular phenomenon. Isserson's ethnicity may also have been a factor in his long-term obscurity, particularly in light of the widespread official anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union during his final years. Nor can one completely discount the influence of his odious personality, which even an admiring biographer must recognize, made him a less than appealing candidate for fame.

A few examples drawn from the post-Stalin Soviet military press should suffice to illustrate the uneven status of Isserson's reputation over the years. The period since the late 1950s saw a veritable explosion of military studies and memoirs, most of which dealt with the events of the Great Patriotic War. An important byproduct of this movement was a

heightened interest in the period between the end of the civil war and the German invasion of 1941, which also witnessed the rapid development of the country's military art. During the 1960s a number of laudatory books and articles appeared in which many of the Red Army's leading interwar figures were praised for the progressive views and personal courage, a fact which was often made more poignant by the knowledge that many of these individuals became victims of Stalin's 1937–38 purge of the armed forces.

By way of illustration one may cite the example of the Soviet Union's first full-scale attempt at a comprehensive history of World War II — the six-volume *History of the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union, 1941–1945*, which appeared at the beginning of the 1960s. In the section devoted to the development of the Red Army's prewar military theory, Isserson's name was conspicuously absent from the lengthy roster of thinkers, despite the fact that the achievements of most of those listed paled in comparison to his. This oversight was addressed several years later in the 12-volume *History of the Second World War, 1939–1945*, which despite the title was overwhelmingly concerned with events on the Soviet–German front. Here, Isserson was listed as one of many who contributed to the development of Soviet operational art during the 1930s.¹

This pattern of being either completely ignored or mentioned only in passing held true throughout the remaining years of Isserson's life. To cite a particularly egregious example, a piece by Maj. Gen. Vasilii Aleksandrovich Semenov, from the classified journal *Military Thought*, utterly fails to mention Isserson at all. Despite a scrupulously compiled bibliography of the period's major operational works, Isserson's several groundbreaking books on the subject are conspicuous by their absence.² Given the author's previous slighting of Isserson's contributions, the omission would appear to be deliberate.

On the other hand, Isserson is cited by name or his works mentioned in a number of other articles from the same journal.³ However, once again he appears as only one of many figures from the period, and no effort is made to determine the relative weight of each individual's contribution. The same is true of another entry, which appeared two years after Isserson's death. Although the author praised Isserson as a “prominent military theoretician” whose ideas “retain a certain value in modern conditions,” he was nonetheless again lumped together with a number of other interwar writers.⁴

To a certain extent the English-language literature on the subject of Soviet military thought during the interwar years reflects the same divided approach, although Isserson seems to have fared better abroad than at home, at least since the fall of the Soviet Union. This is hardly to be wondered at; as for so long British and American authors lacked access to the Soviet military archives and were therefore dependent upon memoirs and other official publications. For example, the late John Erickson, the dean of Western authorities on the Soviet armed forces, fails to mention Isserson in his groundbreaking work, *The Soviet High Command*, despite a number of excellent passages dealing with the development of the Red Army's prewar military theory. Erickson mentions Isserson a number of times in a later work, although not as a theorist in his own right, but rather as a chronicler of the ideas of the far better known Mikhail Nikolaevich Tukhachevskii.⁵ Erickson's successor, David Glantz, has been more generous, calling Isserson “a prestigious theorist and prolific writer,” and his two-volume work on the development of Soviet operational art contains extensive excerpts from several of Isserson's works.⁶ Elsewhere, Glantz praises Isserson's ability “to write advanced and visionary works” under extremely difficult conditions, while at the same time citing these very works as examples of “the futility of Soviet operational theory in the interwar years.”⁷

Many Westerners who do refer to Isserson do so as a means of highlighting the accom-

plishments of others — most notably Tukhachevskii. Jacob Kipp, for example, refers to Isserson as Tukhachevskii's "collaborator," although he does give Isserson credit for providing "the intellectual synthesis" for the marshal's ideas on the employment of large armored formations in the operation.⁸ Elsewhere, Shimon Naveh consistently lumps Isserson together with any number of interwar commanders, usually Tukhachevskii and Vladimir Kiriakovich Triandafillov, and at one point even refers to Isserson as a member of "Tukhachevskii's school."⁹ Richard Simpkin generously refers to Isserson as a member of a "creative triumvirate," which included Tukhachevskii and Triandafillov, and as the individual "who was ultimately to exert the greatest and most enduring influence on the Soviet concept of land operations." He further calls Isserson's work on the Red Army's 1936 field manual "not only a brilliant piece of exposition but a good read into the bargain."¹⁰ For the most part, however, the author is more interested in using Isserson as a way of shining a light on his real subject, Tukhachevskii.

The tendency of many Western analysts to focus excessive attention on the personality of Tukhachevskii is understandable, particularly as they were dealing with a society that jealously guarded its secrets. My object is not to criticize those who have taken this route but to caution against accepting at face value so much of what was written in the Soviet Union under the influence of transient political considerations over forty years ago. The greater access to the Russian military archives demands a reexamination of many previously held beliefs inherited from a previous era. In this respect, it is my hope that this book may play a positive role in this movement.

The centerpiece of this book is Isserson's role as a military thinker. Accordingly, a great deal of weight is given to an examination of his theoretical views, as expressed in his major works, both open and classified. For this purpose I have relied heavily on such open-source works as *The Evolution of Operational Art*, *Fundamentals of the Defensive Operation*, and *The New Forms of Combat*. Other works, such as *Lectures on Deep Tactics* and the surviving parts of *The Fundamentals of Conducting Operations* are so difficult to obtain as to almost be classified. Even Isserson's masterwork, *The Fundamentals of the Deep Operation* remains classified to this day. These sources constitute the core of Isserson's work and are supplemented by numerous articles that appeared during his most productive years, as well as those that he wrote following his return from exile. Another source was Isserson's own voluminous file, housed in the Russian State Military Archives. This is particularly valuable, in that it contains the draft versions of several articles and speeches, among other papers, that were later shortened for publication purposes, or never made it into print.

My desire to illuminate Isserson's military theories is responsible for the organization of this book. For the most part, I have followed traditional biographical practice and organized the narrative chronologically around the most significant events in my subject's life, while at the same time highlighting in as much detail as possible his strategic, operational, and tactical theories. The major exception to this rule is chapter 3, which is devoted primarily to an exposition of Isserson's tactical views. In this chapter I have chosen to sacrifice chronological consistency in favor of thematic unity, in order to encompass the entirety of his tactical works from 1931–32 and 1936–37. I believe I have been able to do this without violence to the overall unfolding of events. Chapters 4 and 5 have very little to do with the details of Isserson's life, and are dedicated almost entirely to an examination of his operational views as expressed in two of his major works. These three chapters, as it were, form the theoretical backbone of the book, although questions of military theory nevertheless figure prominently in almost all chapters.

The curious arc of Isserson's life is also evident in the book's organization. His active participation in the elaboration of the Red Army's military theory ended with his arrest in 1941, at the age of 43. However, Isserson still had another 35 years to live, although 14 of these were spent in labor camp and internal exile. Thus while the first two chapters are devoted to the first 30 years of his life, the bulk of the narrative (chapters 3 through 8) deal with the flowering of his intellectual talents from 1929 to 1941. The remaining chapters (9 through 12) deal with Isserson's arrest and the last 30 years of his life. One of these chapters also contains an examination of the influence his theories had on the Red Army's conduct of operations during World War II.

Isserson's career and personal life, while of undoubted interest, nonetheless take a back seat to his intellectual endeavors. The information on these aspects of his life also came from a number of sources. Of decisive importance to the development of this book was the large amount of personal and career-related information contained in Isserson's arrest file, housed in the Federal Security Service Archives in Moscow. Despite their deservedly odious reputation, the security organs that preceded the FSB were at least thorough in their interrogations of those unfortunates, such as Isserson, in their charge. During the course of building a case against him, Isserson's interrogators forced him to give an exhaustive account of his life, which filled in many of the gaps in his service career. The account, despite Isserson's many prevarications, also goes far in revealing his character and relations with his contemporaries. Equally important were his daughter's personal reminiscences of their family life. Despite her difficult relationship with her father, she was most anxious to see that his legacy is not forgotten. Her memory of the intimate details of the Isserson family's stormy existence was revealing and went far toward revealing the man behind the thinker. It is my greatest regret in writing this book that Irena Georgievna Yeremina died before I could finish.

It is the confluence of these various factors that make up this book. What began as a bare-bones examination of Isserson's theoretical views gradually evolved into a more balanced account of his life and writings, supplemented by the personal accounts of those who knew this remarkable, if difficult, man. As the work progressed further I sought increasingly to achieve what I believe any decent biography should aspire to — to render an account not only of a man's life, but also of the time he lived in. As to how well I have succeeded in this effort, I leave it to the reader to judge.

CHAPTER 1

Youth and Early Military Service

Introduction

The first half of the twentieth century was a time of wars, great and small. It was also the golden age of military theorists and those who foresaw the era's military trends and sought to mold their countries' armed forces accordingly. The period between the two world wars was especially rich and marked the heyday of such proponents of armored warfare as Heinz Guderian in Germany, J.F.C. Fuller in Britain, and Charles de Gaulle in France, as well as the air power advocates William Mitchell in the United States and Giulio Douhet in Italy. Some, such as Mitchell, suffered professional disgrace for what was regarded as the too-forceful advocacy of their views. In other cases an individual's fame increased as the result of his wartime and postwar activities. Of these, easily the most well known was Guderian, who enjoyed a highly successful career as an armored commander during World War II. His postwar memoirs further cemented his reputation in the West and, along with other publications by former commanders, were partly responsible for the subsequent elevation of the German army's wartime experience to undeserved heights. Others, such as Britain's Basil Liddell Hart, skillfully managed to salvage their damaged reputations after the war and succeeded in reinventing themselves as prophets of a new age in military affairs.

These men, all working from a similar scientific and industrial base, sought to explain and systematize the various military-technological developments of the time and apply them to a future war. Uppermost in their minds was the necessity of avoiding a repetition of the trench deadlock of 1914 to 1918 and restoring maneuver to warfare, although the specific approach adopted varied in accordance with their countries' geographical position and historical traditions, the biases of the political leadership, as well as perceived geopolitical needs. What is remarkable is that despite these various considerations, the conclusions they reached were, in many cases, strikingly similar, often varying only in the emphasis placed on various elements in their respective military equations. The German approach, for example, emphasized the employment of large armored masses, backed by tactical air power, and sought a quick decision against individual members of a potentially stronger enemy coalition before the latter could gather its forces. On the other hand, the United States and Great Britain secure in their geographical isolation and protected by the sea developed less radical "standoff" strategies, which emphasized the employment of long-range means such as

air and sea power. This implied a more prolonged conflict, in which they would be able to use their economic superiority to greatest advantage.

The Soviet Union, despite its radical political ideology and sharply adversarial relationship with the capitalist world, was very much a part of this evolutionary process. Even the country's relative economic backwardness did not hinder these developments for long, and by the mid-1930s the Red Army was on a technological, organizational and theoretical par with the leading armies of Western Europe, and in some areas, had even surpassed them. Unlike their counterparts in the West, however, many of the Red Army's leading theorists today are almost completely unknown outside a small coterie of military historians. Easily the most brilliant and least known of these was G.S. Isserson, whose story can now at last be told.

Childhood and Youth



Isserson with his sister Liusi, ca. 1902 (courtesy Russian State Military Archives).

Georgii Samoilovich Isserson was born on June 16, 1898, in Kaunas (Kovna), a sleepy provincial town along the Neman River, on the western periphery of the Russian Empire. He was the second child of Samuil El'iashevich Isserson and his wife, Betty Isidorovna. Isserson's father was a medical doctor, and his mother, whose maiden name was Shereshevskaiia, was, according to family legend, a Jewish woman from Germany.¹ The couple's first child was a daughter, Liusi, who was born on December 24, 1895.²

Isserson's birth certificate contains the interesting notation that his name was originally Grigorii.³ Why and when he came to be called Georgii is unknown. Nor is it clear why the younger Isserson received the patronymic Samoilovich, instead of what should have been Samuilovich. The Isserson family's flexibility with names seems to have been part of a fairly widespread practice among the more russified Jews of the

empire, particularly those who resided in urban areas. Due to their tenuous position in society, this group often adopted the ways, if not the religion, of the majority Russian culture by russifying to some degree their names. For example, family lore still refers to Isserson's father as Solomon Grigor'evich.⁴ The elder Isserson may have adopted this name for professional reasons, perhaps hoping that he could attract more patients with a russified name. The latter may also have been inherited from his father, as two brothers — David and Yakov, who also carried the patronymic Grigor'evich.⁵

Almost nothing is known about Isserson's antecedents, although to judge from his surname, which means "son of Isser," his family originally came from Germany. The Issersons may have arrived in the area during one of the periodic migrations in the latter part of the Middle Ages. However, as Jews, the Issersons would have been subject to the various discriminatory policies imposed by the czarist regime on the empire's Jewish population. One of the most onerous of these was being forced to live in the "Pale of Settlement," that area in the western part of the Russian Empire to which Jews were generally confined by law. This could be evaded, provided one was willing to bend to the prevailing winds. Isserson's daughter, Irena Georgievna, stated that her great grandfather served for 25 years in the czarist army during the reign of Nicholas I (1825–55) and eventually attained the rank of colonel and was later even granted a life peerage.⁶ Such a career path would have been impossible had he openly practiced his faith, and implies that he may well have been baptized as a Christian (*vykrest*) as a way of evading the regime's restrictions. Whatever his status, however, he probably showed his true feelings by marrying a Jewish woman from Sweden.⁷

By the time Isserson's father reached adulthood some of the more overtly anti-Semitic legislation had been repealed, or at least softened. During the early period of Alexander II's (1855–81) reforms, for example, wealthy Jewish merchants and other groups, including students and doctors, were allowed to reside outside the "Pale of Settlement," although this had no bearing on the lives of their less fortunate brethren. The relatively more liberal atmosphere that then prevailed meant that Samuil El'iashevich was able to graduate from the Military-Medical Academy in St. Petersburg.⁸ His whereabouts prior to moving to Kaunas are unknown, and it is not certain that he even remained in the army. Even if he did, he may have maintained a private practice as well, as he is listed on his son's birth certificate as a "supernumerary house surgeon" at the city hospital.⁹ A short work of his, on the incidence of scarlet fever at the city hospital, remains from this period.¹⁰ He did maintain his connection with the armed forces, however, and briefly served in Manchuria during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05.¹¹

For his part, Isserson always wrote "Jew" in the paragraph in his service biography dealing with nationality, although during the Soviet regime this was considered a question of ethnicity and not religion.¹² Isserson was certainly not a religious Jew, and his family seems not to have actively practiced the faith of their fathers, although both children's births were registered with the local Jewish authorities in Yiddish.¹³ However, as a committed communist, Isserson was duty-bound to regard questions of religion and nationality as so many "bourgeois" prejudices. His daughter later declared that Isserson's ethnic roots "had absolutely no significance for him," and that in this sense he was a man of "broad views."¹⁴ Nevertheless, Isserson's ethnicity may have played a major role in the formation of his combative character as the result of a perpetual feeling of being an outsider. This may have created a "me against the world" mentality, which often brought him into conflict with others.

Nevertheless, the young Isserson probably moved freely between the Jewish and Russian worlds, despite the remaining restrictions on his people. As one historian has commented: "The immense majority of the Jewish intelligentsia was 'russified'; it attended Russian schools, was brought up on Russian literature, and it went through the same spiritual evolution as the Russian intelligentsia."¹⁵ Among the fruits of this association was the Russian Jewish community's introduction to Western culture, which the young Isserson probably imbibed from his mother. Aside from his formal studies, Isserson also found the time to practice music, about which his mother was particularly insistent, and he eventually learned to play the violin and piano.¹⁶ These lessons fell on fertile soil and Isserson maintained an intense love for music throughout his life.

Samuil El'iashevich's marriage to a foreigner did create some practical problems. Betty Isidorovna, known to her friends as Amalia, never mastered Russian, and German remained the language of conversation in the family home.¹⁷ The predominance of German may have had a good deal to do with her imperious character, and Isserson's daughter stated that her grandmother "commanded her husband and children just as she pleased." She added that her father "took after her in this regard, having in mind his overbearing personality."¹⁸ As a result, the young Isserson grew up speaking German, which influenced his future career immensely, and many of his early works were drawn from German-language sources. His daughter later recalled that the German language left a deep impression on her father, adding, "If you begin reading daddy's works, you'll see a purely German phrase construction, just like Tolstoy, with the subject on one page, and the predicate on another."¹⁹ In fact, Isserson's command of German was so good that he could almost pass for a native of that country, at least to a Soviet citizen. One commander who knew him in the 1920s later testified that "I don't know where Isserson is from, or what his nationality is, but I do know that he speaks German with a Berlin dialect to a degree that one can achieve only after a lengthy stay in Germany."²⁰

Isserson left no account of his early years in Kaunas, which must have been a dreary place to grow up in. During the Middle Ages the city had formed part of the holdings of the Teutonic Knights and later became part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. It was incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1795, following the third partition of Poland. Since then the city had lost some of its previous importance, although the construction of the main rail line from St. Petersburg to Germany, had abetted its growth somewhat, so that by 1897 the city numbered some 71,000 inhabitants.

Isserson seems to have had mixed feelings about his hometown and throughout his military career insisted on listing Leningrad (St. Petersburg) as his place of birth.²¹ Years later, while undergoing interrogation, he admitted that this was not true and that he had indeed been born in Kaunas. When pressed for the reasons behind this lengthy subterfuge, Isserson rather lamely admitted that he could not explain why he had done so.²² One likely explanation is that in those days of "revolutionary vigilance" tampering with one's biography was not uncommon, and a number of commanders sought to downplay their original station in life by stressing or creating out of whole cloth "worker" or "peasant" roots. Given St. Petersburg's revolutionary traditions, he may have felt it the wiser course to attach himself to that city. He also most likely took pains to disguise the fact that he had been born in a town that for 20 years was the capital of "bourgeois" Lithuania, and it would certainly have been to his advantage to hide this dangerous fact. Following his arrest, however, Isserson may well have decided that things could probably not get any worse, and he owned up to the lie.

Probably the most memorable event of Isserson's early years was the outbreak of the first Russian revolution (1905–07). The immediate cause of this upheaval was the Russian army's disastrous conduct of the Russo-Japanese War, which vividly exposed the rot in the entire czarist system. The true reasons, however, ran deeper and had everything to do with the accumulated grievances of the country's long-suffering peasantry and its new industrial working class. The revolution failed to topple the regime, although the czar was forced to concede to a number of important domestic reforms, including the creation of an elected legislative body and the establishment of a free press and other liberties. The Issersons' attitude toward these events is not known, although one may engage in some informed speculation. As Jews, they certainly had no reason to love the existing order, which had severely restricted Jewish participation in the country's political and commercial life and which continued to encourage anti-Semitic pogroms. It is also possible that the young Isserson imbibed some of his earliest political convictions as a result of these events.

A family photograph taken a few years later reveals nothing of these turbulent times and depicts the Issersons as exemplars of middle class respectability. Like many such families, they believed in the value of education and were determined that their son, as the bearer of the family name, should have the best. The young Isserson seems to have been a diligent student, and a photograph of him in his school uniform and high intellectual forehead is indicative of the young man's serious intentions.

These pleasant pursuits were soon swept aside, however, by the outbreak of World War I in 1914. The border with Germany was not far away, and the German army occupied Kاونas in the summer of 1915 in the wake of the Russian army's retreat. The Issersons relocated first to Pskov, and then to Narva, where the elder Isserson worked in the local military hospital as the senior surgeon.²³ It was probably from either of these two towns that the young Isserson was sent to complete his studies in the capital of Petrograd (renamed from



Isserson with his parents, Betty Isidorovna and Samuil El'iashevich, ca. 1910 (courtesy Russian State Military Archives).

St. Petersburg upon the outbreak of war). In 1916 Isserson completed high school (*gimnaziiia*) No. 12.²⁴

Upon his graduation from high school, Isserson enrolled in the law faculty at Petrograd University sometime late in 1916.²⁵ That he chose the law is hardly surprising, given the many later proofs of his contentious character and scrupulous attention to detail. One can easily imagine him achieving a good deal of success in the law, had not events disposed otherwise. During this period he also continued to study music and practiced at a local conservatory.²⁶

It is likely that Isserson, who turned 18 in 1916, received some kind of military deferment upon entering the university. The reprieve did not last long, however, as the Russian army's demand for new recruits was insatiable, in order to make up for the extremely heavy losses it had suffered. As a result, in January 1917 he was drafted into the army as an enlisted man.²⁷ Isserson's obvious intelligence and educational accomplishments would have quickly distinguished him from the mass of semi-literate recruits, and he soon found himself in Peterhof, the site of Peter the Great's summer palace, as an ensign (*praporshchik*), undergoing junior officer training.²⁸ Upon the completion of his training he was promoted to the rank of officer on September 25 of that year.²⁹ However, he only served until October, at which point he seems to have simply left the army, which was in any event fast disintegrating.³⁰

By this time the old order in Russia was beginning to collapse under the weight of military defeat and its own internal corruption and in March 1917 the 300-year old Romanov dynasty was overthrown. Isserson, as a Jew, certainly had no cause to mourn the imperial regime's passing and no doubt welcomed the event. As one participant in the year's revolutionary upheavals put it, "Of all the nationalities in the western borders of Russia the Jews were the most oppressed."³¹ This was one of the reasons behind the fact that for the previous half century Jews had played a disproportionately active role in the underground revolutionary movement, often in the leading positions. For example, the Bolshevik faction contained such Jewish activists as Lev Borisovich Kamenev (Rosenfel'd), Grigorii Yevseevich Zinov'ev (Radomyl'skii), and Lev Davydovich Trotskii (Bronstein). Whatever the reason, Isserson had made his sympathies clear as early as February, when he aligned himself with the Russian Social-Democratic Workers' party (Internationalists), one of the many small left-wing parties active at the time. This party was grouped around the newspaper, *Novaia Zhizn'*, published by the well-known radical author, Maxim Gorky. His affiliation was short-lived, however, and lasted only until July of the same year, when he left for unstated reasons.³²

A Soviet-era study described this group as standing on the "far left wing of petty bour-



Isserson in his student uniform, ca. 1914 (courtesy Russian State Military Archives).

geois democracy,” which it favorably contrasted with the views held by the Bolsheviks’ Menshevik opponents. However, the article also chided the party for what it called its contradictory advocacy of a socialist government, while at the same time rejecting the idea of an armed proletarian uprising.³³ This may mean that Isserson, while sympathetic to the group’s revolutionary rhetoric, rejected the Bolsheviks’ insistence on the violent creation of a workers’ state. On the other hand, Isserson’s decision to leave the party coincided with the Bolsheviks’ failed July coup attempt against the Provisional Government, which had succeeded the czarist regime, and which was not supported by his fellow party members. This may be more than a coincidence, and if so is evidence of a growing radicalization of the young man’s views.

Whatever the truth of the matter, this was the sort of youthful enthusiasm which could easily be held against one under the Stalin regime, in which real and imagined “deviations” were punished with equal severity. The fact of Isserson’s brief allegiance to a non-Bolshevik party was used against him nearly a quarter-century later, following his arrest for participating in an “anti-Soviet plot.” During one interrogation he was forced to concede that his brief fling with the Social-Democratic Internationalists constituted membership in an “anti-party grouping.”³⁴ The fact that such a category of ideological deviation did not even exist at the time of Isserson’s youthful infatuation, however, meant nothing.

The summer and fall of 1917 were certainly exciting times in the Russian capital, as rival groups vied for power against the weakening center. The Provisional Government, meanwhile gamely attempted to prosecute the war against the Central Powers more effectively, while at the same time carry out much-needed domestic reforms, and failed utterly at both. From the very beginning the government was beset by radical forces on the left, among which the most intransigent were the Bolsheviks, under their leader Vladimir Il’ich Lenin, who demanded an immediate end to the “imperialist” war and the establishment of a socialist regime at home. By the fall of the year the momentum had decisively swung in favor of Lenin’s party, so that the Bolshevik coup of November 7, 1917, was a relatively simple affair.

Isserson later recounted that at the time of the coup he was undergoing treatment for an illness at the military hospital in Peterhof. He was discharged from the hospital sometime after November 20 and was therefore unable to take part in the momentous events occurring just a few miles away.³⁵ Nor did he leave any written impressions of his reaction to the coup, although he probably approved it, or at least did not regret much the Provisional Government’s passing. If such was the case, his approval did not extend to joining the paramilitary Red Guard, which included many soldiers who had joined the Bolshevik cause and constituted its first armed force. In late November Isserson left the hospital and shortly afterwards began working as a technical secretary of the Petrograd Printers’ Union, where he remained through May 1918.³⁶

Life as a trade union clerk must surely have fallen short of the young Isserson’s expectations, which had seemingly been dashed by the previous year’s upheavals, and he was obviously looking for something for more out of life amidst the revolutionary turmoil around him. In late spring he moved to the provincial town of Vologda, southeast of Petrograd, where his family now resided. Following the Bolshevik takeover and the Russian army’s complete collapse, Samuil El’iashevich had been forced to move once again; this time to the relative safety of Vologda, which was securely in Bolshevik-controlled territory. There he served as the head doctor of the local military hospital until 1921.³⁷ The younger Isserson’s move may have been triggered by a desire to be near his family, or perhaps it was the worsening food situation in Petrograd that forced him to leave.

With the Red Army in the Civil War

Meanwhile the civil war in Russia was gradually heating up as the various anti-Bolshevik forces began to organize themselves along the country's periphery, particularly in the Cossack regions around Rostov and Yekaterinodar (Krasnodar) in the south. The new Soviet government responded to this threat by creating the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army (RKKA) on January 28, 1918. The army was at first organized as a purely voluntary force and relied on the "revolutionary enthusiasm of the masses" for its recruits. However, this system of recruitment quickly proved insufficient to raise the army's size to the level necessary to meet the myriad of threats, and in May of that year the government decreed the full-scale mobilization of the country's working class population. Isserson did not wait to be drafted, however, and he voluntarily joined the Red Army on June 20, 1918.³⁸

Isserson later described his reasons for joining the Red Army as a case of "youthful romanticism."³⁹ This comment seems to have been more tongue in cheek, however, and there was probably more to his decision than mere youthful ardor. His previously discussed left-wing convictions clearly indicate where his thoughts lay and he obviously felt strongly enough about the crisis in Russia to risk his life for a regime that promised a radical break with the country's past. Isserson's daughter stated that he joined the Red Army out of "ideological convictions," and that he "consciously" became a revolutionary, like many other young men of his generation.⁴⁰ This statement indicates that Isserson's convictions in 1917 and 1918 evolved in much the same way as that of many other soldiers during this time: a grudging participation in an unpopular war, followed by an increasingly hostile view of that conflict and the society that allegedly spawned it, to the point that he was ready to take up arms in order to put an end to both. In this sense Isserson's political development corresponded closely to Lenin's 1915 call to transform the "imperialist war" (World War I) into a civil war.

This the Bolsheviks did, with a vengeance, unleashing a conflict of unimaginable savagery, in which centuries-old hatreds were given free rein in the name of building a better society. That this society never came about, and that what horrors came later dwarfed the injustices of the czarist regime is a separate matter more the province of criminal pathology than history. Suffice it to say that during the civil war some eight million people lost their lives through fighting, disease and starvation, including about a million soldiers in the Red Army.⁴¹ This was accompanied by the emigration of several million more of Russia's best and brightest, who could not contemplate living under the new socialist order.

The civil war was also a conflict of enormous spatial scope, spreading out over thousands of kilometers and simultaneously embracing sub-arctic wastes and trackless desert. The two main areas of contention lay in the south and east. The first encompassed most of Ukraine, the lower Don River, and the northern Caucasus, while the second stretched from the Volga River, through the Ural Mountains and into Siberia. Secondary fronts included Central Asia, the area of the Russian-Estonian border, and the Far East, as well as the northern part of European Russia. It was in the latter area that Isserson's military career began.

The civil war in the north had its beginnings in the occupation of the port of Murmansk by Allied troops in March 1918, followed by Archangel later that August. These actions were ostensibly taken to prevent large stores of military equipment, which had been shipped to Russia by the Western Allies, from falling into German hands. They also reflect the deep distrust that the former allies felt for the Bolshevik regime, which was seen at the time as nothing more than the pawn of the Germans. This expeditionary force eventually

came to include a few thousand British, American, French, and Italian and Serbian troops. Indigenous anti-Bolshevik forces later clustered around these centers, although their numbers always remained small. The same was true of the Soviets, who nevertheless feared an enemy advance south on Petrograd and another through Vologda on Moscow.

The northern front remained throughout one of the least important of the civil war's main areas of contention. This was due chiefly to the area's geographical location, which lies entirely to the north of the 60th parallel, where winters are long and harsh, and the marshy forested terrain restricts movement in the summer. Moreover, the almost complete lack of roads and railroads made this an unlikely area for deploying large forces. To get an idea of just how minuscule the forces involved were, the Soviet 6th Army, which was responsible for the entire northern front for the greater part of the conflict, in early 1920 numbered only 19,000 infantry and cavalry, with another 2,800 in rear training units, plus 260 artillery pieces and 551 machine guns.⁴²

Isserson's first appointment was with the apparatus of the Vologda provincial military commissariat (*voenkomat*), which was only one of many such organs established that spring to organize recruitment into the Red Army. There he worked as an "instructor" in the commissariat's mobilization section.⁴³ In January 1919 he began working as a secretary in the 6th Army's "revolutionary military tribunal."⁴⁴ These were judicial organs established to try political and other crimes committed by members of the Red Army. This is not to imply that Isserson's early postings were safe, rear-area assignments, as the extremely fluid conditions of the civil war meant that the front was often everywhere. During this period Isserson was commandeered to the Buy and Danilov areas, south of Vologda, "to fight bands of Greens."⁴⁵ The latter were generally loosely organized groups of peasants who often lacked a political program and who generally wanted to be left alone. Depending on the circumstances, they often fought against both the Whites and Reds. During May and June 1919, Isserson also served briefly within the 6th Army's political department as the deputy head of its "cultural-enlightenment" section.⁴⁶ This assignment may have involved a number of duties ranging from holding literacy classes for the ill-schooled troops, to arranging amateur theatricals with a political message.

Isserson's service in Vologda brought him into close contact with the command and staff of the 6th Army, which was headquartered in the town. The army had been formed in September 1918 out of stray detachments stretching from the White Sea to the Ural Mountains. Vladimir Mikhailovich Gittis, a former czarist colonel, who had joined the Red Army earlier that year, commanded the army at this time. It was at army headquarters that same fall that Isserson first laid eyes on Ieronim Petrovich Uborevich, a junior officer in the old army, with whom he was to cross paths many times. Isserson described Uborevich as an "energetic young man" (he was only two years older than Isserson) with "sharp, jerky motions." He also called him "tactically competent" and a "brave commander," who had already been awarded the Order of the Red Banner, the Red Army's first military decoration. Thanks to these qualities, Uborevich had quickly risen from the command of an artillery battery to brigade commander and had inflicted a sharp defeat on the Whites in mid-October. Gittis and members of the army's political apparatus, Nikolai Nikolaevich Kuzmin, I.K. Naumov, and Aleksandr Mikhailovich Orekhov (Malikov) afterwards summoned Uborevich to Vologda for a report.⁴⁷

Uborevich, according to Isserson's admiring account, was unfazed by the high-rank-ing assemblage and immediately launched into a spirited criticism of the army command's handling of affairs. He claimed that the army staff was ignorant of the true situation at the

front and that its orders did not correspond to the reality on the ground. He also charged that the army's entire defensive system was "tactically incorrect" and that its supply system was disorganized. Isserson called this tirade "fair," and added that army headquarters, located far in the rear in Vologda, had almost no contact with its subordinate units and no real idea of what was happening at the front. Gittis, he wrote, was so "stunned" by this unexpected outburst from a subordinate that he didn't know what to say.⁴⁸

Commissar Kuz'min was the first to break the uncomfortable silence and suggested to Uborevich that he lay out his ideas as to how to improve the situation. The young commander stated his ideas for an active defense more suited to the region's peculiar terrain. This meant, he said, organizing the army's defense along the main axes, by which he meant the area's few roads and river arteries. The areas between these axes would be held by a system of blockhouses and cleared areas swept by machine gun fire. These defenses would be held by a minimum of forces, thus enabling the army command to form a reserve for launching counterattacks against possible enemy penetrations. Uborevich also emphasized the need for howitzers, stating that regular artillery fire was ineffective in the dense forests of the region. Isserson stated that this presentation made a "great impression" on the army's military council, and that Gittis had no choice but to approve these proposals.⁴⁹

So impressed was the military council that shortly afterwards it decided to appoint Uborevich commander of the new 18th Rifle Division, which was then being formed from various units deployed in the Plesetsk area. I.F. Kupriianov was named division commissar, and A.A. Aleshin was appointed to head its political section.⁵⁰ Uborevich was quick to justify his superiors' confidence, and the 18th Rifle Division played a major role in eliminating the enemy salient around Shenkursk in January 1919. By summer the division had succeeded in blunting a White offensive and had even managed to advance somewhat between the Onega and Northern Dvina rivers.

In late June of 1919 Isserson was appointed commissar of a cadet (*kursant*) detachment, operating in the areas of Bui, Danilov and Onega, which marked the beginning of his brief career as a political officer.⁵¹ The position of political commissar sprang from the Red Army's desperate need for trained command cadres to staff its upper echelons. However, these were not to be found among the Bolsheviks' supporters, who were almost completely lacking in any military experience. Thus the party was forced, much against its will, to recruit thousands of former imperial officers, like Gittis, in order to fill key command and administrative positions. This was a politically suspect class, however, capable, as the Bolsheviks believed, of betraying the revolution at the first opportunity. To ensure the former officers' loyalty, the commissars were to serve as the party's "eyes and ears" at the front and report any suspicion of treason. The key to the commissars' power was the stipulation that no commander's order had validity unless countersigned by the commissar assigned to him, thus ensuring party control over combat operations. Strictly speaking, the commissars were not supposed to interfere in purely operational matters and were to confine their efforts to maintaining the unit's political health and *esprit*. However, overly zealous or unscrupulous commissars sometimes abused this power.

Aside from surveillance duties, one of a commissar's chief tasks was defending the "party line" in what was a very fluid political situation. This involved explaining the party's political and military policies to the Red Army's primarily peasant recruits, the great majority of whom were illiterate and ignorant of the world beyond their villages. These conscripts were notoriously unreliable and could desert or join the other side, depending on the circumstances. One participant in the fighting in northern Russia recalled some 45 years

later that Isserson had taken an active part in the struggle against “guerilla war” (*partizanshchina*) tendencies in the army, which meant campaigning against those elements in the army that despised more formal organizational methods. He also was involved in overcoming the remaining influence by members of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party, who had broken with their erstwhile Bolshevik allies in the summer of 1918. This involved Isserson in a conflict with what the writer called the “anarchy” of one Petr Alekseevich Popov, whom he described as a “cowardly demagogue.”⁵² Whether or not this involved mere agitation and propaganda work among the rank and file, or whether more forceful methods were used, is unknown.

It was while serving on the northern front that Isserson joined the communist party, an absolutely essential step for anybody who sought to work as a political officer. For several years, however, Isserson regularly filled out personnel forms in which he listed his party membership as dating from 1918, instead of the following year, which was actually the case. Years later Isserson was confronted with this discrepancy and lamely sought to pass off the subterfuge by claiming that he “did not consider it a crime” to add a year, arguing that he “did not have any self-serving purpose” in mind. Moreover, he stated, he had been involved in “social-political work” in the army since 1918, but because of the difficulty in securing the requisite number of recommendations from party members the process of joining the party had dragged on into 1919. Isserson then stated that when this discrepancy was pointed out to him in a subsequent check of party documents, he began to date his membership in the party from 1919.⁵³

Unfortunately, Isserson left only one account of his military career that included actual combat. This occurred in Onega, a small seaport along the river of the same name, just south of the White Sea. The town had been previously seized from the Bolsheviks at the height of the Allied intervention in North Russia. However, a mutiny on July 22, 1919, by Russian troops supposedly loyal to the local White government restored the town to Red control.⁵⁴ The 18th Rifle Division’s 154th Regiment, commanded by S.V. Mulin, then occupied the town. Onega stood directly athwart the anti-Bolshevik forces’ land communications between Archangel and Soroka (Belomorsk) on the Kola Peninsula, and they resolved to retake the town. The local Bolshevik forces must have gotten wind of this move, for on the morning of August 1, 1919, Isserson arrived with about 100 of his cadets as reinforcements for the garrison. Suddenly shells began bursting all around, fired by British gunboats which had unexpectedly appeared in the estuary. The British, under cover of this fire, then proceeded to land parties of White troops along the shore, while they remained on the gunboats, keeping up a heavy fire.⁵⁵

The Red forces had not only been taken by surprise, but were outgunned as well, and possessed only a battery of 37-mm guns. Isserson said that a battery of 75-mm French artillery pieces, which had been abandoned by the Whites during the previous fighting for the town, stood nearby, but that no one knew how to operate them. Mulin was killed at the start of the battle, as was the commander of the artillery battery, while Isserson was wounded in the left shoulder by a shell fragment.⁵⁶ Despite these losses, however, the Reds were able to establish a hasty defensive position in the town and along the nearby hills, and managed to keep the attackers confined to the riverbank. Isserson and his cadets held the right flank of the position along the hills on the northern edge of town.⁵⁷

As the fighting wore into the afternoon, Isserson conferred with Aleshin as to their best course of action. They attempted to contact brigade headquarters in Chekuevo, some 60 kilometers away, but communication had been disrupted early in the battle when the

local telephone station burned down. After much effort they were finally able to restore contact through the single remaining telephone line. To Isserson's surprise, he heard the division commander's voice through the din. Uborevich had left division headquarters for Chekuevo as soon as he learned of the fighting in Onega and had been trying to reestablish contact with the defenders. Uborevich curtly told him not to give up the town and that he was leaving to take charge of its defense. Isserson later recalled that the news that the division commander was on his way "filled everyone with confidence."⁵⁸

Meanwhile, the battle continued without letup, and if the Whites remained pinned to the shore, the Reds continued to take heavy casualties from the gunboats' fire. However, by early afternoon the tide literally began to turn in the Reds' favor, and by 4 o'clock the level of the river had fallen enough to strand the gunboats on a sandbar for a few critical hours. The Reds knew that they had only a short amount of time before the incoming tide freed the gunboats and sought to take advantage of the brief opportunity. They began a series of attacks against the Whites in the town, in order to push them back and bring the gunboats within range of their machine gun fire. However, these repeated attacks also resulted in heavy casualties, particularly among the cadet detachment.⁵⁹

It was evening when Uborevich arrived and immediately took charge of the situation. One of his first actions was to order a group of soldiers that had been milling around, to return to their positions and open fire on the enemy, adding that all shirkers would be shot. He then demanded that all available forces be gathered along the hills on the northern edge of town and held ready for a counterattack, while the town would be held with minimal forces, armed with machine guns. Uborevich then moved to the abandoned battery of 75-mm guns, from which position the gunboats were clearly visible in the harbor below. He then proceeded to load, aim and fire one of the weapons himself. The division commander's first shot was a direct hit, which put one of the gunboats out of action. Isserson called this moment the battle's "turning point."⁶⁰

As darkness set in Uborevich concluded that the battle for Onega had already been won, and that the British would attempt to evacuate their White allies at high tide. He was determined that the enemy would not get away and set about making plans for a final attack. In his makeshift command post he took stock of the regiment's losses and the state of its morale, and told Isserson to get out and "inspire the troops" before the final attack. More to the point, he ordered that the regiment's field kitchens be brought up and that the men be given a double ration of breakfast as most of them had not eaten for more than twelve hours. Thus fortified, the Reds began their final attack shortly after midnight. The fighting was intense and at one point bayonets were employed. According to Isserson, losses among the White forces were heavy and that only a few made it back to their vessels. The British, in turn, were forced to tow the damaged gunboat back to Archangel. "It was a complete victory," he wrote.⁶¹

Descriptions of the fighting from the anti-Bolshevik side were less colorful than Isserson's account, but no less emphatic as to the outcome. One chronicler wrote that the attack "failed completely," although Onega was nearly destroyed by British naval fire.⁶² Another source stated, "although the attacking party was skillfully landed" by the British ships, "*the Russian troops simply would not go forward*" (emphasis in the original).⁶³ This was a perennial problem for the British and other members of the expeditionary force, whose White allies could rarely be counted on in a heavy fight. In fact, it was incidents such as these that convinced the Allies to withdraw their troops from the area soon afterward, leaving the indigenous White government to its fate.

Isserson's actions in the engagement did not go unnoticed by his superiors, and according to a description of the battle, drawn up the following day in 6th Army headquarters, he and division commissar Aleshin had distinguished themselves by their "selfless work." The report then went on to commend the two for having "inspired our troops to attack and directing those units which remained without leadership as the result of a large number of the command element being put out of action."⁶⁴ It was probably for this action that he was later decorated with the Order of the Red Star.

Isserson's wound may have been serious enough to earn him a temporary transfer, and on August 2 he was appointed military commissar for the "troops of the Onega direction," which would seem to represent a territorial expansion of his previous duties, although this is not entirely clear.⁶⁵ In any event, this assignment did not last long, and in mid-September he was transferred back to the 6th Army's political department as head of its "cultural education" section.⁶⁶ This assignment was also short-lived, and in late November 1919 he was appointed commissar of the 18th Rifle Division's 159th Onega Rifle Regiment.⁶⁷ The 159th was a new regiment, made up chiefly of mobilized workers and peasants, and Isserson sought to commemorate the event with an inspiring ceremony.⁶⁸ After consulting with Naumov, the chief of the 6th Army's political department, the two decided upon the following inscription for the regimental banner: "The northern eagles will carry out their duty for the Revolution. They will take Archangel. They will raise the Red Banner of labor in the snows of the far North."⁶⁹ In early winter Isserson traveled to regimental headquarters in the village of Shalakusha, not far from the station of the same name along the Vologda-Archangel railroad. Here he presented the regiment with its flag and the rank and file vowed to capture Archangel.⁷⁰

Isserson later recalled that the troops were not dressed badly for the time — sheepskin coats, felt boots, and hats with earflaps. Food was another matter, however, and the daily ration consisted of a pound of bread and three small dried fish, from which the troops prepared soup. During their advance on Archangel the troops captured a number of supply stores left behind by the Allied forces, which included canned milk and meats. For many of the troops it was their first contact with canned products, and it was rumored that the meat was made of monkey parts.⁷¹ However, there was good reason to be optimistic, as the civil war in the north was gradually winding down in the Reds' favor. In August the major foreign contingents began to be evacuated from Murmansk and Archangel, a process that was completed by October. White forces briefly recaptured Plesetskaia and Onega in October, but this was their last gasp; Soviet forces soon counterattacked, pushing the Whites back. By this time the only thing holding the Reds back was an overall lack of forces, as most of their available reserves were tied down on the more decisive fronts.

As the Red Army closed in on Archangel in January 1920 Isserson was promoted to commissar of the 18th Rifle Division's 53rd Rifle Brigade, although he remained for the duration of the march with his old regiment.⁷² The White forces, outnumbered and abandoned by their foreign benefactors, gradually began to give way under the pressure, and some units went over *en masse* to the Bolsheviks, having first killed or captured their officers. The advance was nonetheless difficult, and the troops often had to make their way forward through deep snowdrifts and trackless forests.⁷³ Their efforts were finally rewarded, and on February 21 the Red Army entered Archangel. Isserson was later appointed political commissar for the garrison at Archangel, which he combined with his duties as a brigade commissar.⁷⁴

Commissars were often called upon to address the troops and write articles on the burning topics of the day, as they sought to bring the party's message closer to the rank and

file. Isserson, given his educational background, was a natural, and he was doubtlessly able to develop his skills as a writer and propagandist during this time. One of his early efforts, "The Red Army — the Last Army," was penned upon the occasion of the capture of Archangel and appeared in the 18th Rifle Division's newspaper, *The Road to Archangel*, on February 23, 1920, which was also the second anniversary of the Red Army's baptism of fire. The article's purple prose and apocalyptic tone are fairly typical of the time and do not differ significantly from thousands of similar efforts during these years. As a reflection of Isserson's youthful thinking, however, the article deserves to be quoted at some length.

The article was shot through with the usual Bolshevik boilerplate and blamed the capitalist system for the existence of war and armies. "For the sake of a golden idol," Isserson wrote, "rivers of blood have been spilled; the best efforts of humanity have been given over to the insatiable thirst of those who rule, on the altar of all-powerful capital." As a result of the revolution, it had fallen to the awakened proletariat to create its own army, he wrote, quoting Marx to the effect that "the old world can only be destroyed through old means," i.e., war.⁷⁵ However, whereas "a capitalist army fought for the sake of plunder and violence; the Red Army is conducting its victorious offensive in order to liberate laboring mankind from the yoke of capital, in order to bring true peace to this world." And since the capitalist system is the source of war in modern times, it follows that only with the overthrow of capitalism will true peace come about. Thus Isserson could claim at the close of his article that "the Red Army is waging war against war; it is the army of peace; it is the last army on Earth."⁷⁶ And while age and experience may have tempered Isserson's passion over the years, there is no indication that he ever came to question his youthful beliefs, and he remained a dedicated communist to the end.

The Polish Campaign and Internment

Certainly to a true believer such as Isserson, the triumph of the revolution seemed near in that heady spring of 1920. The Red Army's reoccupation of Archangel meant the end of the civil war in the north, while elsewhere White resistance to Soviet rule was also collapsing. In Siberia Admiral Aleksandr Vasil'evich Kolchak's armies had been thrown back as far as Lake Baikal. In the south Gen. Anton Ivanovich Denikin's forces were rapidly falling back under the hammer blows of the Red Army, after briefly threatening Moscow the previous fall, and would soon find themselves bottled up in the Crimean peninsula. Elsewhere, political instability in Germany and other European countries seemed to offer hope that the Russian Revolution would soon spread beyond the borders of the old empire.

The only cloud on the horizon was the reconstituted Polish state, which had been quick to take advantage of the Red Army's preoccupation with the regime's internal enemies to seize most of Belorussia and part of western Ukraine, which it claimed by historical right. Had the Poles attacked the Soviet Republic in the summer of fall of 1919, when Denikin's advance was at its height, the Bolshevik government would most likely have been overthrown. However, the Polish rulers were even more fearful of the Whites' aim of restoring the Russian Empire in full than they were of the Soviets' revolutionary ideology, and the moment passed. Negotiations between Poland and the Soviet Republic soon broke down, and in April 1920 the Poles attacked in Ukraine and quickly rolled up the weak Soviet forces in the area. A few weeks later they had advanced as far as the Dnepr River and seized Kiev.

Although the Polish army's gains were greatest in the south, the area of decision for the Red Army was always Belorussia, which offered the most direct route of advance into the Polish heartland along the Smolensk-Minsk-Warsaw axis. This was made apparent in a conversation between Sergei Sergeevich Kamenev, the Red Army's commander-in-chief, and Aleksandr Il'ich Yegorov, commander of the Southwestern Front (army group), then engaged in eliminating the remains of the White forces in Ukraine. Kamenev informed Yegorov that in the likely event of war with Poland the Western Front would constitute the "main direction," while Yegorov's *front* would play an important but supporting role by advancing along the axis Berdichev-Rovno-Kovel'-Brest. He added that due to the great distances involved and the presence of the Pripiat Marshes, which effectively divide the western theater of military activities into two semi-autonomous parts, coordination of the two *fronts* would be exercised from Moscow.⁷⁷ As if to underscore the importance of the western direction in the high command's calculations, Gittis was soon replaced as commander of the Western Front by the dynamic Tukhachevskii. The latter, despite his youth (he was 27 at the time of his appointment), had already distinguished himself as an army and *front* commander during the civil war and seemed the ideal candidate to lead the Soviet forces against the resurgent Polish state.

Tukhachevskii immediately set about organizing his forces for the decisive offensive. His plan foresaw the *front's* 15th Army launching the main attack toward Vilnius, in order to turn the Polish flank and pin the enemy forces to the south against the Pripiat Marshes. For ease of control the army was divided into a "Southern Group," charged with carrying out the main attack south of the Western Dvina River, and a "Northern Group" to the north of the river in the Polotsk area. It was to the Northern Group that the 18th Rifle Division's lead elements began to arrive in early May. However, so disorganized was the Soviet rail network at the time that the division's movement from the Archangel area was seriously delayed. In fact, two of the division's rifle regiments, an anti-aircraft battery, and an air detachment were temporarily left behind in the Petrograd area.⁷⁸

Yevgenii Nikolaevich Sergeev, a former czarist officer who had gone over to the Reds, was appointed to command the Northern Group in the forthcoming offensive. He later described the first units of the 18th Rifle Division as 5,000 "hardened troops, full of vigor and confidence" in their abilities following their experience in the "difficult conditions" of the Far North. Discipline, he noted, was "severe and politically conscientious," which indirectly speaks well of Isserson's labors, while the division's command and staff apparatus under commander B.A. Burenin was first-rate.⁷⁹ The impression created by the new division's arrival stood in sharp contrast to the sector's previous occupants, who had grown soft as the result of the lengthy positional stalemate and who had been further demoralized by incessant enemy raids.⁸⁰

However, Sergeev noted, if the 18th Rifle Division's morale "left nothing to be desired," its supply situation was "extremely poor." He attributed this to the peculiar habit of local military authorities, particularly those in rear areas, to meet their own supply needs at the expense of those units bound for the front. For example, following the capture of Archangel the division's personnel were outfitted in British uniforms from captured enemy stocks. However, no sooner did the division receive word to embark for the Western Front than it was ordered by the military district command to turn over a part of its uniforms and shoes, for which it received in return its own discarded felt boots and quilted uniforms, despite the fact that it was already April. The local officials even requisitioned some of the division's horses, while consoling the division command that any shortfalls would quickly be

made up upon arriving in Belorussia. These depredations continued as the division passed through the Petrograd area, where it entered the 7th Army's "sphere of influence." Here it lost its food-requisitioning unit, although it did manage to hang on to its commissary. As a result, the division arrived in its assembly area north of the Western Dvina almost entirely without transport. Nor were there hardly any horses to pull the artillery, which in any event lacked limbers and ammunition chests. To top it off, the division was armed with Japanese rifles, thus further increasing its supply woes.⁸¹

The Western Front's offensive opened on May 14 and at first enjoyed a measure of success; in two weeks of fighting the Soviets advanced over 100 kilometers in some areas. The 18th Rifle Division took almost no part in this stage of the fighting, however, and due to delays in crossing the Western Dvina was not able to take its place in the line until near the end of the month. The Poles launched a powerful counteroffensive on May 31 and by early June had succeeded in retaking most of the territory they had lost. The 18th Rifle Division fought well during this period, but suffered heavy casualties amounting to 70 percent of its strength.⁸²

Undeterred by this setback, Tukhachevskii immediately set about preparing for a renewed and larger effort, which involved a considerable reinforcement of the units under his command. This was accomplished through the normal arrival of reinforcements and by the rounding up of deserters, of which there were some 80,000 in the *front's* rear areas alone. The latter were given the alternative of rejoining the ranks and expunging their guilt, or being shot.⁸³ These methods soon bore fruit and by late June the Western Front numbered 91,463 infantry and cavalry to the Poles' 72,600.⁸⁴

Among Tukhachevskii's organizational moves was the creation of the 4th Army under Sergeev. This army, which included a cavalry corps, occupied the Western Front's extreme right flank and was assigned the leading role in turning the Polish position along the Western Dvina and defeating the enemy north of Minsk. The 18th Rifle Division, with a strength in late June of 4,168 infantry and 220 cavalry, was easily the largest of the new army's units. The division also counted 135 machine guns, 32 light, and eight heavy artillery pieces, considerably more than the army-wide average.⁸⁵ The division, however, faced a serious shortage of command personnel and at one time lacked as many as five regimental and 16 battalion commanders.⁸⁶

Efforts to remedy this situation may well have had something to do with Isserson's appointment on June 20, 1920, as an assistant to the commander of the 18th Rifle Division's 154th Rifle Regiment, although he later stated that the transfer came at his own initiative.⁸⁷ This was a significant shift for someone whose previous service had been confined almost exclusively to the army's political ranks. As we have seen, Isserson was no stranger to combat, and political commissars were often in the thick of the fighting, as they were indeed expected to be, rallying the troops for the cause. It may be that Isserson was no longer content with mere political hectoring, but was eager to undertake the field command of troops in his own right.

The Soviet offensive opened on July 4 and was an immediate success. Polish forces began to fall back the next day as the offensive gradually came to spread along the entire front north of the marshes. Minsk fell on July 11, followed by Vilnius three days later. On July 16 Isserson was made assistant to the commander of the 18th Rifle Division's 52nd Rifle Regiment.⁸⁸ During this time the division remained in the forefront of the advance, moving southwest along the Glubokoe-Molodechno-Lida axis. On July 29 units of the Soviet 4th Army took Bialystok and closed to the line of the Narew River, where heavy fighting

ensued. To the south, Brest fell to the Soviets on August 1, and for the moment it appeared as if the Poles were beaten.

Appearances were deceiving, however, and if the Poles had retreated far and fast, they had nevertheless done so in reasonably good order, and losses in prisoners were minimal. Tukhachevskii's forces, however, were already beginning to feel the strain of their month-long advance, and supplies and reinforcements lagged woefully behind. By this time the army's cavalry corps had nearly exhausted itself and up to 1,500 horsemen were without mounts, and losses over the preceding month had reduced the already weak rifle divisions to mere cadre units.⁸⁹ The Soviets had reinforcements in abundance, but the near-complete breakdown of the Soviet rail system made it nearly impossible to catch up with the *front's* rapidly advancing armies. Tukhachevskii later wrote that as the Soviets approached the borders of ethnic Poland some 60,000 reinforcements were strung out throughout the *front's* rear.⁹⁰

The troops' condition caused Sergeev to conclude that a two-week pause in the advance at this stage was called for, in order for the *front* to put its supply situation in order and bring its units up to something like full strength. He calculated that such a move would have enabled Tukhachevskii to regroup his armies and bring the Western Front's strength to 120,000 combatants, or half again as much as the Poles could have mustered during the same time. Moreover, he argued that even a temporary halt along the ethnic frontier would have damaged Polish efforts to raise new units by removing the specter of renewed Russian domination.⁹¹ This was all the more important, as the expected uprising by the Polish proletariat failed to materialize and the country's working class elected overwhelmingly to take up arms against the country's ancient enemy, Russia.

Tukhachevskii, writing some two years after these events, defended his decision to press ahead with the offensive. While he readily admitted that it would have been preferable to continue the war with a smoothly functioning supply system and full-strength units, these advantages were more than outweighed by the opportunities a continuous offensive offered. He wrote that "our pursuit had absolutely demoralized the Polish troops," who had lost their combat effectiveness and were deserting in large numbers. The spirit of defeatism, he argued, had also penetrated the Polish high command and led to a feeling that all was lost. Given this situation, an operational pause would only have played into the Poles' hands by giving them a respite to put their military house in order and, supported by Britain and France, emerge from the crisis stronger than the Soviets. Moreover, he added, "the existence of the capitalist world, not only in Poland, but throughout Europe," was at stake. Given these stakes, he concluded that under such circumstances "we had the right to and had to continue our offensive."⁹²

If anything, Isserson was later even more adamant in arguing against a halt and claimed that Tukhachevskii's decision was "justified," given the great stakes involved. He declared somewhat grandly that "history would never have forgiven Tukhachevskii if he, having reached the Bug, had halted," as this would have enabled the Poles to recover from their previous defeats. Also, given the revolutionary enthusiasm of the time, "if someone had even hinted about halting" at the Western Bug, "he would have been considered either a traitor or a madman." Such a decision was particularly unlikely, he argued, "given the unprecedented political élan" then reigning among the troops, when it seemed that all that was needed was one more great effort and the war would be over.⁹³

Tukhachevskii's problems were further exacerbated by confusion at the highest levels of the Red Army. As long as the Western and Southwestern fronts remained separated by

the formidable barrier of the Pripiat Marshes, their coordination by the high command in Moscow did not present any particular problems. However, it was namely at the end of July, when both *fronts* emerged from the flank protection offered by the marshes, that the strategic coordination of their efforts began to break down. As has already been mentioned, the western strategic direction from the very outset was considered the primary route of attack, with those Soviet forces to the south of the marshes relegated to a supporting role. However, instead of orienting the Southwestern Front's main forces to the northwest in the general direction of Lublin and Warsaw, Yegorov and his political commissar Joseph Vis-sarionovich Stalin elected instead to move their armies to the southwest against Polish forces in the L'vov (L'viv) area. Commander-in-Chief Kamenev, who seems to have been blinded by the Red Army's recent successes, meekly acquiesced in this change of plan.

As it transpired, Kamenev was not the only one who was operating blind. Tukhachevskii, despite his mounting problems, doggedly urged his armies forward, blithely assuming that the Poles were at the end of their tether. Seemingly transfixed by the example of the German army's 1914 drive to the Marne River, the *front* commander increasingly oriented the bulk of his forces to the northwest of Warsaw. On August 10 Tukhachevskii ordered his right-flank forces (4th, 15th, and 3rd armies) to cross the Vistula downstream from the capital and turn the Polish flank. For its part, the 4th Army was also to push due west and cut off the Polish Corridor, through which the Poles received supplies from their western allies.⁹⁴ This unrealistic order seriously overrated Soviet capabilities and had the effect of dissipating the army's forces away from the main battlefield at a critical moment. Tukhachevskii's fixation with events north of the city moreover meant ignoring the situation on his left flank, where a few understrength units covered the juncture with the Southwestern Front. This very thin reed, the pivot of the turning movement against Warsaw, constituted what Isserson later called the "Achilles heel of Tukhachevskii's plan."⁹⁵

Tukhachevskii's problems were further compounded by the insubordinate actions of the Southwestern Front command. On August 11 Kamenev ordered Yegorov and Stalin to turn over two of its armies to the Western Front's control and direct them to the northwest, in the general direction of Lublin and Zamosc.⁹⁶ And although the commander-in-chief did not explicitly state this; the reorientation of the armies' axis of advance could have created the conditions for a double envelopment of the Polish forces around Warsaw. Even if this were not Kamenev's intent, the timely arrival of these forces in the Lublin area would have gone far toward securing Tukhachevskii's left flank for the wheel around Warsaw. However, Stalin and Yegorov repeatedly delayed the armies' movement until it was too late.

The Southwestern Front's fixation with events around L'vov actually enabled the Polish command to switch forces from the fighting in Galicia to oppose Tukhachevskii. This infusion of strength meant that by mid-August the Polish forces arrayed against the Western Front numbered some 88,000 men against the latter's 54,000 infantry and cavalry, according to Soviet sources.⁹⁷ This new correlation of forces was not long in making itself felt, and on August 14 the Polish left-wing forces counterattacked across the Wkra River north of Modlin. The Poles at first advanced slowly, but the next day a cavalry raid captured the 4th Army's headquarters in Ciechanow, which completely disrupted that army's communications with the *front*, as well as with its subordinate divisions, including the 18th, which was well to the west. The army's scattered units near the Vistula turned south to meet the threat, although communications with headquarters were becoming increasingly problematical. Even then, it is likely that the anticipated counterattack would have been successful had not a greater crisis arisen further to the south.

On August 16 the main Polish attack moved out from the Deblin area, catching the overstretched Soviet forces in the area completely by surprise. The Poles moved quickly into the gap toward through Siedlice and the Western Bug River between Warsaw and Brest, deep in the rear of the Soviet forces approaching the Vistula River below the capital. This movement spelled disaster for the 18th Rifle Division, elements of which had advanced as far west as Plock, on the Vistula. At first Tukhachevskii was oblivious to the threat and only belatedly ordered his armies to fall back, but it was already too late. On August 23 Polish forces reached the East Prussian border, trapping the entire 4th Army, a cavalry corps, and units from the neighboring 15th Army. Faced with the prospect of surrender or destruction, these units crossed over into German territory, where they were interned for the duration of the war. Sergeev, citing a French source, put the number of Soviet troops who were interned in East Prussia at 80,000.⁹⁸ If true, this figure certainly gives the lie to Soviet claims of being badly outnumbered during the operation's final phase.

The war with Poland made a deep impression on the Red Army and heavily influenced its thinking regarding the conduct of operations for many years to come. In fact, a number of authors were to use the campaign as the basis for making valuable observations on the conduct of modern operations. The conflict also remained a major blot on the young Red Army's reputation and the entire subject was a political hot potato, with rival factions in the party and army blaming each other for the debacle. With Stalin's rise to power the debate effectively ceased and was replaced with a sanitized version of events that made no mention of the dictator's role in the Soviet defeat. Ill feelings continued to rankle, however, and Stalin's resentment of Tukhachevskii no doubt played a part in the latter's downfall years later.

Isserson did leave a detailed description of his internment, although this was a forced account and rendered under conditions no doubt worse than the original event. He later stated that the 18th Rifle Division crossed into East Prussia in the Chorzele area, where German authorities disarmed them. This was by now familiar work for the latter, which had rounded up large numbers of Russian prisoners near the same area, following the rout of the Russian 2nd Army six years earlier. The internees were at first confined to a prisoner of war camp in the town of Arys.⁹⁹ It was while he was interned at the Arys camp that Isserson resolved to escape along with another political worker, Kupriianov.¹⁰⁰ However, he lacked the means to carry out his plan, which involved not only passage through Germany, but the hostile territory of Poland and/or the Baltic States as well.

It was at this point that Isserson seems to have recalled that his German-born mother had two sisters, Feinstein and Shereshevskaiia, the latter an operatic performer. Both resided in the East Prussian capital of Königsberg. The situation at the Arys camp was quite fluid during the first days of internment, and the German authorities were not at first able to post enough guards around the camp to adequately contain the large number of internees. Isserson decided to take advantage of the situation and, employing his fluent German, was able to walk several times into Arys. During one of these trips he managed to locate the town post office, where he found a Königsberg telephone book, which also contained the address of his aunt Feinstein. He immediately wrote his aunt a postcard with a request that she send him food, some money, and an old suit, all of which he would need for his planned escape.¹⁰¹

His aunt replied in a postcard shortly afterwards that she would be traveling to Arys by train to meet him, naming the date and time of arrival. Isserson received her reply *post restante*, which indicates that the security situation at the Arys camp was still lax enough

that he could continue his trips into town. As a result, he was at the train station at the appointed time to meet her. Isserson testified that he recognized his aunt, although she did not recognize him, not having seen her nephew since he was eight years old. She brought him 50 to 60 marks and a used suit, before returning home. However, for some reason, the planned escape was never attempted.¹⁰²

Shortly afterwards Isserson, along with 60 to 70 political workers, were separated from the rest and moved to the nearby town of Lotzen. Isserson speculated that the Germans included him among this group because he had for so long served in the division's political apparatus and had only recently made the shift to a command position.¹⁰³ This action indicates that the Germans sought to eliminate the political commissars' influence on the rank and file in order to weaken their units' internal cohesion and prevent any overtly political actions. It is also likely that the authorities, who had spent a good deal of time combating domestic communists since 1918, also sought to isolate this highly politicized group from the general population as well. That the German authorities took the threat of Bolshevik propaganda seriously is evidenced by the fact Isserson was held in solitary confinement for a week at Arys merely for speaking to a German soldier.¹⁰⁴

Iosif Yakovlevich Karasik, a retired colonel, offered another, less flattering, view of Isserson's activities in East Prussia. Karasik had served as a political commissar with the 58th Rifle Division during the Polish campaign and had also been interred in East Prussia. Interestingly enough, Karasik stated that Isserson was the only individual he could recall from the 18th Rifle Division, although he could not remember his name or patronymic. He confirmed that Isserson had been a commander at the time of his internment and could offer no explanation as to how the latter had ended up in the group of political commissars that had been singled out for special attention by the German authorities. Karasik confirmed that Isserson spoke German well, although contrary to the latter's testimony he maintained that none of the political workers had been confined at the camp in Lotzen. He also made the damning comment that "The entire group of political workers was suspicious of Isserson." He added that Isserson was "very full of himself" and that this quality "repelled everyone away from him." The political workers' suspicions of Isserson were further inflamed, he added, by the fact that the latter had received a package from a relative in Germany or the Baltic States, whom Karasik identified as Isserson's sister.¹⁰⁵

Karasik's testimony is naturally somewhat suspect, as he was himself under arrest at the time and had every reason to give damaging testimony against Isserson in an effort to mitigate his own lot. Moreover, the alacrity with which he recalled Isserson after 20 years suggests that his interrogator was prompting him. The difference in the two men's version of events regarding their confinement can either be attributed to confusion over events that occurred more than two decades before, or efforts to garnish the truth by one or both of them. Whatever the truth of the matter, it is highly unlikely that the discrepancies in their testimony were interpreted in Isserson's favor.

The group of political workers was held for several weeks before being transferred to the north German town of Hameln, southwest of Hannover. The German authorities' intentions in this regard remain unknown, and in any event the political internees were reunited with their units after only a week. By then peace had been concluded between the Soviet Republic and Poland and plans were already under way to send the internees home. The internees were then transported to the Baltic port of Stettin (Szczecin). From there they were transported by sea to the Estonian capital of Tallinn, after which they traveled by rail to the Soviet border at Narva. Isserson's journey home ended with his arrival in

mid-November at Western Front headquarters in Smolensk.¹⁰⁶ Here he finally parted ways with the 18th Rifle Division, which was reconstituted and sent south to the Kuban' region to wipe out the remains of White resistance, after which it took part in the Soviet occupation of Armenia in early 1921.

So far Isseson had managed to squeeze a good deal of adventure into his young life. In a little more than three years he had witnessed the collapse of the Romanov dynasty and its replacement by a democratic republic, which was itself soon overthrown by a regime dedicated to revolution at home and abroad. He had been drafted into the czarist army at the end of one war and had voluntarily joined another army at the beginning of another conflict. He had been wounded in one campaign and been interned as the result of second. Many might consider this to be enough excitement to last a lifetime. Not Isseson, who had by now given up all thoughts of practicing law and had decided firmly upon a military career. Now, fired by a powerful sense of his own destiny, he returned home to begin a new life.

CHAPTER 2

Maturation

The RKKA Military Academy

Isserson's extended stint in German captivity doubtless left the 22-year-old junior commander with plenty of time to ponder his future. These ruminations may well have prompted him to decide upon a course that would determine the remainder of his military career — the decision to enroll as a student in the new RKKA General Staff Academy. The Soviets, acutely feeling the lack of trained military cadres, had established the Academy two years earlier as a successor to its defunct imperial counterpart. Upon his arrival in at Western Front headquarters in Smolensk he immediately applied for permission to enroll. His request was granted, and at the end of November 1920 he arrived in Moscow to begin his studies.¹ Given his high level of education and intellectual inclinations, such a decision is hardly surprising. In later years Isserson offered no particular justifications for his decision to enroll, aside from the laconic phrase: "I was drawn to the Academy."²

Isserson left no specific reminiscences of his years at the academy, and the little information he did provide was extracted from him some 20 years later in prison. One student who did leave a record of his stay was Alexander Grigor'evich Barmine, a future Soviet diplomat who later defected to the West. Barmine had served as a regimental commander during the recent war with Poland and had also been caught up in the Western Front's debacle, although he managed to avoid capture or internment. Coincidentally, he enrolled in the academy the same time as Isserson, although there is no indication that the two knew each other. Others who entered the academy with Isserson were the famed civil war commander Yepifan Iovich Kovtiukh and his future colleagues Sergei Nikolaevich Krasil'nikov and Vladimir Arsen'evich Melikov.³

Barmine also arrived in Moscow in the autumn of 1920, a time which marked the nadir of the period known as "War Communism," when the accumulated ravages of war and the Bolsheviks' own economic mismanagement had reduced the country to the subsistence level. He described the city as "half vacant, miserably poor, and melancholy," in which the inhabitants' main concern was to get enough to eat. Upon his arrival, Barmine was assigned quarters in a former hotel near the Nikitskie Gates which had been converted into a dormitory for the academy's students. The Bolshevik policy of expropriating private property for public use could result in some interesting situations, and Barmine described his room as "more suitable for a transient love affair than for military study." Nor was the room

sufficiently heated by a “useless radiator, which evoked memories of a vanished civilization,” and he resorted to burning his few pieces of furniture in a homemade stove.⁴

Life for a student at this time was equally spartan and hunger was a constant presence. Barmine recalled that his ration cards entitled him to some thin, foul-tasting soup and some potted meat. He was also authorized a daily allotment of black bread, for which he and the other students and faculty would patiently line up in the morning. By 2 P.M., however, this meager fare had usually been consumed and “from then on there was nothing we could do to stave off the pangs of hunger but drink unsweetened tea.” The academy’s administration did what it could to allay these pangs by at least providing the students with “spiritual fare” in the form of theater tickets. Barmine recalled that operettas such as *The Bells of Corneville* and *The Geisha* were very popular at the time and how in the latter production, which was held in an unheated theater, “the actors’ breath would vaporize ludicrously in contrast with the cherry-blossom scenery of summer in Japan.” No doubt such diversions provided some relief from such daily sights as that of vultures devouring the frozen entrails of animals that had succumbed on the streets to hunger.⁵

The RKKA General Staff Academy was located at this time on Vozdvizhenka Street, which was later renamed Kalinin Prospekt and became one of Moscow’s main thoroughfares. Its first building was the city’s former Hunt Club, yet another example of the party’s expropriation policies. Barmine noted that at even at this late date evidence of the former owners’ passion was to be found everywhere. This included the building’s main staircase, which “was flanked by two stuffed bears holding card trays,” while “the walls were adorned with antlers and other trophies of the chase.”⁶ At the time of Isserson’s arrival a former czarist lieutenant general, Andrei Yevgen’evich Snesev, a graduate of the imperial general staff academy, headed the academy. Turnover among academy chiefs during these early years was high, however, and Snesev was replaced the following year by Tukhachevskii. He, in turn, was succeeded in 1922 by Anatolii Il’ich Gekker, who was quickly followed by Pavel Pavlovich Lebedev, who had headed the Revolutionary Military Council of the Republic’s Field Staff during much of the civil war. Of these, Gekker and Lebedev were also graduates of the imperial general staff academy.

The reliance on pre-revolutionary military cadres was duplicated at the faculty level. In fact, Barmine noted, the academy “could not boast one instructor of good revolutionary color.”⁷ During the early years such products of the old army as Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Neznamov, N.A. Suleiman, Aleksandr Andreevich Svechin, Aleksandr Konstantinovich Kolenkovskii, Yevgenii Aleksandrovich Shilovskii, Vasilii Fedorovich Novitskii, Nikolai Yevgen’evich Kakurin, Ioakim Ioakimovich Vatsetis, and Aleksei Ivanovich Gotovtsev taught there.⁸ They must certainly felt themselves like fish out of water, although some adjusted better than others. Barmine wrote that “most of these men accepted their lot with the calm philosophy of professional soldiers,” adding that the former officers “were ready to work for any government which seemed able to rebuild collapsed Russia,” although many had their doubts as to whether the Soviet regime was the proper vehicle for this. However, loyal they may have been, they nevertheless remained a suspect class in a society which placed a great deal of emphasis on a man’s “proletarian” social origins. Barmine recalled that as many as three times a year, “Each time the internal situation took a turn for the worse,” the former officers would be arrested and held “as hostages or suspects.” This too they accepted philosophically, and it was rumored that some of them even kept bags in readiness for the next raid by the secret police.⁹

The students were drawn from an entirely different group altogether. These men

included few, if any, pre-1914 officers and their ranks consisted chiefly of those who had risen to junior rank during the civil war. Others had been commissioned as junior officers during World War I; among these was Triandafillov, one of the Red Army's future theoreticians in the field of operational art. Others had served in the czarist army as NCOs and, like their higher-ranking comrades, had later joined the Red Army and fought on one or more fronts during the civil war. Many of these students sprang from Russia's lower classes and, as a result, their educational level was not very high. Barmine even described some of his classmates as "nearly illiterate."¹⁰ Isserson, with his year of university education, must have stood out sharply from his fellow students. Whatever their educational and military-theoretical shortcomings, these men certainly knew war and had only recently defeated their better-trained enemies. Now that hostilities had all but ceased, this group, fired by a sense of its historic mission, set itself the task of mastering the complexities of military affairs. By the end of 1921 two future chiefs of the General Staff, Kirill Afanas'evich Meretskov and Vasili Danilovich Sokolovskii, had already graduated from the Academy.¹¹

The presence of two such disparate groups within the academy inevitably led to friction between them. Some of the antagonism was ideological and as much as the students might respect their professors' erudition, they could not forgive them their "bourgeois" social origins and previous service to the hated czarist regime. There were other, more mundane, reasons as well. Barmine recalled that in the period immediately following the civil war the academy was "in a mood of bitter grievance." These grievances stemmed primarily from the thwarted ambitions of the younger "red commanders" who had come of age during the civil war. These commanders, he continued, found that upon completing the academy's course that the former czarist officers, who occupied many of the army's leading command and administrative positions, hindered their professional advancement. The growing sense of frustration over this situation led to calls for "new blood" in the army's higher ranks and the imposition of a military doctrine based upon Marxism.¹² The chief proponent of the latter view was Mikhail Vasil'evich Frunze, who headed the academy during Isserson's final months there. And although Isserson's exact views on this controversy are unknown, his disparaging comments about the former officers at a later date leave little doubt as to where his sympathies lay.

During the civil war many of the students had their studies interrupted by being commandeered to the various fronts, after which they would return to the academy. Even after the war the students would often be temporarily assigned elsewhere. The most significant of these was undoubtedly the Kronstadt rebellion of early 1921, when disaffected sailors from the Baltic Fleet rose up against Soviet rule. A number of students from the academy were mobilized and sent to Petrograd to put down the revolt, although it does not appear that Isserson was among them. His stay at the academy was not continuous, however, and after several months of study he was posted in July 1921 to the staff of the Minsk region as deputy chief of the intelligence section.¹³ In September he was named the staff's temporary commander and commissar.¹⁴ He returned to the academy in October to resume his studies.¹⁵

Isserson's return to the academy coincided with a time of great flux in its academic program. This is hardly to be wondered at, as the academy had been hurriedly thrown together at the height of the civil war. With the end of that conflict, the academy's leadership could afford to take stock of the situation and determine what the institution's future course should be. One indication of the changes in store was the decision in the summer of 1921 to rename the academy as the RKKA Military Academy; by way of emphasizing

that it would no longer exclusively prepare personnel for staff work, but line commanders as well. To underline this change in emphasis, Tukhachevskii, the most outstanding representative of the younger generation of “red commanders,” was appointed to head the academy. He also brought with him a number of other commanders with recent combat experience to serve on the academy’s faculty.¹⁶

Among the changes Tukhachevskii and his team instituted was to extend the academy’s previous two-year course of instruction to three years by adding a “supplementary” course. Under this system the first year of instruction was devoted to the tactics of the various combat arms, and the second to general tactics at the division and corps level. The third year was concerned with operational-strategic questions at the army, *front*, and military district level, as well as the overall conduct of war. The first two years unfolded for the academy’s students in the traditional format of lectures and seminars, supplemented by work in the field. The third year involved more independent study, in which the students were required to work up several “themes” involving military history, military art, operational-strategic and political questions. This represented a direct borrowing from the pre-revolutionary general staff academy, which is hardly surprising, given the pedigrees of most of the faculty. The supplementary course, however, ultimately “failed to justify itself,” according to one observer, and in 1925 it became the academy’s senior class.¹⁷

Other reforms included the reorganization in late 1921 of the academy’s entire course of instruction into so-called “cycles,” which included the following disciplines: strategy, tactics, socio-economic sciences, military history, military organization, military geography, statistics, and service on the General Staff. None of these cycles contained any “organic” courses or staff, but relied instead on one or more of the traditional departments closest to its area of competence. Primarily former officers such as Snesev, Svechin and Aleksandr Ivanovich Verkhovskii, among others, supervised the cycles at this time.¹⁸ Of these, the most important of the cycles to Isserson’s future development as a military thinker were the ones dealing with socio-economic problems, tactics, military history, and strategy. For this reason, the state of these disciplines within the academy will be examined more closely.

By socio-economic sciences the academy meant the growing body of thought that was becoming known as Marxism-Leninism, which soon became enshrined as the official ideology of the Soviet state. This ideology, as interpreted and manipulated by the ruling party, quickly acquired the status of holy writ and, as such, was widely propagated throughout the country and contending faiths were just as ruthlessly put down. Universal in its pretensions, it was proclaimed to be the single infallible tool for understanding society’s problems, its past and future course.

Military affairs were no exception to this rule and the Soviet leadership placed a great deal of emphasis on training a generation of Red Army commanders steeped in the arcana of Marxist-Leninist thinking. Indeed, as one of the academy’s leading political instructors later wrote, “the mastering of the Marxist-Leninist world view” is necessary for understanding military affairs “in that extremely complex interweaving of international and domestic class, economic, political and national relations” so characteristic of modern times. “For a conscious ... attitude toward military affairs and military art demands a clear understanding of that profound and close connection which exists between war, on the one hand, and politics and economics on the other.”¹⁹

Isserson needed little persuading as to the correctness of this approach. His service as a political commissar is indicative of an early acceptance of the official ideology, which his subsequent transfer to a command assignment did nothing to diminish. In fact, Isserson’s

sojourn at the academy only served to deepen his devotion to the communist ideology and his faith in the correctness of its interpretation by the ruling party. The main tenets of this faith included a belief in the inevitability of an all-out war between the Soviet Union and its allies against the capitalist world, which would end in the overthrow of the latter and the triumph of communism throughout the world. This view, so typical of the institutionalized paranoia that characterized the Soviet Union throughout most of its history, held that the current pause in the struggle with capitalism was only temporary, and that the Red Army must prepare for its resumption in the near future.

Another militarily significant tenet of the Marxist-Leninist worldview was the theory of dialectical materialism, which asserts the primacy of material factors in the development of human society, including war. This meant, for example, that the introduction of new technology, such as the chariot, gunpowder, rifled weapons, aircraft, and the tank, etc., has had a far greater impact on the conduct of war than morale factors, which are, in fact, determined by material developments. It also caused Isserson to view the development of military affairs in terms of epochal shifts similar to the larger changes in society, as determined by the ownership of the “means of production.” According to this view, the kind and numbers of weapons at any given time and the skill of the commanders in adapting to the circumstances, determines the development of military art (strategy, operational art, and tactics). Isserson, who loved writing in broad strokes, and formed the historical basis of some of his outstanding theoretical works during the next decade, particularly favored this approach.

The teaching of military history in the academy fluctuated greatly during Isserson’s years there, a circumstance which reflected not only the institution’s inevitable growing pains, but the students’ own very pronounced preferences as well. When Isserson arrived in the fall of 1920, for example, the students attended lectures on the history of military art, as well as military history. The latter included the Franco-Prussian and Russo-Japanese wars, as well as individual operations from the 1914 campaign on the Eastern Front, and the just-completed civil war.²⁰ However, the teaching of the latter two subjects was hobbled by the paucity of teaching materials dealing with them, as opposed to the substantial body of work covering the two earlier conflicts. It must be remembered that Russia had been in a nearly constant state of war and civil strife since 1914, neither of which were conducive to a careful examination of the historical record. This applied particularly to the Civil War, the dispassionate analysis of which was further distorted by politics of the contending parties, particularly the Bolsheviks.

According to Novitskii, one of the academy’s leading professors of military history, the students were particularly dissatisfied with the inclusion of the Franco-Prussian and Russo-Japanese wars in the teaching cycle, despite the fact that these topics accounted for only 20 percent of the program. He claimed that this was the result of the students’ prejudice in favor of the experience of the Civil War, to the point where “everything that was not closely related to it ... was considered useless.” This is hardly surprising, as most of the academy’s students had received their baptism of fire during the civil war, and for many of them the conflict had been the defining moment in their lives. Moreover, the great majority of these students lacked the necessary grounding in history that their czarist-era predecessors took for granted. As a result, they probably looked upon the wars of the not too distant past in the same way as they might the wars of antiquity — interesting, perhaps, but having little or no relevance to their chosen profession. Novitskii denounced the “narrowly practical, utilitarian character” of this approach, but he was fighting a hopeless battle. During the

1922-23 academic year the Franco-Prussian and Russo-Japanese wars were eliminated from the academic program. In turn, the history cycle was broken up into separate departments — the history of the World War and the history of the civil war.²¹

Isserson's views on this score are unknown, and he may well have been pulled in different directions. On the one hand, as a former civil war commander, he may well have sympathized with the view that such earlier conflicts had little or no meaning for an army that daily expected a renewal of the great struggle against capitalism. On the other hand, his own broad educational background doubtlessly helped him to appreciate the military experience of the recent past and he may have been less ready to dismiss such studies as mere "scholasticism," to borrow a favorite epithet from the time. Whatever his true feelings, however, there can be little doubt that Isserson profited greatly from his immersion in military history at the academy and that the lessons he learned there stood him in good stead for the rest of his life. And although he is remembered chiefly as a theorist in the field of operational art, he also was a prolific, if episodic, writer on topics of military history as well.

Tactics, being an eminently practical discipline subject to battlefield testing, would seemingly have been immune to many of the political currents that buffeted the academy during these years. Nonetheless, these considerations did manifest themselves during the early days in the now-familiar struggle between old and new. Verkhovskii, a professor of tactics at the academy, later wrote that some instructors relied too heavily on the experience of the World War and the civil war, which, in the Russian context, meant a greater reliance on the shock power of massed infantry in the attack due to the armies' low level of technical saturation, particularly in tanks, heavy artillery, and aircraft. This group, he charged, "lagged behind life." Its opposite number, on the other hand, "lived on dreams of the future," fighting battles with a technology they did not yet possess, and retaining a naïve faith in the power of political propaganda to undermine the enemy's will to resist.²² It was only with the creation of the department of tactics in 1922, he wrote, that the situation began to change for the better. Now the Red Army's tactical instruction could begin to move away from the "general phrases and vague ideas" of the past to the more serious task of organizing the battle.²³

As to the forms the tactical battle might take, Verkhovskii stated that the department had concluded that a future war would be waged along a broad front, such as had been the case during the civil war. Such a circumstance would greatly increase the likelihood that a war of maneuver would predominate. Under these conditions the Red Army might employ a "deliberate retirement" in the face of a superior enemy.²⁴ Such a maneuver had little in common with what later became known as the defensive battle, which sought to maintain a fixed position against an enemy attack. More promising was the "meeting battle," which he claimed had been the object of study in the Red Army as in no other. He claimed that his work had run the gamut from the idea of attacking in all instances to a more sober calculation of the chances for success based upon the ability to preempt the enemy's deployment, as well as the overall correlation of forces.²⁵ Finally, Verkhovskii noted that the department had devoted a good deal of work to the attack of a fortified area in a "semi-positional" setting, by which he clearly meant something resembling the trench warfare of the Great War.²⁶ However, his own comments on this score were extremely brief, perhaps because he believed that such a situation was unlikely to arise in a future war.

The evolution of operational instruction during Isserson's years at the academy was far from even, reflective of a number of unsettled views on the subject. The most critical of

these was the Red Army's grudging acceptance of operational art as a separate sphere of military endeavor. This had been along and gradual process, brought upon by the appearance of the operation during the latter part of the nineteenth century. As this evolution continued, however, it became increasingly difficult to group those phenomena connected with the operation into the existing disciplines of strategy and tactics. The Russian army responded to this problem in its usual desultory fashion during its final years, experimenting with such terms as "higher tactics," "operatics," and the "tactics of the theater of military activities."²⁷ However, as the multiplicity of definitions attests, by the start of World War I the problem was far from being resolved. The same dilemma plagued the Red Army in the years immediately following the civil war. During these years such terms as the "operational direction of troops," the "tactics of mass armies," "operational affairs," and the "strategic art in the operation," among others, were bandied about as evidence of the reigning terminological confusion.²⁸

Nowhere was this confusion more evident than in the academy's course on strategy in the early 1920s. Nikolai Yefimovich Varfolomeev, one of the army's leading theorists in the realm of operational art, later recalled that the study of strategy was divided into three parts: lower, higher, and peacetime, the latter meaning the preparation of the country for war. "Lower strategy," or "higher tactics," was chiefly concerned with the operational level of war as we now understand the term, while "higher strategy" was limited to the conduct of war as a whole. According to Varfolomeev, this led to a novel but theoretically untenable situation in which "lower strategy" and "higher tactics" occupied the same niche — the conduct of operations in a theater of military activities.²⁹ Such a state of affairs was hardly conducive to a clear understanding of strategy or tactics, much less of operations. However, it was inevitable as long as the latter remained suspended between the two older disciplines.

This situation was clearly untenable and demanded a solution. Svechin, a brilliant czarist-era military historian and theoretician who had joined the Red Army in 1918, finally resolved the problem. Varfolomeev credits Svechin with coining the term "operational art" (*operativnoe iskusstvo*) at about the time the latter was lecturing on strategy during the 1923-24 academic year.³⁰ Svechin himself elaborated on this concept in a 1924 lecture at the academy, when he declared "the old division of military art into strategy and tactics ... absurd," due to the disappearance of the general engagement, which once marked the dividing line between the two disciplines. He further declared that the two senior disciplines now "are separated by an intermediate member — operational art," which is superior to tactics because it "organizes the separate tactical activities into the operation, proceeding from the criterion of the operation as a whole." On the other hand, operational art is subordinate to strategy, as the latter is responsible for "grouping operations for achieving the war's political aim."³¹

Svechin was a prickly and independent thinker and thus not well thought of in the Red Army. Nevertheless his definition soon gained broad acceptance, particularly in the academy. Proof of this came later the same year, when the strategic cycle was broken up between two now-separate departments — the "study of war" (strategy) and the "conduct of operations" (operational art). According to Varfolomeev, this meant that operational art had firmly entered the academy, "both in the capacity of a definite scientific concept, and in the capacity of an educational discipline."³² Isserson graduated from the academy in the summer of 1924 and so just missed taking advantage of these innovations and the clearer understanding of operational art that they promised.

However, there is no evidence that he ever took issue with the new orthodoxy. On the contrary, he probably welcomed it, despite the Svechin connection, with its implied acknowledgement of the former “military specialists,” whom Isserson heartily despised. In 1932, for example, he wrote that as early as the second half of the nineteenth century the existing division of military art into strategy and tactics no longer reflected the reality of modern war, because they failed to take into account the appearance of the operation. Operational art stepped into fill the theoretical gap only after World War I, when it came to occupy “an independent place among the military disciplines.” Since that time, he continued, military art has been divided into strategy, which is “the study of war, operational art, the study of the operation, and tactics, the study of the battle.”³³

These years were also a time of intense political ferment in the academy, which closely mirrored the larger political struggle then taking place within the ruling communist party. As a party member, Isserson would inevitably have been drawn, like it or not, into these disputes. One of the earliest of these controversies involved the activities of the so-called “Workers’ Opposition,” a faction within the ruling party that espoused syndicalist views, according to which the workers themselves would run the factories. Such a position directly threatened the party’s control over the labor unions, and the “Workers’ Opposition” was almost uniformly condemned by the party leadership. Nevertheless, the platform of the “Workers’ Opposition” enjoyed a good deal of support among the academy’s students, almost all of whom had gone through the egalitarian school of the civil war and were sympathetic to the idea of worker control. At one meeting during this time the “Workers’ Opposition” garnered the overwhelming support of the academy’s party organization.³⁴ This was too much for even these relatively “liberal” times and the party organization took immediate action. During the summer of 1922, 348 of the 648 students were expelled for various shortcomings, among them “political unreliability.”³⁵ Isserson was not among them, however, either because he had the good fortune to side with the party line, or the good sense to avoid taking controversial positions.

It was during his sojourn at the academy that Isserson’s first serious studies began to appear. However, these were not the highly detailed theoretical works of his mature years, for which he is known. They did, however, enable Isserson to put to good use his command of German and indulge his lifelong interest in that nation’s army. The first of these efforts, entitled *Germany*, appeared in 1922 and was essentially an overview of the postwar state of the country and its armed forces. Subtitled *A Survey of Latent Armed Forces*, this work contained a detailed examination of the numerous paramilitary formations that had sprung up in Germany after World War I. This work was published by the RKKA Staff’s intelligence directorate and doubtlessly contained classified information as to the state of the German armed forces.

Isserson saw the postwar appearance of these paramilitary units as being primarily driven by the government’s pressing need for a politically reliable force capable of suppressing a communist revolution. This is hardly surprising, for as a true believer in the imminent proletarian revolution, Isserson was duty bound to view developments through the prism of a domestic political struggle and to give short shrift to any other considerations. According to this view, following the 1918 Armistice “class contradictions” in Germany “were becoming more exacerbated” and the country had effectively “already broken up into two camps.”³⁶ On one side were the industrial proletariat and a disaffected soldiery that sought to recreate the Bolsheviks’ triumph of the previous year and establish a Soviet-style worker’s state. Arrayed against them were the country’s upper and middle classes, as well

as a sizable portion of the old army's officer corps, which were determined to stave off any outbreak of revolution. The latter group proved to be more powerful and by early 1919 the communist movement in Germany had been effectively crushed.

Isserson devoted much less space to Germany's regular army, which had been reduced to a mere seven divisions consisting of extended-service volunteers. Despite the army's minuscule size, he nevertheless claimed that in the event of a crisis it could quickly be expanded into a force of 42 divisions, consisting of an equal number of first-and second-line divisions. The existing divisional/military district staffs would expand into army staffs for conducting larger operations. Such a force, he maintained, would be capable of waging war against Poland or France, despite being far inferior technically to the latter. In the event of a French invasion the regular army would play a decidedly auxiliary role and seek to avoid a major battle by withdrawing into the country's interior. The burden of the fighting would actually be borne by smaller paramilitary groups, which would wage a guerilla war against the enemy's communications.³⁷

This claim, however, unrealistic, should not blind the reader as to the work's overall value. Political pronouncements aside, Isserson at the tender age of twenty-four had managed to produce a well-researched and informative account of a topic the German government sought to keep secret. Even at this early stage in his development as a writer, two elements of a distinctive Isserson style are already present — a painstaking attention to detail and a clear manner of organizing his thoughts, which was well above the standards of the time. It was a skill that would come to fruition during the next decade and produce some of the most imaginative and lucid works on Soviet military art.

Isserson remained at the academy until February 1923, when he was dispatched to Western Front headquarters, where he served through September as the commissar and chief of the intelligence section.³⁸ It was at the latter posting that Isserson first met Tukhachevskii, then the Red Army's bright young star. He described his contacts with Tukhachevskii during this period as "episodic," as he did not report directly to the *front* commander, but to the Western Front's successive chiefs of staff, Sergei Aleksandrovich Mezheninov, and Ivan Ivanovich Gludin.³⁹ He may have had more after-hours contact with his superior, however, and later recalled how in a small circle of intimates Tukhachevskii would bring up his own aristocratic past as a way of underlining the irony of his rise to the heights of the proletarian military establishment.⁴⁰

It was while stationed in Minsk that Isserson completed his next work, a small monograph, entitled *Contemporary German Infantry*, a tactical-organizational study of the postwar army, or *Reichswehr*. This contained a detailed examination of the German army's tactical development since 1919, in which the dominant factors were the strict quantitative and qualitative limits imposed upon it by the Treaty of Versailles. These held the size of the postwar army to a mere 100,000 men and deprived it of tanks and all but the lightest of artillery weapons, while the prohibition against an air force further constrained the army's tactical possibilities by depriving it of the ability to develop an air support capability. This situation was in stark contrast with the former Allied armies, particularly the French, which faced no such external constraints.

Despite its small size, Isserson found much to admire in the postwar German army, even though the latter was shorn of any such modern equipment. These limitations, Isserson asserted, had by way of compensation forced the German command to stress the importance of individual training, during which every long-term service soldier was honed to a high degree of combat effectiveness and instilled with the offensive spirit. In other words,

the Germans were forced to make a virtue out of their technical inferiority by emphasizing morale factors, which was the only avenue open to them. On the other hand, he maintained, the French conscripts had become spoiled by their own surfeit of technical means, to the detriment of their fighting spirit. As a result, the German infantryman “undoubtedly stands higher” than his French counterpart, who lacks confidence in his own abilities due to his heavy reliance on technical support.⁴¹

Isserson’s enthusiasm for the German approach drew an unusual rebuke from the editors, who proceeded to take the young author to task in the monograph’s introduction. Here the editors accused Isserson of “an entire series of exaggerations and unfounded judgments” regarding the weight accorded to morale factors in the French and German armies, and had even removed some of his more egregious assertions. To buttress this point they cited recent French manuals which emphasized individual initiative and the offensive spirit no less than their German counterparts. On this basis they concluded that “sharp principle difference in the evaluation of the technical and morale factors” between the two countries’ doctrines does not exist.⁴² Elsewhere, they adamantly rejected the young author’s assertion that the French soldier has become merely a “supplement” to modern weaponry, and called his views an “exaggeration.”⁴³

Isserson, however, was no unthinking admirer of German methods, but sought instead to adapt the *Reichswehr’s* experience to the needs of the young Red Army. The latter was still in the throes of a major post-civil war demobilization and the debate as to what form the peacetime army should take was already heating up. And although the Red Army suffered from no external limitations on its size, its woeful level of technical development and supply, as the result of Russia’s historical backwardness and the devastation wrought by the recent civil war, rendered the comparison with the contemporary German army not without merit. In fact, for Isserson the *Reichswehr’s* approach offered the only conceivable way out of a situation in which the Red Army would be in a position of technological inferiority *vis-à-vis* its likely enemies for the foreseeable future. As a result, he closed, “The German army offers us an example of great internal strength, simplicity of organization and inventiveness in the struggle with the enemy’s technical superiority,” and that the study of this experience “is useful for us to a high degree.”⁴⁴

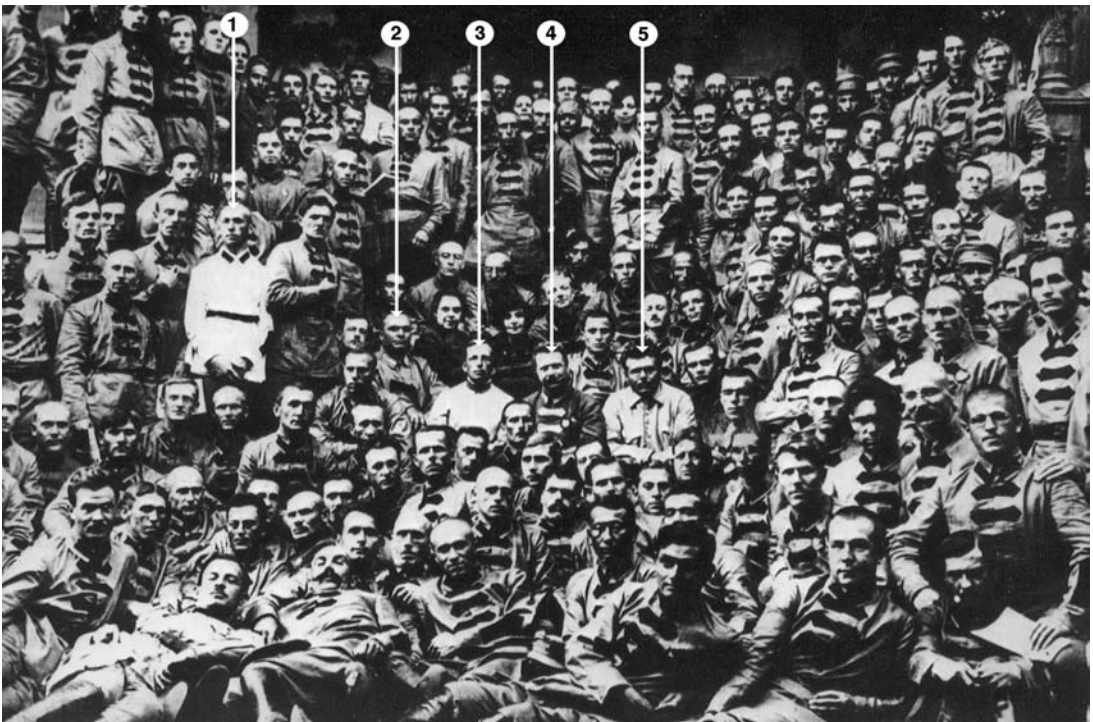
Academic Controversies

Isserson returned to Moscow in October 1923 for what proved to be his final period of study at the academy.⁴⁵ There he was quickly caught up in the latest political controversy to shake the institution. This arose after Lenin suffered a series of debilitating strokes in 1922, which left him increasingly unable to perform his duties. The vacuum left by Lenin’s incapacitation was quickly filled by his erstwhile lieutenants, who immediately fell to squabbling amongst themselves for supremacy within the party. Two main factions dominated this struggle: the group around war commissar Trotskii, and those who aligned themselves with the party’s general secretary, Stalin. Barmine later noted that it was during this time that an “underground opposition” to Trotskii began to manifest itself within the party and army, and that its “rallying points” were Stalin and his henchman Kliment Yefremovich Voroshilov. Their supporters, he claimed, knew that as long as Trotskii remained in charge of the country’s military establishment their chances of promotion would be blocked by the latter’s protégés among the former officers.⁴⁶ Their efforts were soon rewarded, and in 1923

the more pliable Andrei Sergeevich Bubnov was appointed to head the armed forces' political administration, replacing Trotskii's man Vladimir Aleksandrovich Antonov-Ovseenko.

The lengthy controversy also led to a good deal of bitter political infighting within the academy, where the issue was in evidently in doubt. It may have been for this reason that a high-ranking military-political delegation visited the academy sometime in 1923, in order to argue the anti-Trotsky camp's case. A group photograph from this meeting shows Bubnov, Yegorov, and Frunze, posing with the academy's instructors and students. This group also included Yemel'ian Mikhailovich Yaroslavskii, an intellectual hatchet man for Stalin and one of the more vigorous propagators of the dictator's cult of personality. Among the students who posed with the delegation is the 25-year-old Isserson in a distinctive white tunic, which stands out sharply against the other students' more drab attire. The photograph also shows that Isserson was already sporting the shaved-head look that was so popular at one time among Red Army commanders.

The delegates evidently had their work cut out for them, as the academy's official history later describes this period as one of constant struggle between the party line and "various opportunistic factions and groups," among which the most "noxious" were the "Trotskyites."⁴⁷ Another student recalled a "sharp, irreconcilable struggle for the general line of the party against all sorts of its enemies," and that "the Trotskyites placed great hopes on the higher educational party organizations, particularly the military ones." He went on



Isserson with a group of students from the RKKA Military Academy, 1923. Isserson [1] is in the middle left in a white tunic. Seated near center are A.I. Yegorov [2], A.S. Bubnov [3], M.V. Frunze [4], and Ye. M. Yaroslavskii [5] (courtesy Russian State Military Archives).

to describe numerous party meetings in which “the general line of the party was passionately defended” and where the “pathetic oppositionists, who had betrayed the cause of the working class by breaking with Marxism-Leninism, were unmasked.” He closed by adding that the struggle “ended with the complete rout of the Trotskyite opposition.”⁴⁸

It was at one of these meetings that Isserson fell afoul of what later became the official party line by voting for what he later described as an “anti-party resolution” regarding a question of “intraparty work.” What the actual content of this resolution was is unknown, although it probably had to do with attempts by Stalin and his allies, Zinov’ev and Kamenev, to stifle Trotsky’s supporters within the party and army. Nearly 20 years later he claimed that he voted for the resolution because the party bureau and the academy political commissar did as well. He added that “as a communist, I was inexperienced in this matter, and when it was explained to us, I voted for the resolution of the TsK [Central Committee].”⁴⁹ The fact that there was as yet no such thing as an “anti-party resolution” or that “Trotskyism” was not a crime in 1923 made no difference years later as the hunt for “deviationists” from the party line intensified as the Stalinist dictatorship became more firmly established. Isserson managed to keep his youthful indiscretion a secret at least through 1936 during an exchange of party documents.⁵⁰ However, the incident continued to lurk in his past like a time bomb, against the day when it could be used against him in connection with other trumped-up charges.

The struggle continued with increasingly bitterness, and Lenin’s death in January 1924 only added fuel to the fire. A year later Trotsky was removed as war commissar and replaced by Frunze. The latter, however, died that same fall under mysterious circumstances shortly before the latest party congress. Voroshilov replaced him and immediately set about bringing the armed forces under Stalin’s control. Shortly afterwards Stalin parted company with Zinov’ev and Kamenev, who chafed under the restrictions of Lenin’s New Economic Policy (NEP) and who wished to more forcefully industrialize the nation’s economy. Moreover, they were increasingly troubled by their erstwhile partner’s growing power within the party. However, Stalin handily defeated his former allies, now styled the “left opposition,” thus securing his place as first among equals in the ruling party.

Other controversies also engaged the energies of the young commanders during the years immediately following the end of the civil war. These debates chiefly concerned the nature of a future war and how the Red Army should prepare for it. Four chief issues dominated these debates: would a future war be a protracted struggle along the lines of World War I, or one in which the issue would be decided in a single campaign; would the next war witness the reappearance of mass armies, or smaller, high-mechanized forces; would a future war be one of position, or would maneuver be restored; and should the Soviet Union pursue an offensive or defensive strategy? These were no mere abstract discussions, as the resolution of these problems would inevitably affect the army’s training, organization and force mix, as well as any concrete war plans.

Isserson was too junior a commander to have taken a prominent part in these discussions, although he must surely have debated their various points with his academic colleagues. Moreover, given his youth and previous service as a political officer, one may engage in some informed speculation as to the probable content of his views. We may also draw upon his later writings, which although they appeared in the early part of the 1930s, probably reflect the views he held as a younger man.

Central to Isserson’s analysis was his communist worldview; like most party members he believed in the inevitable clash between the Soviet Union and the developed capitalist

world. He called this future war “a revolutionary-class” struggle, which would unfold as “the highest manifestation of the class contradictions between two mutually exclusive social systems,” and which will play out as a “decisive collision of worldwide-historical significance.”⁵¹ According to this view, two other types of war were inevitable at the present stage of social development. The first group included so-called “imperialist” wars between rival capitalist countries or blocs, each competing for a greater share in the world economy, as had most recently been the case during World War I. Communists “condemned such a war, by its very nature,” given the social systems involved and the aims pursued. The other category of war was one of “national liberation,” which pitted the colonial peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America against the metropolitan powers.⁵² Such struggles by the colonial peoples were automatically classified as “just,” and Isserson likely had in mind such recent conflicts as the ongoing civil war in China and the Riffian Rebellion against the French and Spanish in Morocco.

Past wars had varied greatly in intensity, due primarily to the political aims pursued by the belligerents. The religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries had been extremely bloody affairs, due to the mutually exclusive ideologies professed by the various parties, which offered no room for compromise. Following this a reaction set in and warfare in Europe for 150 years was relatively moderate in its aims and civilized in its conduct. The wars of the French Revolution, however, saw the contending parties seek to overthrow their opponents’ social order, which engendered enormous efforts by the combatants. On the other hand, the German and Italian wars of national unification during the latter half of the nineteenth century were more moderate in their aims, and therefore did not rise to the level of national exertion seen previously.

The Bolshevik triumph in Russia, on the other hand, restored radical political aims to the forefront of modern war. Soviet propagandists now held that the nature of these aims, which involved the destruction of one economic class by another, would inevitably raise the intensity of the conflict to the nth degree. Isserson was in full agreement with this proposition and predicted that future revolutionary wars will raise “the intensity of the struggle to the highest historic level” and that this struggle “will demand colossal material resources and an enormous strain on the economy.”⁵³

Isserson did not address directly the problem of a future war’s duration, although his statement that the Russian Civil War had been only the “first act” in the coming cycle of revolutionary wars implies that he felt it would be a protracted struggle that might last for years.⁵⁴ This was certainly the prevailing view in the Red Army, which had witnessed the failure of the war against Poland and the ebbing of the revolutionary tide in Europe. Even such commanders with impeccably communist credentials as war commissar Frunze realized this, and as early as 1925 were warning that a war between “first-class enemies” “cannot be decided by a single blow.” Rather, he cautioned, a future war against the major capitalist powers would be a “protracted and cruel contest, putting to the test all the economic and political foundations of the belligerent sides.”⁵⁵

A war of such magnitude presupposes the raising and deployment of large armies to carry out such grandiose tasks. “Huge multi-million masses will be drawn into this war,” Isserson wrote.⁵⁶ This claim was a natural outgrowth of the deeply held conviction that the Bolsheviks’ political program would find mass support not only at home, but also among the disaffected proletariat in the capitalist countries. The reliance on large armies was also a hedge against the capitalist world’s technical superiority, which the Soviets were feverishly trying to overcome. On this basis he took to task such Western theorists as von Seeckt

and Fuller, who advocated the creation of small professional armies, backed by a high level of mechanization, as a way to avoid a repetition of the trench deadlock. These theories, he claimed, were simply more evidence of the “insoluble contradictions” of the capitalist military system, and in no way corresponded to the actual demands of a future war.⁵⁷

In this regard Isserson found himself in complete agreement with Tukhachevskii, who also criticized these theories as nothing more than a capitalist plot to create mercenary armies, so as to avoid relying on the politically unreliable proletariat.⁵⁸ The politically conditioned adherence to a large army did not mean, however, that the Soviets rejected the idea of creating a modern, technically proficient force to back it up. As Isserson later wrote, a future revolutionary war will be conducted “on an elevated material-technological basis.”⁵⁹ That the Red Army eventually opted for such a solution is hardly surprising. They had only to look at the promise revealed by the mass employment of tanks and aircraft on the Western Front during the latter half of World War I, to see what the future held. Moreover, if anything, it prided itself on being the most “progressive” army in the world, and was thus ideologically more than ready to embrace the twin gods of mechanization and motorization.

The unique conditions of the Russian Civil War had caused some of the more impetuous red commanders to assert that the highly mobile character of that conflict was due to the Red Army’s “inherently” greater mobility characteristics, which supposedly sprang from its “revolutionary” essence. The civil war’s deep penetrations and wide-ranging maneuver were contrasted favorably with the positional stalemate along the Western Front, which was taken proof of the degraded state of “bourgeois” military art. Some even went so far as to claim that the maneuver operations of the civil war were the prototype of future revolutionary wars, pitting the armies of the capitalist powers against the forces of the working class. Isserson, himself declared that the civil war, with its “destructive, *deep* blows,” represented “the beginning of a new era in the history of military art,” and that the war’s highly mobile operations were indicative of the “mobile character of our revolutionary-class war” (emphasis in the original).⁶⁰ However, his later writings reveal that this bit of revolutionary hyperbole aside; he was more than ready to admit the possibility of a new positional front, and in fact expected it.

Other observers understood that the civil war had been in many ways an aberration in the overall development of military affairs and that its conditions were not likely to be repeated in a future war against a major European opponent. By the early 1920s the Red Army was increasingly forced to face up to its manifold weaknesses *vis-à-vis* the more developed capitalist countries of the West. In this more subdued atmosphere, cooler heads gradually prevailed, and the notion that a future war would most likely be punctuated by periods of positional stalemate, gradually came to be accepted. One of the proponents of this view was Frunze, who had successfully commanded armies and *fronts* during the civil war and who had been an early exponent of the Red Army’s special “proletarian” qualities. As early as 1922 Frunze was stating, “Even the most extreme war of maneuver cannot be without its elements of positional warfare,” and called upon the army’s commanders to acquaint themselves with this form of combat.⁶¹

Of these questions, none aroused more controversy than the one over whether the Soviet Union should pursue an offensive or defensive strategy. This was played out symbolically in the bitter polemical battle waged by the advocates of the “strategy of attrition” (*strategiia izmora*), headed by Svechin, and the adherents of the “strategy of destruction” (*strategiia sokrusheniia*), whose acknowledged leader was Tukhachevskii. Broadly speaking,

the strategy of attrition was a “gradualist” approach to waging war and involved wearing the enemy down through the measured accumulation of political, economic and military advantages until one’s opponent is forced to surrender. The strategy of destruction, on the other hand, sees the immediate and unrelenting offensive as the sole means of achieving victory and obviously owed it inspiration to the Red Army’s conduct of operations during the civil war and the war with Poland.

Not surprisingly, Isserson came down fully on the side of the “destructionists,” who eschewed as half-measures anything that smacked of a less than all-out offensive. His reasons, however, had as much to do with the likely political contours of a future war than with strictly military considerations, although he would certainly have maintained that the two were inseparable. He argued that the struggle “against the old and decaying world of capitalism” inevitably imparts an offensive impulse to the proletariat’s efforts to overthrow the old order. This offensive spirit, which has long been characteristic of revolutionary regimes, was reflected in the aggressive actions of their armies, as had been the case during the French Revolution and the Russian Civil War. Thus a future war against capitalism must be waged as an “historical offensive” against the class enemy and end in his “destruction by crushing and destructive blows.” A war in pursuit of such decisive ends can only be waged according to the “*strategy of the offensive and destruction*” (emphasis in the original).⁶²

By the end of the 1920s the Red Army’s leadership had reached a consensus on these issues. A future war, it was held, would be a prolonged struggle, straining to the limit the country’s military, economic and political resources. This war would witness the deployment of mass conscript armies, supplemented by a high degree of mechanization. It was also asserted that a future war would be characterized by a high degree of maneuver, although periods of positional stalemate could not be excluded.

Finally, the Red Army would pursue an aggressively offensive strategy in order to achieve victory as quickly as possible, although a defensive stance along secondary fronts was considered quite possible. Among those who undoubtedly embraced these conclusions was Isserson, who, along with his fellow red commanders set out to remake Soviet military art.

Back in the Ranks

It had long been a custom in the old imperial army to assign its staff academy graduates to a combat unit for a bit of “real world” experience, and the Red Army was no different. Isserson graduated from the academy in August, 1924 and in October he was transferred to a company command with the 40th Rifle Regiment (14th Rifle Division) at a garrison somewhere in the Moscow Military District.⁶³ In December he was appointed chief of the regiment’s training school.⁶⁴ He served at this assignment until March 1925, when he is listed as “at the disposal” of the military district staff, which meant that he probably spent most of his time performing *ad hoc* assignments while waiting for his next posting.⁶⁵ The latter came in June 1925, when Isserson was appointed a section chief in the Leningrad Military District’s operational section.⁶⁶ This was certainly a responsible posting for such a young commander and reflected a high opinion of Isserson’s abilities.

However, it was during his service in Leningrad that Isserson’s prickly character and unwillingness to compromise on what he regarded as questions of principle got him into trouble with his superiors — the first of many such incidents. He later recalled that during



Left: Marshal Mikhail Nikolaevich Tukhachevskii (1893–1937), ca. 1936. Isserson and Tukhachevskii did not always get along, but the latter respected Isserson’s talents as a writer (courtesy Central Armed Forces Museum). *Right:* Army Commander Vladimir Kiriakovich Triandafillov (1894–1931), ca. 1930. Isserson deeply admired Triandafillov’s theoretical work and considered himself the latter’s successor (courtesy Central Armed Forces Museum).

the winter of 1925–26 the RKKA Staff, then headed by Tukhachevskii, ordered the military district’s staff to carry out an “operational task,” or exercise for the military district’s command personnel. Isserson said that he found the assignment to be “incorrect,” although he did not elaborate on just what this meant. He then drew up a report, in which he criticized the assignment’s formulation. This act occasioned Tukhachevskii’s “very sharp displeasure,” and the chief of staff summoned him to Moscow, where he publicly upbraided Isserson in front of Triandafillov, then head of the RKKA Staff’s operational directorate, and an academy colleague of Isserson’s.⁶⁷ To someone of Isserson’s intellectual self-confidence, this must have been particularly humiliating. Moreover, Tukhachevskii later took the opportunity to sharply criticize Isserson’s decision at a later analysis of the exercise, and the entire incident shortly became known to Boris Mikhailovich Shaposhnikov, the military district commander.⁶⁸ Isserson’s daughter later obliquely confirmed the pair’s estrangement, claiming that a “black cat had run between” Tukhachevskii and her father, which she attributed to their disagreement over the military district’s exercise.⁶⁹

While on duty in Leningrad, Isserson was commandeered to Germany in 1926 as a member of a military delegation.⁷⁰ This was in keeping with the friendly relations maintained by the *Reichswehr* and the Red Army during the years before the Nazis came to power in 1933. The benefit of these ties for the Soviets was their access to high-quality German

military institutions of higher learning, and a number of high-ranking Red Army commanders studied in Germany. The *Reichswehr* profited by being allowed to conduct in the USSR experiments with tanks and aircraft, which had been forbidden by the Treaty of Versailles. Isserson later testified that the purpose of the visit was to study the German army's combat training procedures and to act as observers at maneuvers. He said that he was given the additional assignment of studying the *Reichswehr's* methods of staff work. He was later allowed to be an observer at a divisional command post and was able to send back copies of operational orders to the RKKA Staff for further study. In an interesting comment on the times, Isserson noted that of the seven other Red Army commanders who accompanied him on this trip, four were known by him to have later been arrested.⁷¹

Upon his return to the Soviet Union, Isserson was able to make a brief stop in Kaunas to see his parents and sister. This was probably the first time that the Issersons had seen each other since the parents left Vologda and Soviet Russia in 1921. Yan Karlovich Berzin, then the chief of Soviet military intelligence, personally authorized the detour.⁷² That someone of Berzin's stature involved himself in this matter is significant. This circumstance, combined with Isserson's previous intelligence-gathering background with the Western Front during the early 1920s, suggests that the sojourn in Germany had been more than a simple fact-finding trip.

As will be recalled, Samuil El'iashevich and his wife elected to return to Kaunas after the civil war. This circumstance doubtlessly placed a great strain on the family's relations, given the antagonistic relationship between the Soviet Union and the newly independent Lithuanian state. Isserson's visit proved to be the last meeting with his family. His father died the following year, followed by his mother in 1928.⁷³

It was also the last time Isserson would see his sister, Liusi, who had returned to Kaunas with her parents. There she married a "quite wealthy man," taking the name Pokrovskaia.⁷⁴ The very fact that his sister resided in a "bourgeois" state no doubt created a number of problems for Isserson, who served in a system that was becoming increasingly suspicious of any and all contacts with foreigners. Normal communication became possible only in the summer of 1940, following Lithuania's absorption by the Soviet Union. However, they were unable to see each other during 1940–41, by which time Isserson's star was, in any event, fading rapidly. Any chance of a reunion was soon interrupted by Isserson's arrest and Hitler's attack on the USSR. German forces captured Kaunas on June 24, 1941, only two days after the war began, which gave Liusi no time to escape. As a result, she and her son perished during the destruction of the Kaunas ghetto in 1943.⁷⁵

Isserson, despite his recent brush with Tukhachevskii, apparently acquitted himself well at his staff posting in the Leningrad Military district, for in October 1926 he was transferred back to Moscow to take up his new duties as a section chief in the RKKA Staff's first, or operational directorate, which made him *ex officio* deputy chief of the directorate.⁷⁶ This was a particularly fortunate assignment, as it allowed Isserson to renew his acquaintance with Triandafillov, who was fast becoming the Red Army's leading operational theorist. The two men had attended the RKKA Military Academy together and had graduated a year apart.⁷⁷ According to Isserson, it was Triandafillov who recommended him for the post. The appointment had to be cleared by Tukhachevskii, however, but if the latter had any objections Triandafillov was able to persuade the chief of staff to give his opinionated young friend another chance.⁷⁸ Tukhachevskii's agreement indicates that he held no particular grudge against Isserson as a result of their previous disagreements and that he valued the latter's talents, if not his personality.



Left: Felitsata Pavlovna Fedulova (at left), with an unidentified friend, ca. 1900 (courtesy I.G. Yeremina). **Right:** Galina Ivanovna Fedulova in white boots, and Yekaterina Ivanovna Fedulova far right, ca. 1917–18. Yekaterina Ivanovna later became Isserson’s first wife (courtesy I.G. Yeremina).

Isserson’s return to Moscow was also the occasion for meeting the first of his three wives. This was Yekaterina Ivanovna Fedulova, from the provincial town of Barnaul in the Altai region of Siberia, near the border with China and Mongolia. Yekaterina Ivanovna was the younger daughter of Ivan Ivanovich Fedulov (1874–1922), a prosperous merchant who had made his fortune in the local grain and flour business with his brothers. Ivan Ivanovich married Felitsata Pavlovna Neshumova (1881–1963), the daughter of a defrocked priest, in 1900.⁷⁹ They had three children: Galina Ivanovna (1902–1975), Yekaterina Ivanovna (1903–1992), and Innokentii Ivanovich (1906–1943).⁸⁰ Ivan Ivanovich’s wealth enabled him to purchase the first automobile in the city and to have his two daughters educated by governesses. Both of the girls finished the local high school, played the piano, and knew German.⁸¹ Ivan Ivanovich also seems to have been somewhat of a “high roller,” according to his granddaughter, and once lost a steamship he owned in a game of cards.⁸²

The Fedulovs took an active part in the city’s political and social life. Ivan Ivanovich, for example, served as a town councilor, while Felitsata Pavlovna was a trustee of a local grammar school. They also funded stipends for students in grammar and secondary schools, as well as the university in Tomsk. The Fedulovs were also quite politically liberal for the time and often lent a hand to those persecuted by the czarist regime. According to family legend, Konstantin Leonardovich Knipper (the brother of Ol’ga Leonardovna Knipper, the wife of the writer Anton Pavlovich Chekhov) spent some time with them following his ban-

ishment from St. Petersburg for making unflattering remarks about the empress. Felitsata Pavlovna was also known to provide refuge for all manner of tramps and escaped convicts, one of whom was the Latvian Bolshevik Engel'.⁸³

This provincial idyll soon came to an end, however, and for the Fedulovs, like so many other families of means, the Russian Revolution brought suffering and ruin. The Bolsheviks seized control of Barnaul in December 1917, but were driven out by White forces in the spring of the following year. However, by the autumn of 1919 the tide had irrevocably turned against the White armies in Siberia, now led by Admiral Kolchak. As the Whites prepared to abandon the town, the Fedulovs were urged to leave, lest they suffer reprisals and expropriation at the hands of the advancing Red Army. Fedulov's wife refused, however, declaring that she was a Russian and would die on Russian soil, and so the family remained.⁸⁴

On December 10, 1919, the Soviet Fifth Army's 26th Rifle Division entered Barnaul, this time for good. The Fedulov's property was confiscated, according to the standard practice, and the family was forced to vacate its home. They were spared worse by the intervention of the very same Engel', who had returned with the army and who was able to mitigate somewhat the family's plight. The Bolsheviks even offered Ivan Ivanovich a position running his former mill for them.⁸⁵

Among others who arrived with the army was Abram Mironovich Vol'pe, later known to his friends as "Mark."⁸⁶ It was in Barnaul that Vol'pe first set eyes on Fedulov's elder daughter, Galina Ivanovna. The young red commander evidently cut a dashing figure, and Galina Ivanovna later joked that she had been "bewitched by his red jodhpurs."⁸⁷ For obvious reasons, the elder Fedulovs objected to their elder daughter's marriage to a representative of the power that had just deprived them of everything, but it did no good.⁸⁸ The two married in February 1920 but never registered their marriage, as the revolutionary morality of the day did not require them to conform to such "bourgeois" prejudices.⁸⁹ This failure to observe the usual formalities had unforeseen consequences years later, when Galina Ivanovna sought to obtain her late husband's pension.

The pair later moved to Moscow, where Vol'pe had been accepted to the new RKKA Military Academy, from which he graduated in 1922.⁹⁰ Yekaterina Ivanovna arrived from Barnaul in 1921 and moved in with them.⁹¹ Following her husband's death in 1922, Felitsata Pavlovna moved to Moscow to be with her daughters, and remained



Yekaterina Ivanovna Isserson, 1932. She remained with Isserson despite his many betrayals. They divorced in 1951, while Isserson was still in camp (courtesy I.G. Yeremina).

there until her death at the age of 82.⁹² It was there in 1926 that Isserson first met his future wife.⁹³ At the time Vol'pe was carrying out special assignments for the war commissar and the chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council.⁹⁴ Isserson's visits gave him the opportunity to renew his acquaintance with Vol'pe, whom he had known slightly at the academy.⁹⁵ At the time Vol'pe was gaining a reputation as a writer on military affairs, which must have drawn Isserson to him. The two shared not only a common ethnicity, but Vol'pe had also been born in Kaunas, although a few years before Isserson.

Their friendship was soon put to the test. Isserson recalled that in early 1927 he sometimes stood in for Triandafillov and reported directly to Tukhachevskii on matters relating to the directorate's activities. He stated that at one point he noticed a "discrepancy" in some of the documents that crossed his desk and in the directorate's work on the operational deployment plan, particularly regarding questions of transportation. Isserson testified that not only were the questions he raised not resolved to his satisfaction, but that his "whistle blowing" activities "created a very difficult situation for me." As a result of this increasingly hostile environment, Isserson he said, he had no choice but to request a transfer. This request soon reached Voroshilov, the People's Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs, who summoned Isserson to his office and demanded a written report on the matter.⁹⁶

Shortly afterwards, Isserson submitted his report, in which he later claimed to have "laid out all the planning defects regarding the most important questions." Elsewhere he added that the report was "definitely directed against Tukhachevskii as chief of staff," although he did not elaborate.⁹⁷ The report was certainly welcome grist for the war commissar's mill, as Voroshilov had long nursed a deep grudge against Tukhachevskii, dating back to the civil war. One of the reasons behind the two men's enmity was undoubtedly Voroshilov's lingering dislike for those former czarist officers, such as Tukhachevskii, who had sided with the Red Army and had gradually pushed aside those politically connected but militarily incompetent party members who had played such an important role in the army's creation. Voroshilov, for example, had been an early and persistent advocate of so-called "partisan" methods during the civil war and had displayed a deep distrust of anything that smacked of a regular army.

Also, as a leading stalwart of the Stalin fraction in the country's political leadership, Voroshilov was duty-bound to oppose Tukhachevskii, whose relations with the dictator had been utterly ruined during the Polish campaign. Tukhachevskii blamed Stalin's insubordinate actions as political commissar for the Southwestern Front for the defeat of his own *front's* armies before Warsaw, and the succeeding years had done little to lessen their rancor. Another reason behind the animosity between Voroshilov and Tukhachevskii may be traced to the war commissar's resentment of Tukhachevskii's military talents and the latter's poorly disguised contempt for his chief's abilities.

The matter did not end there, however. Isserson was evidently quite disturbed at the turn matters had taken and proceeded to confide his problems to Vol'pe. Isserson later recounted that he "fell for" what he called Vol'pe's "seemingly sympathetic attitude" toward his plight and related the incident in full during a conversation at the latter's apartment. He admitted that he "had no right" to do this and had committed "a very serious" mistake in divulging such details to someone outside the RKKA Staff. On the other hand, he maintained that this had been a "purely provocative move" on Vol'pe's part and that the latter had "literally interrogated me" on the matter. He added that "that very evening" Vol'pe went to see Tukhachevskii, where he divulged the contents of their conversation, the details of which soon became common knowledge within the RKKA Staff apparatus. In this way

Isserson was exposed for his formal breach of regulations and simultaneously branded as an informer and ingrate toward the man who had appointed him to the position. At this point, as much as Voroshilov may have welcomed the opportunity to embarrass Tukhachevskii, he had no choice but to issue an official reprimand to Isserson, after which the latter was unceremoniously transferred to other duties.⁹⁸

Isserson, later admitted that he possessed no concrete facts for charging Vol'pe with duplicity in the matter. He maintained, however, that the circumstantial evidence was against the latter, as he had not divulged the matter to anyone else, leaving Vol'pe the only one who could have informed Tukhachevskii. He did allow, however, for the possibility that the chief of staff had learned the details of Isserson's report from sources in Voroshilov's office.⁹⁹ Vol'pe's subsequent career path certainly did nothing to allay Isserson's suspicions. In 1928 Vol'pe was appointed the chief of the RKKA Staff's mobilization directorate, which was followed by a stint as a division commander and a posting as the chief of staff of the Moscow Military District. His last assignment was as chief of the RKKA General Staff's administrative-mobilization directorate.¹⁰⁰ His loyalty to Tukhachevskii certainly did him no good, however, and he swiftly followed his chief along the path of arrest, interrogation and execution.

Whatever the truth of the matter, the incident utterly ruined the friendship between



Left: Marshal Kliment Yefremovich Voroshilov (1881–1969), 1941. Voroshilov was not only incompetent but also presided over the extermination of the Red Army's higher command echelon in 1937 and 1938 (courtesy Central Armed Forces Museum). *Right:* Division Commander Abram Mironovich Vol'pe (1895–1937), 1933. He married Galina Ivanovna Fedulova. Isserson later claimed that Vol'pe betrayed him (courtesy I.G. Yeremina).

Isserson and Vol'pe, despite their emerging familial ties. Isserson, in typically categorical fashion, later stated that the incident "put an end to any kind of close relations between myself and Vol'pe and forced me to always treat him with a great lack of faith, circumspection and squeamishness," and that he considered his future in-law "a person capable of disgusting provocative moves," who "did not balk at using any means for achieving his careerist goals." He added that in later years, when stationed outside of Moscow, he maintained no personal or written relations and that during the times he was assigned to Moscow, he kept their relations "purely official." During the latter times the two men exchanged house visits, although even this was due to his wife's influence, and the chill remained in their relations right up to Vol'pe's arrest in the spring of 1937.¹⁰¹

Understandably enough, the affair also did nothing for Isserson's relations with Tukhachevskii, although they seemed to have lacked the element of personal bitterness that existed between himself and Vol'pe. This probably had to do with the fact that the two had never been on close terms, given their great difference in rank. Following Isserson's forced transfer from the RKKA Staff the two men did not have any contact for nearly ten years.

Isserson's version of this incident, while revealing in several ways, should be taken with a grain of salt. It should be kept foremost in mind that at the time Isserson gave his account he was under arrest with good reason to fear for his life. As such, he had every incentive to exaggerate the extent of his differences with Tukhachevskii, who had been publicly implicated in a plot and executed four years earlier. The same holds true for his relations with Vol'pe, who was arrested at about the same time as Tukhachevskii, but whose fate remained unknown until it was established in the 1950s that he had been executed nearly twenty years before. It would probably be asking too much of anyone placed in such circumstances not to make the effort to distance himself from such dangerous acquaintances. This becomes all the more understandable if one assumes that Isserson, as a product of the Stalinist system, may well have believed at the time that the two men were guilty as charged, and would thus feel little, if any, qualms about blackening their memory, particularly if doing so might increase his own chances of survival. That Isserson, a quarter century later, found himself in the forefront of those who sought to rehabilitate Tukhachevskii's reputation is not necessarily evidence of cowardice or hypocrisy, but merely reveals him as a man of his time.

As a result of this incident, Isserson in March 1927 was returned to the field as commander of the 32nd Rifle Regiment (11th Rifle Division), which was stationed in the Leningrad Military District.¹⁰² By coincidence, Tukhachevskii was appointed to head this district the following year in the wake of a policy dispute with Voroshilov, which caused him to resign his post as chief of the RKKA Staff. However, he and Isserson appear not to have met. This did not prevent Isserson from praising Tukhachevskii's tenure as military district chief years later, and he gave his superior credit for improving the city's defenses.¹⁰³ While in Leningrad Isserson was able to renew his acquaintance with his family and met with his paternal uncles, and a female cousin.¹⁰⁴

During Isserson's stint in the Leningrad area he continued courting Yekaterina Ivanovna from afar. This meant taking the overnight train between Leningrad and Moscow whenever he could, which certainly speaks well of his ardor. However, Isserson's pressing of his suit doubtlessly meant frequent and unpleasant contact with the despised Vol'pe, in whose apartment Yekaterina Ivanovna continued to reside.

Isserson's daughter described her mother as a "green-eyed blonde" and a "very pretty woman." She was also "quite meek" and retiring and evidently found it difficult to resist the blandishments of the young commander with the intellectual bearing. Her daughter

attributes this to her mother's refined upbringing and the fact that governesses educated her.¹⁰⁵ Isserson did more than just sweep up his paramour, however, and before long Yekaterina Ivanovna was pregnant.

Isserson, given his beliefs, probably did not put much stock in such "antiquated" institutions as marriage, but he nevertheless did the right thing by the mother of his child. The marriage nonetheless seems to have been a rather offhanded thing, at least on Isserson's part, and to this day his daughter does not know whether or not her parents actually registered the marriage.¹⁰⁶ Whatever the particulars of the wedding, Yekaterina Ivanovna's pregnancy was evidently fairly advanced, an event which Isserson treated with some rough army humor. The daughter recalled that her mother later told her of an incident which took place before the marriage, during which Isserson told his betrothed: "Sweetie, put some pantaloons on, or the baby may jump out."¹⁰⁷

Isserson later stated that the marriage occurred in 1927, although he failed to specify the date.¹⁰⁸ The fact that Yekaterina Ivanovna was visibly pregnant implies that the wedding took place probably no earlier than the fall of 1927. This certainly made the wedding more convenient, as in September Isserson had been appointed chief of staff of the 10th Rifle Corps, stationed in the Moscow Military District.¹⁰⁹ Corps headquarters was probably located in the provincial city of Kursk, which several years later was the site of one of the pivotal battles of World War II. It was here that Isserson's only child, Irena Georgievna, was born on February 7, 1928.¹¹⁰

Irena Georgievna said that her maternal grandmother, Felitsata Pavlovna, arrived in Kursk sometime in 1928 to see her. She spoke to the baby's nanny, a former nun, and asked how it was that the baby had not been baptized. The nanny, knowing that the grandmother came from a clerical family, took her aside and told her in confidence: "Don't give us away to the master [Isserson], but we baptized Irishka," she said, using the diminutive of the child's name. This was a common practice during these years of official atheism and afterwards, when a child's grandparents would baptize the baby against the wishes of its parents. In this case the subterfuge was probably well founded, as Isserson, given his strong communist convictions, would certainly have objected violently. The nanny also told her the name of the local church where the baptism had been performed, a fact which was to prove important some years later.¹¹¹

As this insight into Isserson's domestic arrangements reveals, he could hardly be called an ideal husband, and his long-suffering wife seems to have put up with a good deal due to his caprices and convictions, which were sometimes one and the same. In retrospect, it is difficult to understand what Yekaterina Ivanovna saw in him, as his pride and haughty bearing must have been apparent even to someone in love. For one thing, Isserson was an intensely private individual and was not inclined to share his personal feelings with others, even those closest to him, which doubtlessly created a good deal of tension within his family. To cite the most striking example, Isserson's daughter recalled that when her father's mother died he didn't speak to his wife for an entire month, and the poor woman had no way of knowing the reason behind this silence. "He kept it all within himself," was how she described her father.¹¹²

Isserson's sojourn in Kursk gave him some more hands-on tactical experience, which no doubt came in handy during subsequent postings. It also afforded him the opportunity to resume his writing career, which had lain fallow for more than a year since the publication of his last historical work. In early 1928 he published a short article dealing with the *Reichswehr's* methods of tactical training through the conduct of small map exercises. The

raw material for the article probably came from Isserson's reading of the German military press, as well as the personal observations acquired during his 1926 trip to Germany, and reflected his continuing interest in the country's military affairs. As might be expected, Isserson lauded the Germans' practice as being not only instructive, but highly economical as well, generally involving only a referee and one or two players. He singled out for especial praise the German army's practice of issuing oral instructions, which he contrasted favorably with the Red Army's continuing reliance on written orders.¹¹³ Unfortunately, as a merely descriptive piece, the article not only lacks the depth of his previous historical studies, but the far-sightedness of his later, more mature, works as well.

It was while serving in Kursk that Isserson was commandeered to Moscow for further training. This involved a return to the Frunze Military Academy to attend its "courses for the improvement of the higher command element" (KUVNAS), from October 23 to December 23, 1928.¹¹⁴ This was a course for promising commanders who had completed the academy's standard three-year cycle, as well as graduates from other courses.¹¹⁵ A contemporary source stated that the purpose of these courses was to "refresh" the students' theoretical knowledge by acquainting them with the latest developments in "tactics, equipment and organization," which had transpired since their last period of study.¹¹⁶ It was also a great opportunity for a young commander and clearly indicated that Isserson was on the army's "fast track" for promotion to more responsible assignments. As evidence of this, one may count among those who completed the course between 1926 and 1930 such future World War II commanders as Ivan Stepanovich Konev, Pavel Semenovich Rybalko, Aleksei Inno- kent'evich Antonov, Semeon Konstantinovich Timoshenko, Fedor Ivanovich Tolbukhin, Meretskov, Sokolovskii, Leonid Aleksandrovich Govorov, Aleksandr Vasil'evich Gorbatov, Georgii Konstantinovich Zhukov, and Konstantin Konstantinovich Rokossovskii.¹¹⁷

Unfortunately, Isserson left no record of his studies in the courses. One who did was Zhukov, who later rose to become the Red Army's most renowned commander during World War II and the author of many of its most spectacular victories. Zhukov enrolled in the courses as a young cavalry commander at the end of 1929 and left a brief but interesting description of his stay there. He stated that the courses' studies were conducted on "quite a high level" and that a "creative environment reigned" in which students were free to discuss the latest military developments. Soviet military science was just beginning to come into its own during these years and the students eagerly devoured such new works as Shaposhnikov's *The Brain of the Army* and Triandafillov's *The Character of Operations of Modern Armies*.¹¹⁸ There seems little reason to doubt Zhukov's statement and the KUVNAS program more than justified itself as to the quantity and quality of the graduates it produced.

Back in Kursk, Isserson returned to print the following year with a five-part series in the *Military Herald* on the tactical training of troops in summer. His recent field doubtlessly inspired the work and the shortcomings he witnessed. The topic, at first glance, would appear to be a fairly innocuous one and could hardly be expected to generate much controversy. The journal's editorial board, nevertheless, felt compelled to distance itself from several of the author's views, declaring them "not fully in accord with official instructions" then in place. Despite this by now familiar disclaimer, the editors consented to print the articles, considering them "useful" as a catalyst for further debate on the subject.¹¹⁹

The editors' displeasure was no doubt aroused by Isserson's forthright condemnation of the army's summer training cycle. Isserson, who rarely pulled his punches, charged that the army's training program suffered from "a lack of established and complete organiza-

tional forms,” which hindered the troops from mastering the complexities of the modern combined-arms battle in all its variety. What is needed, he declared, was a “unified school of tactical training,” which would convey these lessons during the short summer training period. The purpose of this training, he added, would be the preparation of a division for combat in all possible situations.¹²⁰

Isserson’s preferred method of training was the so-called “maneuver exercises” in the field. These would be conducted along the lines of such “universal” tactical “themes” as the meeting battle and the offensive-defensive battle, both of which implied a highly fluid and non-positional setting. During these exercises the troops would rehearse various tactical forms, such as the flanking movement, the encirclement, and the changing of a unit’s front during the battle.¹²¹ Isserson elsewhere took pains to make this point clear when he stressed the need for “untiring mobility” in the “continuous battle.”¹²² Here, in a very elementary form, is a hint of the highly maneuverable theory of the “deep battle” which dominated Soviet tactical thought during the next decade. And while Isserson’s article was not particularly distinguished in this regard, it did, in a small way, indicate the direction his own thinking would take in the years ahead.

The Young Historian

Although Isserson is best known for his theoretical writings in the field of operational art, he first made his mark as an historian. His early works chiefly dealt with the German army, which allowed Isserson to indulge his lifelong interest in that institution, as well as use his impressive command of the German language. This was followed by a lengthy hiatus lasting some thirty years, during which time he concerned himself with problems of military theory. Even then, Isserson was frequently able to draw upon his knowledge of military history to support his theoretical assertions. Moreover, it seems safe to say that Isserson, even during the long years of camp and exile, never lost his love of military history and no doubt continued to read as much as he could on the subject.

Isserson later stated that he had been inspired to write about the World War-era German army by Novitskii, a former czarist officer who had joined the Red Army early on in the civil war. He characterized Novitskii as a “sharply defined Germanophile,” which was more than a little ironic, given the charges that were later leveled against Isserson himself. He eagerly attended Novitskii’s lectures at the RKKA Military Academy, which, he said, “put me on to the study of German military literature.”¹²³ The previously mentioned mission to Germany in 1926 also gave him the opportunity to work in the German military archives, from which he was able to extract a good deal of valuable material for his later works.

Another influence may have been Vatsetis, who had lectured on the conduct of the East Prussian operation at the RKKA Military Academy.¹²⁴ Vatsetis was another former czarist officer who joined the Red Army in 1918. He later that year became its first commander-in-chief, although he was removed from his position and briefly imprisoned the following year as the result of a policy dispute on the conduct of the war. He later taught military history at the RKKA Military Academy during Isserson’s sojourn there. His comments on the operation must have made an impression on the young Isserson, who returned to the subject in 1926 in his first published historical work.

This was his *Cannae of the World War*, which appeared in 1926, in which Isserson sought to illuminate the reasons behind the destruction in August 1914 of the greater part

of a Russian army in the ill-fated East Prussian operation. The book takes its name from the battle of Cannae in 216 B.C., during which the Carthaginian general Hannibal destroyed a Roman army during the Second Punic War. The term “Cannae” was later popularized by the prewar chief of the German General Staff, von Schlieffen, who elevated Hannibal’s method of outflanking and surrounding an enemy force to the highest achievement of military art and assiduously sought to inculcate it in the German army. This approach later became the basis for the so-called “Schlieffen Plan,” which sought to destroy the Allied armies in the West by means of a giant flanking movement through the Low Countries and France.

The Russian General Staff’s plan for the conquest of East Prussia also sought to recreate a Cannae and to destroy the German defenders by a double envelopment. According to this scheme, Gen. Pavel Karlovich Renenkampf’s 1st Army, advancing west from the Kaugnas area, and Gen. Aleksandr Vasil’evich Samsonov’s 2nd Army, moving north from Warsaw, would between them crush the German Eighth Army, which was tasked with defending the province. A victory here, it was believed, would not only open the way for a victorious advance on Berlin, but would also greatly relieve the pressure on the Allied armies in France, which were expected to bear the brunt of the initial German assault.

The reality, however, was quite different. The Eighth Army would be operating along interior lines, aided by an excellent railroad network which allowed the Germans to quickly move forces from one front to another. The Russians, on the other hand, would be advancing into enemy territory along separate axes, leaving them open to defeat in detail. Furthermore, the hurried pace of the initial Russian mobilization seriously disrupted the armies’ supply situation, and many soldiers entered the battle underfed and poorly supplied. Also, although inferior in numbers, the German forces in East Prussia were far better trained and motivated than their Russian counterparts, the vast majority of which consisted of illiterate peasant conscripts.

Even these disadvantages need not have been fatal, however, if the Russian side had possessed a command worthy of the name, and Isserson correctly pointed out the various command and control problems as the chief flaw in the Russian army’s conduct of the operation. He placed particular emphasis on the strained relations between Samsonov and his immediate superior, the commander-in-chief of the Northwestern Front, Gen. Yakov Grigor’evich Zhilinskii. The roots of the two men’s antipathy lay in their disagreements over how the operation should unfold. Zhilinskii’s plan called for the 2nd Army to advance due north upon crossing the East Prussian border, thus outflanking the German defenses along the line of the Masurian Lakes from the south. This approach offered the prospect of a rapid junction of the two Russian armies and a united front against the defenders. Such a shallow turning movement, however, while safe, stood little chance of enveloping the German forces, which could easily avoid the trap by pulling back to the west.¹²⁵

Samsonov, on the other hand, had his own idea of how the operation ought to be conducted and repeatedly sought to orient the axis of his army’s advance west-northwest toward the lower Vistula. Such a broad turning movement, while it increased the possibility of trapping the Germans east of the river, inevitably meant delaying the union of the Russian armies, which would then be vulnerable to defeat in detail. This approach also presupposed a greater degree of coordination of the two Russian armies by the *front* command. Isserson wrote that Zhilinskii should have recalled Samsonov for the latter’s failure to obey orders, but failed to do so. From this point the pair’s relations went rapidly downhill, and as the operation developed, Isserson continued, Zhilinskii and Samsonov “mentally shifted the blame for some sort of misunderstanding in the operation onto each other.”¹²⁶

Lacking the moral courage to relieve Samsonov, Zhilinskii instead limited himself to harassing his subordinate with a series of insulting messages, which only served to widen the gulf between them. As a result, the latter continued to push gamely forward, in effect moving away from a rendezvous with the 1st Army. This situation was further compounded by Zhilinskii's failure to goad Rennenkampf toward a speedier junction with Samsonov, thus allowing the former to be drawn into the fighting around the fortress of Königsberg (Kalingrad). In effect, the *front* commander found himself presiding over two non-supporting army operations, instead of a single *front* one. The chaos within the Russian ranks allowed the Eighth Army command to swiftly transfer the bulk of its troops from the 1st Army's front and concentrate them against Samsonov. The Germans were also immeasurably aided by the inexplicable Russian practice of broadcasting operational orders over the radio in the clear, which gave the defenders an exact picture of the enemy's intentions; even as the Russians continued to blindly move forward.

On August 26 the Germans attacked the Russian right flank in force, sending it reeling southward. The next day an attack against Samsonov's left wing routed the Russian forces there, thus uncovering his other flank, which left the 2nd Army's center in a dangerously exposed position. Communications among the army's corps were such that Samsonov did not learn of the twin disasters until it was too late. Nor did the latter receive any assistance from Zhilinskii, who did nothing to hurry Rennenkampf forward, when a quick advance against very little opposition might have easily retrieved the situation. As a result, the Germans were able to close the trap almost unhampered over the next few days. By August 31 the greater part of the 2nd Army had been surrounded and was forced to surrender.

Isserson's verdict on the Russian conduct of the operation was appropriately scathing. Throughout the battle, he maintained, the Russian army at all levels was characterized by "slowness, a lack of activity, and indecisiveness," which were the hallmarks of the old regime's last days.¹²⁷ To be sure, Isserson's evaluation in many respects was driven by the political necessity of drawing far-reaching and negative conclusions about an institution so intimately connected with the detested czarist system, although there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of his views. In this case, however, his criticism of the army's performance as an expression of a broader systemic decay was well founded, and the same vices he singled out persisted up until the old army's final collapse in 1917.

More particularly, he blasted the *front* commander Zhilinskii for his complete failure to assert his will and strategic vision on the operation. This applied equally to Zhilinskii's inability to rein in the headstrong Samsonov, or his failure to goad Rennenkampf into a faster pursuit of the retreating Germans, even after the latter had left only a skeletal covering force to contest his advance. This, Isserson argued, had nothing to do with "granting initiative to lower commanders," but was rather evidence of the Russian command's "inability to control modern mass armies." He instead demanded the "strict centralization of the operational idea," in which "individual initiative may be only the best means of carrying out the idea in a given case."¹²⁸ To his mind the East Prussian operation was clearly a case of the subordinate army commanders each pursuing his own version of the operational idea to the detriment of the overall goal.

Isserson's view of the German command's actions was far more positive. For example, he was quick to criticize the Eighth Army's first commander, von Prittwitz, whose loss of nerve at the prospect of confronting both Russian armies led to his initial decision to fall back across the Vistula. However, Isserson maintained that the German high command's

reaction to this precipitous move only served to prove the superiority of German command arrangements during the battle. Rather than reproach von Prittwitz for failing to carry out his orders for the active defense of East Prussia, von Moltke, the chief of the General Staff, simply relieved von Prittwitz and replaced him with the more dynamic team of von Hindenburg and Ludendorff.¹²⁹ The pair earned Isserson's unqualified praise for their bold decision to break contact with Renenkampf and throw nearly their entire force against Samsonov, a decision that he attributed to their "moral strength."¹³⁰ Nor did this quality desert them during the battle's crisis, as the Russian 1st Army approached the rear of those German units engaged in finishing off Samsonov.

However, Isserson was keen enough to realize that the "Cannae" achieved by the German army in East Prussia was an isolated phenomenon, which he called a "local battle in a local theater of war." Ultimately, he noted, the Germans' achievement of a tactical-operational "Cannae" in East Prussia did not (and could not) have a decisive impact on the course of the war, given the enormous size of modern armies and the extended fronts in a theater of military operations. The accumulation of these factors, he observed, had rendered the Clausewitzian ideal of a decisive "general engagement" a thing of the past.¹³¹ This was borne out by events, as by the autumn of 1914 the trench stalemate in the East would come to resemble its western counterpart.

Nor did the East Prussian operation have a decisive effect on the outcome of the Battle of the Marne, where the main German armies were ultimately defeated on the approaches to Paris in September 1914. Isserson's reading of the operation's consequences certainly flew in the face of the widely held belief in Russian and the Soviet Union that the Russian army had saved the Western Allies by forcing the Germans to siphon off enough forces from the Western Front and the decisive moment to ensure an Allied victory. The reasons behind the German defeat along the Marne River lay not in the diversion of forces from the decisive wing of the German advance, but in the high command's flawed execution of the Schlieffen Plan.¹³² And whatever the correctness of Isserson's view, it is certainly evidence of a laudable independence of thought, which was to manifest itself on several occasions in the future.

It was just this independence, particularly as regards his praise of the German command, which earned Isserson an unusual rebuke from his editors. While they admitted the "superiority of German strategic thought" and allowed that a study of the former enemy's methods might be a profitable exercise for the Red Army's commanders, they nevertheless took Isserson to task for being "too enamored of German military sources, which excessively praise the German army's leaders."¹³³ There may have been some truth to this charge, as any historian runs the risk of becoming a prisoner of one's sources, particularly those dealing with such a highly partisan and emotional issue as war. One suspects, however, that the chief reason for the editors' displeasure was a wounded sense of national pride.

Strictly speaking, this should not have been the case, and the editors were duty-bound, for ideological reasons, to view both the Russian and German armies as equally reprehensible tools of imperialist aggression. However, Isserson's praise of the German command's methods in defeating a Russian army must have rankled, even for the most committed member of the Soviet working class. As time went on and ideological fervor declined, Soviet authorities came to increasingly rely on appeals to Russian nationalism as a source of support, and views such as Isserson's would become not only unpopular, but dangerous as well.

Isserson's other historical work that year was *The Germans' March Offensive in Picardy*

in 1918, which was also released under the auspices of the RKKA Staff's directorate for the study and employment of war experience. This short work (48 pages) was an operational-level study of the first of the German army's great offensives in 1918. This offensive cycle, which lasted from March to July of that year, was designed to achieve a military decision over the British and French armies before the arrival of large American forces could tilt the scales irrevocably against Germany. As to the size of the forces involved and the decisive goals pursued, the March offensive for many years attracted the interest of Soviet military historians as the most ambitious attempt yet to break the Great War's trench deadlock.

Isserson subtitled his work *A Strategic Sketch*, although it focused only on the activities of the three German armies engaged in the offensive. This reflected the current consensus within the Red Army, which regarded the army as the single operational-level formation and relegated the *front* to the realm of strategy.

Isserson, as was often the case with Soviet military historians, attached a great deal of significance to political questions and their interplay with purely operational matters. In the present instance, this meant the state of morale in the German army, which he identified as being far inferior to that of the force that marched into Belgium and France in 1914. Years of static warfare and the slow but sure strangulating effect of the Allied naval blockade had taken their toll. The Bolshevik revolution in Russia held out an illusory promise of peace for some, although its influence at this stage was minimal. In fact, Isserson openly marveled at the German troops' ability to rouse themselves for one final attempt at victory, which, he noted, "proved to be historically beyond them."¹³⁴ It was only with the failure of these hopes in the summer of 1918 that the German army's morale collapse took on alarming proportions.

Isserson maintained that the entire German plan for 1918 was based upon the realization that victory could not be achieved by organizing a single breakthrough along a particular sector of the front, as had been the case in Russia in 1915 and Italy in 1917. The Germans, in order to break the more formidable Allied defenses along the Western Front, would need to launch a number of limited offensives, consecutive in time, but separate in place, so as to exhaust the enemy's reserves and force him to sue for peace.¹³⁵

The first of these offensives (code name "Michael") would be launched from the Cambrai–St. Quentin area along the junction between the British and French sectors of the front. Once a breakthrough was achieved here the Germans would proceed to roll up the British flank through Albert and Arras, thus pinning the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) against the Channel coast. This would be followed by another effort in Flanders, which would end either in the destruction of the British forces in France, or their evacuation across the Channel. With the British army thus eliminated as a factor, the Germans could then proceed with the methodical elimination of the French armies through another series of offensive further south.

Isserson, who generally found much to admire in the German army's operational methods, made a number of pointed criticisms of the high command's preparations for the offensive. One of these was Ludendorff's (the first quartermaster general of the German army and the driving force behind the 1918 offensive plan) decision to launch the offensive along the boundary of two army groups, with the two northern armies (Seventeenth and Second) subordinated to one army group, and the southern (Eighteenth) to another. Isserson speculated that this was done for political reasons in order to give the German Crown Prince's army group a share in the glory, and suggested that the high command should have taken direct control of the operation into its own hands for the duration of the offensive.¹³⁶ If

adopted, this proposal would certainly have been an improvement over the method ultimately adopted, which was to retain operational control under two separate army groups.

He also found fault with the high command's decision to divert what he felt to be a disproportionate share of forces to the Eighteenth Army's sector of the front, which amounted to half of all forces designated for the offensive. While it is true that this army had the task of securing the offensive's left flank as it wheeled to the northwest, the gradual extension of its expected axis of advance westward would inevitably drain forces from the main effort further north, thus rendering the likelihood of a successful advance by the spearhead Seventeenth Army "more than doubtful."¹³⁷

Significantly, he did not criticize the German command's fateful decision to launch its decisive offensive against the BEF, while ignoring for the time being those sectors of the front occupied by the French. In fact, the entire German plan for the 1918 campaign, despite its punctuated character, possessed all the earmarks of a "destruction" strategy, particularly as regards its early focus on the BEF. This meant that the Germans, who held a respectable but transitory superiority in men over the Allied forces, would be expending their precious initial advantage in a giant "head-butting" exercise against the strongest and most determined member of the enemy coalition. This raised the possibility that even if the twin offensives aimed at the British were ultimately successful, the Germans might lack the wherewithal to reap the fruits of their victory when the time came to turn on the French, particularly in light of the growing American presence in France. In retrospect, it would probably have been wiser to launch one or more large offensives against the French forces between Soissons and St. Mihiel, in order to destroy the armies occupying the center of the Allied front, followed by a march on Paris and the conclusion of a peace.

The German offensive opened in the early hours of March 21 with an artillery bombardment unprecedented for its time. The infantry attack that followed achieved considerable success, particularly along the southern flank. This trend continued over the next few days, although the armies along the projected main axis of advance found the going increasingly difficult around Arras. The greatest progress continued to be made along the left flank, where the Eighteenth Army was soon across the Somme. As a result of this unexpected success, the German high command began to increasingly pin its hopes on this nominally secondary sector, and as early as March 23 authorized the army to continue the advance to the west and southwest. This order, according to Isserson, "deprived the original plan of any real possibility of fulfillment," and effectively meant that the Germans had given up on "their fundamental idea of inflicting a decisive defeat on the English."¹³⁸

The full consequences of this move lay in the future, however, and for the time being the Eighteenth Army's advance continued to move inexorably forward. The French, ever worried about the approaches to Paris, rapidly began to shift reserves to the army in order to regain contact with the BEF. This caused the German high command to increasingly orient its advance to the southwest, thus further dissipating its thrust. Thus even as the northern wing of the German offensive gradually came to a halt before Arras, the southern wing continued its drive and even managed to capture Montdidier on March 27. However, delays in switching reserves to this area, along with growing Allied resistance, meant that the offensive's days here were numbered as well. A final attempt to take Amiens in early April fell short of its goal, and soon afterwards the Germans called a halt. And although it was not apparent at this stage, the end of the offensive also marked the end of Germany's hopes of winning the war.

Isserson's post mortem of the operation's conduct was surprisingly critical. However,

unlike many German historians, he did not fault Ludendorff for placing tactical considerations over strategic ones in his choice of the attack sector, calling the former “a necessity forced by the conditions of positional warfare,” which “could not but influence the development of the operational plan.”¹³⁹ Rather, as we have seen, he condemned the first quartermaster general for allowing a tactical success along a secondary sector to determine the operation’s development along the main axis. In practice, this meant that the operation very quickly took the tactical path of least resistance — the accumulation of territorial gains — while the strategic object of routing the British was all but forgotten. Ludendorff would have done much better, Isserson argued, to continue the Eighteenth Army’s advance to the northwest against the newly exposed flank of the British Third Army. From there the Germans could have rolled up the British front all the way to the Channel coast.¹⁴⁰

However, if the operation ultimately failed to achieve a decisive result, Isserson argued, its failure was due, in the final analysis, to the German high command’s strategic miscalculations committed before the offensive began. This, he maintained, was due to the latter’s inability to see the “Michael” offensive as the supreme effort that would make or break Germany, rather than just the first in a series of offensives. This led, he argued, to the decision to leave up to forty divisions — one-sixth of the army’s total — for occupations duties in the East. It would have been far better in this case, he maintained, to have offered the Bolsheviks more lenient peace terms in order to free some of these units for transfer to the West, where the outcome of the war on both fronts would ultimately be decided.¹⁴¹ While this argument may have some merit, Isserson here assigns an importance to the defunct Eastern Front that it does not deserve.

Just as egregious, he argued, was the high command’s decision to launch its decisive operation along a strategically insignificant 80-kilometer portion (11 percent) of the 700-kilometer Western Front. Moreover, this involved only 62 divisions of the 197 deployed in the West, leaving the remaining 135 idle spectators as the fate of the war was being decided. According to Isserson, this was insufficient to achieve a decisive result, as the defender would always be able to shift reserves from the quiet sectors of the front in order to seal the breach. Ludendorff, by attacking consecutively along different sectors of the front, enabled the Allies to do just that. In this case, he argued, it would have been far better to throw the entire German front from Flanders to Lorraine, into a single make-or-break attempt to win the war.¹⁴²

While Isserson’s comments contain a certain apocalyptic charm, they hardly withstand careful scrutiny. His remarks as to the need for concentrating greater forces along a broader front merit consideration and the German high command could certainly have done more to insure a greater superiority of force for the operation and to pin down the enemy’s reserves. His proposed giant offensive, however, is pure fantasy, and completely ignores the conditions of the Western Front and the limited capabilities of the German army in 1918, which he so ably pointed out earlier in his study. In this regard, Isserson was no doubt influenced by the example of the Russian Southwestern Front in 1916. Here the Russians, who enjoyed only a slight superiority in manpower, nevertheless managed to achieve considerable success against the Austro-Hungarian defenders by attacking along the entire length of their front, which accounted for some 40 percent of the total frontage in the East. However, the Eastern Front differed radically from its western counterpart in terms of size, the quality of the forces engaged, and the amount of equipment which could be brought to bear, and the methods which had been successful on one could not necessarily be transferred to the other.

In Isserson's defense, it should be noted that the habit of underestimating the difficulties that the Western Allies encountered while fighting the Germans in France and Belgium was not his alone, but reflected a widely held belief in the Red Army of the time and beyond. This institutional bias, combined with a number of other debatable statements indicate that the young Isserson was still maturing as a writer, although he now felt confident enough to examine questions beyond the narrow tactical sphere of his earlier pieces. The stage was now set for his groundbreaking theoretical publications of the next decade.

At the same time these articles were being penned major changes were occurring in the country's political life, which were to have far-reaching and tragic consequences for its people. Following Stalin's victory over Zinov'ev and Kamenev a period of relative peace settled over the Soviet Union, as he seemed content to continue Lenin's policies. By the end of the decade, however, Stalin had moved sharply to the left and now favored radical industrialization and expropriation of the country's peasantry. This led to the final break in 1929 with his latest allies, Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin, and Aleksei Ivanovich Rykov, whom he pilloried as the "right opposition." This victory cemented Stalin's hold over the ruling Communist Party and marked the establishment of his personal dictatorship.

Stalin's triumph meant that the dictator could now pursue his policies essentially unchallenged. It was also from this time Stalin's paranoid personality came to exert an increasing influence over the lives of millions of people. As a result, the powers and presence of the secret police, the OGPU, increased dramatically and, answerable only to Stalin, quickly became a separate state within a state. At the same time the labor camp apparatus, which had been a feature of the Soviet state since its inception, began to grow at a phenomenal rate, fed by the millions of prisoners who poured in during the mass repressions associated with the collectivization of the country's agriculture. This, combined with the ruling ideology's inherently anti-democratic tenets, signified the transformation of the Soviet Union into a modern totalitarian state.

CHAPTER 3

The Deep Battle

Back at the Academy

In the autumn of 1929 Isserson's provincial sojourn came to an end and his career took a new and decisive turn. Whatever his personal shortcomings and trouble with various editors, Isserson's historical and other writings had evidently been well received by his superiors, who saw in him the potential for great intellectual growth. On October 7, 1929, he was among several commanders appointed as a junior instructor (*ad'iunkt*) at the Frunze Military Academy.¹ He evidently performed well at this position and on May 11, 1931, was promoted to full instructor.² It was this appointment, and the research and writing opportunities it involved, which marked the beginning of Isserson's career as a mature military thinker.

This is not to imply that Isserson's sojourn at the academy was without incident. His innate habit of dividing people into friends and enemies also colored his view of his fellow instructors. Among the latter was a young cohort of "party military cadres" who were well versed in both political philosophy and military affairs. Such an approach to military affairs was absolutely vital, he claimed, for "in order to understand the new conditions of the new epoch and to understand the altered nature of armed combat and the laws of its development, it was first of all necessary to think dialectically and base oneself on Marxist-Leninist theory." In the final analysis, he stated, only such ideologically fortified and well-trained cadres were able "to reject all that was old and outdated and to create a new military theory."³

Opposed to the "red commanders," according to this account, were the so-called "military specialists," those former czarist officers who had sided with the Red Army during the civil war. However, due to their social origins and their ties to the imperial army, they were never entirely trusted, even after the civil war, and remained in the eyes of many of the younger "red commanders" a suspect class. Isserson couched his objections to this group in the Manichean language so typical of early Bolshevik rhetoric. Thus any theoretical disagreements between the two camps over the development of the army's tactical views were not simply differences of opinion, but rather "an acute ideological struggle with old established views and their representatives," the military specialists.⁴

As a description of events, Isserson's account of these academic struggles is as self-serving as it is inaccurate. On the one hand, Isserson places all the intellectual and other virtues within a small group of politically correct commanders, of which he evidently considered himself a leading member, while consigning his opponents to the theoretical backwaters.

In essence, Isserson constructed an intellectual morality play of the new versus the old, progress versus reaction, and enlightenment against obscurantism, in which he and his comrades-in-arms are on the side of the angels. The account is also misleading in its division of the parties into such sharply divided camps, in which no subtleties or shades of gray are admitted. Isserson's true motivations for siding against the military specialists in the academy can never be known, although they probably were a combination of sincere devotion to the new ideas and self-interest.

Given Isserson's combative personality, it is hardly surprising that he also managed to antagonize a number of other individuals whose political credentials were not in question. This was related to the authorities' decision in 1930 to create a two-year course of study for a "special group" of senior commanders as a means of raising the latter's professional qualifications. Many of these, such as Semeon Mikhailovich Budennyi, Oka Ivanovich Gorodovikov, and Iosif Rodionovich Apanasenko had enjoyed colorful careers in the civil war, but had very little academic grounding in military affairs.⁵ Isserson's daughter said that her father's students included Budennyi and Grigorii Ivanovich Kulik, the latter of which later became head of the Red Army's artillery directorate. These two, whose names are now a byword for military incompetence, evidently believed that their rank and reputation were sufficient and that her father would give them good grades regardless of their efforts. However, Isserson was unbending in his insistence that they study just like the other students, she said, for which they developed an intense dislike for him.⁶

Isserson, in the course of his academic duties, was also a frequent witness to a number of dramatic episodes during these years, of which he left a detailed description. Several of these concerned the controversial question surrounding the conduct of the Soviet-Polish War of 1920, the outcome of which had left a bitter taste in the mouths of the senior command echelon. The Soviet defeat also led to years of recriminations amongst the participants over who was ultimately responsible for the defeat along the Vistula. Was it the Southwestern Front's failure to support the Western Front in time, or was the latter guilty of attempting too much with too little? The problem of apportioning the blame was further compounded by the fact that many of the campaign's principals — Stalin, Yegorov, Voroshilov, Budennyi, and Tukhachevskii — now occupied high-ranking positions in the party and military apparatus.

According to Isserson, in the years that followed these events a number of attempts were made, inside and outside the academy, to explain the reasons for the Red Army's defeat. He singled out for particular praise Triandafillov's 1925 article, "The Coordination Between the Western and Southwestern fronts During the Red Army's Summer Offensive to the Vistula in 1920." Isserson later wrote that Triandafillov, "with his characteristically deep operational analysis," "showed that the Southwestern Front command, by failing to cooperate with the Western Front, increased the distance from it each day and, by conducting an eccentric offensive against L'vov, put the Western Front in a critical position on the Vistula." However, he added, "Before long Triandafillov stopped talking about his article," "having evidently received orders from above." Later on, he continued, each time the events of 1920 were brought up, "Triandafillov would change the subject," calling the entire matter "a thing of the past," and adding that the RKKKA Staff had more than enough current strategic problems to worry about.⁷

Unfortunately, Isserson opined, Triandafillov's was a lone voice in an army that was becoming less tolerant of dissenting opinions. As time passed, discussion of this topic was increasingly dominated "subjectivist distortions," which laid the lion's share of the respon-

sibility for the Red Army's defeat on Tukhachevskii.⁸ Isserson identified the former commander of the Southwestern Front, Yegorov, as one of the most assiduous proponents of this view. Yegorov sought in his 1929 work *L'vov-Warsaw. 1920. The Coordination of Fronts*, to justify his *front's* preoccupation with L'vov, and ascribed the Western Front's defeat to Tukhachevskii's mistakes alone. Another was Shaposhnikov, whose 1924 study, *On the Vistula*, sought to uphold what was quickly becoming the official view of events. Isserson bitterly denounced this exercise in "personal justification," adding that as chief of the Field Staff's operational directorate, Shaposhnikov "was responsible for directing operations along the civil war's fronts." Still another was Budennyi, whose insubordinate behavior as commander of the First Cavalry Army played no small role in the Western Front's debacle. Not being overly literate, Budennyi confined himself chiefly to public statements on the issue, "of course, with Stalin's support."⁹

A more nuanced view of the campaign was offered up by Melikov, who during these years served as chief of the Frunze Academy's department of military history. Melikov's contribution to the debate was a book-length study, published in 1928, and entitled *The Marne—1914. The Vistula—1920. Smyrna—1922*, in which he sought to determine the reasons behind these offensives' failure. Melikov argued that it would have been wiser for Tukhachevskii to halt the Western Front's offensive along the Bug River at the beginning of August, so that its rear services and reinforcements could catch up. Such a pause, he argued, would have enabled the *front* commander to resume the offensive from a more advantageous position with a good chance of victory against the Poles, who would not have had sufficient time to recover. This argument was harder to dismiss, as Melikov had no personal stake in the matter. Moreover, his point about the necessity of an "operational pause" before the decisive battle was certainly well taken and came to constitute one of the component parts of the Red Army's emerging theory of consecutive operations.

By the end of the 1920s the anti-Tukhachevskii interpretation of the campaign had become, in effect, the official version of events. The imposition of this view, Isserson stated, meant that "for several years the false concept of the L'vov axis's importance was beaten into the students' heads," despite the evidence against it. Nor was the faculty spared. The latter had to put up with all sorts of uncomfortable questions by students, who evidently felt that something important was being withheld. Many instructors were "forced to go against their conscience and adhere to the officially established point of view."¹⁰ As a junior faculty member, Isserson may well have been one of these.

Tukhachevskii did have the opportunity to address his critics in a 1929 debate sponsored by the academy's Military-Historical Society. According to Isserson, who was either there, or heard about it later, Tukhachevskii only hinted at the Southwestern Front's fateful role in the campaign, evidently considering it the better part of valor not "to exacerbate the question." He was much more forceful, however, in attacking the notion of a pause along the Bug River, which enjoyed a good deal of currency within the academy. Isserson recalled that Tukhachevskii vigorously denounced the idea of an operational pause as "unacceptable" and not warranted by the situation. Moreover, he continued, the very idea was "decadent" under the circumstances of the civil war and he compared its propagation within the academy to a "doleful" song by the popular émigré singer Aleksandr Nikolaevich Vertinskii. Stung by this, Melikov rose up and retorted sarcastically, "Maybe you wanted a military band, too?" At this point, Isserson wrote, "an unimaginable uproar arose in the auditorium," after which the rest of the meeting proceeded in an "unorganized" manner, with no clear result.¹¹

Isserson later wrote that this incident, while unimportant in itself, nevertheless showed “just how difficult Tukhachevskii’s situation was then and how confident his enemies felt.”¹² The scene is also illustrative of the rather low level of debate in the Red Army at the time and how *ad hominem* attacks were frequently employed against one’s enemies. Isserson also ignores Tukhachevskii’s own transgressions in this regard, as witness the latter’s scurrilous attacks against Svechin in 1931; at the very time the latter was in a labor camp and unable to defend himself.¹³

Isserson recounted another incident from 1930, which shows just how deeply passions ran in the Red Army over the issue of culpability for the 1920 defeat. The occasion was a public discussion of Triandafillov’s recently published book, *The Character of Operations of Modern Armies*. Among those who took part in the discussion were Yan Borisovich Gamarnik, the recently appointed chief of the RKKA Political Directorate, Tukhachevskii, Yegorov, Budennyi, Uborevich, Varfolomeev, and Robert Petrovich Eideman, the chief of the Frunze Military Academy, as well as various functionaries from the RKKA Staff and instructors and students from the various military academies.¹⁴

A particular point of contention was the role of the cavalry in a future war. Cavalry stalwarts such as Budennyi maintained that the mounted arm had lost none of its importance, while others, chief among them Tukhachevskii, held that the cavalry was rapidly being replaced by tanks and mechanized infantry. Tukhachevskii’s position aroused the particular ire of one of the participants, who sought to prove the cavalry’s continuing utility by pointing out how useful it had proved during the 1920 war with Poland. He then added, apropos of nothing, that had the First Cavalry Army not been ordered by Tukhachevskii to break off the attack on L’vov and move north, the city would have been taken. The was evidently a sore point for the speaker, who suddenly rounded on Tukhachevskii, and with “fists clenched,” blurted out “You should be hanged for 1920!” Isserson wrote that a “deathly silence” descended on the auditorium and that Tukhachevskii “turned pale.” At this point Gamarnik, who was chairing the meeting, got up and left and a recess was called. He later returned, having spoken with Voroshilov, and announced that as the conference had veered from its stated purpose, it was better to close the proceedings and resume the meeting at a later date. However, the conference was never resumed and the entire matter remained an open sore, particularly among the teaching staff at the academy.¹⁵

Tukhachevskii, however, was not one to let things stand as they were, particularly if the matter touched upon his own prestige as a commander. According to Isserson, in January 1932 Tukhachevskii, by then a deputy defense commissar responsible for the armed forces’ rearmament program, submitted a memorandum to Stalin, of all people, in which he complained about the “incorrect teaching” of the events of the Soviet-Polish War in the Frunze Academy and singled out Melikov as the chief culprit. The memorandum was afterwards forwarded to Voroshilov, who proceeded to make a number of unflattering remarks about Melikov in the margins. However, Melikov got wind of this document and wrote a response to Stalin in which he skillfully pointed out that Tukhachevskii’s position directly impinged upon Stalin’s own reputation as political commissar of the Southwestern Front in 1920.¹⁶

The end result of this flurry of correspondence was the announcement in early 1932 that a public “discussion” of the Polish campaign would be held in the academy. Isserson recalled that “for the majority this was completely unexpected: there was a feeling that the discussion was being conducted based on orders from on high,” for the express purpose of “compromising” Tukhachevskii and putting the official stamp of approval on the actions of

the Southwestern Front. As proof of a conspiracy, Isserson wrote that both Eideman and Melikov were summoned to Voroshilov's office for instructions as to how the discussion was to be conducted and what conclusions reached. Needless to say, Tukhachevskii was not invited to participate.¹⁷

Not surprisingly, Isserson concluded, the "tendentiousness and subjectivity" of the discussion's addresses left an "unpleasant and painful taste" in the mouths of the spectators. This was, he added, because Melikov and a number of other speakers gave presentations that were directed not so much at justifying the actions of the Southwestern Front command, which were in any case indefensible, as they were an attack on the "incorrectness and even fallaciousness" of Tukhachevskii's plan. In fact, the discussion had been so organized that only "one or two" speakers, including Isserson, dared to come out in favor of Tukhachevskii's actions. According to this account, their speeches "were so well reasoned and convincing" that Eideman, in his closing remarks, sought to blunt the overall point of the exercise, while at the same time remaining true to the spirit of Voroshilov's instructions.¹⁸

Isserson's description of these incidents, while undoubtedly invaluable as a mirror to the times he lived in, nevertheless raises a number of questions, not the least of which is the validity of historical memory. For example, the incidents recounted here are taken from an unpublished biography of Tukhachevskii, written by Isserson in the early 1960s, at the height of the campaign to rehabilitate the martyred commander. As has been shown, Isserson's own relations with Tukhachevskii during the 1920s were tense at best. On the other hand, as will be shown later, Isserson and Melikov were close friends and collaborators during the 1930s. A quarter century later, however, their roles had been completely reversed in Isserson's account, with Tukhachevskii appearing as the embattled hero and Melikov the pliant stooge of the Stalinist clique. How much this change of heart represents a deliberated distortion of the historical record and how much a glossing over of inconvenient facts, is impossible to say.

Laying the Foundation

Isserson's transfer to the academy coincided with the even more dramatic developments taking place in the national economy, as the result of Stalin's attempt to transform his backward country within a few years into a modern industrial power. The first Five-Year Plan (1928–1932) witnessed the radical industrialization of the economy and the forced collectivization of the country's peasant majority; a process which not only lowered the overall standard of living, but cost millions of lives as well. However, the overall quantitative results of this campaign were impressive, and by 1932 the Soviet Union was producing 21.4 million tons of oil, compared to 11.6 million in 1928. Coal production increased from 35.5 million tons to 64.4 million during the same period, while the production of steel rose from 4.3 to 5.9 million tons during these years.¹⁹

This dramatic surge in industrial production had immediate and far-reaching consequences for the Red Army, which was still largely an infantry-cavalry force, and which lagged far behind the armies of the major capitalist powers. For the Soviet government this was an intolerable situation, as the ruling ideology regarded war between the USSR and the capitalist powers as inevitable. A decree by the ruling party's Central Committee on July 15, 1929, made clear Soviet intentions to close the gap by vastly increasing the num-

ber of artillery, tanks, armored cars, and aircraft in the Red Army's arsenal.²⁰ Soviet industry responded to the call, and although production shortfalls were frequent during these years, the Red Army's weapons park grew at a furious pace, and by the end of the first Five-Year Plan the number of artillery pieces (76-mm and greater) in the Red Army had grown to 10,684, as opposed to 6,645 in 1928. By 1935 this figure had grown to 13,387. The same was true of the army's airpark, which grew from 1,394 machines to 3,285 in 1932, and which by 1935 had increased to 6,672. The growth of the army's armored forces was even more spectacular, rising from a mere 92 tanks in 1928 to 1,401 in 1932 and to 10,180 in 1935.²¹ A parallel growth in the size of the army, which increased 617,000 men in 1929 to 885,000 by 1932, and 930,000 by 1935 matched this influx of modern equipment.²²

The Red Army's vastly increased materiel capabilities gave the high command the wherewithal to experiment with different force mixes and to implement a number of critical organizational changes designed to increase its units' speed and striking power. For example, whereas a rifle division in 1925 numbered 12,800 men, 54 artillery pieces, and no tanks or anti-aircraft weapons, its 1935 counterpart numbered slightly more men, 57 tanks, 96 artillery pieces, and 18 anti-aircraft machine guns.²³ Cavalry divisions were buttressed by the inclusion of separate artillery and mechanized regiments in 1936, which increased their striking power and sustainability.²⁴ The Soviet airpark also underwent considerable change, primarily in the direction of bomber aircraft and the creation of larger units. In 1936 the army's long-range bomber aviation was organized into corps, each consisting of three brigades.²⁵ Similar changes were also taking place in the armored forces. In 1929 the Red Army created its first experimental mechanized regiment, which was reorganized into a brigade the following year. In 1932 the Soviets deployed the world's first mechanized corps. By 1936 there were four of these, as well as six independent mechanized brigades, six independent tank regiments, 15 mechanized regiments as part of cavalry divisions, and 83 tank battalions and companies organic to the rifle divisions.²⁶

These revolutionary changes and the possibilities suggested by them, opened up vast new prospects for the Red Army, as it sought to adapt itself to the demands of modern war. This search reaped its earliest benefits in the field of tactics, where Soviet theorists, like their Western counterparts, were keenly interested in avoiding a repetition of the positional stalemate of World War I, during which the defensive capabilities of modern weapons (machine guns and long-range artillery) temporarily outstripped the offensive ones. This imbalance quickly led to a situation from the autumn of 1914 where the front in the West became fixed along opposing trench lines, stretching from the North Sea to the Swiss border. The same was true in the East, where the front at its greatest extent stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

Given the absence of flanks, the opposing commanders were forced to forego the heretofore-favored turning movement and instead organize a breakthrough of the enemy's tactical defense in order to restore a measure of operational mobility. However, as time went on both sides' defensive arrangements became increasingly sophisticated and were soon nearly impervious to even the most determined assault. The difficulty of effecting a breakthrough of the defender's deep, multi-layered defensive position meant that the belligerents' major offensives (Verdun, the Somme, Passchendaele) quickly degenerated into extended slugging matches, in which both sides suffered hundreds of thousands of casualties in exchange for a few miles of useless, moonscape territory.

In fact, the importance of achieving a tactical breakthrough of the enemy's defensive position soon gained such importance that it virtually eclipsed the larger questions of strat-

egy and operational art. General Ludendorff, the quartermaster general of the German Army and the driving force behind the successive German offensive efforts during the spring and summer of 1918, conceded as much in his memoirs. In recalling his decision to launch the first offensive against the British forces along the Somme River, he wrote that he was ultimately influenced by “tactical considerations,” the first among them being the weakness of the enemy in this sector. “Tactics,” he continued, “had to be considered before purely strategical objects, which it is futile to pursue unless tactical success is possible.”²⁷

However, in order to overcome the enemy’s tactical defense, the attacker must dispose of weapons capable of penetrating this position in its entirety and maintaining the pace of the advance. These were mostly absent during World War I, in which the major armies were chiefly composed of the traditional infantry and cavalry, supported by an increasingly powerful artillery arm. Thus even the German Army’s tactically successful offensive of March 1918 was barren of larger results because the infantry could not advance quickly enough to prevent the enemy from moving up reserves and sealing off the breakthrough. The appearance of the tank and airplane began to change matters, and despite the usual teething problems, they soon became an important factor in Allied calculations. The massed employment of tanks at Cambrai in November 1917 was particularly promising, despite their failure to achieve a breakthrough. However, this potentially decisive weapon ultimately failed to redress the imbalance, as the tanks at the disposal of the Allies were as yet too few in number and mechanically unreliable.

The promise of armor nonetheless inspired some to propose an even more ambitious role for the tank. One of these was Fuller; the leading British armored theorist of his time, whose Plan 1919 foresaw the employment of thousands of tanks to bring about final victory that year. However, the war ended before Fuller’s plan could be put into effect and further progress in this area slowed considerably. Isserson charged that Fuller’s own thinking in this area failed to develop along the correct lines and, in fact, took a politically motivated wrong turn, which “reflects the class character of the capitalist military system” and its desire for a politically reliable soldiery. By this Isserson clearly had in mind Fuller’s too ardent embrace of the tank and his consequent denigration of the traditional infantry component, which meant a rejection of the entire idea of the combined-arms battle so dear to Soviet military theorists. “Such a point of view,” he concluded, “was, of course, completely unacceptable to us.”²⁸

The tank and airplane found their advocates in the Red Army as well. Among them was Verkhovskii, who in 1928 criticized those who looked upon the tank with suspicion and who failed to see its potential “to carry out a decisive revolution in the means of waging modern war.” Rather than dismissing the tank, he wrote the army should strive to create an armored force “capable of broad maneuver on the tactical and operational scale.”²⁹ He also assailed the push in some quarters, no doubt inspired by Western theories of “air power,” to create an “autonomous air force.” Such ideas, Verkhovskii declared, were “alien and beyond our capabilities,” by which he meant these ideas’ capitalist origins and the inability of Soviet industry to create such a force. This is not to say, he continued, that the Red Army was not committed to creating a large air force; however, it would remain harnessed to the land battle.³⁰

The Red Army’s tactical thought in the interwar period ultimately coalesced around the theory of the “deep battle” (*glubokii boi*). The deep battle consisted of three subsets: the meeting battle, the breakthrough battle, and the defensive battle. The first would most likely occur when both sides pursued offensive aims and collided on the battlefield. This

form was thought to be most likely to arise at the beginning of a war, when a period of maneuver was most likely, or along the flanks of a positional front, where a limited form of maneuver was still possible, or following the breakthrough along a portion of the front. The breakthrough battle involves the penetration of the enemy's tactical defensive position and the restoration, if only briefly, of maneuver conditions. It was assumed that this form of battle would predominate in a future war's positional phase, once the initial maneuver operations have ended and the front line has stabilized. In the event of success, the attacker would most likely encounter enemy reserves moving up to seal the breach, which would result in a meeting battle between the two sides. The defensive battle might arise as the result of a defeat in the meeting battle, or it could be the result of a higher command decision to assume the defensive on one portion of the front in order to husband resources for an offensive elsewhere. In the event of success, the defender would either counterattack to restore the situation, or seek to develop the success in the enemy's depth as part of a larger operational counteroffensive.

Isserson later gave Tukhachevskii a good deal of credit for laying the groundwork of the deep battle during the latter's tenure as Red Army chief of staff. He singled out for special praise Tukhachevskii's 1928 proposal for an enormous rearmament program to close the technological gap with the capitalist armies. Tukhachevskii's proposal called for a massive technical makeover of the army, with special emphasis on sharply increasing the number of tanks and aircraft, as well as updating the infantry and artillery arms. The projected figures, however, vastly overestimated the capabilities of the country's industrial base, which had barely regained the pre-1914 level of production. "For the time," Isserson wrote, "the proposed figures were indeed grandiose," and they were rejected by Stalin and Voroshilov as "unrealistic," which they certainly were. He cited this incident as one of the reasons behind Tukhachevskii's transfer to the command of the Leningrad Military District.³¹

At the heart of the deep battle lay what Isserson referred to collectively as the "new means of combat" (*novye sredstva bor'by*). These included the previous war's tanks and aircraft, which since 1918 had improved considerably in both range and firepower. These were inherently offensive weapons, which offered a way out of the positional stalemate by combining unprecedented levels of maneuver and striking power in one system. The "new means of combat," with their increased range, speed, and firepower "put the question of the correlation of the qualitative power of defensive and offensive means into a new light, revealing an obvious tendency toward the preponderance of the latter."³² Two new combat arms had since joined them — motorized infantry and airborne troops, which promised to extend the attacker's reach even further.

As a committed Marxist, Isserson believed in the primacy of material factors in shaping human affairs, which is no less true in military matters. Thus it was axiomatic that the "new means of combat" should give rise to equally "new forms of combat" (*novye formy bor'by*), i.e., a change in *how* war is waged. The "new means of combat" now enable the attacker to carry the battle to the defender throughout the entire depth of the latter's position, while simultaneously disrupting his system of command and control. This shift in emphasis to the question of depth marked a true sea change in the conduct of the battle and operation, which had previously been confined to the forward edge of the battlefield. In fact, Isserson often referred to these developments as the "deep forms of combat" (*glubokie formy bor'by*).

He maintained that other factors also influenced the development of the Red Army's military art during these years. As a former political officer and a member of the genera-

tion that made the revolution, he believed that a political component was inherent in his theoretical approach. For Isserson it was axiomatic that “the epoch of proletarian revolutions, the construction of socialism, and revolutionary class wars, predetermine the coming of a new epoch of military art,” of which the “deep forms of combat” “were the most outstanding manifestation.”³³

Isserson’s explanation for the rise of the “new forms” contains a number of obvious flaws, not the least of which is the fallacy of viewing such complex social phenomena as war through the prism of a single all-embracing theory. This is hardly surprising, as many contemporary military theorists in the Soviet Union felt the need to ground their writings in Marxism, with greater or lesser success. However, it is obvious that such a “one size fits all” approach inevitably excludes any number of important factors, just as it distorts others by forcing them into an existing model. Nevertheless, as a purely historical example of how successive generations of Red Army officers were expected to think, his approach is worthy of a certain amount of interest.

According to Isserson, the seeds of the deep battle first appeared in the Red Army’s 1929 field manual, which, he declared, “looked far ahead and was the most advanced of the European manuals of that time.”³⁴ The first of these, article 191, stated that should a rear defensive position be discovered behind the enemy’s forward defense zone, the corps commander will instruct his division commanders to deploy rifle battalions within the second echelon for their respective shock groups taking part in the main attack against the defender’s forward position. As the latter attack gets underway, the rifle battalions are to attack and break through the rear defensive position, just as the German storm troops did in 1918, being careful not to get bogged down in the fight for the forward position. A special artillery group is to be detailed to support the battalions during their advance, as well as tank units, if available. The infantry divisions’ main forces, once they have broken through the forward defensive position, will then come to the support of the rifle battalions as they struggle to break through the rear position.³⁵

Article 207 stated, “The tanks’ main task is to pave the way for the attacking infantry by suppressing the enemy’s fire resistance and destroying his artificial obstacles.” The rifle division commander is detailed a tank battalion for the attack, the bulk of which is to be allocated for direct infantry support and, if possible, to support the second echelon of infantry. In the event that the division commander is blessed with an abundance of artillery and tank assets, he may form from the latter a long-range tank echelon no less than a company in size, for suppressing the defender’s artillery positions and strong points in his rear.³⁶ The creation of a long-range tank echelon echoes Fuller’s Plan 1919 proposal “to organize an attack by high-speed tanks into the depth of the enemy’s position” simultaneously with the tank assault on his forward defenses.³⁷

Isserson wrote, “The concept of the deep battle first achieved recognition in academic circles.” In early 1930, he continued, the students and faculty at the Frunze Military Academy were already conducting map and field exercises, putting to the test the theory’s precepts. Among the participants were Eidemann, Pavel Ivanovich Vakulich, Krasil’nikov, Il’ia Pavlovich Kit-Viitenko, Richard Stanislavovich Tsiffer, and, one may assume, himself. He also singled out Konstantin Bronislavovich Kalinovskii, the first chief of the Red Army’s new (established in 1929) Motorization and Mechanization Directorate, who contributed to the development of the tactics of the various tank groups. Isserson declared that as a result of the labors of these and other individuals, one may consider the foundations of the theory of the deep battle to have been established by 1930.³⁸

An important milestone in the development of the Red Army's tactical thinking came in the form of a lengthy memorandum in 1931, entitled "Fundamental Questions of Tactics and Operational Art in Connection with the Army's Reconstruction." Triandafillov, Isserson's former academy colleague, who in many ways was a mentor to his headstrong subordinate, drew up the memorandum. In his report, Triandafillov sharply criticized the reigning methods of the offensive battle, which he characterized as "*the consecutive suppression and consecutive attack of separate parts of the enemy's combat formation*," and which had changed little since 1918 (emphasis in the original). Such an attack begins, he continued, with an artillery barrage, designed to suppress the enemy's artillery fire, as well as to blast a passage through his wire and other obstacles. The attacker's artillery then shifts its fire to the defender's trenches and infantry, while at the same time continuing to dominate the enemy's artillery. As soon as the infantry assault against the defender's forward trenches begins, the attacker's artillery shifts its fire to targets in the enemy rear. Once the attacker has cleared the defender's forward position his infantry and artillery then advance forward to engage the enemy's defenses further in the rear. However, this attack can move only as fast as the slowest element, the artillery, thus rendering any further advance extremely problematic. Triandafillov had little use for this "drawn-out" and wasteful approach, which he contemptuously dismissed as the "*gnawing through of the enemy's defensive zone*" (emphasis in the original).³⁹

Now, however, the new military technology enables the attacker to carry out "*the simultaneous attack of the enemy throughout the entire depth of his tactical position*" (emphasis in the original). Triandafillov identified these weapons as the "cruiser tank" and assault aviation, which together "comprise the heart of the new tactics," which he called the "tactics of the future."⁴⁰ According to this scheme, the deep battle (although Triandafillov did not use the term) would begin with a concentrated artillery barrage of the defender's position, directed primarily against his artillery emplacements and anti-tank weapons. The ground attack would then begin, spearheaded by heavily armored and fast-moving long-range tanks, which would quickly pass through the enemy's forward defenses and attack his artillery positions, headquarters, and communications centers. In some cases, he added, this phase of the attack might be preceded by an air attack involving low-flying assault aircraft and light bombers. This wave would quickly be followed by another, consisting of long-range infantry-support tanks, whose primary targets included the defender's machine gun nests, artillery observation and command posts. The attack's third echelon consisted of the infantry units and their immediate support tanks; together they would build on the success of the preceding echelons to overcome the enemy's forward defenses and carry the attack into the depth of his position. This attack, in turn, would be supported by assault aviation and light bombers, which would direct their efforts against the enemy's reserves moving up from the rear.⁴¹ In certain cases, airborne landings in the enemy rear might also support the attack.⁴²

The precise coordination of these several echelons demanded a great deal of skill from commanders at all levels. The rifle corps, as the highest tactical unit, has overall responsibility for the conduct of the deep battle, usually on the instructions of the army command, which was concerned with organizing a breakthrough at the operational level. The corps commander also exercises direct control over the long-range artillery and the long-range tank echelons, assault and light-bomber aviation, and parachute drops, the responsibility for which he doles out to his division commanders according to his offensive plan. The corps commander would exercise control of the battlefield to a depth of 6 to 8 kilo-

meters and, given the presence of the defender's tactical reserves, as much as 12 to 15 kilometers.⁴³

Triandafillov devoted somewhat less space to the conduct of the deep battle as a meeting engagement. This battle, he wrote, would begin with air strikes against the enemy, launched while the two sides were still some distance from one another. The object of these strikes is to disrupt the enemy column on the march and, if possible, isolate the enemy's various formations from one another, particularly his vanguard from the column's main forces. This would be followed by a concentrated barrage by the vanguard's artillery component against the enemy's artillery and his infantry still in march formation. Cruiser tanks, because they can deploy faster than the vanguard's infantry, open the ground attack, ideally while the enemy is still in march formation. The vanguard's infantry, upon deploying, then joins in the attack, supported by its infantry-support tanks. Meanwhile, the attacker's main forces continue to close toward the enemy, prior to deploying for the main attack. All available forces in accordance with the existing plan of attack will take part, or in order to take advantage of the gains made by the vanguard.⁴⁴ The attacker, upon the defeat of the enemy's main forces, then takes up the pursuit of his retreating columns. In this case, the pursuit is spearheaded by tanks and infantry mounted on tanks and transports, which penetrate into the rear of the enemy's columns to cut off and encircle his isolated units. In this the ground forces will be assisted by air units, which will aid the pursuit by harassing the enemy's retreat and by creating bottlenecks across his path through bombing raids and gas attacks.⁴⁵

Triandafillov was quick, however, to challenge the notion that the offensive prospects revealed by the new weapons had made the modern defense untenable. On the contrary, he ventured, the appearance of anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons, along with advances in the construction of defensive obstacles directed against the enemy's tanks and troop transports rendered modern defense more than capable of repelling an enemy attack. He was particularly enthusiastic about the anti-tank possibilities of heavy machine guns and artillery, either towed or self-propelled. These weapons would be distributed along the defender's front as needed, and would be further reinforced by a divisional reserve of highly mobile anti-tank artillery pieces, which could quickly be dispatched to the threatened area in a matter of minutes. Moreover, he wrote, not all sectors of the front would be accessible to passage by tanks, and such natural obstacles as woods, hills and swamps would channel the enemy's armored assault along predictable axes. This would enable the defender to concentrate his anti-tank weapons and obstacles along these axes and thus increase his chances of thwarting an attack.⁴⁶

However, Triandafillov continued, in order to take full advantage of these weapons, modern defensive arrangements must be "stable," by which he meant that "the chosen defensive zone must be defended to the end," in order to break up the enemy attack. By this he clearly meant that any reversion to a mobile defense "plays into the hands of the attacker," whose superior forces and mobility will inevitably overwhelm the defender in a battle in the open field.⁴⁷ Rather, he emphasized, since the enemy would be making his attack throughout the entire depth of the defender's position, the latter must be organized in depth as well. This meant making the defense as impervious to an armored breakthrough as possible by taking advantage of terrain unfavorable to tanks and by concentrating one's anti-tank defenses along the most favorable routes. This would channel the armored breakthrough into prepared anti-tank "killing zones," containing large numbers of anti-tank artillery pieces and, if available, the defender's tanks. Here, it was assumed; the defender would

exhaust and defeat the enemy penetration, thereby creating the conditions for launching a counterattack to restore the situation.⁴⁸

Isserson later called Triandafillov's memorandum the "concrete realization" of Tukhachevskii's idea of employing the "new means of combat" to carry out the "simultaneous deep defeat" of the enemy, and gave the two men credit for "having first laid out the idea of the deep battle," which had profound implications for the further development of Soviet military thought.⁴⁹ Triandafillov's death the following year, however, cut his work short and it soon fell to others to complete it.

In 1932 Yegorov, the chief of the Red Army Staff issued a report entitled "The RKKA's Tactics and Operational Art at a New Stage," which provided official confirmation of Triandafillov's views. In fact, many passages were lifted whole cloth from the latter's previous work. And while much of the report differed little from that of the previous year, certain passages did reflect what had taken place since that time, as well as the army's aspirations for 1933. One of these laid out a number of scenarios for organizing a tactical breakthrough by a three-division rifle corps along the main axis of attack, presumably as part of a larger operational effort. In each case the corps would attack along a 12 to 15 kilometer front, with a projected breakthrough zone of 5 to 6 kilometers. One scenario posited the corps attacking over terrain unfavorable to tanks. In this case the corps would be reinforced with artillery from the High Command Reserve, which combined with the corps's organic weapons, yielded a total of 438 guns and mortars, for a density along the breakthrough front of 50 to 65 weapons per kilometer. The second case was considered the most likely and involved an attack over terrain favorable to the massed employment of tanks. Here the corps would be reinforced with three battalions from the High Command Tank Reserve, as well as High Command Reserve artillery, including three battalions of heavy guns. This addition, along with the corps's organic weapons, yielded a total of 250 tanks and 390 guns and mortars, for a density of 30 to 5 tanks and 50 to 55 guns and mortars along the breakthrough zone. The third variant was considered the most unlikely, as it involved an assault against a defender's fortified zone. This scenario saw the corps disposing only of its 303 organic guns and mortars, while being reinforced by 400 tanks, for a density along the breakthrough zone of 50 to 60 tanks and 30 to 32 guns and mortars per kilometer.⁵⁰

Isserson and the Deep Battle

That Isserson was himself an early and enthusiastic convert to the idea of the deep battle is evident from accounts of his tenure as an instructor during this period. One of those who studied under him was Pavel Alekseevich Rotmistrov, a future tank army commander, who graduated from the academy in 1931. He recalled that Isserson was his academic advisor when he was writing his thesis. He added that he particularly remembered Isserson's ideas "on the character of a future war as a war of motors and maneuver actions to a great depth."⁵¹ This is high praise indeed, and speaks well of the influence Isserson had on the young commander.

Another commander who held Isserson in high regard was Ku'zma Nikitovich Galitskii, who later served as an army commander during World War II. In 1930 and 1931 Galitskii also served at the academy as an instructor and had ample opportunity to get to know Isserson on a professional and personal level. He later recalled that Isserson's lectures "consisted primarily of forecasts about the future and they were legendary." The two evidently

got along well and when Galitskii left the academy to command a rifle regiment the two continued to meet, and their families became close. Whenever Galitskii was in Moscow the two men would gather at Isserson's apartment and talk about the contours of a future war.⁵²

Isserson's initial foray into tactical theory appeared in the spring of 1931, in the war commissariat's premier theoretical journal, *War and Revolution*. His article, "The Nature of Control in the Modern Battle," was dedicated to a topic which he defined as "one of the central questions of tactics at the current stage of its development." This is because, he wrote, the modern battle has become so much more complicated compared to the recent past. Even as late as 1914, the battle was still a "one-act phenomenon," the course of which flowed from the commander's instructions, which preceded the first shots. Now, however, due to the multi-layered echelonment common to all large formations, "the battle has become a heterogeneous, complex and protracted process," which "is broken up into a whole series of consecutive stages in depth," which while connected with other, are at the same time quite distinct. These stages include the approach to the battlefield, deployment, the attack, the actual breakthrough, and the pursuit, and have "no designated boundaries in time and space," and each needing to be organized. Under these conditions, he concluded, "the control of the battle cannot be limited to a single initial decision," but must be continuous throughout the battle, "consecutively leading the troops from one line to another."⁵³ This means, he continued, that "*The entire tactical content of the modern battle comes down, in essence, to its control,*" and that without the latter the battle itself becomes impossible (emphasis in the original). This, in turn, quickly leads to "anarchy" and the disruption of the attack.⁵⁴

By now it was a given that the conduct of the modern battle had become more complex, due chiefly to the opportunities opened by the appearance of such new combat arms as the tank and aircraft. These new arms, combined with the older artillery and infantry branches, produce an extremely heterogeneous mix, each part of which has its own peculiarities of range, speed and striking power. To organize these disparate parts into a smoothly functioning whole requires a great deal of organizational skill, so that the various arms would support and complement each other in the attack, which placed a premium on organizing their proper interaction. Under these circumstances, Isserson concluded, "*the control of the battle, in essence, comes down to the organization of the battle,*" not only during the beginning of the battle, but throughout the course of its development in depth (emphasis in the original).⁵⁵

Finally, the range of heavy artillery and air power are such that tanks and aircraft may open the battle well before the opponents' ground forces come into contact. This is particularly true of the meeting battle at the beginning of a war, when the situation is most fluid and shrouded in uncertainty. Under these conditions the traditional march to the battlefield is fraught with danger, as either side will be vulnerable to a surprise attack. This puts a premium on the commander's ability to foresee the outlines of a future collision and organize his forces accordingly, both in terms of the number and types of forces to be employed, as well the likely terrain upon which the battle will be fought, which caused Isserson to declare that "*control of the battle is foreseeing the battle*" (emphasis in the original). This quality is especially important, he noted, during the course of the attack, the intensity of which tends to increase throughout the battle as the various echelons enter the fray. In this case a counterattack by the defender is most likely, and it is the wise commander who will have foreseen its likelihood and prepared for it by previously organizing another echelon in the rear, in order to defeat the enemy counterattack and bring the battle to a successful conclusion.⁵⁶

A far more complete statement of the development of Isserson's views on the waging of the deep battle was contained in a series of lectures he delivered at the Frunze Military Academy at the end of 1932, which "the concept left by comrade Triandafillov was deepened and elaborated upon."⁵⁷ These were subsequently reprinted as an internal academy document and issued under the title of *Lectures on Deep Tactics* in 1933.

Whatever the debt to Triandafillov, the approach was pure Isserson and consisted of two separate but interrelated parts. The first part contained a lengthy historical exposition of the problem of organizing the tactical breakthrough of the enemy's defensive position, with particular emphasis on the military experience of World War I in the West. Here Isserson treated in great detail the various solutions undertaken by the belligerents from 1914 to 1918 to break the trench deadlock. For the most part these attempts were unsuccessful, and at best yielded the attacker a few miles of shattered terrain at tremendous cost. For a number of years both strategy and tactics lapsed into the cruelest sort of attrition, symbolized by the slaughter of Verdun, and it was not until late in 1917 that a glimmer of hope finally appeared. In November of that year the British launched a major armored attack at Cambrai, which held out the promise of an escape from the stalemate, despite the operation's less than satisfactory outcome. The first half of the following year was dominated by a series of outwardly successful German offensives, which achieved impressive tactical results. However, these offensives actually represented the last gasp of a technologically inferior army relying on infantry and artillery. More decisive to future developments was the series of Allied offensives from mid-July to the end of the war, in which the attackers employed tanks, artillery and air power in an increasingly sophisticated manner, and which held out the promise of restoring tactical mobility to the battlefield.

Isserson was willing to give a good deal of credit to Fuller; in particular the latter's plan for bringing the war to a close in 1919 through the mass employment of armor. He was more critical, however, of the general's postwar plans for creating a small professional army built around the tank. Not only was this politically unacceptable to the Red Army, which from the very outset saw itself as a mass organization based upon recruitment from the country's working class, its excessive reliance on the tank was anathema as well. Isserson admitted that there were those in the Red Army who "tend to subsume under the concept of the deep battle absolutely everything which touches upon the new phenomena in military tactics and technology." This infatuation with the new technology tended to short-change the significance of the older combat arms, particularly the infantry. Isserson denounced such views as "incorrect" and declared that "for us the deep battle remains the battle of the united combat arms" and the assertion that infantry and tanks cannot cooperate on the battlefield "is completely unacceptable to us." In fact, the opposite was the case and he closed his argument by stating that the infantry remained the "basic factor" in the organization of the modern offensive battle.⁵⁸

Such statements put Isserson firmly in the mainstream of Soviet military thinking, which held that the modern battle, like the operation, was a combined-arms undertaking, which demanded the harmonious coordination of the various combat arms. Depending on the progress of the deep battle, one or more of these elements would play a greater or lesser role in the fighting in accordance with their combat characteristics.

For example, the artillery will play the main role in the attack's initial phase, which encompasses the destruction and suppression of the enemy's defense in depth. The artillery arm is assisted in this task by tactical aviation, acting as a lighter and more maneuverable form of artillery and engaging the defender's position to a greater depth than had hereto-

fore been the case. Isserson wrote of the “colossal growth” in the importance of modern artillery, which refuted those who maintained that its importance had declined since the Great War. In fact, he continued, the importance of the artillery’s mission to the success of the attack has, if anything increased since 1918. As opposed to the artillery’s former task of destroying the enemy’s machine gun emplacements in order to further the infantry attack, its chief task in the deep battle is to suppress his anti-tank defense.⁵⁹

The tank, on the other hand, possesses a number of advantages over artillery, the chief of which are its speed, firepower, and armored protection, making it the more versatile weapon. These factors enable the tank to cut swiftly through the enemy’s tactical defense during the second stage of the attack. Nevertheless, the tank remains vulnerable to the defender’s artillery and smaller anti-tank weapons, the destruction of which, as has been noted, is the province of the artillery arm. Should the artillery fail to suppress these weapons, it is unlikely that the tank attack can succeed. During the attack’s second phase the attacker’s tanks will be supported by the infantry, which will destroy any remaining points of resistance that the tanks bypassed.⁶⁰

Finally, however successful, the tank attack by itself resembles only the penetration made by a needle — a highly localized penetration with little effect on the overall situation. The tanks’ success must be supported and consolidated by the infantry, which is solely responsible for the success of the attack’s third and final phase.⁶¹

Alongside these developments, similar, if less dramatic, changes were taking place in the realm of tactical defense. For the most part these represented a reaction to the extended reach of modern offensive weapons, particularly the tank and aircraft. As a result, modern defensive arrangements over time had become deeper and now extended back several kilometers from the front line, as well as denser, particularly in the number of anti-personnel and anti-tank weapons.

Isserson chose as the starting point for his analysis the Polish army’s views on organizing the tactical defense. This was a perfectly logical choice for the time and reflected the generally held belief that Poland was the most likely enemy in a future war. However, Hitler’s accession to power that same year and his subsequent decision to rearm Germany soon led Soviet military thinkers to focus on the new threat.

According to Isserson, the tactical defense consists of three distinct zones, extending back from the front to a depth of 12 to 15 kilometers.⁶² The first zone, or main position, constitutes the “basic element of the defense” and extends back some three kilometers from the front line. This zone is the strongest of the three and contains the largest concentration of men and materiel, in order to confine the attacker to this zone and prevent him from advancing further. A second tactical zone, also three kilometers deep, is situated immediately behind the main zone. This zone houses the defender’s artillery positions and tactical reserves, amounting to one-third of the forces holding the main position. The infantry in the second zone occupies prepared positions, although not a continuous trench line, either as a jumping-off position for a counterattack, or in order to meet an enemy attack from an entrenched position. On the whole, however, this zone is more open and less developed than the main position. This zone also contains the defender’s divisional command posts. The remainder of the defender’s position consists of a third zone, which houses his immediate supply depots, medical installations, and other auxiliary services. Directly behind this position lies another defensive zone. However, as this lies beyond the attacker’s immediate reach, it is subsumed under the operational defensive zone.⁶³

As Isserson saw it, the problem for the attacker lay in defeating each of these three

zones *simultaneously*, throughout the entire depth of the enemy's defensive position, in a cycle that he summed up as "destruction, suppression, and paralysis." According to this scheme, the attacker will destroy the defender's first position in a combine-arms assault involving artillery, tanks and infantry. At the same time he will seek to suppress the defender's second zone with a combination of long-range artillery, assault aviation, and long-range tanks, so as to silence his artillery and prevent the movement of his reserves to the front to restore the situation. Finally, the work of the enemy's third zone will be paralyzed by the attacker's long-range artillery, air strikes, and airborne landings, which will further isolate the battlefield from the arrival of the defender's reinforcements.⁶⁴

Given the varying nature of these tasks, the attacker must carefully allocate his disparate forces in such a way as to maximize their use. For Isserson it was a given that the great mass of the attacker's resources would be directed at overcoming the defender's first zone, with the remainder being allocated to the other two, for without the breakthrough of the initial position the other aspects of the battle have no meaning. In this vein, he wrote that "the destruction of the main position is the decisive stage of the breakthrough," which "opens the tactical gates" to a further exploitation into the enemy's tactical and operational depth. As a result, he added, the calculation of the force necessary to destroy the first position has "decisive significance and determines the norms of attack means and the length of the attack front."⁶⁵

Isserson criticized the belligerents' practice throughout much of World War I of organizing the attack along extremely narrow fronts, often as small as 1 to 1½ kilometers per division. This practice, he claimed, had nothing to do with the infantry requirements for the attack, but rather was determined by the need to mass enormous concentrations of artillery to support the attack, which might be as many as three artillery regiments per division. This led to a situation in which the attacker's forces from 1915 to 1917 were echeloned to a depth of three to four and more divisions, and in which the divisions themselves were further divided into two to three echelons.⁶⁶ Isserson charged that this "abnormal" concentration of infantry not only deprived the latter "of the possibility of employing its strength," but also served to make the infantry "fodder for the defender's destructive fire."⁶⁷ To judge from the meager results of Verdun, the Somme, and Passchendaele, one must admit the justice of his claim.

By 1918, however, the greater technical saturation of the Allied armies with tanks, combined with their increasingly skilled employment, had altered the situation considerably. With a sufficient number of tanks now available to accompany the infantry's advance, the previous artillery and infantry densities were no longer necessary, with the result that by the end of the war attack frontages had increased to 3 to 3½ kilometers per division.⁶⁸ However, far from dissipating the force of the infantry attack, the broader fronts actually made its task easier by rendering the assault at once more maneuverable and less vulnerable to enemy fire. By 1932 and 1933 the Red Army had essentially achieved the Allies' previous level of technical sophistication, which in turn offered the prospect of attacking along a broader front than had heretofore been thought possible. Under these circumstances, Isserson calculated that a rifle division of three regiments (nine battalions) could successfully attack along a three-kilometer front to a depth of 5 to 6 kilometers, enabling it to pierce not only the defender's main position, but any defensive lines in the second zone as well. In such a case, three battalions, echeloned in depth, would attack along a one-kilometer front. This means that a rifle corps of three divisions can launch its main attack with two divisions along a six-kilometer front, while a secondary attack by the third division can

be made along a 4 to 5 kilometer front. This would yield an overall attack frontage of ten kilometers, which might in some cases be increased to as many as 12.⁶⁹

Isserson was equally painstaking in drawing up technical norms for carrying out each phase of the attack. Here he proceeded from the assumption that the defender would deploy a certain number of weapons in the first tactical zone, which would have to be destroyed in order for the attack to succeed. These he calculated at six to eight mounted machine guns, 12 hand-held machine guns, and 40 to 60 anti-tank guns per kilometer of front. These weapons would have to be destroyed, for the most part, by the attacker's artillery. The artillery might also be called upon to destroy the defender's command posts and blast holes in his barbed wire, although the latter task could be entrusted to tanks in favorable terrain. Isserson calculated the artillery norms necessary to carry out these tasks at ten batteries per kilometer of front along the main attack zone, or 60 batteries overall. These would consist of 76-, 122-, and 152-millimeter guns.⁷⁰

Isserson further calculated that a successful attack would require the support of a company of infantry-support (NPP) tanks for the breakthrough of the enemy's front-line position, supported by a second company charged with piercing the enemy position in the rear of the main zone. These two companies, numbering 30 tanks, would enter the battle echeloned one behind the other. However, he deemed this force insufficient to destroy all possible centers of enemy resistance and recommended committing a company of long-range infantry support (DPP) tanks to eliminate the defender's machine gun emplacements and anti-tank weapons deeper in the first zone, and which might delay the advance of the infantry and NPP tank echelons. This amounted to a battalion of NPP and DPP tanks per kilometer of front, for a total of 45 tanks. However, Isserson calculated that, on the whole, only four kilometers of the projected six-kilometer main attack front would be favorable for deploying tanks, for a total of four tank battalions along this sector.⁷¹

Simultaneous with the assault on the first position, the defender's second zone will also be heavily engaged in order to render it incapable of supporting those forces fighting to hold the first zone. This involved the suppression of the defender's artillery, infantry reserves, and his means of command and control in depth, requiring the commitment of additional forces by the attacker.

Isserson believed that the second zone might contain as much as two-thirds of the defender's divisional artillery, of which at least six batteries would likely have been identified before the start of the attack. He calculated that it would require two long-range heavy artillery batteries to suppress a single one of the enemy's, and urged the creation of a special counter battery group of 12 heavy artillery batteries for the sole purpose of suppressing the defender's guns. By the same token, he recommended the commitment of a battalion (three companies) of medium, long-range (DD) tanks, on the assumption that a single tank company is capable of suppressing two artillery batteries.⁷²

Perhaps the most important target in the enemy's second zone is his reserves, which may amount to as much as one-third of his infantry strength, or three battalions. Isserson wrote that these battalions "must be subjected to such overwhelming pressure that they will not only be incapable of launching a counterattack, but also be incapable of holding their prepared positions in depth." To accomplish this he proposed creating another special long-range artillery group of six heavy batteries, or two batteries per battalion. A battalion of long-range tanks, or one company of tanks per battalion will further assault the enemy reserves. This would be followed by an attack by a fresh echelon of infantry numbering a battalion for each kilometer of front.⁷³

Isserson further recommended the formation of a two-battery long-range artillery group for suppressing the defender's divisional command post and communications centers. The above-mentioned long-range tanks carrying infantry will further support this attack.⁷⁴

The attacker's assault aircraft would also play an important part in the suppression effort. Isserson proceeded here from the assumption that a detachment of assault aircraft was capable of suppressing either an artillery battery or a battalion of infantry. This, he calculated, required the commitment of nine such detachments, or a single air brigade.⁷⁵

Finally, Isserson recommended the commitment of four long-range artillery batteries, which were to paralyze targets in the defender's third zone. These included roads, large inhabited areas, river crossings, ravines, and large supply depots. The attacker's assault aviation would support this effort by shifting the focus of its raids from targets in the second zone to those in the third. The culmination of this effort is the airborne landing of two battalions, reinforced with light tanks and armored cars, some 15 to 20 kilometers behind the front line with the start of the attack, or within a few hours of its beginning. This force would then proceed to disrupt the enemy's rear by launching attacks against his headquarters, airfields, communications centers, supply depots, bridges, and railroad structures. Together with combat aviation, the landing force might attempt to halt or delay the arrival of enemy forces from the depth in order to isolate the battlefield from the arrival of the enemy's operational reserves. Conversely, the airborne units might support the offensive by attacking the rear of those forces defending against the main attack.⁷⁶

In all, Isserson's shock corps would have to concentrate an impressive amount of manpower and weaponry along its projected six-kilometer breakthrough front. This involved 44 light and heavy artillery batteries from the two divisions' organic forces, plus another 40 batteries from the high command artillery reserve, for a total of 84 batteries, or 252 guns. If one adds to this figure the third division's organic artillery, the total rises to 96 batteries, or 288 guns of all types. Added to this are six battalions of light and medium tanks, for a total of 300 machines, 90 assault aircraft, and the airborne unit.⁷⁷

The task of organizing this impressive but disparate force into a smoothly functioning organism led Isserson to closely study the mechanism of conducting the attack. The chief difficulty for the corps commander, he pointed out, lies in coordinating the various combat arms, given their different speeds and capabilities, appearance on the battlefield so that no part of the enemy's defensive position remained untouched during the attack. Should a disconnect occur at any time during the attack and a component of the enemy's defense emerge unscathed or be allowed to recover, the consequences may be disastrous. As an example of such a failure, Isserson cited the case of the Allied artillery's inability to suppress the German batteries during an offensive as the chief reason for the formers' high tank losses in 1918.⁷⁸

For Isserson the decisive moment in the deep battle was the infantry-NPP tank attack against the enemy's main position. However, this move is preceded by the entry into the battle of the attacker's artillery, long-range tanks, and assault aviation, which must already be engaged in the defender's rear by the start of the infantry assault. To illustrate his point, he cited a theoretical example of an infantry-tank attack against the enemy's main position, which is scheduled for 0500. Based upon the assumption that the infantry and its armored escort will need to cover a kilometer of terrain, this means that the infantry will not actually reach the front line of the enemy's position until 0515. This is the moment around which the rest of the attack revolves, particularly the commitment of the other tank echelons. Under these conditions, the attack actually commences with an artillery preparation in sup-

port of the long-range tanks' attack against the defender's second position. Based upon calculations of the tanks' speed, the DD tanks are required to cross their own forward trenches at 0455, in order to cover the five kilometers to the enemy's artillery positions and reserves, so as to be fully engaged in their suppression by 0515. The DPP tanks will then pass through their own front line at 0500, in order that they encounter the defender's first position five minutes later and reach the rear of this position at 0515. The NPP tanks will then attack at such a time so as to encounter the defender's first position at 0510, in order to support the infantry advance.⁷⁹

Isserson realized that his version of the attack was an ideal one not likely to be encountered in actual combat. He was aware that things were unlikely to unfold in such a clockwork fashion and that "gaps" in the attack's coverage were likely to appear during which the enemy might be able to respond unmolested. The most likely of these, he noted, would occur at 0515, just as the DD tanks were beginning to engage the defender's artillery in the second position. Anticipating possible objections, Isserson stated that to commit the DD tanks earlier to the attack, in order to engage all the defender's artillery would be risky, as it would force the tanks to operate too long in the enemy rear without support. In this case, the deficit would be made up by attacks by assault aircraft against the defender's headquarters and artillery positions, thus ensuring the more effective suppression of the enemy's means of resistance. This will then be followed by the airborne landing in order to complete the disruption of the defender's second position, at the very moment the first position is under assault by DPP and NPP tanks, and the infantry are engaging the enemy trenches along the front line.⁸⁰

The infantry's seizure of the first defensive zone to a depth of three kilometers marks the end of the battle's first phase. The infantry and its escort tanks will then move into the second zone, consolidating the tanks' success and destroying any remaining enemy forces. Meanwhile, the attacker's DPP and DD tanks will have completed their mission of clearing the second position and, having regrouped, will continue the attack into the defender's third zone, hunting down the retreating enemy forces. This phase of the attack will be supported by assault aviation, which having completed its initial task of suppressing the defender's and infantry in the second zone will shift its efforts to hindering the arrival of enemy reinforcements in the third. At this point an airborne landing might be made in the third zone to further increase the disruption of the defense.⁸¹

With the arrival of the attacker's forces in the rear of the defender's third zone, the battle may take two forms. If the attacker is pursuing the limited goal of merely pushing the enemy back the battle will end at this boundary, which constitutes the beginning of the enemy's operational defense. However, if the corps is attacking as part of a larger and more ambitious army operation, it will be expected to advance to a greater depth, spearheaded by a powerful armored contingent. This, however, removes the attack from the realm of tactics and into the sphere of operational art.

These and other writings by no means imply that the theory's development proceeded smoothly, or that its appearance was immediately accepted in all quarters. A number of significant disagreements arose early on concerning the very nature of the deep battle, around which the Red Army's leading figures took markedly different positions. A later generation of Soviet military historians has placed a good deal of the onus for these disagreements on defense commissar Voroshilov, whose obtuse conservatism earned him little respect among the army's more intelligent commanders. For example, Voroshilov once declared that he viewed "the deep battle only as one of the varieties of battle," primarily applicable to positional war-

fare, which essentially reduced it to the breakthrough of the enemy's positional defense.⁸² Tukhachevskii took issue with this statement, when he declared in November 1932 that the concept of the deep battle "is not a synonym for the breakthrough, but new forms of battle, resulting from new weaponry."⁸³ The employment of the term "new forms of battle" is significant and may even reflect to some degree Isserson's influence on his superior.

However, Tukhachevskii's words evidently had had little effect on the defense commissar, who continued to make confused and contradictory statements on the subject. Following the latest of these pronouncements, he wrote Voroshilov in November 1933 to complain that "following your speech at the RVS [Revolutionary Military Council, R.H.] plenum, many are under the impression that despite the new weapons in the army, tactics must remain as before," implying the war commissar's continuing reluctance to embrace the idea of the deep battle. Tukhachevskii continued by declaring, "after the plenum the commanders are full of intellectual ferment. There is talk of renouncing the new forms of tactics and their development," which, he charged, was at odds with what Voroshilov had previously stated.⁸⁴ Tukhachevskii and his allies kept up the pressure, however, until Voroshilov was forced to concede to their views. This public admission came at a meeting of the defense commissariat's military council in December 1934, at which Voroshilov conceded that "any battle is called the deep battle," and that "the modern battle cannot be any other than a deep one," which was a major concession for the stubborn defense commissar. The task before the army, he continued, "is not how to understand the deep battle," but how to wage the deep battle in all its varieties and in all its numerous manifestations," which, he concluded with particularly bad grace, "is more difficult than waging scholastic arguments" over details.⁸⁵

This is not to say, however, that Voroshilov was the only one guilty of mistakes during these early years of the theory's development. One chronicler of these events singled out Aleksandr Ignat'evich Sediakin, then head of the troop-training directorate, whom he also accused of seeking to reduce the deep battle to the breakthrough alone. Even Tukhachevskii was not without his shortcomings, citing his recommendation that the efforts of the air and artillery arms during the period preceding the infantry attack should be "employed completely to help and support the tanks." For a while, he concluded, these extreme tank-centered views were predominant.⁸⁶

These debates, as well as the quickening pace of the Red Army's technical development, kept its theoretical notions in a constant state of flux. This was amply reflected in the appearance, in rapid succession, of several small manuals detailing the conduct of the deep battle. The first of these manuals was the "Provisional Instructions for Organizing the Deep Battle," which was issued in 1933. It is not known whether or not Isserson had a hand in compiling this works from the academy, although it would be surprising if he did not. This was followed a year later by the "Provisional Instructions on the Deep Battle," and by the "Instructions on the Deep Battle" in 1935. However, even this was soon deemed insufficient, and by the end of 1935 the high command had reached the conclusion that a new field manual, summarizing the tenets of the deep battle, was needed.

The Deep Battle Codified

In the fall of 1935 work began on a new tactical field manual to replace the 1929 version, which had been rendered obsolete by the Red Army's technical transformation. An

editorial commission was established to carry out this work, headed by Tukhachevskii, who was shortly afterwards promoted to the position of first deputy defense commissar. Among the commission's other members were such high-ranking commanders as Sediakin, Uborevich and the commander of the Kiev Military District, Iona Emmanuilovich Yakir. A number of other field commanders were also brought in, including Isserson, who was summoned from Belorussia by Voroshilov to Moscow and appointed commission secretary, with responsibility for "putting the materials prepared for the manual into a single draft" for Tukhachevskii's approval. His duties were not limited to simply compiling others' ideas, however, and Tukhachevskii entrusted Isserson with writing the chapter on the "meeting battle."⁸⁷ How much Isserson's own editing of the document influenced its content is more difficult to say. One acquaintance later called him "almost the sole author" of the manual, although this is surely overdone.⁸⁸ Whatever the case, the manual proved to be the "last hurrah" by the army's more progressive theoreticians, many of whom had only a short time to live.

Isserson's appointment to the commission raises two interesting questions. The first is that his appointment as secretary was doubtlessly made at Tukhachevskii's insistence, despite the supposedly bad blood that existed between them due to past conflicts. The appointment speaks highly of both men in that it testifies to the esteem in which Isserson's views were held by the army's leading thinker and that the marshal was willing to forgive his prickly subordinate their past scrapes. Sediakin later said that the marshal was an admirer of Isserson's "brilliant pen," and called the latter "a skillful apologist for the idea of the deep battle."⁸⁹ This indicates that relations between the two men were not as strained as Isserson later tried to make out, at least not on Tukhachevskii's part, and that the latter highly esteemed his younger colleague.

Isserson recalled that the work on the manual was rushed, as it was necessary to codify and distribute the latest ideas on the conduct of the deep battle as quickly as possible. He wrote that Tukhachevskii allowed contributors to call him up until two o'clock in the morning and would hold "lengthy conversations" over the telephone, discussing the manual's various provisions. By the spring of 1936 the manual was ready, and in many ways represented the marshal's "last major contribution" to Soviet military thinking.⁹⁰ However, it would seem that high-level opposition delayed its appearance until the end of the year. This may well have been the result of resistance by Voroshilov, whose personal dislike of Tukhachevskii and inability to understand the vagaries of the deep battle were well known.

The long-awaited *RKKA Provisional Field Manual* was issued at the end of December 1936. As mentioned earlier, many of the army's leading theorists and practitioners took an active part in the document's compilation. One of these was Tukhachevskii, who hailed the new manual in a May 1937 article, which proved to be his final public statement before his arrest and execution a month later. Tukhachevskii sought to make a number of points regarding the manual's significance, as well as to settle some old scores with his opponents. One of his favorite targets was the venerable myth of the Red Army's alleged special maneuver qualities, which, he stated, was "based not on the study and recognition of the new weaponry," but "solely on the lessons of the civil war," by which he clearly had in mind such hidebound relics of that conflict as Voroshilov and Budennyi. The Red Army's very development during the past decade had refuted this theory, he maintained, all the more so as the same weapons were also available to the Soviet Union's likely enemies, who could hardly fail to use their shock and maneuver qualities in a future war.⁹¹

Tukhachevskii also held up to ridicule those factions within the army that differed from

the official line concerning the proper role for the tank in the modern battle. On the one hand, he claimed, were “certain conservative comrades” who “were not willing to accord tanks a more decisive role in the modern battle” than had been the case in the West in 1918, and who believe that “tanks have significance only as a means of direct infantry support.” This mistaken belief, he maintained, led them to doubt the “possibility of a breakthrough by tanks into the depth of the enemy’s defensive position,” a belief he called “unfounded.” On the other hand, he charged, were the extreme tank enthusiasts who believed that “the tank’s speed does not enable it to productively interact with the infantry.” This inflated belief in the tank’s importance, he wrote, led to a “striving for the full independence of tank formations and to their separation from the main combined-arms units,” while, in fact “tanks, like the infantry, cannot operate successfully without powerful artillery support.”⁹²

As the latest word in the Red Army’s tactical thinking, a number of the manual’s general articles are worthy of mention, insofar as they reflect the document’s overall tone. Easily the most distinctive of these is the highly offensive approach to the battle that pervades the manual. For example, the chapters dedicated to the meeting battle and the offensive battle, together account for 50 of the manual’s pages, while the one devoted to the defensive battle numbers only 27 pages. Such a vigorous approach to the battle is a reflection not only of the inherently aggressive influence of Marxist-Leninist thought on Soviet military thinking, but a sober calculation of military and technological realities as well. Thus although both the offensive and defensive battles have as their goal the defeat of the enemy, “only a decisive offensive along the main axis, concluding with a persistent pursuit, leads to the complete destruction of the enemy’s forces and materiel,” preferably by surrounding him.⁹³ To achieve this, the Red Army “must be ready to break the enemy’s stubborn defense, both in maneuver collisions and in conditions when he has assumed a positional defense.” In both cases, the manual continued, success can be achieved through “regrouping men and materiel to achieve a decisive superiority over the enemy along the main axis.”⁹⁴

The offensive’s hand had been immeasurably strengthened over the previous 20 years, and new weapons such as the tank and aircraft now enabled the attacker “to achieve the simultaneous defeat of the enemy’s combat formation throughout the entire depth of his position.”⁹⁵ However, merely attaining superiority over the enemy along a particular sector is insufficient to ensure success. In order to break through the enemy’s deeply echeloned defense, “It is necessary to achieve the interaction of all combat arms, operating along a single axis, throughout the entire depth,” as well as their coordination with units fighting along other axes.⁹⁶

However, despite the various technological advances during recent years, the infantry remains the “queen of the battlefield.” “The infantry,” the manual declared, “in close interaction with artillery and tanks ... determines the outcome of the battle,” while the remaining combat arms “carry out their tasks in its interests,” supporting its advance in the offensive, and its firmness in defense.” The artillery “clears the path for all the ground troops,” by suppressing the defender’s firepower before and during the attack. If tanks are taking part in the attack, the artillery will concentrate its fire on the defender’s anti-tank weapons; if tanks are absent, then the artillery will direct its fire against the enemy’s machine gun nests and other firing points. The tanks, on the other hand, “possess great mobility, powerful fire capability, and enormous striking power,” although they must be employed *en masse* in order to be effective. The task of those tanks attached directly to the rifle units is to destroy the defender’s machine gun emplacements and other firing points, thus easing the latter’s

advance. Other tanks will break into the depths of the enemy's defense in order to destroy his tactical reserves and artillery, as well as to disrupt the defender's command and control, and to cut off his path of retreat.⁹⁷

Among the other combat arms called upon to play a role in the modern battle was the so-called "strategic cavalry," which sought to remain relevant through the addition of tanks and artillery to its ranks. The manual recommended using the cavalry for attacks "along the flanks, in the development of the breakthrough, in the enemy's rear, in raids, and in the pursuit." Also included were the mechanized troops, which combined the speed and firepower of the tank and artillery arms, with the infantry's ability to hold terrain. These units, the manual declared, were capable of carrying out "independent tasks apart from the other combat arms, as well as in coordination with them." Air power, the most mobile and far ranging of the combat arms, is also capable of carrying out either independent tasks, or combat in support of the ground troops. The latter may include attacking enemy columns on the march, as well as other troop concentrations, or destroying transportation links in the enemy rear, and engaging enemy air units on the ground and in the air. Aircraft will also be called upon to carry out reconnaissance and to maintain communications between the various headquarters. Finally, airborne troops may be dropped in the rear of the enemy position along the main axis, in order to disrupt his command and control apparatus.⁹⁸

As might be expected, the manual's introduction gave short shrift to the defensive battle, and the latter was seen, in many ways, as an afterthought to its more offensive-minded counterparts. Nevertheless, its mission was critical to the overall effort, in that it had to maintain the less-critical sectors of the front, while an offensive decision was sought elsewhere, and avoiding a crisis that might detract from the offensive's success. To this end, the manual declared, "The defense must be insurmountable for the enemy, no matter how strong he is on a given axis." And like the meeting and offensive battles, the defensive battle was to be organized in depth, for only in this manner could it hope to parry the attacker's deeply echeloned battle order.⁹⁹ The defensive battle was also a deeply combined-arms undertaking, depending for its success on the smooth coordination of the infantry, artillery, tanks, and air power. Thus the enemy, weakened by the grinding advance into the defensive depth, would be vulnerable to a devastating counterattack, which would restore the situation.¹⁰⁰

Isserson also weighed in with an article that appeared in the debut issue of *Military Thought*, the Red Army's new military-theoretical journal, in January 1937. The article "The Historical Roots of the New Forms of Battle" sought to justify the new manual's appearance by tracing the evolution of the new tactical forms from the World War to the present.

To illustrate his point, Isserson divided the development of tactics into two parts. The first was the age of close-quarters combat, when the outcome of a battle was decided by the shock power of two sides actually coming to grips with each other, using the sword, lance, or bayonet. During this time the employment of cold steel conferred no particular advantage to either the defense or offense, which remained essentially on equal terms. This was followed in the second half of the nineteenth century by the dramatic increase in the importance of firepower, due to the widespread introduction of rifled firearms and artillery. Now the armies began increasingly to engage each other at a distance and by the second half of the nineteenth century battles were more and more often decided by the preponderance of fire. As the range and accuracy of these weapons grew the advantage shifted decisively to the defender, who could also employ the terrain and man-made obstacles for cover while the attacker was forced to advance over open ground. The latter, in turn, adopted the less

vulnerable skirmish line and increasingly came to employ the turning movement against the enemy's flank to the frontal assault.¹⁰¹

Despite these numerous disabilities, the offensive was everywhere recognized as the only means of achieving victory in the years immediately preceding World War I. The commanders of the time persisted in this belief, even though the armament and organization of the chief European armies utterly failed to meet these new demands. For example, the strength of an infantry unit continued to be measured in the number of rifles it could field and the number of machine guns was still quite small. Artillery was more plentiful, but was mainly limited to the smaller calibers, and only the Germans made a serious investment in heavy guns. Moreover, the skirmish line was clumsy to maneuver, and as a linear formation it was ill suited to exploiting any success in depth.¹⁰²

Nevertheless, during the Great War's first weeks it seemed as though the offensive might yet reassert itself. Isserson warned that such appearances were deceptive and although the Germans at first succeeded in pushing back the Allies in the West they were never able to actually penetrate the enemy's position. In fact, the Germans enjoyed great initial success chiefly because they were able to turn the Allies' left flank, which caused the latter to pull back the rest of their front. However, once they lost their flanking position along the Marne the great offensive came to a halt in a giant frontal collision in which neither side was able to break through the other's position. This was followed by the "Race to the Sea," during which each side tried to outflank the other and each time encountered an impenetrable wall of fire before which it was forced to halt.¹⁰³

The stabilization of the front in the West from the fall of 1914 brought the dominance of the defense into especially sharp relief. The rapid increase in the number of machine guns per unit, which dates from this time, only served to tilt the advantage further in favor of the defender. Moreover, beginning in 1915 the Germans began to construct complex defensive positions, consisting of three separate trench lines and extended back some 4 to 6 kilometers from the front line. Before long a second position some 10 to 12 kilometers back also appeared, thus imparting a new dimension of depth to what had heretofore been a primarily linear struggle.¹⁰⁴

The deepening of the enemy's defensive arrangements brought about a corresponding response from the attacker, who began to organize the attack by a division into three echelons, one regiment behind the other, for the assault. However, these troops marched into the teeth of the enemy position with very little in the way of materiel support. The transformation of the war into a protracted positional struggle took all the belligerents by surprise and found them completely unprepared for the kind of war they now faced. Both sides would need time to develop new artillery systems, primarily heavier guns with a longer range, as well as the copious numbers of shells to feed them. However, the existing limitations on the artillery meant that only the first few kilometers of the enemy trench system could be taken under fire for a few short hours, leaving the depth of the defender's position untouched. The failure to suppress the enemy's defense throughout its entire depth led to predictable results, such as during the offensive in Champagne, where the French army made insignificant gains at a horrible cost.¹⁰⁵

The following year brought about a complete reversal of this infantry-heavy approach in favor of the artillery, which quickly came to dominate the war's middle period. This was due, in part, to the further development of defensive measures, which now included a fortified zone of artificial obstacles and concrete emplacements extending back from the front line to a depth of 15 to 20 kilometers. Also, the arrival of sufficient numbers of new artillery

systems enabled the belligerents to increasingly make it a war of materiel, not men. Offensives during this period generally began with an intensive artillery bombardment, which often lasted several days and consumed millions of shells. The infantry assault that followed was, if anything, even more deeply echeloned than before, with division frontages as narrow as a single kilometer. Even when successful, however, these offensives entailed enormous casualties for the attacker, as his artillery could only effectively destroy the first 3 to 5 kilometers of the enemy defense, beyond which he encountered the deeper elements of the latter's position, including his tactical and operational reserves. At this point a pause usually set in while the attacker moved up his artillery to begin the process all over again. This might be repeated several times until the fighting came to a halt through mutual exhaustion. Isserson's verdict on the military art of this period was harsh. "Beginning in 1916," he wrote, "offensive activities turned into the creeping and exhausting capture of each defensive position," during which the attacker might advance no more than a few hundred meters per day.¹⁰⁶

The only bright spot in this otherwise gloomy picture was the appearance of a number of qualitatively new weapons, which potentially offered a way out of the positional deadlock. Among these was poison gas, which had made its debut the previous year and was continuously being refined for offensive purposes. Another was the airplane, which by 1916 had moved well beyond its original function as a means of reconnaissance and whose importance as a combat factor was steadily growing. Finally, there was the tank, which had appeared in the latter part of the fighting along the Somme River.¹⁰⁷ Armored technology was still in its infancy, however, and it would be some months before the tank would come into its own as an offensive weapon.

All this was in the future, however, and the greater part of 1917 played out as a "period of complete tactical confusion," depressingly similar to the previous year. If anything, the attacking infantry was even more deeply echeloned than before, while the artillery densities employed by the Allies in their various offensives were some of the highest in the war. The growing numbers of British and French tanks were primarily used for infantry support and suffered heavy losses due to mechanical breakdowns and enemy fire. The end result of this "complete stagnation," in tactical thinking was the slaughter along the Chemin des Dames and at Passchendaele, and the prospect of a breakthrough seemed as far away as ever.¹⁰⁸

Matters took a much more promising turn in November 1917 with the British attack at Cambrai, which opened a new chapter in the tactical conduct of the war. Here the attack jumped off without a preliminary bombardment, which guaranteed surprise. The artillery was primarily employed to support the initial assault, while the attacking divisions moved forward along what for the time were fairly broad frontages. Most importantly, the attack echelon included a large number of tanks, which, operating ahead of the infantry penetrated deep into the German defenses on the first day. However, just as the way to Cambrai lay open the British failed to commit their cavalry to exploit the breakthrough, and the opportunity soon passed. Despite this disappointing conclusion, Isserson called the operation an event of "enormous historical significance," which proved conclusively that in order to achieve a breakthrough it is necessary to suppress the entire depth of the enemy's defense. He singled out the tank as the prime factor in any such operation, although he warned that the appearance of new technology only provided the means to resolve the problem of piercing the enemy front. What was lacking, he concluded, was the requisite skill to employ this new arm; a skill that was still in a "very embryonic state."¹⁰⁹

The climactic year of 1918 on the Western Front saw both sides launch a number of large-scale offensive operations, although at decidedly different levels of technology. This was because by now the Allies had achieved a considerable superiority over their German adversaries in the number of combat aircraft, while their advantage in tanks was absolute. These factors, in turn, determined to a great extent the manner in which the offensives were conducted.¹¹⁰

The Germans approached the problem by massing enormous amounts of artillery along the projected breakthrough zone, followed by a short but intensive barrage. Their concentration of infantry for the attack was equally impressive, and in a number of offensives they were echeloned several divisions deep. Isserson pointed out, however, that these follow-on echelons were not tasked with developing the breakthrough in depth, but to strengthen the advance against the defender's counterattacks.¹¹¹ Tactically, the German offensives in the spring of 1918 were highly successful and their March attack in Picardy and across the Aisne River in May achieved some of the highest daily rates of advance since the imposition of trench warfare. Ultimately, however, these offensives were barren of operational results and accomplished nothing more than pushing the defenders back. In those cases where the Germans were able to overwhelm the Allies' tactical defense they were unable to exploit the opening because they lacked the means to complete the breakthrough and enlarge it into one of operational proportions. This rendered any tactical achievement pointless, or as he pithily noted: "It goes without saying that it makes no sense to force open a door if there's no one to go through it."¹¹²

The Allies, on the other hand, sought to exploit their overwhelming materiel superiority and adopted a more technological solution. According to Isserson, their offensive efforts from the summer of 1918 to the end of the war were characterized by the presence of four basic features. The first was the massed employment of tanks to support the infantry attack and to penetrate deeply into the enemy's tactical defense. The presence of tanks in the attack also made it possible to significantly broaden the infantry division's attack front without suffering a loss of firepower. The second was that this broader front enabled each division to employ more of its own firepower in the attack, while at the same time presenting less of a target to the defender's machine guns and artillery. A third feature was the lack of an artillery preparation, which generally ensured surprise. This method had its drawbacks, however, as the failure to suppress the defender's guns before the infantry-tank assault allowed him to take a heavy toll of the tanks, which in many cases had to destroy these batteries themselves. These losses, in turn, affected the armor's ability to suppress the defender's machine guns, which inevitably led to higher casualties among the infantry. The final element was the presence behind the infantry of a cavalry group, the mission of which was not to support the attack, but to exploit its success in depth. This represented in rudimentary form what he called a "breakthrough development echelon," which is called upon to transform a tactical success into one of operational proportions. However, in neither the French counteroffensive along the Marne River in July, nor the British attack around Amiens the following month, did a second-echelon cavalry corps produce the desired exploitation in depth.¹¹³ The war ended a few months later with an operational solution to the trench deadlock seemingly as far away as ever.

As Isserson saw it, the attacker's failure throughout most of the war was due to the lack of correspondence between the reigning one-dimensional offensive methods employed by both sides and the multi-layered nature of the modern defense. In the years preceding the appearance of the tank, he wrote, "the suppression of the defense and the attack were

conducted directly along only a single line of immediate combat contact, leaving the depth of the defense untouched” by the attacker’s fire. By the time the “demoralized and weakened” attacker finally penetrated to the depth of the enemy position, the latter’s “deep defensive reserves, fresh and free to maneuver, and reinforced by newly arrived operational reserves, could reestablish the defense each time, thus ensuring its constant depth.” At best, such an approach succeeded in pushing the enemy’s front back a few very expensive kilometers, while his defense remained as resilient as ever. He compared the attacker’s dilemma to that of an ancient hero battling a multi-headed hydra, who grows back a new head as soon as it is cut off, and who can be killed only if all of its heads are cut off simultaneously.¹¹⁴

This aspect of the offensive’s failure was primarily technical in character, however, and the prospects for overcoming the trench stalemate improved considerably with the appearance of the tank and the ongoing improvements in the field of aviation. However, the operational possibilities of these new weapons were never fully realized and their effect remained confined to the tactical sphere alone. Isserson ascribed this to the Allied commanders’ innate conservatism, which kept them from taking the necessary doctrinal steps toward organizing the new technology at a higher level. This was expressed most conclusively, he charged, in their failure to create special breakthrough development echelons for exploiting a tactical success, despite the fact that the tanks’ technical characteristics now matched these demands. He went on to caution that even had the Allies possessed such an echelon it probably would not have been enough to secure an operational breakthrough, as the defender’s operational reserves remained out of range and could be moved up to the front to seal the breach. This task could best be accomplished by the attacker’s aviation, and although the Allied air force in 1918 possessed all the technical prerequisites for carrying out this mission, they were never called upon to do so.¹¹⁵

The intervening two decades had done little to change the nature of the problem despite the vast improvements in the armies’ artillery, tank and aircraft parks. On the contrary, Isserson observed, while the beginning of a future war would likely witness a good deal of wide-ranging operational maneuver, at the tactical level the troops would still face the daunting task of piercing the enemy defense in a frontal attack. The influx of new weapons had made it possible, on the other hand, to resolve this task in a new way — the deep battle, which he defined as “the simultaneous containment and suppression of the enemy’s entire tactical depth,” which he called the “chief task of tactics, and the waging of the modern combined-arms battle.”¹¹⁶

He identified four conditions as being absolutely necessary for the success of the deep offensive battle. The first was the presence of a weapon that combined maneuverability and firepower, while at the same time offered a defense against the enemy’s small-arms fire. This was the tank, which also must be employed in such numbers so as “to ensure the completion of the task to the entire depth along the corresponding sector of the front.” The second condition, he wrote, is the ability to suppress “simultaneously the entire tactical depth of the defense.” If this is not done, he warned, that those strong points in the depth of the enemy position that escaped destruction would quickly form the backbone of a new defensive position, the piercing of which would require a new breakthrough. The third condition actually had more in common with the sphere of operational art than tactics, but flowed immediately from the latter, as the piercing of the enemy’s tactical defense is a pointless exercise if not exploited and developed into a success of operational proportions. The prime ingredient in this case was the presence of a sufficiently powerful operational echelon capa-

ble of translating the tactical success into an operational one. Finally, he warned, even the attacker's scrupulous observance of the first three conditions is insufficient to guarantee success if "the sector being penetrated is not completely isolated from the defense's strategic and operational depth." If this is not done the defender will be able to move up his deep reserves and, by means of a counterattack, restore his front. The means for achieving this is the attacker's long-range aviation will seal off the breakthrough sector by attacking the enemy's reserves as they move up to the battlefield.¹¹⁷

The publication of the field manual gave Isserson yet another opportunity to propound his views on one aspect of the deep battle — the meeting battle. Isserson's task was certainly a daunting one, as the meeting battle was the least schematic of the three types and the most difficult to predict. This is because both the offensive and defensive battles presupposed an initially static front, where the situation prior to the attack has been relatively stable, enabling both sides to gather a good deal of information regarding the location and makeup of the opponent's forces. Movement, on the other hand, characterizes the meeting battle, as both sides close together with offensive intentions. Under these circumstances the opposing commanders are likely to know very little of their opponent's forces or intentions. Isserson called this lack of information in the meeting battle "a common phenomenon," but argued that this should in no way constrain the commander in making a decision. "No one," he wrote, "upon entering into the meeting battle, should wait for the situation to clear up," arguing instead that the meeting battle, above all others, demands "daring and courage, seizing the initiative, and decisive actions" in an uncertain situation.¹¹⁸

Whatever the uncertainties attending the meeting battle, however, according to Isserson it must be vigorously pursued to the enemy's "encirclement and destruction" in three more or less separate stages. The first stage consists of air strikes against the enemy's columns on the march, even while a considerable distance separates the two sides. The second stage occurs when the opposing forces are closer and involves an attack by the vanguard's mechanized and cavalry units against the enemy flank and rear. The third stage begins when the opponents have closed for battle and have deployed their main forces. Some of these forces will pin the enemy down in holding attacks, while the main body moves against his flank and rear in an effort to isolate and destroy his forces.¹¹⁹

One of the decisive conditions for victory in the meeting battle, Isserson wrote, is the ability to preempt one's opponent in deploying, opening fire at long range, and in attacking, ideally when the latter is still in march formation.¹²⁰ One means of securing this advantage is to maintain constant surveillance of the advancing enemy, in order to discern the axis of his advance and the strength and composition of his forces. Long-range reconnaissance is carried out by the corps's air assets, which the commander may concentrate in his own hands, or allocate to his division commanders. Ground reconnaissance would be increasingly employed as the two sides draw closer together, and would predominantly be conducted by the cavalry. The later will screen the column's advance along the route of advance and along the flanks. The cavalry's task here is to penetrate the enemy's forward screen and come into direct contact with his combat units before the start of the ground action.¹²¹

Another key to success is anticipating the battle even while still on the march. Isserson wrote that "a definite plan of maneuver must form the basis for the formation of the march," and closely approximate the sequence that the column's units will enter the projected battle. However, he warned, "the march order ... must be sufficiently flexible" so as to allow for the necessary regrouping in response to a rapidly changing situation.¹²²

The column on the march would, as a rule, consist of a vanguard and a main body.

The vanguard, as the name implies, precedes the main body along the line of march. Both bodies contain units drawn from the various combat arms, with the vanguard containing a higher portion of tank and mechanized units. In some cases, Isserson wrote, the vanguard might be allotted up to half of the column's artillery, including its long-range guns. Such a large artillery complement, he added, would enable the vanguard "to quickly open a way, strike the enemy columns on the march, to contain their deployment, and support the main forces' entry into the battle." As the column's spearhead, the vanguard advances at some distance from the main body and will be the first to come into contact with the enemy. The main body will contain a higher percentage of infantry units than the vanguard, although under ideal conditions it will also be liberally supported with tanks and artillery. Its rifle division would advance in two or three columns, corresponding to the number of roads at its disposal, as this would facilitate the division's rapid deployment and concentration for the battle. In such a case, the tanks and mechanized troops would advance along the column's flanks, which would facilitate their rapid deployment and, in the event of a sudden enemy attack, to ward off the latter's flanking movement. If the division is able to advance only along a single road, the column's tanks will be concentrated in the area between the vanguard and the main body, which would enable them to exert their influence on the battle at an earlier stage. The artillery will generally be divided up among those divisions advancing along the main axis, with that portion of the long-range artillery still under the corps artillery chief's control advancing in a separate column. The bulk of the artillery will move along with the main axis of advance. In order to assure its rapid deployment, it will be concentrated near the head of the main body. The column will also contain any number of anti-aircraft, anti-chemical, and anti-tank units, the latter of which will be distributed throughout its length.¹²³

It was a given, Isserson wrote, that "the enemy must be thrown into confusion on the march," before he can deploy his forces for the battle. Accordingly, this process would begin well before the opponents' forces came into contact. This task would be carried out in the form of air strikes against the enemy's advancing columns by assault aircraft and light bombers, using a combination of conventional bombs and "poisonous substances." Recommended targets included the enemy's troops and his artillery, which should be put out of action at all costs. Follow-up targets would also include the enemy's transport service, supply depots, and transportation nodes.¹²⁴

As the two sides draw closer together the vanguard springs into action, its chief goal being the destruction of the enemy's vanguard before the latter can deploy his main body to come to its assistance. The vanguard's artillery would open this phase of the battle by directing the bulk of its fire against those targets in the enemy vanguard that might hinder the projected ground attack. Long-range artillery would seek out targets within the enemy's main body, in order to disrupt its deployment. The vanguard's tank units, advancing under the cover of their artillery fire, move out, breaking through the enemy's forward screen and attacking his vanguard in the flank and rear. The infantry will then deploy for the attack, following in the tanks' wake and attempting to turn the enemy flank.¹²⁵

As the vanguard's battle rages the commander begins to deploy his main body for the attack, the form of which will inevitably be influenced by the knowledge of the enemy position that the vanguard's attack has revealed. The commander will then direct his "shock group" of tanks, cavalry and mechanized troops against the enemy's revealed flank. This attack will be maintained until the enemy shows signs of giving up the fight and withdrawing, at which point the pursuit phase of the battle would begin. Isserson recommended con-

ducting a parallel pursuit of the enemy's retreating columns, in order to seize vital road junctions and cut off his line of retreat. The pursuit will be spearheaded by the formation's air units, which would harass the enemy's retreating columns along the way and bomb vital "choke points" along their way. On the ground, tank and motorized units would be thrown forward to cut off the enemy.¹²⁶

Upon completing his work on the field manual, Isserson was took very little part in tactical discussions, preferring instead to devote his considerable energies to his theoretical works in the more congenial field of operations. In the years following 1936, however, the Soviet Union engaged in a number of large and small conflicts under the most varied conditions, which put its tactical tenets to the ultimate test. These conflicts included a sharp border skirmish with the Japanese in the Far East in the summer of 1938. The struggle was renewed the following year in a much larger clash with the Japanese army in Mongolia. And although the Red Army emerged victorious in all both conflicts, the fighting nevertheless exposed many of its tactical shortcomings. As a result, a movement began to revise the 1936 manual and bring it into line with combat experience. Isserson took part in this work, contributing three chapters, although he did not specify the subject matter. According to him the manual did much to advance the previous work and introduced "a series of new tenets, which broadened and deepened the tactics of the deep battle."¹²⁷ For some reason, however, the manual was not adopted, and the Red Army entered World War II without an up-to-date tactical guide.

CHAPTER 4

The Deep Operation

Antecedents

Despite the Red Army's notable progress in the tactical sphere by the beginning of the 1930s, Isserson correctly observed that its work on the deep battle was only a "half measure." After all, he continued, tactical breakthroughs of the enemy defensive front had been achieved by both sides during World War I.¹ However; even such tactically spectacular successes as the German Army's March 1918 offensive were ultimately barren of any significant results because of the attackers' inability to translate their local tactical breakthroughs into a larger one of operational proportions. Even the string of Allied offensives during July to November of 1918 did not really bring about a solution to this problem, despite their ultimately successful outcome. In the end, the Allied gains came through the gradual accumulation of tactical advances, which merely served to press the Germans back, and never was a breakthrough of operational significance achieved.

The interwar period witnessed any number of attempts in the West to find an operational solution to the positional deadlock of the previous conflict. These searches generally sought to exploit the offensive possibilities of the various new weapons, particularly the tank, as a way out of the dilemma. These efforts met varying degrees of support and resistance in different countries and progress was slow in a time dominated by tight budgets and wishful thinking. In the Soviet Union much the same process may be observed, although these developments were seriously retarded during the first postwar decade because the country's military industry lagged so far behind those of its Western counterparts.

Isserson later charged that the Red Army's operational thinking during the 1920s "rested primarily on the experience of the First World War and was to a significant degree" focused on the events of the recent past.² He elsewhere recalled this period in particularly harsh terms and blamed the lack of theoretical progress in this area on the czarist-era professors in the Frunze Military Academy, whose views, he maintained, "were based upon the backward foundations of the linear conduct of operations" during the First World War. He then continued his indictment, adding that from 1928 to 1930 the Red Army's operational theory "basically marked time."³

Although Isserson is being too harsh, there is more than a little truth to these charges. During these years the army's historians and military theorists *were* mostly concerned with operations along the Eastern Front from 1914 to 1917, and little thought was given at the

time to operations along the Western Front, particularly during the latter's period of greatest technical saturation from 1916 to 1918. In fact, the trench stalemate was as often as not ascribed to the failures of "bourgeois" military art, rather than being examined as a phenomenon that might have an explanation beyond the political coloration of the contending parties. Much the same was true of the theorists' fixation with the Russian Civil War, to which recent and highly emotional ties inevitably bound the Red Army.

Nevertheless, the 1920s were by no means an empty period in the army's theoretical development, and much that was useful and original dates from this time. Perhaps the most notable theoretical innovation was the elaboration of the so-called theory of consecutive operations. This theory, which was assiduously propagated in the 1920s, held that victory in a modern war could no longer be achieved in a single engagement, as had been the case in earlier wars. Given the virtual immunity of the modern state and its armed forces to a single "knockout" blow, victory is now possible only at the end of a series of consecutive operations leading to a final strategic result. One writer claimed that extended operational efforts consist of three distinct phases: the "initial," the "pursuit," and the "decisive" operations.⁴ There were any numbers of historical precedents for making such a claim. The Red Army, for example, conducted a number of single and multi-*front* strategic consecutive operations from 1918 to 1920. The most notable of these was the Eastern Front's extended campaign against Kolchak's forces, which lasted from April 1919 to January 1920, and covered a distance from the Volga River to Lake Baikal. The strategic operations conducted by the Southern and Southeastern fronts during the fall and winter of 1919–20 are another example, as were those of the Western and Southwestern fronts during the summer of 1920.

The popularity of the theory was reflected in the Frunze Academy's course load, and for most of the latter half of the 1920s operational instruction there stressed the destruction of the enemy force in a continuous offensive. This would take the form of several consecutive operations, reflective of the Red Army's experience in the Civil War and the war with Poland. However, so as to avoid the fate of the Soviet armies before Warsaw, questions of materiel supply were given a high priority alongside the purely technical aspects of organizing the operation. During exercises the students performed the roles of army commander, army chief of staff, as well as the chiefs of the various combat arms and services.⁵ This pattern was repeated in the army's war games along the western strategic direction, where the Soviets expected to deploy two *fronts* against the Poles, one north and one south of the Pripiat Marshes. These *fronts* would then advance into the Polish heartland, through a series of consecutive efforts.

In any event, matters began to change considerably with the publication in 1929 of Triandafillov's *The Character of Operations of Modern Armies*, which decisively affected the evolution of Soviet operational art during the coming years. Marshal Zhukov later praised the author's "bold and profound views" on the conduct of operations at the army and *front* level, and such questions as the "duration and depth of an operation" under modern conditions.⁶ Triandafillov's achievement is all the more impressive in that it foresaw an army equipped with the sort of modern weaponry which was, as yet, beyond the ability of the Soviet Union's military industry to produce. Nevertheless, *The Character of Operations of Modern Armies* provided a clear blueprint for the development of the Red Army's operational art for years to come. In fact, so far-sighted were many of Triandafillov's ideas that he was considered by some to be the father of the later theory of the deep operation.⁷

Despite this achievement, Isserson recalled, Triandafillov was not completely satisfied with his work, and "considered it incomplete as regards a concrete conception of conduct-

ing operations in a modern war.” He stated that that his colleague was contemplating a continuation of his work and that “his inquisitive mind was already groping for the key to resolving the problem.”⁸ “Several of these thoughts were contained in the previously cited “Fundamental Questions of Tactics and Operational Art in Connection with the Army’s Reconstruction,” which he submitted in the summer of 1931, shortly before his death.

Triandafillov opened his examination of operational questions by stressing the great depth of the enemy’s operational position which, he calculated, now extends back from the front line some 100 to 120 kilometers, embracing the enemy’s operational reserves and airfields, including those of heavy-bomber aviation, railheads, storage depots, and army transportation troops. To break through this position would be exceedingly difficult and time consuming, he warned, and the attacker might expect to advance only 8 to 10 kilometers per day, with an advance of 12 kilometers under especially favorable conditions. The reasons for the slow pace, he noted, were the strength of the modern defense, outfitted with machine guns, and the presence of large reserves in the defender’s rear. The defender is able to quickly transport these forces by truck or train to the breakthrough zone in order to seal the breach.⁹

Now, however, the quantitative and qualitative development of the modern combat arms now makes it possible for the attacker to simultaneously strike the enemy throughout the entire depth of his operational position and to transform the tactical breakthrough into an operational one. This situation, he continued, marked a decisive change from the practice of 1914 to 1918, when the operation consisted of “a series of combat activities,” “primarily taking place next to each other,” in which the question of depth was practically nonexistent. Thanks to the appearance of the new long-range strike weapons, these same “combat activities” now occur simultaneously “along the front, and in depth,” in which the latter might be as deep as the former is wide.¹⁰

The combat arms cited by Triandafillov as crucial to the operation’s success are an interesting blend of old and new. Among the latter is the mechanized brigade, which would primarily be employed along the flanks of the attacker’s advance, as well as in the enemy’s rear against the latter’s reserves and communications. Under certain conditions the mechanized brigade would be capable of advancing 80 to 100 kilometers.¹¹

Another component is the motorized division, which is to operate in the enemy’s rear following the breakthrough of his tactical defense. As opposed to the tank-heavy mechanized brigade, the motorized division has a higher complement of infantry and is thus more capable of holding ground against enemy counterattacks. This circumstance makes it an ideal instrument for establishing blocking forces along the enemy’s line of retreat during the operation’s pursuit phase.¹²

To be effective, Triandafillov recommended employing these units *en masse* by organizing motor-mechanized corps, consisting of a mechanized brigade, two motorized divisions, as well as attached reconnaissance and fighter aviation, and anti-aircraft artillery.¹³ The motor-mechanized corps would become the army’s prime instrument for breaking through the enemy’s tactical defense and maneuvering in his operational rear for extended periods of time. It was also the forerunner of the Red Army’s more powerful tank and mechanized corps, and tank armies, of World War II.

The ground forces component was completed by so-called “strategic cavalry,” supported by reconnaissance and fighter aircraft, and reinforced with tanks, artillery and motorized troops, thus increasing its radius and striking power. This would enable the cavalry to break through lightly held portions of the front and defend itself from the enemy’s air

attacks. Once in the enemy rear, the cavalry could be used most effectively against the defender's reserves and supply lines, as well as for raids against enemy airfields. During the pursuit phase the cavalry might be employed to complete the encirclement of enemy forces, in which case Triandafillov advised massing as many as four to six cavalry divisions for greater effect.¹⁴

The final element in this mix was "combat aviation." Triandafillov called this arm the "most powerful and efficacious means for disorganizing the enemy's *maneuver* capabilities and in paralyzing the entire work of his rear" (emphasis in the original). The attacker's air arm would directly engage the enemy's air assets before and during the operation, in an effort to achieve and retain air superiority over the battlefield. As the operation developed, the attacker's air force would increasingly shift its efforts to supporting the ground troops by launching strikes against the defender's troop columns, defensive obstacles, and railroad transport system.¹⁵

Triandafillov also raised the possibility of employing airborne landings in the enemy's deep rear, in order to further disrupt his operational defense.¹⁶ Such ideas were still in their infancy, however, and he did not elaborate further on the subject.

Triandafillov did not live to see his project to completion; he perished in an airplane crash outside of Moscow on July 12, 1931, along with the Red Army's leading exponent of armored warfare, Kalinovskii. Isserson called Triandafillov's death a "great misfortune" for the army and a particularly heavy loss for the small "family" of operational theorists, who were thus "orphaned" by the loss of their leading voice. And while the army's tacticians rejoiced at the opportunities opening up for them, "at first operational thought did not find a new path."¹⁷ The interregnum did not last long, however, and others stepped forward to fill the gap left by Triandafillov's untimely death. "Considering myself, to a certain degree, a student and follower of Triandafillov," Isserson wrote some thirty years later, "I decided to tackle this assignment to the best of my strength and abilities."¹⁸ It is from this point that his ten-year reign as the Red Army's leading operational theorist begins.

It was certainly a case of the man and the hour well met. By the early 1930s it had become obvious that the Frunze Academy's existing course of instruction no longer met the army's growing needs, particular at the higher command level. As a result, the decision was made in the summer of 1931 to create an "operational department" (*operativnyi fakul'tet*), as a one-year adjunct to the academy's main course of study. The new department was tasked with preparing commanders and staff officers at the corps, army and *front* (military district) level, and for the RKKA Staff.¹⁹ As this list makes clear, the department's mission was to prepare students for the operational level of war.

The Red Army's leadership attached a great deal of importance to selecting the student body, and a special commission, headed by RKKA Chief of Staff Yegorov, carefully drew up a list of candidates, which was then affirmed by war commissar Voroshilov. The prospective students were drawn from officers who possessed a higher military education, which included having completed the Frunze Academy's basic course of instruction, or who had completed the command course at other academies. Also included were those officers who possessed command and staff experience from division upwards. The first group of students selected in the fall of 1931 numbered 30 officers, followed by 37 the next year. And although the department existed for only five years, it nevertheless made a valuable contribution to the operational training of the younger generation of Soviet commanders. Among these were the future chiefs of staff Antonov and Matvei Vasil'evich Zakharov, and the wartime army and *front* commander Govorov.²⁰

Vakulich was appointed to be the department's first chief, while Isserson served briefly as his assistant.²¹ Isserson replaced him in September 1932 and held the position for little more than a year.²² He later described the department's faculty as a group of "intelligent and capable instructors" who had "become imbued with the new ideas of the deep forms of combat." Among these early instructors were Anatolii Vasil'evich Fedotov (Isserson's assistant), Krasil'nikov, Sergeev, Isserson's former army commander from the Civil War, and Aleksei Makarovich Peremytov. Specialized instructors included Aleksandr Nikolae-vich Lapchinskii — on the employment of air power in the operation, Dmitrii Mikhailovich Karbyshev, the Red Army's leading engineer and expert on the subject of enemy defenses, and Iosif Ivanovich Trutko and V.K. Leonardov, who, respectively, answered for questions of rear and medical support. Several of these individuals, Isserson observed, would later perish in Stalin's purge.²³

To Isserson, the department's creation was a sign that operational art had come of age in the Red Army and signaled "a complete revision of the fundamentals of operational art" as they had previously been taught in the academy. The new department's "guiding idea," he wrote, "became the deep forms of combat called forth by new high-speed and long-range weaponry, which have conditioned the deep character of operations of modern armies."²⁴ Years later Isserson referred to this period as a "golden age in the development of Soviet military art" and called himself and his fellow instructors "romantics" motivated by "the great goal of our struggle, the great mission of Soviet military art in history."²⁵

Isserson's tenure with the operational department was certainly an exhilarating one, filled with intellectual challenges and the bracing knowledge that he was engaged in ground-breaking theoretical research. In later years he recalled this time as an especially creative one and singled out the academy's chief, Eideman, for particular praise for fostering a positive intellectual atmosphere amongst the faculty and students. Eideman, a former czarist officer, had commanded an army on the Southwestern Front during the Civil War, and afterwards held a number of other positions before making the switch to academic-administrative work. According to Isserson, under Eideman's tutelage "exceptionally favorable conditions for the faculty's scientific work were created" and he took special pains to encourage the academy's "young cadres," among whom Isserson counted himself. Thanks to Eideman, he continued, the academy "flourished greatly in 1930–32, and its departments of operational art and tactics ... became the main source of the new operational and technical ideas, which the other academies imbibed, and which gained general acceptance within the army."²⁶

Isserson also expressed his gratitude to a number of other commanders for their patronage during these years. The most prominent of these was Tukhachevskii, who was appointed deputy war commissar and the Red Army's director of armaments in 1931 and oversaw its dramatic physical makeover.²⁷ This is more than a little surprising, given the two men's previous encounters, although an explanation exists. Isserson was writing this account during the heyday of Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev's anti-Stalinist campaign, when the "martyred" Tukhachevskii's reputation was being assiduously rehabilitated, with the result that the late marshal's undoubted virtues were exaggerated and his equally prominent defects passed over. Isserson's assessment certainly contrasts with his previous attempt to distance himself from the then-disgraced Tukhachevskii, although this was certainly understandable, given the fact that his own life hung in the balance, and may thus be treated accordingly. Moreover, at the time of his later statement, Isserson was free to express a positive opinion of Tukhachevskii, or at least remain silent. The fact that he chose the former course is thus



Left: Robert Petrovich Eideman (1895–1937), ca. 1933. Eideman was chief of the Frunze Military Academy during Isserson’s most productive period of work there (courtesy Central Armed Forces Museum). *Right:* Marshal Boris Mikhailovich Shaposhnikov (1882–1945), 1940–41. Isserson accused Shaposhnikov of retarding the development of the Red Army’s military theory (courtesy Central Armed Forces Museum).

a more likely an expression of his true opinion, and indicates that Isserson had been able to put his personal feelings aside and arrive at a more balanced view of his old adversary.

Another important figure that influenced events in the academy was Sediakin, then head of the Red Army’s combat training directorate. Isserson praised both Tukhachevskii and Sediakin as “creative minds” who “were moving our military theory ahead” and who “undoubtedly played a very large role” in developing the Red Army’s tactics and operational art. Together with Yegorov, the chief of the RKKA Staff, they combined to render the operational department the “broadest support.”²⁸

However, this academic idyll came to an abrupt end in 1932 with the departure of Eideman and his replacement by Shaposhnikov, a former chief of the RKKA Staff. According to Isserson, Shaposhnikov’s appointment to head the army’s premier education institution was a serious setback to the entire notion of the “new forms of combat” and a triumph for “a military world view, based exclusively on the experience of the First World War” and thus unable to understand the changes that had taken place since then. He later recalled that under Shaposhnikov the operational department met with little support and recognition and that “everything that was done in the operational department after Eideman was done despite the academy’s new leadership” and had it not been for Yegorov “the development of military theory in the academy would probably have been significantly retarded.”²⁹

This was in many ways a remarkable indictment on Isserson's part, as Shaposhnikov is one of the "sacred cows" of Soviet military history, whose reputation remained essentially intact despite the comings and goings of the political tides. A generation of postwar writers successfully sought to portray Shaposhnikov as the quintessential staff officer and an extremely erudite student of war. Among them was Shaposhnikov's pupil and wartime chief of staff, Aleksandr Mikhailovich Vasilevskii, who described his mentor as "a renowned military figure and highly experienced specialist" whose "extensive and all-round knowledge was acutely needed at that difficult time."³⁰ There is no doubt a good deal of truth in this statement, and the fact that Shaposhnikov served three times (1928 to 1931, 1937 to 1940, 1941 to 1942) as chief of staff is certainly testimony to his professional capabilities. No man is without blemishes, however, and as Isserson had frequent contact with Shaposhnikov during their time at the academy, his assessment deserves consideration. However, whatever Isserson's intentions in painting this unflattering portrait of Shaposhnikov, his efforts came to naught, and the published version of this account, which appeared in early 1965, contains no mention of Shaposhnikov or his tenure at the academy.³¹

The Historical Background

For all of its problems, the operational department's intellectual environment certainly had a bracing effect on the 34-year-old Isserson, who was now entering upon his most productive period as a theorist. Proof of this was the appearance of *The Evolution of Operational Art*, which was published in 1932. This work evidently had its inception as an in-house publication in February 1931, under the working title of "The Deep Strategy as the Next Stage in the Evolution of Military Art."³² He later wrote that the work later received its "literary formulation" and issued as a separate open-source publication.³³

As Isserson's writings on the deep battle indicate, he was obsessed with the idea of depth and the role that factor had come to play in military affairs. It was a question that would occupy his thoughts for years to come, whether at the tactical, operational, or strategic level. However, it was as an operational theorist that he came to exert the most influence on the Red Army and, as such, his writings in this field demand our particular attention. Nowhere are these views expressed more originally and concisely than in *The Evolution of Operational Art*, a truly brilliant work, which appeared when he was a mere 34 years old.

The first half of the book, entitled "The Operational Heritage of the Past," was dedicated to an examination of the modern operation's development over the preceding century and the appearance of a body of thought dealing with its conduct — operational art. In this section Isserson reveals himself to be very much a mainstream exponent of operational art as a discipline separate from strategy and tactics, although his exposition, as always, was distinguished from that of his peers by its stylistic eloquence, logical organization, and depth of analysis.

Isserson's analysis of the development of operational art was grounded in the Marxist notion of historical materialism, which holds that all social phenomena are the product of economic forces, and that changes in the latter inevitably bring about changes in the former. And, like his contemporaries, he believed that historical experience could be objectively analyzed in order to derive appropriate lessons for the present and to foresee future developments. Military affairs are no exception, and Soviet military theorists long held that military art is particularly sensitive to socio-political, economic, and military-technical

changes in society. Thus, “in order to understand the specific character of the modern operation, it is necessary to establish the prerequisites and conditions which called it forth and which determined its evolution to the present time.” Such an approach, he added, “will also reveal the prerequisites which determine the further evolution of the operational forms of armed combat the current stage of their development.”³⁴

The starting point for Isserson’s study of the operation’s development was the Napoleonic Wars, which, he held, constituted a distinct era in the history of military art. The distinguishing feature of the age involved a lengthy strategic march by the army’s various units to a distant objective, often by different routes, such as during the Ulm campaign of 1805, and at Jena a year later. These units would then converge on the battlefield for a short but extremely violent battle with the enemy. Isserson called this the “age of the *strategy of the single point*,” in which the “entire task” of strategy was to “simultaneously concentrate all forces to a single battlefield”; at which point it “would yield its place to tactics once the engagement began” (emphasis in the original).³⁵

This strategy had its material basis in the weaponry of the time, which was of limited range and even lesser accuracy. The extremely short range of these weapons meant that the contending armies caught sight of each other before they could actually engage. As a result, the commanders had the luxury of deploying their forces directly from the march and preparing for battle just beyond the range of each other’s guns. This pause between the strategic approach to the battlefield and the tactical battle meant, he wrote, that just as at Marengo in 1800 and Borodino in 1812, the engagement “does not organically flow from the overall march,” thus making the former a “separate tactical episode” independent of the strategic maneuver which preceded it.³⁶

Isserson called the Napoleonic engagement (*srazhenie*) a “one-act tactical phenomenon” having “no dimension in space” because the commanders always sought to concentrate their armies at a single point in the theater of military activities. Nor did the Napoleonic engagement have a “dimension in time,” because the short-lived battles of the era, for all their decisiveness, were no more than a moment in the overall course of a particular war. The engagement also lacked the dimension of depth, because it was waged “on the spot,” employing only those forces immediately available for battle, while being unable to rely on the contenders’ strategic reserves. The irrelevance of these indices caused Isserson to conclude that “Napoleon’s military art still did not know the operation in the modern sense of the word.”³⁷

This was certainly true of such important battles as Marengo, Ulm, Austerlitz, Jena and Auerstadt, Eylau, Friedland, Wagram, Borodino, Leipzig, and Waterloo, which were geographically insignificant affairs, occupying only a minute area of the overall theater of military activities. As a rule, these battles lasted only one or two days, with Leipzig an unusually long four days, although they often, as at Ulm and Austerlitz, Jena and Auerstadt, decided the outcome of the campaign or even the war. This is because these battles usually represented the commitment of a country’s entire armed forces, without any follow on in depth.

Matters began to change considerably from the middle of the nineteenth century, by which time a number of technological advances were starting to revolutionize the way the advanced industrial powers waged war. Easily the most important of these developments was the large-scale introduction of rifled firearms, which significantly increased the range and accuracy of infantry fire. Later innovations such as the appearance of repeating rifles and smokeless gunpowder also raised the effectiveness of the individual infantryman. This

phenomenon was matched by similar developments in artillery, the range and accuracy of which began to increase several fold. The net effect of these improvements was to greatly augment the staying power of the defender, without conferring equal benefits on the attacker, who had to cross an increasingly lethal battlefield in order to come to grips with the enemy.

Faced with the fact that a successful frontal assault against a defender, who was increasingly likely to be entrenched, was now all but impossible, the commanders of the time were driven more and more to seek a decision on the flanks of the enemy position. This led to the demise of the deep column formation of the Napoleonic era, which was unwieldy and its very compactness kept all but a small proportion of the soldiers therein from bringing their weapons to bear. And, as the experience of the American Civil War (1861 to 1865) and the Franco-Prussian War (1870 to 1871) showed, the compact column was also extremely vulnerable to the defender's rifle and artillery fire during the attack. In its place there appeared the extended order, which decreased somewhat the attacker's vulnerability to defensive fire. The extended order also meant that the overall length of the battlefield began to increase dramatically. And as the battlefield grew, so did the armies' attempts to turn their opponent's flank, further increasing the length of the front.

Another factor in the spatial growth of the battlefield was the appearance of the railroad, which enabled commanders to carry out large-scale troop transfers in days what earlier took weeks. The railroad had particularly significance for the concentration of a country's forces at the beginning of a war, which to a significant degree was determined by the very outline of a country's rail system, and which tended to spread out the arriving troops according to the availability of railheads along the frontier. And while the front during these wars shrank dramatically during the march to the battlefield and the battle itself (Konnigratz, Metz, Sedan), the overall tendency toward a significant lengthening of the front held true.

"Since that time," Isserson wrote, "military art went over to the broad deployment of forces in a single line, and the armies soon began to enter onto the theater of military activities in a broad linear front," a development which reached its apogee in Germany's 1914 plan for war in the West. "This was the beginning," he wrote, "of a new era in the evolution of military art — the *age of linear strategy*" (emphasis in the original).³⁸

With the growing tendency of armies to advance along a broad swath, the single decisive battle of the Napoleonic era was beginning to break up into any number of smaller engagements, spread out along the expanding front. To be sure, "this was still not a continuous front; this was a broken-up front of separate points for the application of combat efforts." For example, the war between Austria and Prussia began with three nearly simultaneous battles along a 100-kilometer front, while the Franco-Prussian War opened with the conduct of two simultaneous battles separated from each other by a distance of 60 kilometers. Isserson called this new circumstance "the first characteristic sign of that phenomenon, which is known in modern terminology as the operation."³⁹

A second element in the emerging phenomenon of the operation was the growing tendency of the engagement to lengthen in time. As we have seen, many of the engagements of the Napoleonic era were one-day affairs, often distinguished by the decisiveness of their results. Those of the latter half of the nineteenth century, on the other hand, usually lasted longer and were often barren of immediate strategic results, as the defeated party, by employing the defensive advantages accorded him by modern weapons, could fall back to a new position and renew the struggle another day. Isserson cited as an outstanding example of this phenomenon in action the multiple engagements of Columbey and Nouilly, Mars-la-Tour, Gravelotte and St. Privat, in 1870, which lasted six days.⁴⁰

The same battles also served to highlight the tendency of the engagement to increase in depth as well, to the point where the matter soon “outgrew the boundaries of the battle and took on indications of operational depth.”⁴¹ This was first made apparent when the Prussian Second Army carried out a 90-kilometer turning movement against the French forces around Metz. Isserson noted, “This interesting system of engagements, broken up in depth, already contained all the traits of the modern operation.” The same, he added, was true of the even broader turning movement against the French army at Sedan, which took ten days and covered up to 150 kilometers.⁴²

None of these phenomena developed uniformly, however. As a Marxist, Isserson was aware that every new age, however revolutionary, contains elements of the preceding one, the methods of which are not immediately discarded. This is particularly true of military affairs, where commanders trained in the old ways of doing things often have a great deal of difficulty in adjusting to the new reality. For example, despite the tendency of the front to expand in breadth, the Austrian and French armies’ defeats at Konnigratz and Sedan took place on a relatively restricted battlefield reminiscent of the Napoleonic Wars. However, this was more the result of the defeated commanders’ adherence to the outmoded principle of the maximum concentration of forces at a single point, which only played into the hands of the Prussians. In both cases the later took advantage of their opponents’ extreme concentration in order to outflank them. In the case of Koniggratz the Austrians were defeated, but escaped to fight another day, while at Sedan the German forces eventually surrounded the French army and later forced it to capitulate.

Whatever the pace of their development, however, there is not doubting the tendency of the engagement/operation to expand in width, time and depth. This was made abundantly clear at the Battle of Mukden during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05, which was the largest military contest between 1870 and 1914. Here the fighting spread out along a 150-kilometer front and lasted three weeks.⁴³ Moreover, the battle was ultimately decided by the Japanese army’s deep turning movement, which outflanked the Russian position and forced them to abandon their defensive works in order to avoid destruction.

Upon the outbreak of World War I in 1914 these indices grew even further. For example, the German armies deployed initially along a 340-kilometer front and later fought the Battle of the Marne, between Paris and Verdun, along a front that stretched 250 kilometers in length.⁴⁴ What was even more noteworthy in this development was the fusing of the formerly separate battles along the front into a continuous line of combat activity. Isserson opined that at this point the only remaining question was the “limit that the spread of the entire line of the front would reach.”⁴⁵ This question was answered soon enough, and by the end of 1914 the front stretched the entire distance from the North Sea to the Swiss border.

The length of the war’s opening campaigns also increased considerably. For example, the German army took five weeks to advance from the frontier to the Marne River. This did not necessarily involve a great deal of actual fighting, as the German advance through Belgium and the pursuit of the Allied armies across northeastern France took up most of the march. In the East the initial clash between the Russian and German armies in East Prussia occupied an entire month, with even less time spent in combat. Much the same was true of the month-long battle in Galicia between the Russian and Austro-Hungarian armies.

The opening operations in the West were conducted to an overall depth of some 400 kilometers. Isserson noted that outwardly there was nothing particularly novel in the latter development, as armies had carried out such lengthy marches before. What was differ-

ent about this campaign was that the entire advance was conducted as a single unit, “united by the general design of the operational plan.” This plan played out as “a series of stages in a single operation, or a series of combined consecutive operations, from which each flowed from the preceding one and gave rise to a subsequent one.”⁴⁶ Here Isserson was undoubtedly correct, and one can distinguish at least two separate operational efforts by the German army (August 3 to 23 and August 24 to September 9) during this period. The same was true in the East, where the East Prussian operation (August 17 to September 15, 1914) and the Battle of Galicia (August 18 to September 21, 1914) were also broken up into separate operations.

In 1914 the linear strategy seemingly achieved its highest degree of development according to the indices of width, time, and depth. However, the war’s opening campaigns quickly revealed several flaws in the conduct of operations, which Isserson held were peculiar to the strategy.

Among these shortcomings were the greatly increased difficulties encountered by the high command in controlling operations. The disappearance of the former pause between the march to the battlefield and the engagement had given rise to the meeting engagement (*vstrechnoe srazhenie*), in which the fighting would begin directly from the march. This development effectively eliminated the previous dividing line between “strategy as the tactics of the theater of military activities and tactics as the conduct of the battle.”⁴⁷ Under these circumstances, it was now nearly impossible to make major changes in one’s march formation before the fighting begins, which places a premium on the proper organization of the march in anticipation of the engagement. From the time the armies came to occupy the entire theater of military activities, their control by the high command “acquired a new qualitative difference” of strategic proportions.⁴⁸ The supreme command is now responsible for the proper organization of the armies’ march from the beginning — i.e., from the moment of their initial deployment. Thus the supreme commander must be able to foresee the initial engagements and incorporate them into his overall plan for conducting the opening campaign of the war.

Isserson charged that the commanders of 1914 stubbornly continued to believe that the conduct of the engagement lay outside the sphere of operational art, which by default came to concern itself exclusively with the armies’ movements toward the enemy, thus consigning the engagement to the sphere of tactics. “Given this approach,” he wrote, “there was nothing for operational art to do but to limit its activity to grouping forces and directing them in fixed directions.” He charged that this hands-off approach came to characterize the German army’s conduct of the campaign in the West, during which the individual armies were assigned distant geographical objectives, with hardly a thought for what opposition might be encountered or how this might effect the situation. This had the effect of rendering the operation of the time “*uncontrollable*,” as he put it, by which he meant that once the individual armies had been dispatched along their respective axes, there was very little that the high command could do to influence the situation further (emphasis in the original).⁴⁹

By way of example, he cited the German high command’s rigid adherence to its original plan for the advance across Belgium and France as being responsible for missing an excellent opportunity to crush the French Fifth Army during the Battle of the Frontiers. Instead of bringing the German armies in the area to bear against the French, who were dangerously jammed between the Meuse and Sambre rivers, the chief of the German General Staff merely reiterated his orders for the armies to continue along their assigned routes.

This meant the abandonment by the high command of any attempt to influence operational events, a policy which he derided as “the simple mechanical transference of an unchanging grouping into the depth of the space between the Rhine and the Marne.” He added that the German high command evidently considered it “sufficient to carry one’s operational efforts forward, as if this constituted the entire meaning of the operation.”⁵⁰ In this way, the intermediate goal of the enemy’s operational destruction, which requires that the individual armies outflank their opponents and get into their rear, was sacrificed to the Schlieffen Plan’s strategic goal of destroying *all* the Allied armies at the conclusion of a giant turning movement. Instead, the advancing armies merely threw the enemy back along its line of march. As a result, “the offensive operation had changed into a pushing back operation.”⁵¹

Nor was this a failing exclusive to “bourgeois” military art. The same “false methods of operational leadership” had affected the Red Army as well. This had certainly been the case during the latter’s 1920 offensive against the Poles north of the Pripiat Marshes, which bore a close resemblance, both in its conduct and outcome, to the German army’s effort of six years before. It was also a harsh rebuke to his former chief, Tukhachevskii, who commanded the Western Front during its six-week dash from the Dvina to the Vistula. Here too, “the armies were invariably confined by their grouping to fixed directions” and “distant reference points” to a depth of 600 kilometers. Meanwhile, Isserson charged, the *front* command “completely ignored the immediate given situation” in its pursuit of “an indiscriminate direct motion forward” in the general direction of Warsaw.⁵² As it transpired, Tukhachevskii was able to exercise even less control over events from his headquarters in Smolensk than the younger von Moltke, who had remained the entire time at GHQ in Coblenz as his armies raced toward the Marne.

A related problem of the solid front in motion was the extreme difficulty of carrying out internal maneuvers among the various armies in order to strengthen a particular axis of advance. One reason was that the front was expected to be almost always on the move, making timely lateral transfers between the armies nearly impossible. The linear strategy’s tendency to lengthen the front as much as possible in order to turn the enemy’s flank further complicates this shifting of units. This means that almost all of the armies’ forces are committed into the rapidly extending front in width, while at the same time ignoring considerations of depth.

Under these conditions, the best means for reinforcing a particular advance is the presence of deep operational reserves, moving in a second echelon behind the main armies. “However,” he charged, “the linear strategy was namely linear because it had none and failed to recognize any kind of operational reserves.” This was the case because the commanders of the time continued to view the engagement as a separate “one-act effort, which demanded the simultaneous commitment of all available forces into the action” in order to achieve victory. As a result, there were no operational reserves of any consequence in the 1914 and 1920 campaigns, and even the regular arrival of reinforcements from the interior was often disrupted by the destruction of the rail network as the defenders retreated. Thus when the Germans and Soviets found themselves faced with an unexpected enemy counteroffensive, “not a single division” was available to parry the blow.⁵³

However, the greatest challenge to the linear strategy arose with the disappearance of the open flank, which had heretofore been its distinguishing feature. This problem began to manifest itself once the Germans were defeated along the Marne and forced to fall back to the Aisne River, where they began to establish a defensive position. Since the occupied

parts of the theater of military activities could not be taken by a frontal assault, both sides sought to outflank each other in a month-long process that became known as the "Race to the Sea." By mid-October the race was completed and the two sides faced each other along a solid 700-kilometer front, which stretched from the North Sea to neutral Switzerland. Given the greater distances in the East, this phenomenon was slower to materialize there, but by the spring of 1915 a solid front existed from the Baltic to the Carpathian Mountains.

To Isserson, the dialectician, this development was merely the end result of a process whose outcome could have been easily predicted. Given the tremendous growth in the size of modern armies and the various geographical (the presence of seas and mountain ranges) and political (the presence of neutral countries) factors limiting their maneuver, these armies could very quickly be expected to occupy the entire theater of military activities. This caused him to conclude that "the spread of combat efforts along the front — that first sign of the operation — completed its evolution during the World War," having achieved the limits of its growth. In this same way, the linear strategy had also reached an historical dead end in its development, having "arrived at its antithesis," as its "entire meaning" had heretofore been bound up in the search for the open flank. With this flank now gone, he concluded, "the linear strategy lost the fundamental meaning which gave it birth."⁵⁴

This gave rise to a situation totally at odds with everything the commanders had been taught since the Franco-Prussian War. Now the only way to restore an element of maneuver to warfare was to break through the enemy's defensive front and create a flanking situation *vis-à-vis* the remainder of the defender's position. This was a bit of irony that Isserson must have appreciated, as it was the high cost of mounting frontal attacks against the enemy that had given rise to the linear strategy nearly a half century earlier. Now, he wrote, "that which was considered impossible after the war of 1870 became necessary during the World War." This development, he concluded, signified that "the age of the linear strategy had come to an end," its evolution having come full circle. Under these new conditions, he declared, operational art must now concern itself with organizing the breakthrough of the enemy front.⁵⁵

This was no easy task, however, as the appearance of the continuous front coincided with the height of the defensive's ascendancy over the offensive, and was a direct outgrowth of this phenomenon. The belligerents' offensive operations throughout the war were conducted under this handicap, and with predictable results. For example, Allied attacks in Champagne and at Loos in 1915, and along the Somme River in 1916, were all bloody failures, certainly in terms of achieving a breakthrough. Further Allied attacks along the Aisne and at Passchendaele in 1917 cost the attackers at least as much as the defenders, with still no breakthrough in sight. Indeed, things became so bad that the Germans, despairing of achieving a breakthrough, launched their 1916 offensive at Verdun for the expressed purpose of bleeding the French army white, even though they could afford the attrition struggle less than their enemies. The few exceptions to this bleak record of failure occurred in the East, where the greater length of the front and the pronounced qualitative differences between the contending armies significantly increased the prospects for maneuver. Even under these more favorable conditions, however, an operational breakthrough remained elusive.

These offensives were generally launched along an extremely narrow front of no more than 20 kilometers in breadth, although General Brusilov's 1916 effort in Volhynia was a notable exception, in that it was launched along nearly the entire width of his *front* command. The infantry attack was supported by massive concentrations of artillery, which, it

was presumed, would so pulverize the enemy defenses as to make the initial tactical breakthrough relatively easy. As the war progressed, these preparatory bombardments came to last several days, although whatever advantage they offered was often nullified by removing the element of surprise, which enabled the defender to move forces to the threatened sector even before the beginning of the infantry attack. As often as not, however, the artillery preparation failed to suppress the defender's machine guns, which rendered the initial infantry attack an extremely costly endeavor. Even in those cases where the opening attack was more successful, the infantry usually outran their artillery support, as the latter could not follow quickly enough. This immediately rendered the attacker vulnerable to the defender's artillery, as well as the latter's infantry counterattack. As a result, the offensive usually ground to a halt after the first few days, after which the original preparations would have to be repeated before the attack lurched forward again. In some cases (Verdun, the Somme, Passchendaele) the struggle might continue for months, with the attacker held to an advance of only a few blood-soaked kilometers before the offensive ended through mutual exhaustion.

The failure or limited success of these offensives was due in part to the fact that the means of attack were still relatively underdeveloped, particularly the tank and the airplane. These and other weapons were as yet unable to extend their reach beyond the enemy's immediate tactical defensive position and aid the offensive by bringing his operational defense under assault as well. An equally important but less visible reason was the improper organization of the offensive, a defect that found its expression in the lack of a separate echelon for transforming the tactical breakthrough into one of operational proportions. Isserson blamed this on the "stagnant influence of the outdated linear strategy," which did not concern itself with questions of depth. The absence of such an echelon meant that even when the tactical breakthrough was achieved, as in March 1918, the attacker lacked the ability to rapidly drive into the breach and exploit the success into the defender's operational depth. Or, as he put it in one of his favorite phrases, "*It made no sense to knock down the door, if there was no one to go in*" (emphasis in the original).⁵⁶

Isserson wrote that as the war progressed, "the entire problem of the breakthrough was reduced to the tactical smashing of the front," with no operational follow through to give it meaning.⁵⁷ This is because "a tactical effort is merely a step toward achieving a goal and can never be an end in itself."⁵⁸ Even the final Allied victory was achieved largely using the grinding methods of the previous years, in which the contribution of the tank and the airplane, however important, remained confined to the tactical sphere. By way of making his point, he added that even during the war's final four months (July to November 1918) the Allies succeeded in pushing back the German army no more than 100 kilometers, despite the fact that the latter was clearly at the end of its tether.⁵⁹

The inability of the commanders to achieve an operational breakthrough led to a serious devaluation of operational art *vis-à-vis* tactics, its nominal subordinate. This topsyturvy situation was by no means unique to operational art, and one need only recall Ludendorff's admission that tactical considerations had been decisive in shaping the location of the German army's March 1918 offensive, so as to even determine questions of strategy. Thus stymied by its inability to achieve an operational breakthrough, the era's operational art sought to compensate, in effect, by devoting itself to the minutiae of organizing one at the tactical level. However, by concerning itself so completely with matters outside its sphere of competence, operational art "essentially liquidated itself as the art of conducting the operation."⁶⁰

Here, Isserson is obviously exaggerating for effect, although his overall point was well taken. To be sure, both sides conducted a large number of major operations during 1918 (the Somme, Flanders, the Aisne, Noyon-Montdidier, and Champagne-Marne offensives by the Germans, and the Aisne-Marne counteroffensive, Amiens, St. Mihiel, and the Meuse-Argonne offensives, among others, by the Allies). However, in none of the operations did a breakthrough of operational proportions occur, and their entire movement forward consisted of innumerable tactical pinpricks, which did nothing more than push the defenders back. This pattern continued until the end of the war, when the accumulation of these tactical actions finally brought about a strategic result, thus completely bypassing the sphere of operational art. Even then the immediate end of the war was not the result of a strictly military decision, but was rather the consequence of the collapse of the German home front.

Isserson's verdict on the failings of the Great War's operational art was harsh. It had not been able to adjust to the "new character of armed combat," and was thus effectively pushed aside by tactics. This was hardly surprising, he argued, as the era's operational art sprang from the linear strategy and was inevitably burdened with the latter's disabilities once the turning movement became impossible. And while the belligerents had arrived at a tactical solution for breaking through the enemy front by the end of 1918, operational art continued to lag behind. In fact, the era's operational art had signally failed to develop further and had become "feeble" when the linear strategy reached its "antithesis," and "the problem of conducting an operational breakthrough of the enemy front remained unresolved."⁶¹

The Problem of Depth

The second and more groundbreaking half of the book, entitled "The Basis of the Deep Strategy," was devoted to resolving this problem and to forecasting how offensive operations in depth were likely to be conducted in a future war in which motorization and mechanization would play a much greater role. These operations might be conducted under maneuver conditions, or in a period of positional warfare. Here the originality of Isserson's thinking was fully displayed, as well as the direction he was to take toward developing an applied theory of operational art.

First and foremost, this was to be a *Soviet* theory of operational art, reflecting the peculiarities of the USSR's social system and its stated mission of overthrowing the capitalist order. Isserson endorsed this view completely, adding, "Only on the bases of the Marxist-Leninist teaching about war can our theory of operational art be constructed."⁶² The use of the possessive pronoun here is particularly significant and speaks to a strong desire within the Red Army of the time for a homegrown military theory it could call its own. Indeed, the notion that the Red/Soviet army, as a product of the USSR's socialist political-economic system, possessed a "scientific" military art superior to that of the capitalist powers was an article of faith from the very beginning and did not die until the final collapse of the Soviet system itself.

Meticulous as always, Isserson sought to anchor future operational developments in a specific strategic environment, which would necessarily determine the conduct of these same operations. As we have seen, this revolved around a number of assumptions regarding the contours of a future war, the resolution of which was arrived at in the 1920s, when Isserson was still a student at the academy. These involved the conviction that a future war between capitalism and socialism would be a high-stakes conflict of unprecedented vio-

lence, which would strain to the utmost the human and industrial resources of the combatants. "Only one outcome is possible in such wars," he wrote, "the death of capitalism and the triumph of a new world — the world of socialism."⁶³ As such, the war would witness the employment of mass armies, supported by unprecedented amounts of modern military equipment. It was further anticipated that a future war would see the restoration of maneuver, although periods of positional stalemate were also to be expected.

Most strongly of all, he believed in the strategy of destruction. This conviction sprang from the inherently aggressive Marxist approach to solving social problems through revolution, which in turn, was expected to provoke an equally violent reaction on the part of the bourgeoisie. With the Bolshevik triumph in Russia, this high-stakes struggle had become an international one, pitting the USSR against the entire capitalist world in a fight to the death. Extreme political ends imply the employment of extreme military means to realize them, and the strategic offensive effort was recognized as the only way to achieve victory.

The adherence to a strategy of destruction has automatic implications for operational art, which must follow its lead. For example, future operations would have nothing in common with the "languid and drawn-out attrition operations with limited aims" so characteristic of the Great War, which was waged under the aegis of attrition. Instead, a future war would see these operations unfold as "active, destructive blows with decisive aims." This would be further advanced by the appearance of the new long-range and maneuver military technology, which was increasingly giving the offense the upper hand.⁶⁴ Given these premises, the Soviet theory of operational art should be based upon "the concept of the most decisive offensive operation."⁶⁵

Isserson then proceeded to a more detailed analysis of the likely strategic situation in a future war. A constant feature of warfare over the past half century, he wrote, has been its steady expansion in width and depth. The first element had quickly reached its natural geographical limit on the Western Front in 1914, followed shortly afterwards by the front in the East, and there is no reason to believe that this trend would not obtain in the future. Even the Soviet Union's western frontier, which then stretched some 3,000 kilometers from the Barents Sea to the Black Sea, might well be occupied along its entire length. This was also the case, he argued, in the Far East, by which he clearly meant Manchuria, which had recently been occupied by the Japanese.⁶⁶ When one considers the geographic scope of the wars that the Soviet Union waged from 1941 to 1945, this was a remarkably prescient forecast.

He hastened to add that this by no means excluded the possibility of maneuver along a future western theater of military activities. Even against the backdrop of a solid front, "separate operational windows" might arise at the beginning of a war, which would permit an element of maneuver. This interval might arise for a variety of reasons: the vast distances involved, and the makeup of the anticipated anti-Soviet coalition. As to the latter, it had long been assumed that Poland would be the chief opponent in a land war, presumably backed in some fashion by France and Britain. Isserson ventured that Poland might also be joined by some or all of the Baltic States, which were considerably inferior in their military capabilities. This factor, plus the difficulty of coordinating the various countries' armed forces, might temporarily increase the prospects for operational maneuver, particularly given the skillful use of mechanized forces and air power by the Red Army.⁶⁷ This implies a turning movement along the Daugavpils-Vilnius-Bialystok-Warsaw axis reminiscent of Tukhachevskii's 1920 offensive.

These circumstances caused Isserson to compare the likely conditions along the Soviet

Union's western frontier with those that obtained along the Western Front in August to September 1914, when freedom of maneuver still existed. "This means," he continued, that "the prerequisites of the linear strategy have in no way disappeared for us," at least at the beginning of a war. This was even more the case in the Far East, where the vast distances involved made the appearance of open flanks more than likely, as eventually proved to be the case in 1945. He concluded that "turning maneuvers along exterior lines in the beginning period of the war are far from being excluded" and that the assumption that a war of position will arise from the very start is based upon "the mechanical transfer of the conditions of the Franco-German front to our theater of military activities," where entirely different conditions would prevail.⁶⁸

He hastened to add, however, that no matter how favorable the maneuver conditions may be at the beginning of a war, the commanders must nevertheless "provide for the inevitability, or at least the likelihood," that this initial maneuver phase will pass and that a war of position will ensue. Moreover, the indications are overwhelming that this will take place even sooner than occurred on the Western Front in 1914, where the trench line had basically solidified by the end of the war's third month. This was the case, partly because the greatly increased maneuver possibilities offered by the new weapons enable the defender to more quickly and more powerfully deliver forces to the threatened area and thus oppose the attacker's enveloping wing with equal or greater forces. The railroads also had an important role to play in these movements and Isserson calculated that the Red Army's likely enemies along a future western front would be able to shift "in a relatively short time" up to one-third of their total forces from the central sector of the front to either of the flanks.⁶⁹

The growth of the battlefield in breadth was matched by a similar increase in its depth. And while the former had reached its geographical limits, the factor of depth was coming more and more to the forefront. As had Triandafillov, Isserson saw the modern front as being made up of "consecutively echeloned fortified zones," extending some 60 to 100 kilometers in depth. Such a deeply echeloned front on the defensive would be especially resistant to attack, as so often had proven to be the case from 1914 to 1918. Moreover, the presence of the defender's deep reserves along the front and in the rear enables the defender to reinforce his position and halt even the most determined attack. This overall "thickening" of the enemy's defensive front means that any future offensive operation "will have to overcome the entire modern operational depth," fighting every inch of the way in an "endless series of *combat efforts*" (emphasis in the original).⁷⁰

For example, he calculated that during the advance to the Marne the contending armies spent only 23 percent of their time fighting, with the remainder being taken up by the march. However, in a future war nearly 100 percent of this time will be spent in combat and, overall; the troops will spend a far greater part of their time deployed for combat than on the march.⁷¹ Nor will this be a uniform development, but would instead vary according to local conditions. For example, he calculated that this trend would manifest itself most fully in the technically advanced and geographically cramped conditions of Western Europe, and less so in the East, where the qualitative difference between the armies and the greater distances involved would likely ameliorate this tendency.⁷²

Now, the "main thing in the evolution of the modern operation, is its *depth*, which determines its new and enormous intensity" as it makes its way through the enemy's position (emphasis in the original). Under these conditions, the extension of the operation in depth will attain its "final limit" in a future war, just as it reached its natural limit in breadth during the First World War. Under these conditions, future operations will develop "*not as*

a single chain of intermittent engagements,” as had been the case in 1914 and 1920, but as “*a solid chain of combat efforts, flowing together throughout the entire depth*” of the theater of military activities (emphasis in the original).⁷³

Isserson asserted that the unceasing nature of combat at the operational level is most commonly identified with the notion of consecutive operations, which had been a prominent feature of the Marne campaign and the Western Front’s advance to the Vistula. However, he took issue with this “incorrect definition” to declare that “*A series of consecutive operations is the modern operation,*” in which “a series of consecutive operational efforts fuses into single overall concept of the modern deep operation” (emphasis in the original). Under these circumstances, one should no longer speak in terms of a series of consecutive operations, but rather of a “series of *consecutive strategic efforts, of a series of separate campaigns in the same war*” (emphasis in the original).⁷⁴

The same overriding considerations of depth which determined the strategic contours of a future war also played out at the operational level, and Isserson called the factor of depth a matter of “enormous historical significance in the evolution of the operation’s character,” completely changing the manner of its conduct. On the basis of this watershed development introduced by the factor of depth, he declared that “*we are at the dawn of a new age of military art and must move from a linear strategy to a deep strategy*” (emphasis in the original).⁷⁵

The depth of the modern operational formation had become such a dominating factor that radically new technologies were required to overcome it and avoid a repetition of the Great War’s positional stalemate. These were the so-called “new means of combat,” already alluded to in the previous chapter. Technical improvements in these weapons’ range and firepower since 1918 now enable the attacker to simultaneously suppress the enemy’s forces throughout his entire formation and thus transforming the tactical breakthrough into one of operational proportions. Chief among these weapons was the tank, the numbers of which had increased dramatically in the Red Army with the onset of the country’s industrialization drive. The modern tank combined speed and firepower in a single vehicle capable of suppressing the defender’s machine guns and artillery, thus providing invaluable support for the infantry attack. The tank’s increased range and numbers also allowed its employment in depth for the exploitation of the tactical success. Thus in a very short time the tank had been transformed from a short-range tactical infantry-support vehicle to a formidable weapon capable of carrying out operational missions to a great depth.

Another factor was the appearance of motorized infantry, which could quickly be fed into battle for the exploitation drive into the operational depth. The motorized forces were also capable of holding ground taken by the armored forces until the arrival of slower-moving units from the rear. Air power also underwent considerable development during the interwar years, with aviation’s reach extending from the tactical and into the operational and even strategic spheres. However, the Soviets managed to avoid the more extreme theories of air power then in vogue and their air force remained in a support role *vis-à-vis* the ground forces. Isserson also predicted a “great future” for the airborne troops and bemoaned the “certain lack of trust” which their appearance had inspired in some quarters.⁷⁶

However great the effect of the “new means of combat,” Isserson cautioned, these weapons cannot be employed to their full potential without a corresponding change in the way the attacker organizes his forces for the offensive. This had been achieved to a certain extent at the tactical level during the latter part of World War I and afterwards, particularly with the formulation of the theory of the deep battle. Unfortunately, the years since

World War I had not witnessed a similar development at the operational level and the organization of the offensive operation continued to lag seriously behind its technical possibilities. He ascribed this lag to the lingering and baleful influence of the linear strategy, which continued to dominate operational thinking well into the 1930s. The linear strategy, he explained, which relies on “*a single wave of operational efforts*,” is particularly unsuited to overcome a deeply echeloned modern defense (emphasis in the original).⁷⁷

This is because the deep nature of modern defensive arrangements makes a “one-shot” offensive effort highly problematical, because the latter usually lacks the resources to follow through upon its initial victories. These victories are often purchased by a favorable correlation of forces at the beginning of the attack, by means of which the attacker is able to achieve a temporary superiority over his opponent. However, the further the attacker penetrates into the defender’s territory the weaker he becomes, due to his own losses, the drain of troops for occupation duties, and the growing difficulty of supplying the advance over a damaged communications net, among other factors. The defender, provided he is able to disengage after the initial defeat, is able to fall back on his own territory, thus shortening his own line of communications. Should the attacker persist in his advance he will inexorably grow weaker, while his opponent grows stronger.

This tendency had revealed itself in embryonic form as early as the Franco-Prussian War, following the destruction of the main French armies at Metz and Sedan. However, despite these resounding victories, the Germans were not only not able to immediately impose a peace on the French, but instead had to contend with the new armies that the successors to Louis Napoleon were raising in the interior. To be sure, the final French collapse was certainly conditioned by the magnitude of its defeat early in the war, although the principle remained the same. Developments in the following years considerably reduced the likelihood that a single, uninterrupted strategic effort could achieve success. By the outbreak of World War I all the major continental powers had adopted some form of conscription, which enabled them to exploit their vast manpower reserves to continue fighting well beyond the first clash of the armies. The growth in industrial production meant that a modern industrial state would be capable of supplying these armies with ever-increasing amounts of military equipment. In fact, the European powers had become more impervious to a single “knockout” blow than ever before. That this was so became obvious as early as the Marne campaign. Here, following the German army’s initial success along the frontier and the subsequent pursuit, its right-flank armies arrived east of Paris weaker than their opponents and were thrown back in the general engagement that followed.

The pattern was repeated along the Polish front in 1920, following the Western Front’s initial victory in Belorussia. Here the operation’s successful outcome was thought to be assured by the “offensive’s initial development” from the Berezina River and the notion that the *front* might actually have to fight a major engagement with the enemy along the Vistula was hardly considered. This was a “bitter delusion,” Isserson concluded, as the subsequent Polish counteroffensive inflicted a defeat on the Red Army far more severe than the one suffered by the Germans. It also enabled him to deliver a dig at Tukhachevskii, whose conduct, he charged, betrayed “a deep lack of understanding of the dynamics of the modern operation’s development.”⁷⁸

Isserson believed that the tendency of the modern offensive operation to falter at the moment of crisis is due not so much to the attacker’s exhaustion as he nears his goal as it is to the tendency of the defender to increase in strength as he falls back on his resource base. This dilemma is a direct outgrowth of the linear strategy’s innate penchant for merely

pushing back the enemy, instead of cutting off his path of retreat and destroying him. The attacker, however, is not aware that the odds are turning against him and, drunk with success, approaches the operation's crisis confident that the worst is behind and that one more push will gain the victory. In fact, quite the opposite is true, and it is the operation's "first step" that is the easiest and that now "*One must expect the greatest exertion and crisis at the end*" (emphasis in the original).⁷⁹ This conclusion moved Isserson to declare that "*the modern operation is an operation in depth and must be calculated to the entire depth and must be ready to overcome the entire depth*" (emphasis in the original).⁸⁰

To overcome this depth the "new means of combat," however useful, by themselves are not enough. They must be organized in such a way as to ensure their maximum effectiveness in the attack throughout the entire depth of the enemy's position. The latter is the task of the "new forms of combat," which must now conform to the requirements of the age of the deep strategy. For Isserson, the solution was simple: since "*the modern multi-act deep operation is not resolved by a single stroke of coinciding efforts*," what is now required is "*the deep operational layering of these efforts, which grow as they approach the culmination point of achieving victory*" (emphasis in the original). This is only natural, and is a direct response to the problem of penetrating in full the enemy's operational position, which is also deeply echeloned. In fact, the greater the depth and degree of resistance of the enemy defense the deeper must be the depth and echeloning of the attacker's battle formation.⁸¹

Isserson evidently anticipated objections on this score, the chief of which was that such a deep echeloning of combat efforts represents a serious dispersal of force, thus weakening the attack. He hastened to claim that such a charge was unfounded and that echeloning one's forces in depth has nothing in common with the wasteful practice of committing them in detail. Rather, these echelons would enter the fighting, each in support of the preceding one, constantly battering the enemy in a "*consecutive and unbroken accumulation of operational efforts*" throughout the entire depth of the enemy defense (emphasis in the original). In a particular apt comparison, he likened this uninterrupted offensive effort to the ceaseless action of waves, which would rise continuously from the depths of the ocean and ultimately wash away all obstacles on the shore.⁸²

This approach also raised the question of reserves and their place in the operation. Isserson stated that the linear strategy's efforts to achieve a result through a single operational effort rendered the maintenance of a reserve in the advance superfluous. What small role the reserve did play was generally limited by the linear strategy's innate drive to lengthen the flank of the advance in order to turn the enemy's position. Now that the growth of the battlefield in breadth has reached its limit and has shifted to the depth, the place of the reserve is in the rear of the advancing column, from where it can be employed to strengthen the blow from the depth of the attacker's position.⁸³ This, in turn, raises the problem of strategic and operational echelons.

Isserson claimed that the deep echeloning of strategic efforts is conditioned by what he called "*consecutive, permanent mobilization*," which is an inevitable product of the modern state's inability to adjust to the demands of total war immediately upon its outbreak (emphasis in the original). On the one hand, the extreme demands of modern war determine that the belligerents cannot limit themselves to those forces that can be mobilized immediately upon the outbreak of war, lest enemies who are willing to push their population and economy to the limit eventually defeat them. On the other hand, no country is capable of deploying its entire military capacity at the outset of a war. Were it to attempt this, it would have to delay the opening of hostilities to such an extent that it would be

forced to carry out its mobilization deep within its own territory, so that its forces not be subjected to defeat in detail. Paradoxically, this would enable a weaker opponent, which can mobilize its smaller forces more rapidly, to steal a march on its stronger neighbor and gain an initial advantage.⁸⁴

Given these conditions, it is no longer possible to achieve victory with the forces of the “first-line armies” alone, by which he meant those forces already in being or deployed by the state as a result of the initial wartime mobilization. The new realities now require that a nation’s armies be deployed in depth upon the outbreak of war, so that their initial formation would facilitate a deep strategic offensive into the enemy’s territory. This would take the form of second- and third-line armies entering the war in the wake of the first-line armies in a series of “deep strategic echelons.”⁸⁵ Such an approach clearly violated those dictates of the linear strategy, which call for the massing of the state’s immediately available forces at the beginning of a war for a massive “one-shot” offensive, designed to end the war in a single campaign. It is far more in tune with the tenets of the deep strategy and its “layered” approach to achieving victory through the accumulation of offensive efforts.

This approach also dovetailed nicely with the reigning belief that a major war might easily last several years, during which the Soviet Union would require considerable time to put its economy on a war footing. It also corresponded to the peculiar conditions of the country, whose vast distances and underdeveloped transportation system made a more gradual mobilization of its resources inevitable. Moreover, it is a profitable strategy for the Soviet Union, which is in a uniquely favorable position to carry out this strategy, due to its enormous size and immense human and other resources. “The deeper and more spacious a country’s territory and the greater its mobilization resources,” he wrote, the broader the scope of its “deep echelonment of strategic efforts.” He contrasted favorably the USSR’s nearly infinite opportunities in this regard to those of its smaller western neighbors along the Baltic coast, whose limited size and resources restricted them to a one-act mobilization effort.⁸⁶

The strategic echeloning of efforts at the beginning of a war will also be reflected on a smaller scale at the operational level. Outwardly, this was not particularly original, as the belligerents in World War I had echeloned their armies in depth for the larger offensive operations after 1914, although this was done under conditions of a positional front. Triandafillov had briefly touched upon this problem, when in *The Character of Operations of Modern Armies* he proposed creating second and third echelons behind the front of an army conducting an offensive operation. These echelons would contain anywhere from one-third to one-half of the number of divisions in the first echelon and would be committed into the fighting to maintain the offensive density necessary to sustain an advance.⁸⁷ However, Triandafillov’s vision of various operational echelons still relied primarily on the traditional infantry arm. It was only with Isserson that the echeloning of operational efforts was fully married to modern technology.

The number and composition of an army’s operational echelons is determined by several factors: the speed and operating range of the various combat arms, as well as the overall operational plan, which determines the order in which these echelons will enter the engagement.⁸⁸ The army’s first operational echelon is an aerial one and is made up of air units organic to the army or subordinated to the *front* command. This echelon is capable of attacking the enemy immediately upon the outbreak of war to a depth of 500 to 600 kilometers. In fact, it will already be heavily engaged with the latter’s air and ground forces even while its own ground forces are still in the rear, far from the battlefield.⁸⁹ The second operational echelon consists of tanks and motorized infantry, as well as “modern mecha-

nized cavalry.” This is also the first ground echelon, and in this capacity it acts as the vanguard for the rest of the army. In a case when both sides pursue an offensive strategy, this echelon would be the first to encounter the enemy on the battlefield. In conjunction with the air arm, the second echelon was “to disrupt the enemy’s concentration and occupy a favorable position for going over to a general offensive,” even as the army’s main forces are still concentrating in the rear.⁹⁰

The latter comprise the army’s third echelon and includes the greater part of its rifle units, moving forward some 100 kilometers behind the second echelon’s lead columns. The third echelon’s columns will themselves extend back another 75 kilometers, due to the expected shortage of roads. Behind this body lies a gap of 25 kilometers, behind which lies the fourth operational echelon. This consists of those rifle units that could not be accommodated in the third echelon due to the congestion on the roads and other “bottlenecks.” This echelon’s columns will stretch back another 50 kilometers, constituting, in effect, the army’s reserve. In all, the three ground-based echelons will occupy a front some 250 to 300 kilometers in depth, behind which, albeit in an embryonic stage, the second strategic echelon is already beginning to coalesce. These figures caused Isserson, who could never resist flogging a dead horse, to declare, “If this is not the dawn of the age of the deep strategy, then one must call into doubt the very concept of depth.”⁹¹ See diagram 1.

He immediately added the caveat; however, that such a theoretical scheme was not likely to play out in a future war. He argued that it was more probable that at the beginning of a war a country’s quick-reaction forces will immediately take up position along the border, thus providing some cover for the mobilization and concentration of the army in the interior. This protective shield will also enable the country to deploy its armed forces much closer to the frontier than would otherwise be the case; it will also contract some-

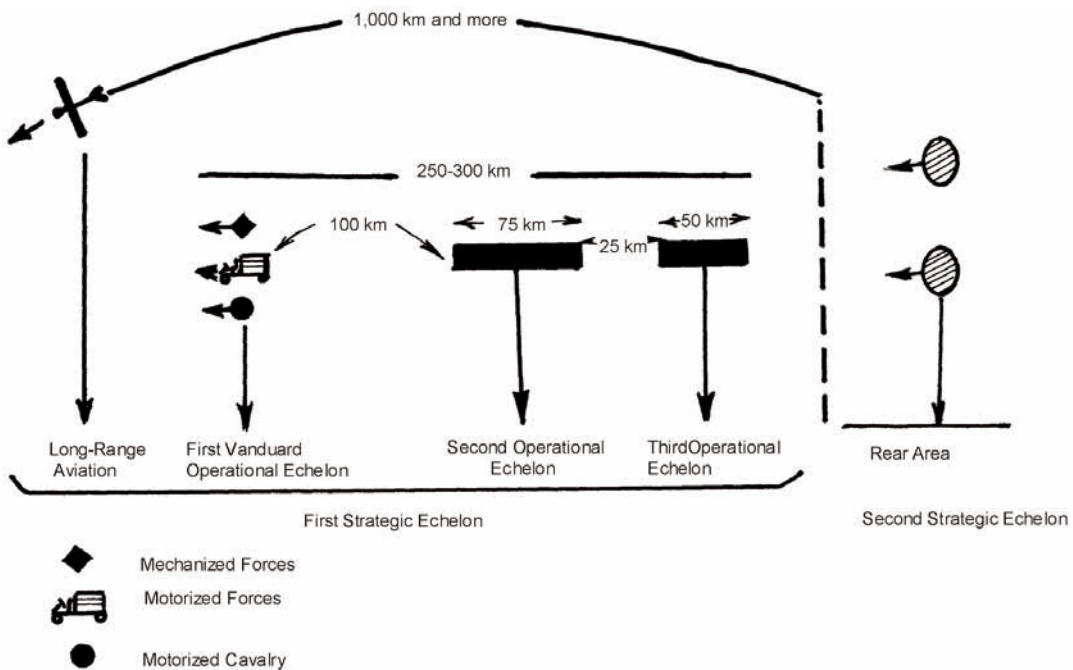


Diagram 1. The Deep Advance to the Battlefield.

what the deep echeloning of forces as previously described. In a situation where both belligerents adopt such measures, it is more likely that military operations will begin close to the frontier and that extended 300-kilometer marches to engage the enemy "will undoubtedly be excluded."⁹²

Even though the various operational echelons would depart from the same line, their differing speeds and capabilities insured that they would enter the meeting operation in a staggered formation. For example, while the last echelon is still moving forward in the deep rear, threatened at most by enemy air strikes, the first echelon will already be heavily engaged at the front. In such a situation, where combat activities are being conducted throughout the army's depth, to one degree of intensity or another, it becomes increasingly difficult to tell where the operation ends and the engagement begins, which is a function of their historical evolution. During the age of the linear strategy, "the engagement sprang organically from the operation," whereas under the conditions of the strategy of depth "*the operation and the engagement merge organically*" in an uninterrupted wave of combat activity (emphasis in the original).⁹³ This will take the form of two opposing operational waves crashing into each other, as it is likely that the enemy's advance will be organized along the same lines. Based upon this supposition, he declared that in such cases "*final success will go to the one whose operational formation is deeper*" (emphasis in the original).⁹⁴

Whatever the outcome of the initial fighting, it is probable that sooner or later be a positional front would come into being.⁹⁵ Isserson called this as a "normal phenomenon" during the process of which "the decisive turning movement" employed in the meeting operation is transformed into a "frontal blow, which must become just as decisive and calculated through the entire depth of the enemy position."⁹⁶ In other words, with the disappearance of open flanks from which to carry out a turning movement, the attacker must recreate these same flanks by organizing a frontal breakthrough of the enemy defensive position in order to restore maneuver in the latter's rear. Managing this "transition from one operational method to another," he stated, now constitutes the "fundamental and central task of our operational art."⁹⁷

As we have seen, the task of breaking through the defender's position had been accomplished to some degree at the tactical level as far back as 1918. This is insufficient, however, as "a deep tactical effort must still grow into a deep operational breach," without which the tactical breakthrough itself makes no sense. Rather, a way must be found to sustain the momentum of the initial tactical breakthrough throughout the entire depth of the enemy's position; or, as Isserson so artfully put it, "*to extend the blow from the depth into the depth*" (emphasis in the original). To do otherwise is "to continue the system of senseless, grueling frontal blows of self-exhaustion" which were the hallmark of the major offensive operations of 1918.⁹⁸

The breakthrough operation would be no easy task, however, as modern defensive arrangements had grown in depth to the point where they formed a complex, multi-layered zone of resistance. For example, a division of the time generally occupied a position extending 6 to 8 kilometers back from the front. To a depth of 8 to 10 kilometers behind this position lies the tactical reserve zone, which forms the second line. Extending another 20 to 25 kilometers behind this position lies a third line, where the army (operational) reserves are located. Finally, 25 to 50 kilometers behind this line are the railheads, through which strategic reserves may arrive in times of crisis. These multiple positions will form a series of "consecutively echeloned fortified belts," each of which would have to be penetrated and overcome in its turn. This arduous process will certainly be made more difficult,

Isserson warned, by the enemy's ability to bolster the defense by bringing up more reserves and feeding them into the battle.⁹⁹

The solution to the problem combined the long-range strike capabilities of the new military technology with the necessity of "layering" the efforts of the various combat arms in depth. Isserson proposed organizing the army's offensive formation for the breakthrough into two echelons. The first is the "attack echelon" (*eshelon ataki*), which has the task of breaking through the enemy's tactical defense. The second is the "breakthrough development echelon" (*eshelon razvitiia proryva*), which, as its name implies, will push the tactical breakthrough forward into the entire depth of the enemy's operational defense.¹⁰⁰

Isserson somewhat grandly claimed that this organization "resolves the fundamental problem of modern operational art," which he defined as "the decisive and deep surmounting of frontalism" (*frontal'nost'*), or the tendency of the front to become solid and continuous. This is true, he added, whether the front in question is one that has been previously fortified, or one that has arisen spontaneously as the result of offensive exhaustion by one or both sides.¹⁰¹ In the first instance he probably had in mind the Maginot Line in France, or the Soviet Union's intermittent system of fortifications along its western frontier. The second scenario, however, was considered more likely and would probably arise after the war's initial offensive impulse had spent itself.

In the latter case, the army's second echelon will encounter the enemy's increasing resistance, which cannot be overcome despite the arrival of the succeeding third and fourth echelons of infantry. It soon becomes obvious that the enemy's front cannot be turned by the army's present formation, and the second echelon, which also serves as the army vanguard, is withdrawn into the rear. This echelon, with its heavy complement of tanks, motorized troops and cavalry, becomes the success development echelon. The third and fourth echelons' rifle units take its place at the front and become the attack echelon.¹⁰²

The breakthrough operation will begin with a massed air and artillery assault against the enemy's tactical defensive zone. This is followed by the attack echelon's assault, which develops along the lines of the deep battle. Once a breach has been made in the tactical defense the breakthrough development echelon is committed to exploit the success. This will come in successive waves of light tanks, self-propelled artillery, and cavalry, followed by the motorized infantry. In certain cases, each of the combat arms might have its own breakthrough zone, in which case "the development of the breakthrough will follow simultaneously along several areas of the front," as they pour into the breach created by the attacking infantry. Simultaneous with these events, the army's long-range aviation will attack targets deep in the enemy rear, in an effort to seal off the area and prevent or hinder the arrival of enemy reserves to the battlefield. The attacker will also carry out airborne landings in the enemy rear to further disrupt his defense and to cut off possible routes of retreat.¹⁰³

A key factor in the conduct of the deep breakthrough operation is how it unfolds both consecutively and simultaneously along the front and in the depth of the enemy position, which stood in sharp contrast to the one-dimensional operational efforts of World War I, which were conducted only along the front. For example, even after the operation's successful beginning the attack echelon may still be trying to widen the breach along the breakthrough's flanks, or even along another portion of the front. Meanwhile, part of the breakthrough development echelon (cavalry and mechanized forces) may be doing the same along the enemy's second defensive position to the rear. At the same time, the latter echelon's forward elements might already be well into the depth of the enemy position, where his air and motorized forces would be heavily engaged with the enemy's reserves as they

march to the battlefield. Together, these activities constitute what Isserson called “a new, grandiose, multi-tiered engagement, conducted in several tiers of the operational depth” (emphasis in the original).¹⁰⁴ See diagram 2.

He also claimed that the deep operation had resolved the age-old confrontation between the advocates of interior and exterior lines. The first had been particularly beloved of Napoleon, who preferred to launch his attacks from a single point in an attempt to split the enemy and destroy him in detail. The employment of exterior lines, on the other hand, involves a turning movement from more than one direction, and was the preferred form of maneuver during the age of the linear strategy. These two types of maneuver, he added, had often been considered “operational polarities” and unalterably opposed to one another. Now, however, the two are united in the deep operation and reveal themselves at various stages. The attack echelon, for example, operates along exterior lines by attacking along a broad front. The breakthrough development echelon, on the other hand, operates along interior lines by concentrating its forces for a single blow into the depth of the enemy position.¹⁰⁵

This synthesis, he maintained, refuted the belief, commonly held since the Great War, that only frontal attacks along exterior lines were possible. The corollary of this belief is that the turning maneuver and encirclement of the enemy “have quit the historical arena” and are no longer possible.¹⁰⁶ Nothing could be further from the truth, he argued, and in fact the maneuver possibilities offered by the rise of the deep operation will lead to a rebirth of “Cannae” based on the strategy of depth.¹⁰⁷ In this regard, Isserson was unusually prophetic and the deep operation leading to the encirclement of large enemy forces was the flagship of the Red Army’s operational art during World War II and a staple of its operational theory for many years afterward.

The Evolution of Operational Art marks a sharp departure from Isserson’s earlier, more

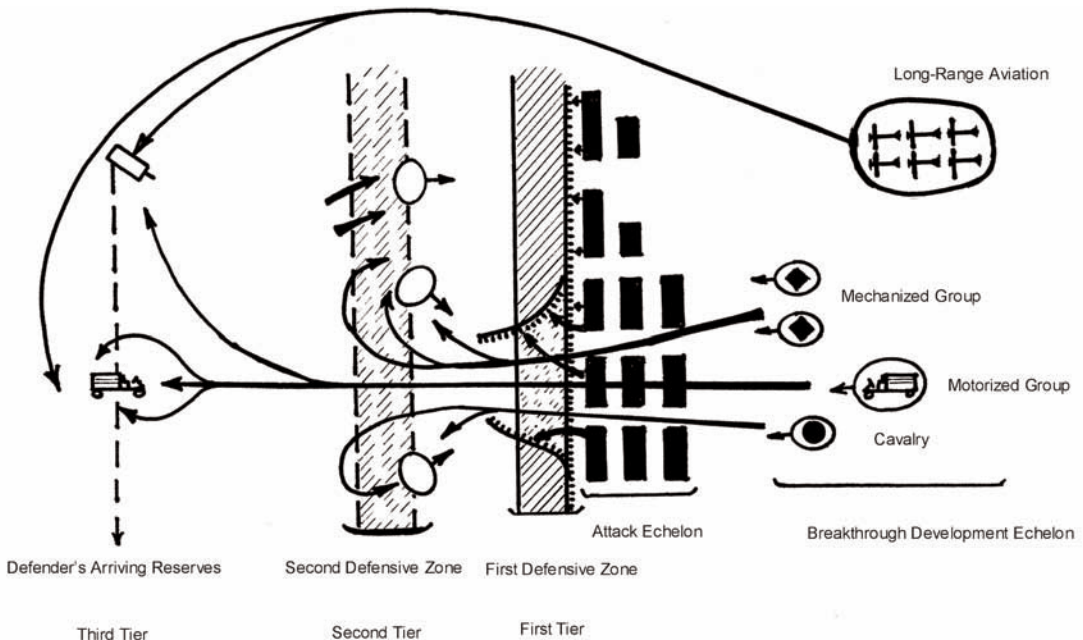


Diagram 2. The Breakthrough Operation.

descriptive works and indicates his maturation as a military thinker. To be sure, the book often seems overly “academic” and in several places suffers from the author’s too-zealous attempts to force his ideas into an existing Marxist framework. For example, instead of seriously examining such technical complexities of the 1914 and 1920 campaigns as the poor state of communications and transportation, he preferred to dwell on the on their offensive failures as the stuff of “historical inevitability,” due to an adherence to the linear strategy. Only slightly less egregious is his attempt to divide the development of military art over the previous 100 years into stages, aping Marx’s own division of human society into successive stages. Also, his attempt to “reconcile” the maneuver along internal and external lines within the Marxist framework of thesis — antithesis — synthesis is more than a little bit forced. On the other hand, the Marxist stress on materiel factors did aid his analysis of the operation’s development as the result of technological changes in the means of war.

For the most part, however, political questions affected mostly the first half of the book and did little violence to the second; for it is there that the true genius of the work lies. For example, the division of the attacking force into breakthrough and exploitation echelons found some of its earliest and most eloquent expression here, some ten years before it was successfully put into practice. Other Soviet theorists, most notably Triandafillov, had put forward the idea as well, although his ideas were based only on what might be. Isserson was one of the first in the Red Army to harness the idea to the new technical possibilities offered by the new long-range strike weapons, and to ground it in an all-embracing theory of warfare.

Despite its relatively small size (71 pages), *The Evolution of Operational Art* caused what was probably the greatest stir within the Red Army’s intellectual ranks since the publication of Triandafillov’s groundbreaking work three years earlier. The military publishing house evidently had placed great hopes in the work by rushing it into production. Moreover, the book was issued in a run of 10,000 copies, a large amount for the time. Isserson later called, with characteristic lack of modesty that the book “was read by the army’s entire higher command element.”¹⁰⁸ One of these was Tukhachevskii, and Isserson stated that his public criticism of the Western Front’s 1920 offensive against the Poles “had deepened even further our previous hostile relations.”¹⁰⁹ Here he was probably exaggerating for effect and, as events would show, this was not the case.

So great was the interest in Isserson’s book, in fact, that a special conference was organized in the Central House of the Red Army by the army’s Political Directorate to publicly debate its merits.¹¹⁰ The centerpiece of the conference was Sediakin’s lengthy appraisal of the book, which was reprinted in a later installment of *War and Revolution*.

Sediakin chose to limit his remarks to the second half of Isserson’s work, as that part having the greatest relevance to the army’s future development. Most of his comments were positive, and he praised the author for having written “a valuable contribution to military literature,” and compared the book favorably to Svechin’s much-maligned *Strategy* of the previous decade.¹¹¹ He even paid Isserson the high compliment of declaring that *The Evolution of Operational Art* should serve as the basis for a future operational manual, which the army sorely lacked.¹¹²

Most of the criticism Sediakin offered was relatively minor and indicated differences of degree only, as when he took the author to task for failing to highlight sufficiently the USSR’s “progressive” role in a future war.¹¹³ This was mere window dressing, however, and there is no reason to doubt that Isserson was any less devoted to the notion of the Soviet Union’s “liberation mission” than anyone else.

More to the point were his remark regarding what he felt was the author's "unjustified optimism" as to the tank's ability to break through a modern defensive position. Related to this was what he considered Isserson's tendency to underestimate in general the resilience of the modern defense, the development of which had not stood still either.¹¹⁴ Thus while Sediakin approved the idea of a multi-layered approach to breaking through the enemy's positional front, he evidently felt that the author was too sanguine as to such an operation's success. More likely, he surmised, the attacker would encounter a stout defense that would demand his utmost exertion to overcome. Left unsaid was the very real concern that the cost of such an effort might render the army incapable of "reaping the fruits of the deep operation," a question which he declared Isserson had "insufficiently illuminated."¹¹⁵

On the other hand, Sediakin challenged Isserson's oft-stated belief that the resilience of the defense increases the deeper the attacker advances into enemy territory. This was not always so, he maintained, particularly during the Russian Civil War. He noted that in 1919 both Denikin's and Kolchak's White armies had quickly fallen apart following the first hard blow by the Red Army. These attacks were followed by a vigorous pursuit deep into their territory, which culminated in the opposing armies' virtual disintegration. And while Sediakin admitted that the Red Army's defeat along the Vistula in 1920 validated Isserson's thesis, he nevertheless chided the latter for his "serious mistake" in seeking to make that operation's outcome valid for all others.¹¹⁶

Actually, it was Sediakin who committed the greater error by comparing apples and oranges. His use of the two examples drawn from the civil war, while outwardly correct, had very little to do with the argument at hand. Both Denikin and Kolchak commanded conscript armies whose loyalty to the White cause was dubious at best. As long as they advanced and were outwardly successful they remained a cohesive fighting force. Once they suffered a serious check, however, desertions rose significantly and the armies rapidly fell apart. Their plight only grew as they retreated through politically unreliable areas, which meant that they had little to draw upon in terms of materiel supply and reinforcements. Just the opposite was true in the war with Poland. Here the Red Army defeated but failed to destroy the Poles in Belorussia and only succeeded in pushing them back into their own territory. The fact that the Poles viewed the conflict as a national war against the Russian invader, and not as a class war, only increased their resolve, and their counteroffensive shattered the exhausted Red forces. Sediakin here seemed to be hoping that conditions not unlike those which obtained during the civil war might reappear in a future conflict against the major capitalist powers and their allies, and the belief in a proletarian uprising in the enemy rear had long been an article of faith within the Red Army. The mature Isserson, although he was probably not entirely free of such beliefs, had the good sense to discount this factor.

Another, much less informative, review appeared three years later on the pages of the German military weekly *Militar Wochenblatt*. Unfortunately for its readers' edification, this publication was already in the grip of Nazi ideology. Even the title of the article, "The Modern Genghis Khan," is indicative of its overall thrust, and Isserson's obviously Jewish surname certainly did him no good in the reviewer's eyes. Thus instead of a rational critique of *The Evolution of Operational Art*, the reader was treated to such boilerplate phrases as the "specter of a Mongolian Caesar" emerging from the trackless steppes to drown Western civilization in blood.¹¹⁷ The reviewer did allow that Isserson's work should be taken seriously, but for all the wrong reasons. Rather than address the ideas raised in the book, the reviewer warned that Germany might one day be called upon to defend European culture from a

“barbarian invasion from the East,” supported by the most advanced military equipment.¹¹⁸ Thus was lost an opportunity to educate the German military readership on the complexities of one of the Red Army’s military theory. Given the events of the next ten years, this was certainly a mistake.

A Historical Interlude

Isserson’s next published work involved his first foray into the field of military history since 1926. This latest effort was a lengthy (242 pages) study entitled *Military Art in the Age of the National Wars of the Latter Half of the XIX Century*. The book’s appearance in the spring of 1933 is testimony to Isserson’s phenomenal productivity during his first academic sojourn. It is also indicative of his continuing interest in the German army; this time by examining its activities during the various wars of German unification — the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, and the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, the successful outcome of which led to the creation of the German Empire.

However, it is not the intention of this study to dwell on the operational details of these conflicts, which are already well known to military historians. Rather, it is to further illuminate Isserson’s military-political worldview, as expressed in his writings. This is no idle exercise, as Isserson’s military-theoretical beliefs were inextricably connected to his political outlook. Seen in this light, the book should be understood more as a continuation of the work so ably begun in *The Evolution of Operational Art*, but in another historical setting. In fact, the phenomena covered in *Military Art* correspond in many areas to that already highlighted in his previous work.

Isserson’s Marxist-based determinism was nowhere better displayed than in his examination of the development of military art during the latter half of the nineteenth century. These developments were closely connected to the triumph of capitalism in Western Europe, which was exemplified by the dominance of the bourgeoisie, in whose hands was concentrated the greater part of society’s productive assets. The bourgeoisie had increasingly replaced the old feudal aristocracy after the French Revolution, when changing economic conditions rendered the old ruling class’ dominance of society anachronistic. Below the bourgeoisie was the new industrial working class, which was increasingly being enserfed by the burgeoning factory system. It was the working class, according to Marx, which was destined to overthrow capitalism and build a new society based on the common ownership of the means of production — communism.

For all of its injustices, however, capitalism presided over remarkable advances in the development and production of goods, including military technology. This was the era in which military art was increasingly influenced by the widespread introduction of rifled weapons — infantry firearms and artillery — into the arsenals of the major powers. Moreover, these weapons could now be mass-produced more quickly and at a fraction of the cost required in the recent past. Also, whereas earlier technical improvements might take many years, if not decades, to reach the troops in the field, the greatly increased productive capabilities of the capitalist economy significantly reduced the time from development to delivery, meaning that a nation could revamp its armed forces with newer and more powerful weaponry in just a few years. This, in turn, led to the phenomenon of government-sponsored military innovation, which has continued into our time.

Another important development during this period was the appearance of a highly

developed rail net in the major capitalist countries, such as Germany, where the total amount of track laid increased from a mere 469 kilometers in 1840 to 18,450 only thirty years later.¹¹⁹ This had decisive consequences for the conduct of war, as large numbers of troops could now be swiftly transported from one front to another in a fraction of the time previously required. From this time military considerations came to play an important role in the planning and construction of new rail lines, with the appearance of a highly developed rail network along the French border by 1870 as an obvious case in point. The exploitation of the railroad's possibilities in this area now enabled a commander to "steal a march" on his enemy by mobilizing and concentrating his forces more quickly in order to preempt the latter and land the first blow.

The perennial competition between Prussia and Austria for supremacy in Germany broke out anew in the spring of 1866, following a dispute over their joint administration of the former Danish provinces of Schleswig and Holstein. Both countries were initially able to deploy around 300,000 men in the Bohemian theater of military activities, with significant forces stationed elsewhere along their borders to guard against third parties.¹²⁰

The Prussian war plan called for the concentration of three separate armies—two large ones in Silesia, plus a smaller one against Austria's ally, Saxony. These armies would then cross the border at widely separated points, with a view to making a junction along the headwaters of the Elbe River in northern Bohemia, where von Moltke expected to meet the Austrians for the decisive battle. However, Isserson was quick to point out that von Moltke's notion of concentration differed fundamentally from the Napoleonic ideal of gathering all one's forces at a single point. Concentration under modern conditions, he wrote, now meant the "concentric aiming of all the armies toward one unifying area," where the enemy was expected to concentrate his army, "in order to attack it from different directions along the front, flank and, if possible, the rear."¹²¹

The Prussian armies began to cross the Bohemian frontier in the last week of June, defeating small Austrian forces barring the mountain defiles. By the end of the month only a short distance separated the various armies, and by July 2 the Prussians had effected a loose junction and occupied an advantageous position *vis-à-vis* the Austrians, who were tightly massed in the Sadowa-Koniggratz area. The decisive battle began the following day with a concentric attack by all three armies. These assaults were not always well coordinated, and the Prussians suffered heavily from enemy fire, but by mid-afternoon the Austrians faced the real danger of being encircled. Nevertheless, the latter were able to break contact and fall back on Vienna. There was to be no more fighting, however, and defeatism within the country's political-military leadership and the threat of uprisings within the country finally compelled to come to terms. The peace treaty that followed effectively excluded Austria from German affairs.

Koniggratz had been the largest battle fought in Europe since the end of the Napoleonic Wars. For Isserson, it represented the triumph of two important trends which had been gathering force since 1815, and whose dominance could no longer be disputed. The first of these was the new phenomenon of separate armies concentrating on the battlefield from different directions, indications of which had appeared as early as the Battle of Leipzig in 1813. In 1866 von Moltke had been able to achieve this concentration on an operational scale, in which the Prussian armies had begun their march toward the battlefield, separated from each other by more than 400 kilometers. However, unlike the Napoleonic era, in which the march to the battlefield was an event separate from the battle itself, the operational deployment of the Prussian forces at the beginning of the war "already contained the

prerequisites of the future battle,” Koniggratz being merely the “logical consequence” of the initial deployment.¹²²

The battle also marked the clear triumph of the linear strategy. The distinguishing features of this strategy were the broad and widely separated deployment of the armies at the start of the war, followed by their separate approach to the battlefield, culminating in their concentric attack against the enemy army, in order to turn the latter’s flanks and surround him. The superiority of this strategy had been evident as early as the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, where the Prussian attack against the French flank led to Napoleon’s defeat. However, this was still an embryonic development and it required the social-economic conditions of the latter half of the nineteenth century to bring it to fruition. Nor was its importance universally recognized, Isserson declared, and while von Moltke was able to defeat the Austrians he was less successful in overcoming the resistance of his own subordinates, who continued to “blindly bow down before the military art of Napoleon” by concentrating their forces in a single compact mass.¹²³ The chief of staff now faced the arduous task of educating the Prussian army in the spirit of the new strategy.

Prussia’s lightning victory over Austria made the former the dominant power in northern Germany, with only the southern principalities and kingdoms free from its control. The new reality aroused particular anxiety in France, whose emperor; Napoleon III had long nursed pretensions of playing the leading role in European affairs and whose position was now threatened by the upstart Prussian state, which was clearly seeking to unite all of Germany under its sway. Given the accumulation of tensions between the two countries, France and Prussia needed only an excuse to go to war. This came in the summer of 1870, when France declared war on Prussia. This act played directly into the latter’s hands by putting the onus for starting the war on France, which enabled Prussia to present itself to the world as the aggrieved party and the defender of German national interests against French aggression. It also served to bring into an anti-French coalition the remaining south German states, such as Bavaria, which otherwise viewed with alarm any increase in Prussian power in Germany.

As a Marxist, Isserson inevitably viewed these events in terms of the class interests of the two sides and felt compelled to render a political evaluation. On the one hand, he wrote, the Prussian victory over Austria “strongly upset French bourgeois circles,” which regarded Prussia’s rise as a “direct threat” to their economic position, by which he meant that the unification of Germany would immediately result in the creation of a single dynamic economic power on its very doorstep.¹²⁴ Isserson’s view of the Prussian role in the war was much more positive, even going so far as to call the initial phase of the conflict a “defensive war” on the latter’s part, as it “was defending the historically progressive national unification of Germany.”¹²⁵

That a Marxist could take sides in a conflict between two bourgeois countries is, at first glance, odd, particularly as the Prussian bourgeoisie, according to Isserson’s own analysis, was thoroughly under the thumb of the *junker* land-owning aristocracy. On closer examination, however, this position is not as contradictory as it seems, as Marxists are obliged to support the most “progressive” element in any conflict, whatever the classes involved. For example, Marx himself was a fervent supporter of the Union cause during the American Civil War, because it supposedly represented the progressive bourgeois interests of the North against the semi-feudal aristocracy of the South. In the matter at hand, therefore, the “progressive” cause of German national unification was bound to elicit Isserson’s sympathy.

Upon the outbreak of war both sides began to mobilize and concentrate their forces along the frontier. This process unfolded far more efficiently on the German side, so that by early August these forces, under overall Prussian command, numbered slightly more than 500,000 men. The French, on the other hand, could initially muster only 250,000 men.¹²⁶ For this and other reasons the French command early on adopted a defensive strategy that sought to delay the Germans until the full resources of the country could be brought to bear against the enemy.

The Prussian-led forces suffered from no such constraints and adhered to an offensive strategy throughout. Von Moltke's plan was to outflank the French armies in Lorraine and cut them off from Paris by pushing them to the north and east. His efforts were successful in splitting the two main French armies and by mid-August they were threatening to cut off the French around Metz from the south and west. Here they collided with the French near the villages of Vionville and Mars-la-Tour, Gravelotte, and St. Privat, where a meeting engagement of several days' duration ensued. German casualties were extremely heavy, but the French were halted and forced to fall back into the fortress of Metz, where they surrendered two months later.

The remaining French army then withdrew to the northeast, pursued by those German forces not engaged in investing Metz. The latter continued their attempt to outflank their enemy and finally cornered the French at Sedan. It was there that the French, following brief but heavy fighting, were surrounded and compelled to surrender on September 1.

Revolution followed swiftly upon the French army's defeat and a new government of national defense was proclaimed in Paris on September 4. To Isserson, however, the change of regime was not an unalloyed victory, as the new government was hopelessly "bourgeois" in its makeup. This placed the government immediately at odds with the capital's industrial working class, which now constituted a significant share of its defenders. Accordingly, the uneasy alliance between antagonistic classes in defense of France could not last for long, as "the French bourgeoisie understood that the main enemy was the armed workers, and not the German hordes," and quoted Marx to the effect that the government of national defense "became the government of national treachery."¹²⁷ And while much of Isserson's analysis may be dismissed as conspiracy theory, there is no doubt that social tensions were at a fever pitch and would soon find their expression in the short-lived Paris Commune of March to May 1871.

Moreover, following Sedan and the fall of the monarchy, the political content of the war underwent a complete reversal. What had been a "defensive war" by Prussia and the other German states, he wrote, "had turned into an imperialistic one," while for the beleaguered French the conflict was now a progressive "defensive" struggle.¹²⁸ Whatever one thinks of this view, there is little doubt that with the victory at Sedan the Prussian rulers had achieved their goal of uniting Germany in all but name and that the war increasingly became a conflict of territorial aggrandizement at the expense of France. This was made apparent by the cession of the French provinces of Alsace and Lorraine to Germany as the result of the 1871 peace treaty between the two countries.

Isserson called the Franco-Prussian War the "first major war" of the industrial age, during which such technical innovations as the railroad and telegraph were widely employed.¹²⁹ As such, the war brought into sharp relief a number of developments peculiar to the "new age of the linear strategy," which had itself succeeded the Napoleonic-era "strategy of a single point." Among the most notable features of the new age were the rise of a new tactics, based on fire, the linear strategy of widely separated armies operating in unison along a

broad front, the conduct of operations to a great depth, and the importance of the turning movement leading to the enemy's encirclement.¹³⁰ All of these elements, he claimed, were dialectically intertwined with each other, with each one both complementing and opposing the others at the same time.

To a Marxist, however, only change is permanent, and the new quickly becomes the old and is, in turn, challenged by new phenomena. Ever true to the dialectic, Isserson wrote, "the development of military art often moves forward so quickly that already in its first manifestations it betrays signs of its own negation."¹³¹ One of these contradictions was that even the stunning German victories at Metz and Sedan did not immediately bring the war to a close and that several more months would pass before the French finally capitulated, because the latter were still able to draw upon their manpower reserves and raise new armies to carry on the fight. The ability of large modern states to recover from even the most serious defeats meant "final victories can no longer be achieved in a single wave of operational efforts." This was a "sufficiently serious warning for the linear strategy of the simultaneous deployment of all forces in a single line," by which he clearly had in mind the initial grouping of German forces in the West in August 1914.¹³²

Another serious contradiction revealed itself early in the war when the German army's turning movement collided with a "front of solid fire," as at Gravelotte and St. Privat. The meeting of two solid flanks, Isserson continued, was a serious check to von Moltke's linear strategy, and the latter's subsequent victories were possible only because he faced opponents who adhered to the old "strategy of a single point" and who allowed themselves to be outflanked.¹³³ This warning, however, was also ignored and by 1914 many of the continental European powers had to one degree or another adopted a linear strategy and the strategic outflanking of an opponent's forces became the basis of more than one country's war plan. Unbeknownst to the general staffs of the time, by 1914 the heyday of the linear strategy had passed and, dialectically speaking, "had turned into its own antithesis," having given rise to "factors which led to its own negation." With the collapse of the German attempt to envelop the Allied armies in France, "front came up against front" and the linear strategy passed from history.¹³⁴

As we have seen the demise of the linear strategy inaugurated the strategy of depth, in which overcoming the enemy's deeply echeloned position became at least as important as outflanking it. Accordingly, Isserson increasingly turned his talents to the practical problems of organizing such a breakthrough, as expressed in his various works on the deep battle and the deep operation. These efforts occupied the next eight years of his life, which saw some of his most important works published. This was followed by another decade and a half of camp and exile, so that by the time Isserson returned to the writing of history he was already an old man.

The Deep Operation Revealed

The Organizational Basis

The Evolution of Operational Art was a significant addition to the Red Army's growing body of literature in the field of operations, ranking alongside works by Triandafillov, Nikolai Nikolaevich Movchin, and others. However, Isserson's work, while a brilliant exposition of his military worldview, was too highly theoretical to be of much practical value. He was himself fully aware of this shortcoming, even going so far in the book's introduction as to write that the principal task now before the Red Army was "to construct an applied theory of modern operational art."¹

Isserson was quick to rise to his own challenge and proceeded to undertake the task of producing a more concrete guide for conducting an operation at the army and *front* level. The result was *The Fundamentals of the Deep Operation*, which represented an expanded and reworked version of a series of lectures on operational art delivered by the author in the spring of 1933.² However, this work was never published in the open military press, and remains classified to this day. Nevertheless, given the work's depth and the author's own erudite manner, *The Fundamentals of the Deep Operation* undoubtedly made a profound impression on those fortunate enough to read it.

Isserson was uncharacteristically modest in his evaluation of the work's scope, declaring that he sought only "to investigate the calculation standards and concrete forms of the deep operation" at the beginning of a war. He explicitly cautioned against drawing any far-reaching conclusions from even these limited aims, adding that the theses presented "can in no way claim to be a final and complete solution of the problem" of conducting an operation in depth. This was particularly true, he warned, as the equipment and manpower figures offered were necessarily speculative and subject to change in accordance with circumstances.³ He further advised the reader against elevating the ideas laid out in the work to the status of a ready-made guide for all situations and that any attempt to do so risked fettering the kind of free inquiry that was so essential to the development of the army's military theory. Rather, the work's theses should be rigorously tested, by which he presumably meant map exercises and war games. Only after having passed muster under these conditions could the theses advanced here serve as the springboard for the next stage in the development of the Red Army's operational art — the compilation of an operational manual.⁴

As has been shown, Isserson believed that the chief issue facing modern military art

was the “opposition of front to front,” to which he gave the name “frontalism.”⁵ This confrontation was the outgrowth of the great advances in military technology since the mid-nineteenth century, as well as the equally impressive growth in the size of modern armies. These parallel developments soon led to a situation where by the end of 1914 the armies’ previous freedom of maneuver had been reduced to nil and they were forced, instead, to organize a breakthrough of the enemy front. However, there were no cases of an operational-level breakthrough achieved during World War I.

He reduced the reasons behind this failure to four materiel-organizational shortcomings, of which the first two were tactical and the latter two operational in character. The first was the attacker’s lack of a weapon capable of withstanding and overcoming the defender’s rifle and machine gun fire.⁶ The second was the absence of long-range weapons that would enable the attacker to “simultaneously strike the entire tactical depth of the defense.” The lack of such weapons in the past had forced the attacker to “resolve the task of such a breakthrough by consecutive, meticulously divided blows in depth, during which the deep tactical reserves remained untouched,” and thus capable of restoring the situation. The modern defense’s extraordinary ability to regenerate itself caused Isserson to return to his favorite comparison with of the ancient warrior battling a twelve-headed hydra, and who finds that after chopping off one head another has grown in its place. What is necessary, he declared, is a means for chopping off all twelve heads at once.⁷

However, even previously successful tactical efforts had ultimately foundered for lack of a separate “factor” for carrying the battle beyond the immediate tactical defensive zone and into the operational depth. This resulted in a situation during the Great War in which “the tactical breakthrough itself proved to be, in essence, unnecessary, and quickly died out,” leaving only an insignificant dent in the defender’s front.⁸ The fourth reason behind previous operational failures was that even if a 1918-style offensive could have penetrated to the operational depth it would nevertheless have failed to achieve its objective due to the attacker’s inability to isolate the battlefield against the arrival of the enemy’s operational and strategic reserves. This left the defender free to move up these forces to the penetration in order to seal the breach and to even launch a counterattack, which as often as not turned the initial offensive into a defensive operation.⁹

Isserson’s solution to this dilemma was also four-fold and addressed each of these points in turn. First, the attacking forces must be supplied with the means for overcoming the defender’s anti-infantry fire. The ideal weapon for this purpose is the tank, and he called for the “tankification” of the attack, by which he meant the saturation of the tactical assault with armored support.¹⁰ The second step involves the simultaneous destruction of the enemy’s tactical defense throughout its entire depth in order to prevent the enemy from restoring the situation and rendering any further operational effort stillborn. This was the province of the deep battle, which he called the single form capable of “radically solving the problem of the tactical breaking of the front.”¹¹

The third step was an operational one and foresaw the creation of a “qualitatively new factor” in the attacker’s combat order, capable completing the tactical breakthrough and carrying the attack into the enemy’s operational depth. In organizational terms, this meant the creation of a separate “breakthrough development echelon,” which he had already raised in *The Evolution of Operational Art*.¹² The final ingredient for ensuring operational success is the attacker’s ability to isolate the battlefield against the arrival of the defender’s operational and strategic reserves. This was the task for the attacker’s long-range air assets, which would hinder the arrival of these reserves by deep strikes in the enemy rear.¹³

Together, these four conditions formed the cornerstone of the modern deep operation (*glubokaia operatsiia*), which is called upon “to break and to shatter” the enemy’s defensive front “throughout its entire operational depth.”¹⁴

Isserson held that the deep operation can only be realized within the confines of the modern combined-arms army, which is the “chief operational formation,” capable of uniting the “separate tactical efforts into one general operational effort.” The army carries out this task along a specific “operational direction” (*operatsionnoe napravlenie*), which is that portion of the theater of military activities which “leads to important objectives on the enemy’s territory” having economic, political and military significance. Operations conducted along the entire theater of military activities are the province of the *front*, or army group, which organizes the separate army operations in pursuit of a larger goal. Indeed, he defined the *front* as “a formation of a strategic order,” and its operations lie within the realm of strategy.¹⁵

Some operational directions are inevitably more important than others, and the delineation between primary and secondary operational directions constitutes one of the main tasks of a country’s general staff in peacetime. On this basis the staff makes its recommendations for allocating forces to the various directions, which take the form of the given country’s plan for deploying its armed forces in time of war. Along directions of particular importance the country would deploy its main forces, part of which would be organized as the “shock army” (*udarnaia armiia*). However, even a powerful shock army is incapable of carrying out a *front* operation with its resources alone and will need help to accomplish any larger tasks. In such a case, a *front* might include three or more shock armies.¹⁶

The shock army concept dated at least back to the days of the Russian Civil War, when the Red Army high command would strengthen certain armies in order to carry out important offensive missions along the main operational directions. Soviet writers during the interwar period often employed the term. For example, Triandafillov made the shock army the centerpiece of *The Character of Operations of Modern Armies*, which he modeled after the right-flank German armies that marched through Belgium and France in 1914 and the Soviet Western Front’s right-flank armies in 1920.¹⁷ His shock army, however, was to be no mere recapitulation of the previous era’s relatively homogenous force, but a modern combined-arms formation numbering 12 to 18 rifle divisions, 16 to 20 artillery regiments, and eight to 12 tank battalions, and augmented by four to five fighter squadrons and two to three bomber brigades.¹⁸ Triandafillov calculated that this concentration of force would enable the shock army to “carry out a series of consecutive operations from beginning to end” and to “overcome any enemy resistance in the beginning, as well as during the operation” (emphasis in the original).¹⁹

Triandafillov returned to the subject in his previously cited memorandum, in which he spelled out in greater detail his ideas for strengthening the shock army’s offensive capabilities. His shock army consisted of four to five rifle corps (12 to 15 rifle divisions), which would be augmented with tanks and artillery for a major operation from the high command’s reserves, according to a variety of scenarios. These scenarios depended upon whether the terrain favored the mass employment of tanks, which, in turn, influenced how much artillery would be detailed to the attack. In addition, the shock army could be reinforced by as many as six to nine squadrons of assault and light-bomber aircraft, as well as six to eight squadrons of fighters. These units, together with the army’s organic air assets, would yield from 500 to 600 aircraft. In the case of a major *front* operation, several shock armies might be organized for an attack along an entire strategic direction. In such an event, the

total number of aircraft may reach 2,500 to 3,000 machines, including 300 to 400 heavy bombers.²⁰

This work was taken up the following year by Yegorov, chief of the RKKA Staff, who, while lacking the talent and insight of his late subordinate, was nevertheless willing to push the latter's ideas forward. This he did in a lengthy memorandum, which offered an updated version of Triandafillov's original theses. Here Yegorov declared that the quantitative and qualitative changes then taking place in the Red Army's equipment park would enable the Soviets to create several shock armies by 1933.²¹ A particularly valuable addition to the shock army's striking power was the inclusion of a mechanized corps, the first two of which appeared in 1932. The shock army would also continue to be heavily reinforced by the previously mentioned strategic cavalry, separate mechanized brigades, and motorized divisions. It might also look for support from the new air corps, the first of which was slated to appear in 1933.²²

By 1935 the Red Army had four mechanized corps each with an authorized strength of 348 light-model BT tanks, 63 T-37 tankettes, and 52 flame-thrower tanks. The mechanized corps was organized into two mechanized brigades, a rifle-machine-gun brigade, a separate tank reconnaissance battalion, and a communications battalion. The corps also disposed of 20 artillery pieces, 1,444 automobiles, for a total strength of 8,965 men. The corps might be further reinforced with engineering, anti-air and other units from the high command reserve. It was planned to combine them with the cavalry corps to form cavalry-mechanized armies/groups. After this date, however, no further mechanized corps were created, and their redesignation as tank corps in 1938 brought about no changes in their internal structure.²³

Thus reinforced, the shock army was indeed a formidable entity for the time. Yegorov's shock army would number five rifle corps (15 rifle divisions), four-fifths of which would be reinforced for a major operation with "additional means of suppression." According to one possible scenario, he wrote, the shock army would dispose of 1,983 guns of various calibers (including 468 from the high command's artillery reserve), and 250 tanks. Another scenario saw the shock army attacking with 1,863 guns (including 348 from the high command artillery reserve) and 1,500 tanks (including 1,000 from the high command's tank reserve). Moreover, the shock army might be reinforced by four to five air brigades of assault and light-bomber aviation, as well as five to six fighter squadrons, for a total of 850 to 900 aircraft. Also, the shock army could expect to be supported by the *front's* heavy bomber assets.²⁴

Yegorov believed that a shock army so constituted was capable of delivering the "*combination of a blow from the front with blows throughout the depth of the enemy's operational positions,*" echoing word for word Triandafillov's declaration of the previous year (emphasis in the original).²⁵ "This combination of blows," he continued, "must lead to the *fastest possible* rupture of the entire enemy front," followed by the "encirclement and destruction" of the enemy forces defending that sector (emphasis in the original). Success in this phase of the operation would then create the conditions for pursuing "decisive actions against the flanks and rear of the troops occupying the remaining sectors of the enemy front."²⁶ This is language that Isserson surely approved of and illustrates just how deeply the idea of the "deep forms of combat" had already penetrated into the Red Army.

For his part, Isserson was hesitant about laying down specific norms for the shock army and declared that its strength and composition must be determined in every instance by the situation at hand and the overall importance of the operational direction in which

it operates. Whatever the specific case, however, the shock army must be capable of not only breaking through the enemy's positional front, but also of continuing the attack throughout his entire operational depth. This means calculating the army's strength and composition in two dimensions: along the front, and in depth.²⁷

This would not be easy, as the composition of the army had changed dramatically over the years. In 1914 an army consisted chiefly of infantry, cavalry, and artillery. And while the three arms differed from each other in their operating range, the distinction was not such as to be decisive. The commander's task at the time was to simply put these forces into play simultaneously along the front. The modern army, on the other hand, is a far more complex mechanism, which has been radically altered by the addition of mechanized, motorized, and air units, which differ greatly from the older arms in terms of speed, striking power, and their radius of operations.²⁸ And although these combined factors present the modern commander with a wealth of possibilities, he is now faced with the task of organizing this heterogeneous grouping, each having its own peculiar qualities, into a smoothly functioning whole unit capable of carrying out the operation

The first element in this mix is the reinforced rifle corps, which Isserson called "the chief factor of the deep operation." This is because the corps's primary task is to break through the enemy's tactical defense, thus making it the cornerstone of the army's attack echelon, or EA. The corps, aside from its organic rifle divisions and their weapons, is to be reinforced for the operation by the addition of four to six tank battalions of up to 300 tanks to support the infantry attack. Other reinforcements include two howitzer regiments and one of gun artillery from the high command reserve, for a total of up to 300 guns, as well as an aviation assault brigade numbering some 90 planes. Isserson calculated that this increase in striking power would enable the corps to attack along a front 10 to 12 kilometers in breadth and to simultaneously suppress the enemy's tactical defense to a depth of 10 to 15 kilometers on the operation's first day.²⁹

He calculated that a breakthrough of the enemy's tactical defense can be achieved only if this takes place along a front of no less than 30 kilometers in width, as anything less would be vulnerable to enfilading fire from the defender's artillery. As even a reinforced rifle corps can break through a front of no more than 10 kilometers in breadth, this would demand three such corps attacking side by side, a combination which he called "the minimum" necessary to carry the attack through the enemy's tactical position. To increase the operation's chances of success, he proposed conducting the breakthrough operation along particularly important operational directions with four reinforced rifle corps, as well as a standard-sized one. The non-reinforced corps would support the main attack along a 20-kilometer front. However, as not all sectors of the front would be suitable for an attack, and could therefore be left untouched, the shock army's overall attack front might be safely increased to as much as 80 kilometers.³⁰

Two of the reinforced corps would be reinforced with six tank battalions, with four each supporting the other two, for a total of 20 battalions. Each reinforced rifle corps would be further strengthened with two howitzer regiments and one gun artillery regiment from the high command artillery reserve. In those cases where the shock army would be attacking heavily fortified defenses, Isserson recommended reinforcing it with at least one regiment of heavy artillery.³¹

It was even harder to calculate the force and composition of the breakthrough development echelon, or ERP, which is tasked with continuing the tactical breakthrough into the enemy's operational depth. What is certain, however, is that this echelon must consist

of a high proportion of large mobile units capable of operating independently in the enemy's rear. These forces would most likely include a cavalry corps, mechanized corps, a motorized division, and an airborne detachment.³²

The cavalry corps will consist of from two to four cavalry divisions. In certain cases, the corps might be reinforced with a mechanized brigade in order to increase its striking power. The corps is capable of attacking along a five to 12 kilometer front under conditions of maneuver, depending on its size. It could also advance as much as 60 kilometers per day and up to 150 kilometers in two or three days. In some cases it is not expedient for the cavalry to directly take part in the initial attack. Rather, it will be held in reserve and deployed for "resolving independent operational tasks." In this case the cavalry corps, aside from its offensive duties, can render valuable assistance to the mechanized corps by taking over sectors of the front and holding them against enemy counterattacks until the arrival of the attacker's motorized infantry formations.³³ In this one may detect the kernel of the Red Army's World War II-era "cavalry-mechanized groups," which were often employed in the enemy's operational depth following the tactical breakthrough of his position.

The conditions for the army's cavalry arm's effective functioning are the same as for the mechanized corps — ahead of the front under maneuver conditions until a positional situation arises, after which it is moved to the rear to await the disruption of the front and commitment into the breach. Under no circumstances should the army commander employ his cavalry purely for reconnaissance purposes, an activity that tends to disperse its efforts and reduce its striking power. Instead, it should be teamed with the mechanized corps in order to carry out an independent operational task following the breakthrough of the enemy's tactical defense.³⁴

Isserson's inclusion of the cavalry corps was part and parcel of the Red Army's extended love affair with the mounted arm. Much of the reason behind the cavalry's staying power, and indeed its remarkable growth between the wars, had to do with high-level support of such civil-war era cavalry veterans. Among the most prominent of these were the defense commissar, Voroshilov, and Budennyi, who furiously resisted any and all attempts to reduce the cavalry's role. On the other hand, it is also true that in 1933 the Red Army as yet lacked the mechanized and motorized units in the numbers necessary to bring to life such ambitious theories as the deep operation, and that the presence of large cavalry formations was a necessary, if imperfect, stopgap measure, and that by the eve of the Great Patriotic War the number of cavalry divisions in the army had decreased considerably. The cavalry arm nevertheless remained an important part of the Red Army's arsenal until the end of the war.

Isserson called the shock army's mechanized corps the "main core" of the breakthrough development echelon.³⁵ It included two tank and one rifle-machine gun brigades, numbering up to 300 tanks. The mechanized corps will attack along a 10 to 12 kilometer front under maneuver conditions and is capable of advancing as much as 100 kilometers per day in advance of the main body, either on the attack's flank, or in the enemy's operational rear. In theory the corps can cover as much as 300 kilometers in three days, although this will mean exploiting its capabilities to the maximum, after which technical exhaustion quickly sets in. However, the mechanized corps by itself is incapable of holding captured territory and needs to be supported by motorized infantry or cavalry.³⁶

Isserson called the mechanized corps "a powerful factor in the deep operation" due to its two chief characteristics — "shock power" (*udarnost'*) and "long-range capability" (*dal'noboinost'*), which had never before been united in a single weapon.³⁷ The combination of these two qualities means that the attacker now possesses not only the speed and

range to operate deep in the enemy rear, but the firepower to defeat his operational reserves as well. However, the army commander should not succumb to the temptation of trying to maintain the corps at full strength for the attack; if he holds it in the army's rear he deprives the shock army of its long-range striking power on the march. In fact, any time there is a significant space between two opposing forces, the mechanized corps should be in the front. This will enable it to pick off enemy units and isolate them from the main body. After all, a mechanized corps operating ahead of the main body is more likely to encounter enemy units still in march formation, making their destruction far easier than if they were already deployed for battle or in a fortified position.³⁸

Once a solid front has been established and the possibilities for maneuver greatly reduced, the mechanized corps' place shifts to the army's second echelon, where it must await the outcome of the combined-arms attack against the enemy's positional defense. Once the tactical defense has been pierced, it is committed into the breach to exploit the success, again ahead of the army's other units. At this point it will drive into the enemy's operational rear, disrupting his communications, destroying isolated units, and hindering the arrival of his reserves to the battlefield. Once enemy resistance begins to stiffen, however, and the shock army's combined-arms units draw even, then the mechanized corps' usefulness is ended and it must be withdrawn to the rear, where the process begins all over.³⁹

Another element is the motorized division, consisting of four rifle battalions, a battalion of light tanks, and a light artillery regiment. Isserson calculated that this unit is capable of attacking along a four-kilometer front and defending one of eight kilometers. He described the division as an "extremely valuable factor in the operation," capable of advancing up to 150 kilometers per day following its commitment into the tactical breach. It is also extremely flexible, capable of keeping up with and assisting the heavier mechanized corps in retaining ground.⁴⁰ Likewise, the motorized division's high degree of mobility makes it an important part of the breakthrough development echelon, performing many of the same tasks as the cavalry corps — exploiting the tactical breakthrough and securing ground gained by the mechanized corps. The division's "lightness" can quickly become a liability, however, once it "dismounts" and becomes anchored to a particular section of the front. In such a case, the division not only loses its chief mobility asset, but also may become the victim of a counterattack by heavier forces. In this case the motorized division should be relieved as quickly as possible by a rifle division, freeing it to resume its part in the maneuver operation.⁴¹

The airborne troops were the newest element in the shock army's makeup, the first unit having been formed only in 1930. As a result, an army's airborne detachment (ADO) as of yet consisted of only two motorized battalions, reinforced with T-27 light tanks and other mechanized equipment. Isserson intended that the airborne detachment be employed for landings in the enemy's operational rear, while its use during the tactical breakthrough phase is to be avoided. He further predicted a great future for this arm and described its possibilities as "colossal" and limited only by the capabilities of existing transport aircraft.⁴²

As the most maneuverable and versatile of the combat arms, the shock army's air component occupies a prominent place in the deep operation. This force will ideally consist of four assault aircraft brigades, or one per reinforced rifle corps. Isserson allowed that this was not always possible, and that in certain cases the army might have to make do with just two brigades. These forces will primarily attack the enemy's tactical front during the breakthrough, with no less than two light-bomber brigades for attacking targets in the enemy's operational depth. Heavier aircraft will mostly consist of light-bomber units, with heavy

bombers relegated to attacking strategic targets and therefore subordinated to the *front*. However, as such targets as railroad junctions, industrial and administrative centers may be located with the army's area of operation, the army might be reinforced with a heavy bomber brigade. Fighter aviation, tasked with protecting the ground forces against enemy air attack, consists of six squadrons.⁴³ Other elements include a fighter squadron, for covering the front against enemy spies to a depth of up to 12 kilometers.⁴⁴

Isserson hailed the air arm as "an independent factor in the deep operation," capable of carrying out these tasks whether the shock army is on the march to the battlefield, deployed for the meeting operation, or preparing for the breakthrough operation. Given the variety and differing capabilities of these units, he warned against scattering their efforts, and recommended organizing them into a single army air group (AGA), subordinated to the army commander.⁴⁵

All told, Isserson's shock army was a truly formidable instrument, consisting of as many as 15 rifle divisions, two cavalry divisions, three mechanized brigades, a motorized division, and an airborne unit, as well as attached air support, for an overall strength of some 350,000 men. This force also included 1,472 artillery pieces, 1,457 tanks, and 1,045 aircraft.⁴⁶ The shock army would be further augmented by as many as ten anti-aircraft batteries, communications and engineering units, as well as a chemical battalion to organize chemical barriers to an enemy advance to a depth of 30 kilometers.⁴⁷ An army of this size devours enormous resources, however, and Isserson calculated that it would take 36 trains per day just to keep it supplied, of which half would be devoted to transporting ammunition.⁴⁸

Still, even at this strength, the shock army was admittedly not everything Isserson could ask for. For example, the army's density of artillery pieces amounted to only 18.5 guns per kilometer along an 80-kilometer attack front, which he ruefully compared with 80 guns per kilometer common on the Western Front in 1918, although the latter was under conditions of positional warfare. This small number had more to do with the Red Army's technically backward state at the time, and he recognized the need to reinforce the tactical breakthrough with additional artillery assets. By the same token, the shock army could field 18.2 tanks per kilometer along the same front, which was only a slight improvement over the 1918 average of 14 tanks per kilometer. Nevertheless, he predicted that the overall frontage of the modern armored attack would continue to increase, due to the improved range and effectiveness of the new tank models then arriving.⁴⁹ The latter certainly proved to be one of his least accurate predictions.

The notion of the shock army was to undergo several permutations during the coming years, as many writers felt compelled to offer their own force mix as a basis for conducting an offensive operation. One of these was Isserson's academic colleague, Varfolomeev, whose *The Shock Army* also appeared in 1933. Varfolomeev's shock army, like Isserson's, was also called upon to break through the enemy front and be capable of exploiting the success to a great depth and carry out a series of consecutive operations. Varfolomeev, however, was much less specific as to the forces the army must dispose in order to carry out these multiple tasks.⁵⁰

The Meeting Operation

As was noted earlier, *The Fundamentals of the Deep Operation* deals primarily with the shock army's activities at the beginning of a war, when maneuver possibilities would pre-

sumably be at their greatest. However, the current situation differed dramatically from the conditions that prevailed at the start of the Great War in 1914. Then the process of mobilization, concentration and deployment from the interior of the belligerents' armies to the frontier had unfolded practically unhindered by enemy forces, and it was only after these preliminary moves were completed that the armies moved forward for the first border clashes. This was best exemplified by the three-week interval between the time when the forward German units crossed into Belgium and the first major clashes with the Allied armies occurred during the "Battle of the Frontiers." A similar situation prevailed in the East, where even in the light of the forced Russian mobilization, nearly three weeks passed from the declaration of war to the first major battles in East Prussia and Galicia. Thus the distinction between preliminary measures and the actual fighting remained constant.

Now the situation was radically different and the previous distinction between mobilization, concentration and deployment had become blurred, if it had not disappeared altogether. This was due to the appearance of the new means of combat — air and mechanized forces — whose mobility and deep striking power had decisively shifted the focus of the war's opening phase to the enemy's previously inviolate rear even before the belligerents' major forces came to grips with each other. Isserson observed that now "it is hardly possible to imagine an outbreak of an armed conflict in which the sides will from the beginning have the possibility of concentrating in full strength, unhindered on the border, without being drawn into combat collisions, and then entering into the fighting." He added that recent events in the Far East had demonstrated the truth of this proposition, by which he clearly meant the Japanese army's conquest of Manchuria in 1931 and 1932.⁵¹

Like Tukhachevskii, Isserson also saw the possibilities for strategic preemption presented by the arrival of such qualitatively new weapons as the tank and the long-range bomber, which have the capability of striking targets deep in the enemy's territory upon the outbreak of war. He maintained that these new weapons had effectively erased the boundary between the strategic mobilization of a nation's forces and the first operations, rendering the enemy's troops vulnerable to attack even as they board their trains for the front. These weapons now have the ability to disrupt the enemy's strategic concentration and force the latter to pull back his deployment measures into the interior of his country. From this he concluded that the beginning of a modern war, unlike the unfettered concentration process of 1914, will instead take the form of a "struggle for concentration" and a "struggle for the right to deploy" unmolested by the enemy. Moreover, he added, the outcome of this phase "determines to a significant degree" the further development of operations.⁵²

However, given the size of the armed forces which modern states can mobilize for war, the task of disrupting the enemy's concentration and deployment to any significant degree cannot be resolved through the activities of a single shock army, even if generously reinforced with modern weapons, and will most likely take place under the auspices of the *front*.⁵³ Besides, the very importance of the task automatically renders it an operation of strategic importance, capable of being resolved only at the *front* level. In actual terms this would probably have entailed the deployment of two *fronts*, one north and one south of the Pripiat Marshes against Poland. In the event of war with Romania, the Soviets could probably make do with a single *front* along the Dneestr River.

According to this scenario, the attacker will make his initial effort against the enemy's concentration measures by employing his air assets, which correspond to the first operational echelon as detailed earlier in *The Evolution of Operational Art*. These would be organ-

ized into a *front* aviation group, which is in effect the *front* air army as the term later became to be understood. As the most mobile service, these assets are not subordinated to the vanguard units, but remain under the direct control of the *front* commander, who can switch the focus of their operations from one sector of the front to another. The heart of *front* aviation will consist of up to two heavy bomber corps, featuring the Soviets' new TB-3 bomber. These aircraft were capable of hitting targets as far west as the middle Vistula in Poland, some 600 kilometers from the border. Other units include assault, light-bomber, and fighter aircraft, for an overall strength of between 1,000 and 1,500 aircraft.⁵⁴

The *front's* strategic aviation has as its primary task the disruption of the enemy's concentration efforts, and included bombing operations against his rail communications, troop concentrations, and supply depots. Another, deeper, task includes strikes against the enemy's industrial centers and factories, mines and the oil industry, and any other targets having economic significance for the enemy's war effort, in order "to paralyze the rear of his country." A third objective is "to terrorize the enemy's deep rear," which includes operations against his political and administrative centers and the employment of chemical and incendiary bombs. It was during this period that "the air war takes on its most extensive and cruel forms."⁵⁵

Nor do air strikes in the enemy's deep rear encompass the entire complex of measures designed to disrupt his strategic concentration. Just as important is the 200-kilometer zone from the frontier in which are housed a large number of the enemy's border troops, which are maintained at a high level of combat readiness. This may include a force of up to ten divisions along a front of 100 kilometers, and it is especially important that these forces be suppressed at the very outset of the war. This will be accomplished in the air by part of the *front's* lighter air units, aided by part of the heavy bomber force. On the ground they will be attacked by the *front's* most mobile elements — motor-mechanized units and cavalry.⁵⁶

However, in a future war with its western neighbors, the Red Army's hypothetical Western, Southwestern, or Southern fronts would be subject to the same mobilization constraints as their enemies, or even worse, given the country's size and underdeveloped transportation infrastructure. This means that the *fronts* would not reach full strength and be able to begin operations for at least two weeks. In this case, the task of disrupting the enemy's mobilization proceedings would be carried out by special high-readiness formations, consisting of air, mechanized, cavalry, and motorized units, and in some cases an airborne detachment. There might be as many as three or four of these groups subordinated to each *front* and deployed along a 300 to 400 kilometer front. Together with the air units, they formed the *front's* "vanguard echelon" (*avangardnyi eshelon*), or AVE, and were to the *front* what the *front* was to the succeeding strategic echelons arriving from the interior of the country.⁵⁷

Isserson calculated that under favorable circumstances the AVE is capable of advancing some 200 kilometers into the enemy's territory, which is the practical limit of its mechanized corps' range. The ground attack would probably develop according to two scenarios. The first arises when the retention of enemy territory is of no particular importance. In this case, the AVE's task resembles a large raid to destroy the enemy's forward ground units, airfields and railroad stations, before returning to the main body. In the second case the AVE's mechanized and cavalry units will drive deep into enemy territory, with the intention of moving forward the line, along which the follow-up echelons would deploy, onto enemy territory. Upon defeating his forward units, the AVE's mechanized units will occupy

the desired territory, before being relieved by the cavalry or a motorized division. In some cases, the cavalry might undertake independent operations to a depth of 100 to 120 kilometers for the purpose of attacking the enemy's airfields or disembarkation stations.⁵⁸

However, the AVE cannot be expected to retain captured territory for long with its own resources, which are too weak to hold out indefinitely against the enemy's main forces. While the AVE, which is held in a semi-permanent state of readiness along the border, may be ready to begin operations as early as the third or fourth day of the war, the *front's* main forces (the rifle corps) will not be able to advance for some 15 to 16 days, thus creating a shortfall in time of nearly two weeks during which the AVE's ground units will be operating very much alone and subject to defeat in detail by superior forces moving up from the interior of the enemy's territory. In such a case the *front* might be obliged to hurry forward one of its rifle corps to reduce the distance between the two bodies, or it might reduce the interval by moving its deployment forward even onto enemy territory. What is absolutely vital is that the AVE's strength not be impaired by an extended foray into enemy territory, so that it may return intact to the main forces in order to take up its rightful part in the *front's* first operation.⁵⁹

In retrospect, there was much that made sense in Isserson's approach to problem of strategic mobilization and concentration raised by the appearance of new long-range weapons. And while his ideas on the beginning period of war are overly schematic at times, they had particular relevance for a major continental power like the Soviet Union. This was even more the case for such territorially compact states such as France and Germany, which, unlike the USSR, could not carry out such measures deep in their own territory without dire consequences. The theory naturally had much less relevance for such maritime powers as the United States and Great Britain, whose relative isolation afforded them the luxury of a less hurried mobilization. However, as time would soon show, this theoretical work ultimately came to naught, and for reasons having very little to do with the military technology of the time.

Even as the AVE begins to engage the enemy in the air and on the ground during the war's first days, the state's main forces are still deep in the rear in the throes of what Isserson called the "complex mechanism" of the armed forces' concentration and deployment. The first stage, as the name implies, covers the transport and arrival of the ground forces' main body at their designated assembly points. The deployment phase begins when the now-concentrated forces begin to organize themselves for the move forward into enemy territory, according to both the larger strategic plan for the war's first operation, as well as the result of the AVE's actions at the front. It is also the point where the main body of the shock army assumes the march formation (the order of the various combat arms along the line of march) that will enable it to launch a blow in depth against the approaching enemy. It is also the point when the heretofore-independent actions of the AVE begin to "grow into the initial offensive operation of a shock army or a group of armies."⁶⁰

Much, of course, depends upon the enemy's actions, the chief of these being whether he adopts a defensive or offensive posture in anticipation of the coming collision. Isserson stated that in the first case it would be relatively easy to organize the army's march formation for a breakthrough of the enemy's solid defensive front, in which the general outline of his position is already known. Much more difficult to plan for is a scenario in which both sides pursue offensive goals during the opening operation. With both sides in motion the number of unknowns increases markedly, making it extremely difficult to plan for the meeting engagement. Nevertheless, Isserson believed that it was a problem that had to be

addressed, as meeting engagements will be a “quite common phenomenon” along the most important axes during the beginning of a future war, as it had been in the recent past.⁶¹

The modern shock army in motion toward the battlefield bears no resemblance to the advance of an army according to the dictates of the linear strategy, by which Isserson clearly had in mind the movement of the right-flank German armies across Belgium and France in 1914. In that case the Germans advanced along a nearly continuous front, having little or no depth in their march formation. His shock army, on the other hand, would not only advance along a broad front, but would be echeloned in depth as well. This process begins early on with the relief of the AVE by the shock army’s motorized infantry and advanced rifle units, which will arrive in the area even before the completion of the army’s deployment. In this case, the AVE, which had previously been operating along the shock army’s projected axis of advance, is folded back into the advancing shock army in order to take part in its first operation. Since it is expedient to maintain the mobile units in the forefront of the advance, the former *front* AVE will take up its new place at the head of the shock army’s column as the army AVE, charged with the piecemeal defeat of the enemy’s forward units as they approach the battlefield. Behind it are the bulk of the shock army’s forces, which comprise the second or main echelon. Even further back are the late-arriving infantry units and reinforcements from the high command reserve, which may not even have coalesced into a definite march formation. These form the army’s reserve echelon.⁶²

Given the shock army’s deep march formation, it is obvious that its various echelons will enter the meeting engagement at different times, beginning with the vanguard echelon and moving back. For example, the shock army along its line of deployment will start out some 100 kilometers from the enemy’s main force. Given an expected rate of advance by both sides of 30 kilometers per day, this means that the main echelon’s lead columns can expect to enter the meeting engagement sometime on the second day. In a case where one of the echelon’s reinforced rifle divisions is advancing along a single road to a depth of 50 kilometers, the division’s lead units will be entering the fighting on the second day of the army’s movement, even as its rear elements are still at their initial deployment position. This cramped situation effectively excludes any significant regrouping of the main echelon’s forces while on the march, a restriction not as keenly felt by the vanguard and reserve echelons at either extreme of the column, where there is relatively greater room for maneuver. For this reason, Isserson recommended that the main echelon’s march formation anticipate the order in which it will enter the meeting engagement, according to the overall operational plan. This would enable the echelon to best group its forces toward achieving a tactical breakthrough of the enemy front, followed by an operational exploitation in depth.⁶³

To insure that the attack possessed the necessary “punching ability,” Isserson recommended that the main echelon’s “shock group” (*udarnaia grupp*a) of reinforced rifle corps attack along a front of 10 to 12 kilometers each. Such a narrow concentration of forces, while necessary to the success of the attack, inevitably creates problems for the main echelon’s movement to the battlefield. In the Soviet Union’s western theater of military activities an army on the move could not count on having more than one usable road every five kilometers, which means that a three-division rifle corps will be forced to advance with two divisions in its first echelon and one in a second. Under these circumstances, a rifle corps and its supporting units will extend back along these roads to a depth of up to 75 kilometers, meaning that at the previously quoted rate of advance of 30 kilometers per day it can be fully committed into the fighting only on the third day.⁶⁴

This extended line of march raises the prospect of the corps being committed piece-

meal into the engagement, which in turn threatens to reduce the effectiveness of its attack. This was a matter great concern to Isserson, who offered a number of solutions to render the advance more compact and efficient. The most obvious of these was to disperse the advance along lesser avenues and even open fields, with wheeled vehicles and heavy equipment confined to the main road, while the infantry and tanks would have to make do over the terrain at hand. Given that a division requires four to five hours to deploy for battle, this savings in distance means that the two divisions in the rifle corps's first echelon could be fully committed into the meeting engagement during the first half of the second day's advance. The distance between the two corps' echelons will also shrink accordingly, which speeds up the arrival of the second-echelon division on the battlefield. If the first-echelon divisions will normally march by day and rest at night, the second-echelon division's position to the rear means that it can only move out on the evening of the first day, marching all night and pausing for rest only at dawn. The division will then resume its march during the latter half of the second day, when the first-echelon divisions have already entered the engagement. The latter is thus able to reach the battlefield that evening and can be committed into the fighting on the morning of the following day. By this time the first echelon's attack may have achieved some success, in which case the second echelon will have to move even further in order to catch up and lend its weight to the battle.⁶⁵

Isserson believed that in most cases the army's vanguard and main echelons would be able to decide the outcome of the meeting engagement on their own and would not require any assistance from the reserve echelon. In fact, it is likely that the reserve echelon will only be used to enable the preceding echelons to break through the enemy's positional front, involving another kind of formation entirely. However, in those cases where the meeting engagement becomes a protracted struggle, the reserve echelon will be committed. This would be no easy matter, given the distances to be overcome, and the reserve echelon is not likely to reach the battlefield until noon on the third day of fighting. During this time the echelon will continue to fulfill its stated function, particularly in protecting the shock army's rear against sudden breakthroughs by the enemy's motor-mechanized troops and cavalry. In some cases the main echelon might have advanced 10 to 15 kilometers since the start of the fighting, thus increasing the distance the third echelon would have to cover. In this case the latter would be able to enter the fighting only on the morning of the fourth day. In practice, however, this will mean that the reserve echelon will only arrive in time to take part in the subsequent breakthrough operation.⁶⁶

Isserson saw the essence of the meeting engagement as the struggle to maintain the shock army's freedom of maneuver in the face of the modern battlefield's tendency to assume positional forms, as it had so stubbornly done from 1914 to 1918. During the meeting engagement, he wrote, "all operational aspirations must be directed so that the enemy's approaching front is destroyed to such a degree that it cannot become established and turn into that solid armed frontalism, which demands a breakthrough." Achieving this, he concluded, constitutes "the main goal of the deep operation's forms in the meeting engagement."⁶⁷

This goal is most likely to be achieved by directing the shock army's main offensive efforts against the approaching enemy's forward units, which is quite different from the formation adopted for the breakthrough operation, where the focus is more on objectives in the enemy's rear. Such an approach inevitably brings to the fore the role of the shock army's vanguard echelon. This echelon, however, differs markedly from the army vanguard of Napoleon's time, which served as a screen for the army's advance. The modern vanguard is much more offensive in character and, for that reason should be concentrated along a sin-

gle direction stead of being spread out across the front of the shock army's advance. Here, in tandem with the shock army's main echelon and its AGA, it is to defeat the leading elements of the enemy force as they arrive on the battlefield.⁶⁸

Isserson cautioned against laying down any hard and fast rules for the AVE's employment in the meeting engagement, writing that each situation is unique and that much depended on the reigning circumstances. As a general rule, however, he insisted that the vanguard echelon should "always operate along the axis of the main echelon's main blow," so as to open an avenue for the latter's advance. Should the enemy succeed in deploying his forces first, it would be best to direct the AVE against the enemy's main forces in order to delay his offensive against the shock army's main echelon. This is a "worst case" scenario, however, and represents the least expedient use of the AVE's offensive potential.⁶⁹ A more favorable situation arises when the shock army's deployment preempts the enemy's. In this case, the AVE should be committed against a "secondary group" of the enemy force, where it will enjoy superiority in armored strength. This will make it easier to destroy the secondary force, thus weakening the enemy's overall front of advance and enable the main echelon's shock group to develop the success against the enemy's flank and prevent him from establishing a continuous front.⁷⁰

The AVE's actions must not only be closely coordinated with the army's other units in terms of space; they must be coordinated in time as well, in order to draw the greatest operational benefit from its technical peculiarities. Thus it is unrealistic to expect the AVE to take part in the meeting engagement from beginning to end, as its mechanized corps is capable of sustained operations for no more than three days, which he calculated would be equivalent to an advance of 150 to 200 kilometers. This means, first of all, that the mechanized corps is severely limited in the time and distance it can operate ahead of the main echelon. Secondly, upon the expiration of this three-day period the mechanized corps must be withdrawn to the rear for refitting, to be replaced by other units more capable of holding the ground gained. This requires a high degree of coordination between the mechanized corps's activities and those of the follow-up cavalry corps or motorized division within the vanguard echelon, lest the fruits of its labors be lost in the transition from one formation to another.⁷¹

Even more important is the degree of cooperation between the vanguard and main echelons, which Isserson wrote, "to a significant degree determines the character of the deep operation." To cite just one example, the AVE cannot afford to operate too far ahead of the main echelon's rifle corps, meaning that in most cases the distance between them during the meeting engagement should not exceed a three-day march, or around 100 kilometers. Isserson added that under particularly favorable conditions the AVE might advance as deeply as 200 kilometers in three days. However, a penetration to this depth, unsupported by other units, runs the risk of dissipating the mechanized corps' strength in the enemy rear. He therefore recommended 100 to 150 kilometers as the maximum distance at which the mechanized corps can operate ahead of, but still be supported by, the main echelon, if not otherwise supported by a cavalry corps or a motorized division.⁷²

Likewise, the shock army commander must take care to husband the AVE's resources so that at the beginning of the meeting engagement it can still carry out its mission of clearing a path for the main echelon. In a worst-case scenario, the AVE might squander its strength in the initial encounter, leaving it too weak to perform when the main echelon finally enters the fighting.⁷³ This would doom the latter to a grinding effort to complete the meeting engagement with its own resources, which would probably end in an expen-

sive failure. Alternatively, the commander might choose to break off the meeting engagement before it has really begun, in order to reconstitute his vanguard echelon. The loss of time, however, would probably enable the enemy to establish a continuous front, which would mean reorganizing the shock army's formation for a breakthrough operation.

Isserson hesitated to establish strict guidelines for the unfolding of the meeting engagement, although he had some firm notions regarding the coordination of the AVE and the main echelon. For example, the mechanized corps is capable of advancing as much as 100 kilometers on the first day, if no opposition is met. In many cases, the mechanized corps will begin its advance at just such a remove from the rest of the army along the line of deployment. Should this be the case, the mechanized corps should first be relieved by the cavalry corps or motorized division, before beginning its own advance, lest the distance between the vanguard and major echelons become too great. Should the enemy choose to move out at the same time the collision will occur before the mechanized corps can advance as far as was planned. In this case, the mechanized corps will attack the approaching enemy force, which he optimistically calculated as consisting of no less than two rifle divisions. The mechanized corps would use its superiority in tanks to defeat the enemy's vanguard, which he called an event of "enormous operational significance," as it would not only weaken the enemy army, but expose the latter's flank along its line of advance. Meanwhile, the cavalry corps will move forward 60 kilometers from its line of deployment, while the main echelon's lead divisions will advance 30 kilometers.⁷⁴

The mechanized corps will continue its attack on the following day and attempt to finish off the enemy's vanguard, as well as his deeper units now arriving on the battlefield. It will be assisted by the cavalry corps, which has arrived and is thrown into the attack. Further support comes from the AGA, which directs its efforts against the force directly opposing the mechanized corps. Its targets include not only the enemy ground units, but his supply lines and depots as well. In this fashion the enemy forces will be "pinned to the ground, paralyzed," and rendered incapable of resisting the attacker's turning movement.⁷⁵

The arrival of the third day brings what Isserson called "the most serious moment" in the activities of the AVE and the main echelon. Whereas the latter's forward elements will have reached the battlefield sometime on the previous day, by the third day the main body will have arrived and be fully engaged. Its objective will generally be the weakest part of the enemy position, which arises as the result of the AVE's advance in one direction and the enemy's in another. By striking at this point, the main echelon, in conjunction with the AVE, will be able to develop the latter's success into an operationally significant turning movement against the enemy's extended position.⁷⁶

However, it is precisely the third day that marks the limit of the mechanized corps's battlefield utility, which raises a number of problems for the shock army's commander. As a rule, if he keeps the mechanized corps in the fighting on the third day, it will not be able to assist the main echelon on the fourth day, just as the fighting along the latter's front is reaching its climax. This will deprive the main echelon of its most effective strike component at a crucial time, which means that the meeting engagement cannot be brought to a decisive conclusion.⁷⁷

However, should the AVE attain "significant" success and the prospects for a further advance into the enemy rear are favorable, it should remain in the fighting on the third day against the flank and rear of the enemy front under attack by the main echelon. Once a decision has been achieved by the end of the day, the mechanized corps can be replaced by the cavalry corps and motorized division and withdrawn into the rear.⁷⁸

On the other hand, it is also possible that by the end of the second day's fighting the AVE will not have achieved anything promising and that the enemy will have succeeded in establishing a rudimentary anti-tank positional front. In this case, the mechanized corps will be withdrawn for refitting and its place taken by the cavalry corps and motorized division, or even by the main echelon's newly arrived units. This means that on the fourth day, just as the main echelon's attack is reaching its culmination point, the refurbished mechanized corps can be committed from the depth and bring the meeting engagement to a successful conclusion. Whatever the case, Isserson concluded; the object is to have the mechanized corps ready for the engagement's decisive moment.⁷⁹

He also cautioned that even the best-laid offensive plans may come a cropper, given the greatly expanded opportunities offered by modern defensive arrangements. Under these conditions the meeting engagement may easily degenerate into a "frontal melee" along a single line because the AVE is unable to achieve a decision along the axis of its attack. In such a case, the mechanized corps, cavalry corps and motorized division will then attempt to hold the front against the approaching enemy forces, after which the AVE is withdrawn to the rear toward the flank of the main echelon's advance units. Isserson called such a development the "moment of crisis," in that the deep operation's chief instrument is removed from the equation, thus rendering the operation's success highly problematical. At this point the AVE loses its previous significance as the army's vanguard echelon. In any event, the main echelon's rifle corps can now more easily accomplish the tactical breakthrough of the enemy's fast-forming front.⁸⁰

The decision to withdraw, even temporarily, the army's most effective long-range strike arm has serious consequences for the engagement's development and is, in effect, "the first step in the establishment of frontalism." Such a development need not be fatal to the attacker's chances, however, as this "soft" form of positional warfare still differs considerably from the more established variety. At this stage the front has not yet "hardened" into a solid mass, bristling with guns and artificial obstacles, and significant gaps in the line can still be found and exploited. Under these circumstances, the main echelon's rifle corps can still achieve a breakthrough of the enemy front, using their own resources, and once again create the conditions for a blow in depth.⁸¹

At this point the former vanguard echelon makes its reappearance as the "success development echelon" (*echelon razvitiia uspekha*), or ERU, charged with exploiting the rifle corps's tactical breakthrough. This formation constituted, in embryonic form, the army's breakthrough development echelon as employed in the classical breakthrough operation of the enemy's positional front. However, given the more fluid situation at this stage of the meeting engagement, the ERU's activities will inevitably unfold in easier and more maneuverable circumstances.⁸²

As has been shown, it takes two days for the main echelon to fully deploy and advance to the battlefield, meaning that only on the third day can it be fully engaged in the attack against the enemy's tactical depth. For this reason, the advance into the enemy's position would likely not be very impressive during the first two days, measuring only 20 kilometers. This pace will pick up considerably starting on the third day and continuing into the fourth, measuring 30 to 40 kilometers, for a total penetration for the four-day period of 50 to 60 kilometers. This will be more than sufficient to enable the commander to commit the ERU into the breach, after which it will drive forward some 60 to 100 kilometers, a distance encompassing the enemy's operational reserves and supply bases. In certain cases, this depth might be increased to 150 kilometers, although too deep an advance will disrupt

the ERU's cooperation with the army's slower-moving units and lead to a dissipation of force in depth. The AGA will also play an active role in this stage of the engagement, combining activities in support of the main echelon's shock corps with deeper strikes in the enemy rear.⁸³

This is not to say that the conclusion of the meeting engagement would be an easy matter. Isserson saw the meeting engagement unfolding as an offensive by *both* sides, and a situation might easily arise in which one side will be successfully attacking along one axis, while defending or being pushed back along another. In such a highly fluid situation unexpected breakthroughs and raids in the shock army's rear are a constant menace. This makes the presence of a powerful reserve echelon essential for fending off enemy penetrations into the army's rear, and the lack of such an echelon might have "severe consequences" in the event of an enemy breakthrough and might even result in a "catastrophe."⁸⁴ Here, he was evidently thinking of 1920 and the debacle that befell the Western Front when the Poles launched a counteroffensive into the nearly empty Soviet rear and proceeded to roll up their entire line.

Isserson's lengthy comments on the preparation and conduct of the meeting engagement were, as always, intriguing. It may be said that no one in the Red Army so understood its dynamics as he did, or was so skillful in describing it. For all of his undoubted brilliance, however, Isserson's detailed recommendations for conducting the meeting engagement were too schematic, and in many places seem more the product of faculty discussions than a hardheaded appreciation of the actual battlefield conditions that might actually arise. It often seems that he is describing events as he would like them to unfold, and not as they would actually be in all their complexity and unpredictability. Certainly the most egregious example of this tendency was his rigid schedule for conducting the meeting engagement, which was built primarily around the anticipated three-day operating life of the shock army's mechanized corps. This fixation meant that the cavalry, motorized division and main echelon of rifle corps all had to deploy and move up to the front like clockwork to support the mechanized corps at precisely the right time, lest the entire effort collapse due to a missing piece. This approach left no room for the various frictions of war that might upset his timetable. To expect any army to perform so flawlessly was simply unrealistic.

Moreover, it was as a prophet of the meeting engagement that Isserson failed the most, and the experience of the Second World War would show that much of what he had written had been for naught. In fact, that conflict contains not a single example of a large-scale meeting engagement at the beginning of a war along the lines envisioned by the author. For example, the German campaigns against Poland in 1939 and in the Balkans and the Soviet Union in 1941, all involved surprise attacks against opponents with forces that were already fully deployed. In all three cases the Germans caught their opponents in the process of mobilizing their armed forces, if not worse. The only possible exception was the German attack in the West in 1940, which was actually launched some eight months after the beginning of hostilities, when both sides had fully mobilized for war and their respective armies had actually been in place along the frontier for some time. The only opportunity for a significant meeting engagement came during the first few days, as the Allied armies on the left flank moved into Belgium and the Netherlands to oppose the invasion of those countries. The engagement was a short-lived one; as the German breakthrough in the Ardennes eventually caused the Allies to pull back their forces in the north to the English Channel, thus breaking off the engagement before a decision could be reached.

The Breakthrough Operation

Nor is it true that meeting engagements would develop uniformly or all along the front at the beginning of a war. Isserson argued that in some cases the enemy would elect to adopt a defensive posture along secondary directions, in order to free up resources for the more important sectors. And even though smaller forces would hold these areas, it does not follow that the latter will be confined to a passive defense, and he predicted that the vigorous type of defense employed by the German army in East Prussia in 1914 would predominate.⁸⁵ Elsewhere, the conduct of the meeting operation along the most important directions might well be complicated by the presence of permanent defensive positions behind the enemy frontier. These positions could quickly be occupied in wartime by troops from the second strategic echelon even as their counterparts in the first echelon are still conducting the meeting engagement along the frontier. Should the latter be defeated in the opening operation, they will most likely elect to fall back upon these prepared positions and assume the defensive in expectation of a follow-up pursuit by the victor.⁸⁶

These and other factors all contribute to the tendency of the front to “stiffen” along positional lines. The first indications that a positional front is forming may manifest themselves even as the meeting engagement is still being fought. Isserson identified such signs as the main echelon’s protracted fighting along the same line and the vanguard echelon’s loss of room for maneuver, followed by the ERU’s failure to break through the enemy front.⁸⁷ Nor in the heat of battle will it always be obvious that the slide into “frontalism” is occurring. And while the line between the two is not always distinct, he emphasized that the shock army commander must be able to foresee the emerging new situation and reorganize his army in anticipation of conducting the forthcoming breakthrough operation. In fact, the entire initial offensive operation should be so constructed as to allow for the fewest halts in the army’s transition from one form of operational endeavor to another. However, even under the most ideal conditions some time is inevitably lost, and the shock army’s regrouping for the operation would still take up to two days.⁸⁸

This pause for regrouping should by no means involve a cessation of the fighting, nor should the enemy be allowed to use it as a respite to strengthen his defenses against the impending attack. Instead, the attacker will continue to bring pressure on the enemy with air strikes throughout the entire depth of his position; designed to seriously weaken the defender before the ground forces even resume their attack. This “aviation preparation” will take several forms, including the struggle for local air superiority, which he achieves primarily through strikes against enemy airfields deep in his rear. Other targets include the enemy’s troops and equipment in the forward defensive zone, which might involve the use of chemical agents. Further to the rear, assault aircraft will attack the enemy’s deep operational reserves, while bomber aviation pounds his supply depots. As important as the aviation preparation is, however, the AGA’s support of the ground assault remains its prime responsibility and Isserson recommended that no more than a third of the army’s air assets be employed during this phase, so as to husband the remainder for immediate ground support of the breakthrough.⁸⁹

As the shock army nears the enemy front its march order takes on a new form in anticipation of carrying out the breakthrough. As opposed to the meeting engagement, the army’s lead elements in this case are its reinforced rifle corps, which together constitute the previously mentioned “attack echelon.” This echelon is tasked with piercing the enemy’s tactical defensive zone, which is absolutely critical to the operation’s subsequent development,

for if this initial tactical objective is not achieved there can be no question of a subsequent exploitation in depth. The latter is the task of the breakthrough development echelon. In the breakthrough operation the ERP will be located behind the attack echelon until the latter's achievement of the tactical breakthrough. Once this occurs, it will move forward and, passing through the EA, will drive into the breach to exploit the penetration in the enemy's operational depth.⁹⁰

Yegorov had proposed something quite similar the previous year. According to this proposal, the attacker's first echelon consists of the army's several rifle corps. The corps designated for the main attack along a fairly narrow front, will be reinforced, to a greater or lesser degree, with tanks and artillery, depending upon the terrain to be crossed and the nature and strength of the enemy's defense. Other corps mounting supporting attacks will strike along broader fronts with little or no reinforcement. Behind the infantry are arrayed the motorized and mechanized units, and cavalry. These formations constitute the shock army's mobile group, to be committed into the battle once the rifle corps has pierced the enemy's tactical defense. The shock army's air component is stationed further in the rear, with "light combat" aviation occupying airfields 40 to 60 kilometers behind the front lines, and heavy bomber aviation based 80 to 200 kilometers in the rear.⁹¹

The shock army's formation reflected Isserson's oft-repeated belief that only a deeply echeloned attack grouping could overcome the enemy's equally deep defensive arrangements. The latter will likely consist of three distinct defensive zones. The first of these is the immediate tactical defensive zone, extending back from the front line to a depth of 15 to 20 kilometers. This zone consists of an initial defensive position to a depth of 5 to 6 kilometers, which contains the bulk of the defender's men and materiel for repelling an attack. A second belt is located at a depth of 12 to 15 kilometers behind the front line. A division occupying a 10 to 12 kilometer front would hold the tactical defensive zone.⁹²

A second, or operational, zone follows the tactical zone. Its contours are determined by the location of the defender's railheads, some 50 to 60 kilometers behind the front line, from which his supplies must be moved forward by truck. This area also contains the defender's operational reserves, and as such has "enormous significance for the operational stability of the entire defensive front and its materiel supply." This zone also contains a number of communications and engineering units, as well as rear-area troops carrying out supply duties. The defender's army aviation is also based within this zone, as well as some elements of the army's command and control system.⁹³

Behind this zone lies a third, or rear, zone, which embraces the area between the railheads and the major distribution centers in the deep rear, where extensive supplies are held. This area might reach back as far as 100 to 120 kilometers from the front line. It is also the connecting link between the front and the country's deep strategic rear, in which the means of war are manufactured. It also contains the *front*, or strategic, reserves, which can be moved to a critical sector by rail to meet an emergency. It might also serve as a staging area for a new force gathered together to resist a breakthrough at the front, and thus must be included within the sphere of the attacker's army operation. The zone will also contain the airfields for the defender's heavy bombers, as well as his army, and possibly *front*, headquarters.⁹⁴

In all, the enemy's operational defense can be said to extend back some 100 to 120 kilometers from the front. Isserson hastened to add, however, that this by no means marks the limit of the enemy's ability to resist an attack, as his strategic defensive position encompasses the entire depth of the given theater of military activities.⁹⁵ Any effort to penetrate

this deeply would inevitably require a larger *front* effort, which in turn would consist of several consecutive operations conducted throughout the entire depth of the theater.

Isserson calculated that armies on the defensive will, on the average, occupy an 80-kilometer front with five to seven divisions in the front line or immediate tactical defense zone, while another two or three infantry divisions and cavalry units will remain in reserve in the army's operational zone. These reserves will most likely begin their movement toward the front during the latter part of the breakthrough's first day, once its dimensions have become apparent. He believed that the ERP's mechanized corps is capable of successfully attacking two of these divisions, while its cavalry corps can take on at least one, which gave him confidence that the breakthrough development echelon should have no particular problem in defeating the enemy's operational reserves. Given that reinforcements arriving from the enemy's deep rear will begin concentrating in his rear defensive zone only on the second or third day of the breakthrough, this window of opportunity seemed more than sufficient to complete the task. In reality, the ERP would be capable of defeating even larger enemy forces in the operational rear, provided they are sufficiently dispersed and incapable of supporting each other quickly. In this case, the ERP's maneuverability will enable it to defeat these scattered units in detail before they can unite.⁹⁶

The layered nature of the enemy defense presents the attacker with a number of challenges in planning an operation in depth. For example, the ERP's mechanized corps might be committed into the breach and quickly penetrate as far as the enemy's railway distribution stations to a depth of 100 kilometers. Such a penetration, however dramatic, will profit the attacker little, even if he succeeds in capturing or destroying these stations. While such an action will certainly delay the arrival of enemy reserves from the deep rear, it will leave untouched enemy strongholds in the tactical zone, as well as his army reserves in the operational zone. Nor will the capture of the distribution centers have any appreciable effect on these forces, as many of the units in the tactical defense zone will already have plenty of supplies on hand, while the roads within the operational zone will still be available to the defender to bring up supplies by truck from materiel accumulated at the railheads. It also leaves the defender's army reserves basically untouched and in a position to mount a counterattack to close off the original penetration, as had so often had been the case during the Great War's trench deadlock. Isserson compared this one-sided development of the operation to an awl, which after piercing as far as the rear defensive zone "drowns in the operational depth without exerting any significant influence on the defense's stability."⁹⁷

In response, he sought to exploit the staggered arrival of the enemy's reserves in order to attack these and other targets in the enemy rear "in that sequence in which they acquire the operational significance of a factor capable of counteracting the breakthrough."⁹⁸ This means that the ERP will have to be restrained during the period immediately following its commitment into the tactical breakthrough and not allowed initially to operate to its full potential. Rather, its chief objective during this is the enemy forces in the operational zone, which he considered the key to the entire enemy defense. The forces and installations in this area must be destroyed or suppressed through a coordinated air and ground assault, so as to so disrupt the enemy's ability to maintain resistance in the tactical defense zone. This meant initially pushing the penetration to a depth of 50 to 60 kilometers, or to the area of the enemy's supply stations. Only after this area is cleared should the ERP be released for a further exploitation into the enemy's rear defensive position to a depth of approximately 100 to 120 kilometers. This will enable the ERP to engage the next "sequence" of enemy

reserve units, now arriving from his deep rear, without interference from bypassed enemy forces in the tactical zone.⁹⁹

The exception to this rule was Isserson's insistence that a portion of the shock army's AGA (not less than a heavy-bomber brigade) be employed from the very outset of the breakthrough operation throughout the *entire* operational depth of the enemy position, up to and including his rail distribution centers in the rear zone. This is for the purpose of isolating the battlefield from the interior of the enemy's territory by "blocking any access to the enemy's deep reserves into the rear zone and preventing their concentration by rail or automobile transport." At the same time, the front's strategic aviation will seek out targets in the defender's deep rear, in order to disrupt the formation of other reserves and their dispatch to the threatened area.¹⁰⁰

Isserson demanded the highest degree of coordination between the attack and breakthrough development echelons. This was particularly true in determining the exact moment when the ERP is to be committed into the breach, which he defined as the point at which the deep battle becomes the deep operation. To commit the ERP too early, for example, means drawing it into the EA's fight for the tactical defense zone, which risks leaving it too weak for its primary task. And although he foresaw a time when an especially powerful breakthrough development echelon might profitably carry out the tactical breakthrough together with the EA, he was forced to admit that the tanks of the day lacked the necessary maneuver and firepower qualities to accomplish the task.¹⁰¹ Nor should the attacker wait for "a completely empty space" to develop in the enemy's position before committing the ERP, for to await the "perfect" breakthrough is to risk committing the ERP too late, as this will enable the defender to move up his reserves to seal the breach, thus nipping the operation in the bud. In fact, a clean breakthrough of the enemy's first defensive position is more likely to arise as the result of its defenders' successful withdrawal to the secondary position ahead of the mechanized corps.¹⁰²

"As a rule," the ERP should be committed immediately upon the breakthrough of the tactical zone's first defensive position to a depth of 5 to 6 kilometers. Moreover, it would be wrong to delay the ERP's commitment until the entire tactical zone is overcome to a depth of 15 to 20 kilometers, because the secondary defensive position is generally not occupied by the defender on a permanent basis, but is constructed as a fallback line for those forces occupying the first position. In this case, it is the task of the ERP to forge ahead and seize this second position before the enemy forces falling back from the first position can occupy it and use it as a basis for restoring their defensive front.¹⁰³

Neither should the shock army commander lose precious time in waiting for the width of the breakthrough to expand sufficiently to prevent the ERP from being enfiladed by the enemy's artillery fire along the shoulders of the penetration. It is unrealistic to hope for a breakthrough along a sufficiently broad (10 kilometers) front to allow for the simultaneous passage of the entire ERP (a mechanized corps and a cavalry corps). In fact, a breakthrough in width of such dimensions this early on is more likely an indication that the enemy forces along the first defensive position have successfully disengaged and fallen back to the second position — a clear sign that the operation is in trouble. More likely is a situation in which a number of tactical breakthroughs might be achieved at intervals along the front, each no more than 3 to 5 kilometers in breadth. These will be sufficient to allow the passage of a tank brigade or a cavalry division, the latter spearheaded by its mechanized regiment. Such a development should not be seen as fatal to the operation's prospects, as the commitment of these lead units "must inevitably lead to the immediate broadening

of the breach along the front,” which will allow for the passage of the remainder of the ERP.¹⁰⁴

In certain situations the enemy will seek to thwart a tactical breakthrough by locating his second defensive position along ground less favorable to the attacker's tanks, such as river barriers and swampy or forested terrain. Should the defender manage to occupy this position, it could create “insuperable obstacles” for the passage of the ERP. To commit the ERP in the face of such resistance would be a mistake, as it would expose the breakthrough development echelon to a debilitating struggle for the tactical zone, which will leave it too weak to carry out its mission of exploiting the breakthrough in the enemy's operational rear. In this case, the EA will have to perform the double duty of continuing the deep battle all the way through this second position and the tactical zone to a depth of 15 to 20 kilometers. Only then can the ERP be released into the breach.¹⁰⁵

Such a development is not inevitable, and it is particularly unlikely in the period immediately following the meeting engagement, when a good deal of maneuver will still obtain. Under these conditions the defender will not have the time to organize his tactical zone to meet the renewed offensive, in which case the ERP may be committed following the breakthrough of the first position. Isserson calculated that this might occur in as little as four to five hours after the start of the tactical assault against the enemy's forward position. Such an early start means that the ERP might penetrate by the end of the first day through the entire operational zone to a depth of 50 to 60 kilometers. Under favorable conditions, this will be followed up on the second day by a further advance to a depth of 100 to 120 kilometers, which will bring the ERP to the outer edge of the defender's rear zone.¹⁰⁶

Isserson recommended that for the breakthrough operation the EA be divided into separate shock and “holding” groups attacking in a single echelon. In most cases, this will include not only those rifle divisions from the former main echelon, but those from the shock army's reserve as well, as there will be no reason to maintain a reserve against the prospect of an enemy attack. In cases involving an attack through difficult terrain or against the enemy's previously occupied second defensive position, several divisions up to a corps in strength may constitute a second echelon for carrying the battle through the enemy's second position as well. At a remove of some 12 to 15 kilometers from the front lies the ERP, along the axis of the projected breakthrough zone.¹⁰⁷

As mentioned earlier, the EA's shock group will consist of 3 to 4 reinforced rifle corps attacking along a 30 to 40 kilometer front, although under favorable circumstances four such corps may attack along a front of up to 45 to 50 kilometers in breadth. The EA's holding group will consist of a single non-reinforced corps, which will attempt to draw off the defender's strength from the main blow by attacking along a 15 to 20 kilometer front.¹⁰⁸ These figures were by no means mandatory, however, and much depends upon the situation. For example, under circumstances of difficult terrain, which precludes an attack along certain sectors, the army's breakthrough front might be increased to as much as 80 kilometers. Such a breadth of attack will facilitate the launching of a single overall breakthrough, which is the most likely scenario. On the other hand, to ensure the success of such an attack, it may be necessary to reduce the overall breakthrough frontage to no more than 50 to 60 kilometers in width.¹⁰⁹

Isserson cautioned that the decision to increase the overall breakthrough front should in no way effect the tactical density of the EA's forces charged with breaking through the enemy's first defensive position. This is an absolutely critical requirement, as any dissipation of the attack echelon's strength along the breakthrough zone will inevitably reduce its

chance of success. Fortunately for the attacker, this task is made somewhat easier by the fact that the EA will rarely ever attack along a continuous front and that “the overall operational breadth of the breakthrough front is always greater than the width of the tactical breakthrough sectors,” due to terrain features which tend to narrow and break up these sectors.¹¹⁰ In such a case the attacker may break through the enemy’s forward defense along two or more axes, which has definite consequences for the manner in which the ERP is committed. If a breakthrough occurs along a single sector, for example, the ERP will rush into the breach in a compact mass, aimed at consecutive targets in the enemy rear. However, should the breakthrough be carried out along widely separated portions of the front, then the ERP will be broken up and committed separately along these axes. This situation presents the shock army commander with the opportunity of launching the two halves of the ERP along converging axes, in order to link up and encircle the defender’s operational reserves. To be sure, such a division of strength will necessarily require a considerably more powerful ERP to ensure success.¹¹¹

On a larger scale, Isserson observed that a particularly telling blow may be dealt the enemy’s reserves by launching simultaneous breakthrough operations along converging axes by two neighboring shock armies, each with its own ERP.¹¹² This would play out within the confines of a *front*, or strategic, operation, according to the usage of the time. It also proved to be quite prophetic; as the encirclement operation involving two armies of the same *front*, or different *fronts*, became a staple of the Red Army’s military art during the latter half of the Great Patriotic War.

Isserson divided the breakthrough operation into four distinct phases, each “having its own definite content and character.” The first phase includes the shock army’s aviation preparation, which he calculated would last 1 or 2 days preceding the start of the ground attack. During this period the AGA will wage a battle for air superiority throughout the enemy’s operational depth by bombing his airfields and directly engaging his fighter aircraft. At the same time, it will also attack targets in the enemy rear up to and including the defender’s rail distribution stations, some 100 to 120 kilometers behind the front line. The attacks against the enemy’s troops and ground installations will steadily grow in intensity as the time for the tactical assault nears, although he advised against frittering away the AGA’s resources in the preparation phase, instead husbanding these assets for supporting the ground attack. The *front’s* strategic aviation will also do its share by hitting enemy targets even further in the rear, so as to seal off the projected breakthrough area from support from the interior of the enemy’s territory. This will include attacks against the defender’s strategic reserves and railroad junctions, as well as industrial and other economic target deep in the latter’s strategic rear. Nor will this assault cease with the beginning of the ground attack, but will continue until the end of the operation.¹¹³

The second, or tactical, phase encompasses the period from the beginning of the EA’s attack through the commitment of the ERP into the battle. In most cases the latter will occur upon the rifle corps’ piercing of the enemy’s first defensive position to a depth of 5 to 6 kilometers, while at the same time the rifle corps will seek to widen the gap as much as possible to allow for the passage of the ERP. Isserson calculated that this would take four to five hours, after which the EA will continue the attack into the defender’s second position. However, should the enemy succeed in occupying his second defensive zone beforehand, the ERP’s commitment would have to await the piercing of this position, a factor which would inevitably prolong this phase. He declined to relegate the ERP’s commitment to a separate stage in the operation’s development and held that the ERP’s passage into the

breach in the enemy's defense "organically grows into the tactical period," and "is carried out in the closest and most direct tactical contact" with the EA. In the case of a single tactical breakthrough, the mechanized corps should be committed first, followed by the cavalry corps. If two breakthroughs are achieved along a single general direction, then these formations might be committed separately.¹¹⁴ See diagram 3.

During this phase the shock army's air group will support the deep battle by launching attacks with low-flying assault aircraft against the defender's artillery positions and tactical reserves. With the passage of the ERP into the breach, the AGA will shift its efforts to the defender's operational zone, where his army reserves are stationed. These reserves, if not destroyed or rendered ineffective, pose the very real danger of becoming the core of a new defensive front, and so are singled out for special attention.¹¹⁵

The shock army commander might also choose to make an airborne landing in the enemy's rear as a means of further disrupting the latter's ability to resist. The landing might be made as early as the eve of the ground assault, although it is more likely immediately before or in the beginning of the EA's attack. The ADO's most likely objective will be the defender's system of command and control, which will be disrupted by "a series of separate diversionary attacks" against various headquarters. This meant that the landing would most likely be made in the enemy's operational zone to a depth of 50–60 kilometers. If the ground assault is successful the ADO will be relieved during the latter half of the first day by the ERP's lead units arriving from the front, after which it will be subordinated to the latter in order to continue the exploitation in the enemy rear. In a situation where the defender's operational zone presented few obstacles to the ERP's advance, an airborne landing might be more profitably carried out in the rear zone against his rail distribution centers.¹¹⁶

The third, or operational, phase begins with the ERP's emergence from the enemy's tactical defense zone and continues throughout the entire depth of his operational defense. This movement, if spearheaded by the mechanized corps, will advance on the first day to the enemy's railheads at a depth of 50 to 60 kilometers, so as to deprive this area of "any operational stability, and the garrisons of the tactical defense zone of any support." During the course of this advance the mechanized corps will also defeat the defender's army reserves and destroy his command and control facilities. The cavalry corps will most likely follow in its wake to a first-day depth of 30 to 40 kilometers, defeating on its way the enemy's tactical reserves along the second defensive position. Isserson believed that the most likely course of action at this stage is to have the ERP wheel inward against the flank and rear of those enemy forces still holding out in the tactical defense zone. The axis of

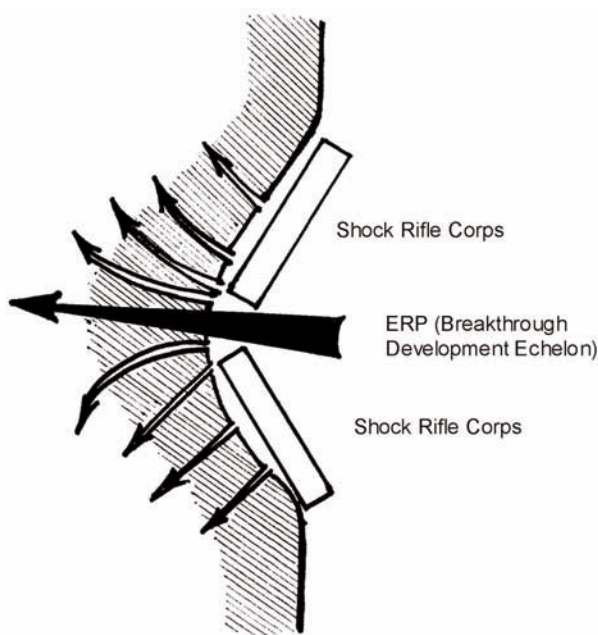


Diagram 3. Commitment of the Breakthrough Development Echelon.

this movement would be the reinforced rifle corps along one of the shoulders of the breakthrough, with the cavalry corps in the middle and the mechanized corps forming the outer arm of the movement.¹¹⁷ See diagram 4.

Meanwhile, the EA's rifle corps will continue to push forward and should reach the enemy's second defensive position some time on the first day. During this time the corps will be constantly seeking to widen the original breach, particularly along the flank where the ERP is operating. Isserson advised doing this by shifting rifle units from other parts of the front where the defender is still holding out, halting the attacks there. These units will then be fed into the breach in order to extend the flanks of the attacking rifle corps. This will also speed up the commitment of the army's motorized division, which cannot be launched into the operational depth until the shoulders of the breakthrough have been widened sufficiently so that it is not enfiladed by the enemy's artillery as it passes through. Also, the damage to the area's road network caused by the initial assault will take time to repair, meaning that the motorized division can only be committed in the early hours of the second day.¹¹⁸

The inability of the shock army's slower-moving units to keep pace means that the ERP is, at least on the first day, itself encircled as it plunges into the defender's operational rear. Its only support during this critical period comes from the AGA, whose fighter aviation is tasked with providing the echelon with "an impenetrable curtain of cover" during the advance.¹¹⁹ Other air units will continue to pound the defender's operational reserves and try to isolate the battlefield against the arrival of his deeper reserves.¹²⁰ Whatever the situation, the first day is critical, and the ERP will either destroy the "deep factors" of the enemy's defense, or will itself be destroyed, particularly if the defender reacts decisively to

meet the emergency. In such a case, it is unlikely that the ERP will be able to return to its own lines, as the enemy will most likely have succeeded in cutting it off from the shock army's main forces.¹²¹

Should all go well, however, the second day should bring into sharper focus the contours of the shock army's impending victory. This is the day, for example, when the EA's rifle corps break into the enemy's operational zone, thus imparting a good deal of stability to the ERP's extended flanks. This tie is further strengthened by the linkup with the motorized division. It is also the day when part of the ERP will complete its flanking movement by encircling sizeable enemy units still holding out along the tactical zone. Meanwhile, the remainder of the ERP will continue the exploitation drive to the full extent of its opera-

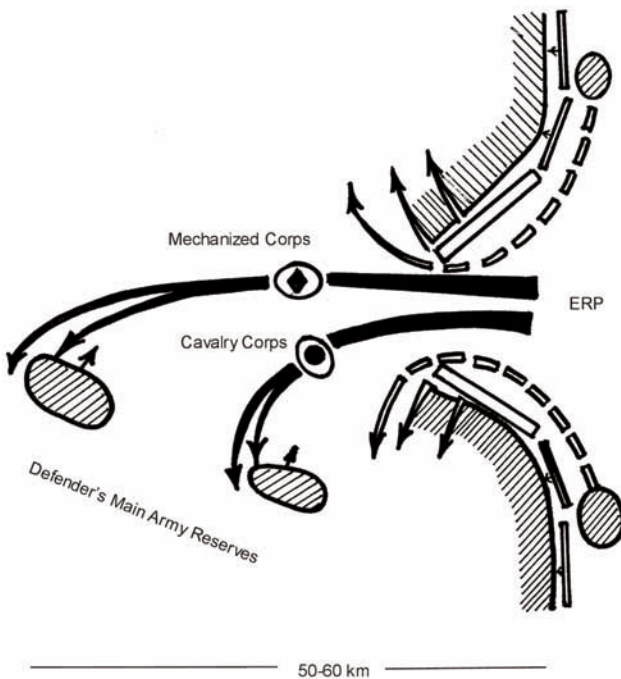


Diagram 4. The Exploitation in Depth.

tional capability — the enemy's supply distribution stations some 100 to 120 kilometers in depth.¹²²

This achievement marks the beginning of the operation's final phase, which Isserson called the "rout" of the enemy's defense throughout its entire depth. This is the stage of the operation least conducive to prediction, and much here depends on the results of the previous days' efforts. At this juncture part of the army will likely be tied down in the rear in eliminating those enemy forces entrapped in the ERP's turning movement, a process that might last up to three days. The remainder of the army will continue moving forward, with the infantry on wheeled transport, to the new front in the enemy's rear zone.¹²³

Consecutive Operations

Isserson warned that the outcome of a campaign, much less a war, could not be determined by a single operation, no matter how successful. Modern industrial states now possess enormous "staying power" and can quickly recover from serious defeats in order to continue the war. These states are capable of putting forward successive "echelons" of men and materiel, thus creating that peculiar "growth in the intensity of struggle characteristic of the present age of the deep strategy." This inevitably raises the question of conducting a series of consecutive operations, which he had previously raised in *The Evolution of Operational Art*.¹²⁴

However, a series of consecutive operations under modern conditions differs fundamentally from those conducted under the aegis of the linear strategy, as recently as 1914. Those operations, Isserson wrote, consisted of "separate stages, separated in time and space by definite distances" and which together presented "a picture of intermittent consecutive operations." Since then the situation had changed dramatically, due in large part to the greatly increased range and striking power of modern weapons. The expanded "reach" of these weapons had now significantly reduced the gaps between formerly separate operational episodes to nil, which, in turn, has led "to the direct growth of one operation into another, as an unbroken chain of operational efforts in depth," lacking "any kind of noticeable boundary in time and space."¹²⁵

He calculated that a breakthrough on the scale just described would compel the defender to immediately rush to the threatened area all available reserves from his strategic rear, as well as other sectors of the front. Such a large-scale movement of troops could only be carried out by rail, a fact that he employed to stress once again the vital importance of capturing or destroying the enemy's rail distribution stations in the rear zone. However, no matter how successful the shock army's effort to isolate the battlefield against the arrival of the enemy's strategic reserves, by the fourth or fifth day of the operation the defender will nevertheless have succeeded in concentrating a sizeable new force just beyond the old line of the rail distribution stations. This new line of resistance, hardly noticeable at first, actually marks the point at which the previous breakthrough operation ends and a new operation begins. What form the new operation takes at this stage depends upon the enemy's actions. Should the enemy launch a counteroffensive; the operation will unfold as a new meeting engagement. Should he, instead, choose to remain on the defensive; a new breakthrough operation will be necessary.¹²⁶

In either case, the shock army's prior formation for carrying out the breakthrough must assume a new march order in anticipation of a new operation, and the sooner the bet-

ter, lest the enemy use the interval to reestablish a solid defensive front. Under these new circumstances, the ERP, which has already made tentative contact with the enemy's new position, automatically becomes the army's vanguard echelon, or AVE. In the same fashion, the EA's rifle corps approaching the new front line becomes the main echelon. To the rear, one of the corps that has been recently tied down in eliminating the last pockets of resistance in the encirclement now arrives to take its place as the army's reserve echelon. Ever the Marxist, Isserson referred to this process as the "dialectic of the development of the deep operation," whereby the approach march and meeting engagement are transformed into the breakthrough. The latter, in turn, becomes a new approach march, which will most likely unfold as a new breakthrough operation.¹²⁷

He calculated that a *front* conducting a series of consecutive operations can cover, on the average, some 15 kilometers per day. Given the inevitable pauses for regrouping along the way, this worked out to an overall advance of 400 kilometers in a little less than a month's fighting. Interestingly enough, this was the same as the shortest distance from the Soviet Union's western border to the middle course of the Vistula. Other operational lines involved turning movements through the Baltic States or Ukraine, but the direct route along the Minsk-Bialystok-Warsaw axis was viewed as the most "likely operational line."¹²⁸ And while he chose not to develop these ideas any further, the logic of Isserson's calculations leads one to posit the likelihood of a decisive Marne-like operation in the Warsaw area sometime during the second month of a Soviet-Polish war.

A continuous advance to such a depth raises the problem of ensuring adequate materiel supply for the entire period. Much here depends upon the advancing armies' ability to repair the railroads, as it was considered a given that the enemy would destroy or damage his rail net during the retreat in order to slow down his pursuer's advance. Given an anticipated rate of repair of eight kilometers per day, however, the attacker could count on restoring only 240 to 250 kilometers of track during the course of a month's advance, leaving a railroad shortfall of some 150 kilometers. This gap can be covered in part by the army's auto supply zone, which extends 100 kilometers from the existing railheads, as well as the 25-kilometer division supply zone. This still left a gap of some 25 kilometers, which could be made up by increasing the daily rate of rail repair, which was technically feasible, as well as an expansion of the auto supply area to 125 kilometers.¹²⁹

The real problem, however, lies not so much in repairing the railroads at the necessary pace, but insuring that a sufficient volume of traffic passes over them to maintain the pace of the shock army's advance. Here the prospects were much less favorable. For example, even a restored rail network will still have a capacity of only 15 to 16 pairs of trains per day, while the army's daily requirements demand 24 trains. Moreover, a significant portion of the railroad's carrying capacity will be devoted to maintaining itself; meaning that in order to keep the shock army supplied the railroad's carrying capacity must be raised to 32 to 35 pairs of trains per day.¹³⁰ How this shortfall would be overcome was left unsaid.

This seemingly insuperable problem called into question the feasibility of conducting consecutive operations to the depth recommended by Isserson. His mentor, Triandafillov, had grappled with the same dilemma four years earlier and was forced to conclude that the maximum depth of a series of consecutive operations is 250 kilometers, after which the shock army would have to halt for as much as three weeks to allow the support elements to close the gap. This would be difficult, he admitted, as the temptation to push an initially successful operation as far as possible is immense. However, to undertake a new operation without proper supply is "risky in the highest degree." In such a case the attacker must await

the full restoration of the railroads, or launch another offensive along an entirely different direction.¹³¹

Isserson allowed that in certain unfavorable circumstances a halt in operations is “inevitable.” In other cases the attacker might continue the offensive by organizing his mechanized and cavalry corps, the motorized division, and any other motorized rifle units available, into a larger and more powerful AVE, capable of operating in depth and supported by the AGA. In this case the lion’s share of the shock army’s supplies will be directed to the AVE, while the slower-moving rifle units will make do with the remainder until such time as rail service is restored to a level capable of supporting the entire army. Such a move would enable the AVE to maintain the offensive against a defender already weakened by previous defeats. However, even this expedient has its inherent limitations, and as the AVE approaches the operation’s “culmination point,” enemy resistance can be expected to increase dramatically. In such a case, the army commander must avoid pushing the operation too far, lest the disaster of 1920 be repeated.¹³²

As was noted earlier, the chief defects of *The Fundamentals of the Deep Operation* are its highly schematic approach to the conduct of the deep operation, a criticism as true of Isserson’s views on the nature of the breakthrough operation as those concerning the meeting engagement. This should not be held too much against the author, however, as a certain degree of artificiality is inevitable in almost any theoretical work, particularly one which seeks to divine the future. In this regard, at least, he was considerably more prescient in his thoughts on the organization and conduct of the breakthrough operation. If his views of the meeting engagement were ultimately not justified by the experience of World War II, the breakthrough operation was a feature of the ground war in every theater, to one degree or another, particularly along the Soviet–German front. To be sure, many of his comments were a product of the times and reflected the Red Army’s still-embryonic level of mechanization, and time and experience would necessarily bring about changes to these views. Nevertheless, the foundation had been laid, although it fell to others to realize the theory’s full potential.

Isserson’s work certainly made an impression on his superiors, who were quick to see its value as a guide to the army’s future theoretical development. Tukhachevskii, for example, ordered the convening of a high-level commission to judge the manuscript’s merits. The commission, headed by Yegorov, evidently recommended against the work’s open publication, which not a criticism, but rather an implicit recognition of its topical value. Instead, the commission ordered that 100 top-secret copies be made and distributed among the military academies and military district commanders. Isserson recalled that in this way *The Fundamentals of the Deep Operation* became the army’s “basic manual on operational art,” and for the next few years played an important role in shaping its views on the subject. In fact, so forward-looking were the ideas expressed here that when the General Staff Academy was created in 1936 this work was employed as a textbook.¹³³

This is not to say that there was anything like unanimity in the Red Army’s views on conducting operations, or that Isserson’s ideas found immediate acceptance. This was made apparent during the course of a three-day war game conducted by the operational department sometime in 1933, which revealed just how wide the gap was between theory and practice. This was particularly the case concerning the possibility of employing large mechanized forces out in front of the main body, and the game revealed that the old ways still had many adherents. According to Isserson’s account, the student playing the role of the army commander refused to bring forward his army’s mechanized group to engage the enemy in what

was evidently a rehearsal of the meeting engagement. This was done, he wrote, “under the influence” of representatives of the RKKKA Staff’s operations directorate, who were monitoring the game; it was only after the student playing the role of the *front* commander overruled this decision that the game could proceed along the designated lines. Such actions only confirmed Isserson’s suspicion that “there was no unity of opinion” on these questions in the RKKKA Staff, and that some of its functionaries looked with a jaundiced eye upon what the operational department was doing. Fortunately, Yegorov, who had closely followed the course of the war game, did not share these prejudices. In fact, he supported the mechanized group’s decisive employment in depth, and in a post-game critique praised the exercise as revealing for the first time the deep operation’s possibilities.¹³⁴

Nor were these ideas always well received in the Frunze Military Academy itself, particularly after Eideman’s departure in 1932. Isserson recalled, in particular, one incident, which occurred after reading his first lecture on the deep operation, during which the academy’s chief evidently had informers in the audience. Shaposhnikov called Isserson up immediately afterwards and asked him: “My dear fellow, what’s this breakthrough development echelon that you’ve come up with?” He then proceeded to cite Clausewitz to the effect that one should not try too hard to bend the leaves of a tree toward the sky, but rather stand with both feet on the ground, which was his genteel way of rebuking Isserson for engaging in what he evidently regarded as baseless fantasy. Isserson, who rarely took criticism well, replied curtly that according to Friedrich Engels a monkey first became a man when he straightened his back and lifted his head toward the sky. In this fashion, he continued, the army’s operational art should lift its head and look boldly into the future. The last statement was a particularly nasty cut, implying that Shaposhnikov was behind the times. According to this obviously partisan account, the academy chief was so routed by this unexpected retort that he could not even reply. After this the divide between the two schools of thought only “deepened,” he concluded.¹³⁵

To Isserson, this incident was just another example of the “lack of faith and ironic comments” with which the older military specialists greeted the operational department’s work. From this he rather smugly concluded that since the latter remained hostage to “deeply held views” dating from the First World War, they were simply incapable of making the intellectual leap necessary to understand the “new forms of combat,” and some of them simply “remained on the sidelines of this process.” He did acknowledge, however, that the “majority” of the military specialists eventually came “to understand the entire progressive nature of the deep operation” and changed their ways. Among these were such former czarist officers as Varfolomeev, Shilovskii, Nikolai Nikolaevich Shvarts, Fedor Platonovich Shafalovich, and Gotovtsev, among others. Isserson later recalled that even Svechin, long the most prominent and uncompromising of the old guard professors ultimately came around to supporting the “concept of the deep operation,” although he stubbornly insisted on subordinating it to his ideas on the strategy of attrition.¹³⁶

Nor did his combative personality win him any supporters. One witness to Isserson’s activities during these years was Nikolai Aleksandrovich Talenskii, who first met Isserson in 1933. He later described his own relations with Isserson as “normal” and emphasized that he had no personal axe to grind, which was probably due to the fact that the two men worked in different departments and thus had limited day-to-day contact with each other. He mentioned, however, that it was well known in academic circles that Isserson had an “extremely quarrelsome character,” and would “often insult and slight his fellow workers.”¹³⁷ To be sure, this testimony was given during the course of a criminal investigation into Isserson’s alleged

complicity in an “anti-Soviet plot,” and Talenskii undoubtedly knew that an unflattering description was expected of him. From what we already know of Isserson’s personality, however, there is more than a little truth in this statement. Like some highly intelligent people, Isserson made the cardinal mistake of assuming that many of those around him were stupid, and compounded this error by flouting his own superiority. In short, he was an intellectual bully.

Despite the friction with Shaposhnikov and others, Isserson’s four years at the Frunze Academy were easily the most productive of his career. During this time he produced two short works on the deep battle, a major study of warfare in the nineteenth century, as well as two groundbreaking works in the field of operational art, while at the same time attending to his numerous other academic duties. As a result of these efforts, by 1933 Isserson was recognized as the army’s leading authority in the field of operational art.

CHAPTER 6

Peregrinations

Division Commander in Belorussia

Isserson's lengthy term at the academy came to an end in December 1933 with his transfer to a field command. Whether this was due to his feuding with the academy's leadership, or the military authorities' desire to give a promising young commander some "hands on" experience is unclear, although a certain amount of intrigue cannot be ruled out. Isserson's new posting was as commander and military commissar of the 4th Rifle Division, or to give its full name according to the revolutionary traditions of the time — the 4th Red Banner Rifle Division in Honor of the German Proletariat.¹ This division had been formed in June 1919 and had spent the greater part of the civil war fighting in the Baltic States and Belorussia. Since 1932 the division had been headquartered in Slutsk, a provincial backwater southwest of Minsk.² In those days the frontier with Poland lay just to the west, making this a front-line unit in the event of a renewed war. As such, the division would have to be well trained and maintained in a high state of readiness. That Isserson was entrusted with such a responsible command was thus a high mark of favor and trust.

By all accounts Slutsk was a typical garrison town of the time — dirty, isolated and almost completely lacking in the civilized amenities. Zhukov, whose cavalry division was stationed in the same town, painted a dreary picture of his arrival in the spring of 1933, several months before Isserson. This was during the thaw, he wrote, and the train station was covered by "impassable mud." There were no sidewalks in the area, and while making her way to the horse-drawn cart that would take the family to its quarters, his wife "left her galoshes in the mud more than once." The family's "quarters" proved to be an eight-meter room that had been temporarily donated for the Zhukovs' use by the division's chief of chemical services, whose own family was relegated to another small room. There were not even any schools in the area, which was a particular point of concern for the commanders' wives.³

Things were no easier for Isserson's wife, whose lot was further compounded by her husband's strictness in all matters relating to his service responsibilities. For example, as a division commander he was authorized a car for official business. However, he never allowed his wife to use the car for family related errands, and Yekaterina Ivanovna had to catch a ride into town for groceries in a truck with the other wives, even though the trip took all day. The same was true when the family occupied a *dacha*, or country house, for the sum-

mer. In this case, Isserson's wife and daughter had to cover the three kilometers to the nearest town on foot.⁴

However, this seeming callousness should not be written off simply as one more instance of Isserson's lack of consideration for his family. More likely his attitude had its ideological underpinnings, rooted in the proletarian morality of the day, which demanded that everyone be treated equally. Some of his strictness also probably stemmed from his extremely fastidious approach to everything he did. This had its expression in a ramrod honesty that permeated all his affairs. Isserson evidently would not even entertain the thought of allowing his wife to use state property for personal matters. This was harsh, but fair. However, with the dying out of revolutionary enthusiasm in the Soviet Union, such scrupulousness soon became the exception to the rule.

The 4th Rifle Division was subordinated to the Belorussian Military District, which was commanded at the time by Uborevich, Isserson's old commander with the 18th Rifle Division in the far north. During the intervening years Isserson lost contact with his former chief as the latter went on to increasingly responsible commands, and their acquaintance was renewed only in 1929, when the two took part in a gathering of the Moscow Military District, of which Uborevich was the commander.⁵ The following year Uborevich was appointed a member of the RVS and chief of the RKKA's rearmament program. In 1931 he was replaced by Tukhachevskii and posted to the Belorussian Military District command, where he served until his arrest and execution in 1937.

According to Isserson, however, relations with his former chief were far from friendly at his new assignment. He later testified that this was due to his numerous conflicts with other commanders, yet another confirmation of his chronic inability to get along with his colleagues. "At first," Isserson said, "Uborevich did not treat me badly," although this would soon change.⁶ At this time Isserson's divisional assistant for political affairs was Ivan Mikhailovich Gornostaev, with whom he maintained uneven but tolerable relations. In the spring of 1935, however, Gornostaev left to take up the post of corps commissar and was replaced by Vladimir Nikolaevich Borisov. Isserson said that at first his relations with his new deputy were "strained," although they "improved somewhat" later on. It was presumably during the low point in the two men's relationship that Uborevich summoned them to military district headquarters in Smolensk for an explanation.⁷

A much more serious problem was Isserson's poor relations with his immediate superior, the commander of the 5th Rifle Corps, Sergei Yefimovich Gribov, and the latter's political deputy, Mikhail Yevseevich Zel'dovich. According to Isserson, his relations with the two men had become "highly exacerbated," a circumstance he attributed in part to the



Isserson with his daughter Irena, ca. 1934
(courtesy Russian State Military Archives).

difficulty he was then having with a certain Russianov, one of his regimental commanders. Isserson later charged that Russianov was Gribov's "protégé," who "always found support" with the latter when questions arose about carrying out his commander's orders.⁸

Nor were Gribov and Zel'dovich shy about presenting their complaints against the obstreperous division commander. Isserson stated that the pair had written a number of reports in which they highlighted the supposedly poor state of affairs in the 4th Rifle Division. Copies of these orders were later forwarded to Uborevich, who summoned Isserson to military district headquarters in the summer of 1934. In what must have been an extremely humiliating experience for Isserson, the military district commander proceeded to dress him down before Gribov and Zel'dovich, accusing him of a "lack of discipline," for not obeying several of the corps commander's orders. Following this incident, Isserson recalled, Uborevich's attitude toward him "worsened sharply."⁹

Years later, while undergoing interrogation in prison, Isserson admitted that the corps commander's charges were not wholly without merit, and that the division's state of combat training was "not quite favorable," although he vigorously denied that training was "poorly organized." He took particular umbrage at what he claimed was the personal tone of many of these orders, which, he stated, "were obviously directed against me." When his interrogator put the obvious question to him as to how a division commander could be viewed separately from the condition of his unit, Isserson replied that "In issuing orders touching upon me personally, Gribov would link them with some sort of facts of work in the division," adding that there indeed "were shortcomings in the division."¹⁰

This passage highlights a central feature of Isserson's character and goes a long way in explaining why so many of his professional relationships ended in conflict and bitterness. By all accounts Isserson was a hard and demanding taskmaster who drove his subordinates to the limit. As a division commander, he was perfectly within his rights to demand the utmost from Russianov and, short of an illegal order, the latter had no right to go over Isserson's head and appeal to a higher command instance. However, once the spotlight shifts to Isserson's "lack of discipline" in failing to carry out a superior's orders, his tone changes and all criticism becomes the stuff of personal attacks, with the original thrust of the complaint lost in the transition. If pressed, Isserson would no doubt have maintained that he failed to carry out Gribov's orders out of the highest of motives, without, of course, extending the same privilege to his own subordinates. It is certainly a glaring moral blind spot, whose commonness makes it no less reprehensible for all that.

Isserson's relations with his military district commander failed to improve, at least according to the former, and a number of unpleasant incidents punctuated the remainder of his stay in Belorussia. He later related to his interrogator that following maneuvers in 1934 Uborevich publicly upbraided him at a command conference. He said that Uborevich's displeasure was aroused by an incident in one of the 4th Rifle Division's battalions, where some of the soldiers had developed blisters from improperly wrapping their foot cloths. Isserson admitted that the incident had indeed taken place, but took umbrage at Uborevich blaming him for the problem.¹¹ To be sure, the military district commander was noted for his irascibility and harsh tone in criticizing subordinates, and this may well have offended Isserson, who hardly ever took criticism well. However, this should not detract from the fact that Isserson was clearly in the wrong in this case. After all, a commander is ultimately responsible for the state of his unit, and such seemingly mundane issues as the condition of the troops' feet are by no means unimportant. Was this a mere oversight on Isserson's part, or did the brilliant theoretician somehow feel that such considerations were beneath him?

Other incidents were not long in coming. One of these occurred in early 1935, when Uborevich reprimanded Isserson for his harsh tone in objecting to Gribov's demand that the latter call off a sniper training assembly that had been organized in the 4th Rifle Division. Isserson noted with satisfaction, however, that Uborevich ultimately supported him by allowing the training to continue, in effect overriding the corps commander's order. A similar incident took place later that same year. According to Isserson, Uborevich again took him to task for his insubordinate tone in speaking with Gribov. He said that at a post-maneuver critique, Gribov "distorted" the 4th Rifle Division's actions, with the obvious implication that Isserson's own leadership skills were being called into question. This, he said, "made me indignant and I objected sharply to his remarks."¹² Putting aside the correctness of the corps commander's actions, the two incidents further tend to reinforce Uborevich's criticism of Isserson as suffering from a lack of discipline, particularly of self-discipline, in his relations with a superior, and do not speak well of him as a commander. They also show that Isserson could be as fierce in criticizing his superiors, as he was his subordinates.

A certain Kazimirovich, who claimed to have worked as an instructor in the 4th Rifle Division's political section in 1935, challenged Isserson's version of his relations with Uborevich a few years later. Kazimirovich laid out his version of events in a letter written immediately after the execution of Uborevich and a number of other high-ranking commanders in June 1937. He stated that at the time Isserson and Borisov were waging a "fierce battle" for division leadership, by which he clearly meant the weight of political instruction in the division's training schedule. These disagreements were sometimes so intense that they were referred to military district headquarters for resolution. In these cases each of the parties would appeal to his superior: Isserson to Uborevich, and Borisov to the military district commissar, Petr Aleksandrovich Smirnov. Isserson would do this, Kazimirovich declared, because he was Uborevich's "favorite" and enjoyed his "active support" for his "improper activities."¹³

Among the latter he counted Isserson's "disdainful" attitude toward "party-political work," a common enough charge directed against commanders throughout the Soviet period, but a particularly damning one at this juncture. Kazimirovich charged that Isserson would schedule the unit's mandatory political instruction for late in the evening, or have it removed to the field or firing range, despite the fact that these locations were not conducive to this activity. Once, he continued, Isserson had reduced his men to a state of exhaustion by forcing them to march in place for eight or ten hours, while preparing for the annual May Day parade, again at the expense of political instruction. He further criticized Isserson for being a "zealous partisan" of enervating 25-kilometer marches, and who recommended combat drill involving marches of three to five kilometers. The cumulative effect of these measures, Kazimirovich concluded, was to reduce combat training to tactical preparation alone.¹⁴

Kazimirovich also charged that the 4th Rifle Division used up some 300,000 rifle rounds in training, despite an order by the defense commissar forbidding such overruns. He maintained that Isserson escaped punishment for this infraction because he enjoyed Uborevich's "patronage." He also referred to facts of "crude deception," which were carried out with Isserson's knowledge, although he did not elaborate on this point. When these transgressions were finally brought to light, he said, Isserson once again escaped punishment, and "only the whistleblowers suffered."¹⁵

To Kazimirovich's mind, these and other of Isserson's methods were "not accidental," particularly in light of the recent events in the army. He argued that Isserson's conduct was all the more suspicious because he was "quite a competent person in the military sense."

Kazimirovich concluded his denunciation by stating that “Isserson personally arouses a good deal of suspicion,” and characterized him as a “pure intellectual, a person completely lacking in party qualities,” a particularly damning statement for the times. And while he acknowledged that Isserson was a party member, he claimed that the latter’s “fine words are at odds with his actions.” Moreover, he added, Isserson’s party record was “not quite unclouded,” as he had padded his party membership to reflect a longer period of service in its ranks.¹⁶

When confronted with this denunciation four years later, Isserson denied that he had ever enjoyed Uborevich’s “patronage.”¹⁷ This is probably true for a variety of reasons. First, Kazimirovich’s overwrought letter should be treated with a great deal of caution as the product of the spy mania then sweeping the country and its armed forces. Moreover, Isserson’s later description of Uborevich, delivered from the relative safety of post-Stalinist retirement, lack the warmth that he displayed in his writings about Tukhachevskii, with whom he also had an uneven professional relationship. On the other hand, however, the estrangement between Isserson and Uborevich seems a bit exaggerated at times, which is probably not accidental. As had been the case in his testimony regarding his relations with Tukhachevskii, Isserson had every reason to try and distance himself from Uborevich, through whom he was tainted by association.

Within his command Isserson proved to be no more adept at getting along with his brother officers than with those who outranked him. Kazimirovich elsewhere described Isserson as a harsh and abrasive commander who carried out “policy” of “harassment and irritation” in relation to the division command, and who seemed to delight in humiliating his subordinates. At one point he reduced the chief of the division’s chemical service to tears, and added that the division engineer also suffered greatly from his chief’s “mockery.”¹⁸ This source provided no further details of the alleged harassment, or whether the commanders in question had been in any way derelict in the performance of their duties. Whatever the offense, however, public humiliation is hardly the best way to improve performance. Kazimirovich went on to add that as a result of this vicious behavior, among other faults, Isserson lacked any moral authority within the division command apparatus, aside from a “small group of toadies.”¹⁹

Isserson may also have made other important enemies during his stint in Belorussia. According to one account, Isserson soon ran afoul of Timoshenko, a civil war-era cavalry commander who became assistant military district chief toward the end of Isserson’s period of service there. This source states that “Several times he [Isserson] had sharply rebuked Timoshenko for stupid remarks, sometimes even making him appear ridiculous, and not only when they were alone, but in front of commanders of all ranks — at various conferences and analyses of training exercises and war games.” As a result, he stated, “Timoshenko had come to hate Isserson with a passion.”²⁰ However, as events will show, there is good reason to question this account of the two men’s relations, or at least the degree of enmity between them.

It would seem that one of the few commanders with whom Isserson did not quarrel was Zhukov, who would become the foremost Soviet commander of World War II. Isserson had occasion to mention his dealings with Zhukov only once, and this was while undergoing interrogation in prison. When asked about his acquaintances from his days in Belorussia, he replied that his relations with Zhukov had been “normal,” adding that Zhukov and his wife would sometimes come to his place, and that he had visited them at their *dacha*, or suburban residence.²¹ Isserson did not elaborate on what the two talked about during

these meetings. Given his rather pedantic character, however, it is hard to imagine Isserson spending much time on idle conversation, so it's probable that the two spent a good deal of time "talking shop." What influence these talks had on Zhukov's later views on conducting operations can never be fully known, although one may engage in some informed speculation.

One of Zhukov's daughters later wrote that her father had been an avid reader of military literature and that his collection amounted to several thousand volumes. Among these were works by Fuller and Liddell Hart, as well as Tukhachevskii, Triandafillov and Isserson.²² We shall see that as time passed Zhukov continued to draw heavily from Isserson's theoretical works, which doubtlessly influenced his later conduct of wartime operations.

Isserson was also evidently on good terms with Zakharov, a future marshal of the Soviet Union who enjoyed a distinguished wartime career as a chief of staff on several *fronts* and who later served two tours as armed forces chief of staff. Zakharov had previously studied under Isserson in the Frunze Academy's operational department and held a number of positions in the Belorussian Military District during these years. Isserson's daughter later recalled that in Belorussia Zakharov was still a bachelor and could not afford a separate *dacha*. Isserson, again according to the proletarian morality of the time, allowed the younger commander to live in a room in the family's *dacha* for a summer.²³

During these years the Red Army was engaged in a continuous round of training exercises and maneuvers, in order to raise the troops' combat proficiency and sharpen the commanders' leadership skills. This was particularly true of the Belorussian Military District, where a particularly high degree of readiness was required due to the proximity of the Polish border. This otherwise unremarkable fact was made noteworthy, however, by two training exercises conducted in the fall of 1935 and which pitted Isserson's 4th Rifle Division against Zhukov's 4th Cavalry Division.

Zhukov, who devotes a good deal of attention to the exercises in a post-Soviet edition of his memoirs, wrote that the theme for the first exercise was "a rifle division's meeting battle with a cavalry division" and sought to test the divisions' ability to conduct a meeting battle under modern conditions, implying the employment of tanks and aircraft alongside the more traditional combat arms. Secondary objectives included the actions of forward detachments in carrying out reconnaissance, seizing and overcoming a narrow passage, and the rapid seizure of a line from which the sides' main forces could be deployed and committed into the battle. An exercise of this magnitude was no small matter and was accordingly presided over by Uborevich and his newly arrived deputy, Timoshenko.²⁴

The exercise opened on a fine September



General Georgii Konstantinovich Zhukov (1896–1974), 1941. Zhukov served with Isserson in Belorussia and was pitted against him in military exercises (courtesy Central Armed Forces Museum).

morning, following a night spent in feverish preparation for the coming “battle.” One of Zhukov’s first moves was to dispatch one of his mechanized regiments, consisting of light tanks, armored cars, motorized infantry, and artillery, to seize a narrow defile through the swampy terrain, beyond which lay a ridge line which offered an excellent field of view. Zhukov, as soon as the mechanized regiment cleared the passage, ordered his division’s main forces to begin negotiating the defile, which they did after two hours. At this stage Zhukov’s forward detachments reported that the two sides’ main forces were still up to 20 kilometers apart, and that the lack of air activity from Isserson’s division convinced him that his opponent had not detected the maneuver.²⁵

Zhukov then dispatched a cavalry regiment against one of Isserson’s flanks, in order to tie down the latter’s main forces and disguise his true intentions. Meanwhile, another regiment, reinforced with artillery and tanks, was to engage the main body. Two hours later the regiments were engaging Isserson’s forces. The latter quickly deployed one of his own regiments to pin down the attackers, while he dispatched another around the flank of the cavalry attack, which he evidently took to be the main body of his opponent’s force. However, Isserson had failed to detect the movement and arrival of his opponent’s main forces, which were now deep in his rear, an oversight that Zhukov labeled “careless.” Suddenly, he wrote, his artillery opened a heavy barrage and his division’s main body, spearheaded by tanks, moved into the attack.²⁶

Zhukov was uncharacteristically silent about claiming victory, perhaps feeling that it would appear unseemly to crow over the defeat of a fellow Soviet commander. Instead, he left this task to Uborevich, whose speech following the exercise he quotes at length. Zhukov states that Uborevich summoned the two commanders to his presence, and then proceeded to silently pace back and forth for five minutes, before rounding on Isserson: *“In my train car last night I read with pleasure the book Cannae, which you, comrade Isserson, wrote. But here, under field conditions, your ‘Cannae’ didn’t come about and, on the whole, nothing worked out.”* He then resumed his tirade in a more impassioned tone: *“How could you permit a rifle division to be surrounded and defeated in a meeting battle with a cavalry division? How could it be that the division commander himself and his staff were captured while having breakfast in a clearing, when the situation demanded particular vigilance and reconnaissance of the ‘enemy’?”* (emphasis in the original). The military district commander then went on, he wrote, to single out “a number of serious shortcomings in the actions of the division commander and staff.”²⁷



Army Commander First Class Ieronim Petrovich Uborevich (1896–1937), ca. 1936. Isserson claimed to have clashed with Uborevich in Belorussia during the 1930s (courtesy Central Armed Forces Museum).

Zhukov then goes on to describe a maneuver conducted sometime afterwards, not far

from Minsk. Once again, he wrote, the 4th Rifle Division command was “unlucky,” and among other units was again surrounded by his cavalry. This was not all, however, the main problem being that the rifle division, by which he clearly meant Isserson and his staff, “tried to break out of the encirclement in an extremely clumsy manner.” Zhukov called a break-out attempt “perhaps the most difficult and complex type of combat activity,” and proceeded to list a number of measures, including the secret regrouping of units to the breakthrough sector, artillery and air support, a swift attack, and the use of smoke, as guarantees of success. However, the rifle division’s command proved incapable of pulling these elements together in a successful whole. “Unfortunately,” he concluded, neither Isserson nor his successors were able to eliminate the “shortcomings in the 4th Rifle Division’s combat training” by the time of the Great Patriotic War and that the division was once again surrounded in Belorussia in June 1941.²⁸

If accurate, Zhukov’s description of these events constitutes a devastating indictment of Isserson’s military skills and essentially paints the later as an abstract theoretician incapable of applying his own ideas in the field. If true, it also obliquely clarifies some points regarding his service in Belorussia and might explain the reasons behind Gribov’s criticism of Isserson’s actions, which the latter took so personally. At the same time, Uborevich’s harsh criticism of Isserson’s handling of his division, if correct, certainly supports the latter’s denial that he was his chief’s “favorite” or enjoyed his “patronage.”

However, Zhukov’s account ultimately raises as many questions as it resolves. For one thing, Zhukov was extremely jealous of his military reputation and was not above embellishing his role. Furthermore, the author’s recollection of these episodes, some 30 years after the event, is remarkable, particularly if one includes Uborevich’s lengthy criticism of Isserson, which he appears to quote verbatim. That Zhukov may have been relying purely on his memory is supported by the fact that there are no archival citations in his memoirs dealing with these incidents, although such references do appear in other parts of the book. Moreover, a search for information on these two exercises in the Russian State Military Archives in Moscow, failed to turn up any record of these events. The absence of documents, given the many instances of Soviet-era abuse of the archives, inevitably raises questions. Were the military archives “cleansed” of unfavorable documentation during Zhukov’s tenure in various high-level positions?

Moreover, it stands to reason that one might be more likely to recall such a lengthy tirade, as delivered by Uborevich, if it had been directed at oneself, rather than someone else, the sting of the humiliation making the memory sharper. On the other hand, Isserson’s own writings do nothing to clear the air, and all that can be determined is that Uborevich rode everyone hard. He later recalled that the military district commander would “chew out” his division commanders for the “slightest shortcomings” in the troops’ combat training.²⁹ Was he thinking of himself?

Unfortunately, the otherwise prolific Isserson left no written account of his battles with Zhukov, which may or may not be significant. What little we do know of his version of events comes from his daughter, in whom he often confided during his later years. According to her, Zhukov’s account is completely false and that it was her father who surrounded his opponent’s cavalry division. Furthermore, she added, so severe was Zhukov’s defeat that he had “to bug out in just his drawers.”³⁰ Unfortunately for this colorful account, lacking witnesses or documentation, it cannot be verified. Nonetheless, it is fascinating to speculate on the actual outcome of these battles between the Soviet Union’s greatest military hero and the outcast.

In September 1935 the Red Army introduced a new system of ranks to replace the one that had been in place since the civil war. According to the existing system, commanders were designated by the position they held, i.e., division, *front* and army commander. The new system instituted so-called “individual” ranks, which were awarded to commanders regardless of the position they held. As a result, Voroshilov, Tukhachevskii, Yegorov, Budennyi, and Vasilii Konstantinovich Bliukher were made marshals of the Soviet Union. Isserson, because of or despite, the results of the autumn exercises, was awarded the rank of brigade commander (*kombbrig*) on November 26, 1935.³¹ However, this was not the demotion it seems at first glance, as senior commanders often held ranks a step lower than their actual position. For example, Uborevich was awarded the rank of army commander first class; although as commander of the Belorussian Military District he could reasonably expect to command the *front* north of the Pripjat Marshes in a war against Poland. To quote another example, Zhukov was also made a brigade commander at this time, and while eventually commanding a small army against the Japanese in Mongolia in 1939, he continued to hold the rank of corps commander.

In any event, Isserson’s turbulent career as a division commander was coming to an end. As was noted in chapter 3, Isserson was chosen to write the chapter on the meeting battle for the Red Army’s new tactical manual, presumably because of his theoretical and practical knowledge of the subject. The appointment is significant, as it is unlikely that Tukhachevskii and Uborevich, would have given this task someone who had been as soundly defeated in a field exercise as Zhukov describes. It certainly stretches the limits of credulity to think that Isserson would have been tasked with writing the chapter on the meeting battle, if he had been so recently trounced in an exercise dedicated to this subject. The appointment thus casts considerable doubt on Zhukov’s account of his recent battles with Isserson.

Back in the General Staff

On February 7, 1936, Isserson was appointed deputy chief of the RKKA General Staff’s first section, which meant his transfer back to Moscow.³² This latest posting only formalized the existing arrangement, in which he was spending more and more time in the capital in connection with his work on the tactical field manual, the work on which was entering its final stages. The transfer may also have represented the consensus among the army command that in light of his continuous altercations with his superiors in Belorussia, Isserson was more cut out for staff work.

Isserson’s immediate superior in the General Staff apparatus was Corps Commander Mezheninov, who as head of the operational section was deputy chief of staff. Isserson had previously served under Mezheninov in the Western Front staff apparatus in the early 1920s, and later in the Frunze Academy’s operational department. At that time Mezheninov was deputy chief of the RKKA Air Force Directorate and would meet with Isserson when he read lectures at the academy on the employment of aviation in the operation. However, Isserson would not be Isserson if he failed to quarrel with his superiors. He later claimed that he felt Mezheninov’s “unfriendly attitude,” and that the latter would make “insulting remarks,” calling him a “theoretician.”³³ Evidently the two men had been at loggerheads for some time, and Isserson later singled out Mezheninov as one of those RKKA Staff functionaries who “did not support the principle fundamentals of the deep operation,” partic-

ularly regarding the employment of large mechanized formations ahead of the main body.³⁴ This was more than sufficient for Isserson to view his new chief with contempt.

For the most part, Isserson's duties during his brief sojourn at the General Staff involved him in drawing up scenarios for tactical-operational exercises up to the army level. These exercises were then sent to the military districts and formed an important part of their training cycle. Such a responsible position also enabled him to acquaint himself with the practical problems of strategy, including such important questions as the mobilization and deployment of the nation's armed forces. One such opportunity arose during the conduct of a strategic war game that was played out in the in the spring of 1936, in which he played a leading part in organizing. Isserson's later account of the war game offers a fascinating insight into the issues and personalities of the time. As such, it deserves to be recounted at some length.

Isserson later recounted that Tukhachevskii had been pressing the General Staff for a year to carry out a war game, which would test the Red Army's ability to repel a German attack upon the outbreak of war. His insistence was all the more remarkable in that the marshal, by virtue of his current position, was not privy to the Red Army's strategic deployment plan.³⁵ This was the case, Isserson wrote, despite the fact that Tukhachevskii "stood a head above many representatives of the Red Army's high command."³⁶ The marshal had for some time been one of the most vocal proponents of a hard line against Hitler's Germany and had publicly warned against the Nazi dictator's military preparations, which he believed were ultimately directed against the Soviet Union.³⁷ Tukhachevskii evidently sought to use the war game as a format for testing his own ideas for repelling such an attack.

The dangers and possibilities inherent in this scenario inevitably raised the problem of the "beginning period of war" (*nachal'nyi period voiny*), a subject which exercised the minds of many of the Red Army's theorists from the end of the 1920s.³⁸ As has been shown, among these was Isserson, who had been very much concerned with questions of the armed forces' initial deployment and the actions of the shock army upon the outbreak of war.

However, the most noted commentator on the problem of the war's beginning period was Tukhachevskii, who as the army's leading strategist sought to discern the character of what was universally regarded as the inevitable future showdown with the capitalist world. In an unpublished paper, written in 1934, Tukhachevskii declared that "the old, familiar notions about the concentration of mass armies by railroad and the mass nature of frontier battles no longer correspond to the real conditions" of modern war. "The frontier zone," he continued, "has become very vulnerable" to attack by aviation, cavalry, mechanized, and motorized infantry units. These combat arms can now reach to such a depth that they are capable of seriously disrupting an enemy's mobilization measures in the frontier zone and preventing the concentration of his armies along the frontier. Such a situation, he concluded, makes the successful mobilization of a large force, as had been the case in 1914, "unrealistic." From this it followed that the reigning notions regarding the mobilization and deployment of a nation's armed forces must be reexamined.³⁹

Given the range of modern aviation and its ability to carry out landings in the enemy rear, Tukhachevskii calculated that an enemy's strategic concentration might be disrupted to a depth of 250 kilometers from the border, unless the latter adopted "special preventive measures." In a case where neither side adopts the necessary measures to secure the unmolested concentration of its forces, the affected zone could stretch up to 250 kilometers on either side of the frontier, leaving the main forces some 500 kilometers apart from each other upon the completion of their concentration phase. Within this zone, he claimed, the

fighting will at first consist primarily of “disorderly combat collisions” between the permanent garrisons and other local troops of one side against the enemy’s airborne landings and smaller units that have penetrated into its territory. Once the main forces have detrained well within their own territory, they will advance to meet each other across the large distance that separates them. The march to the eventual battlefield will not be an easy one, Tukhachevskii warned, as both sides’ main forces will have to contend with enemy airborne landings and the presence of other enemy units along the line of march, in what will play out as a constant battle by the column’s vanguard. The main forces will also have to deal with continuous air attacks during the advance, even as they attempt to restore the local transportation and communications system, which was damaged in the initial frontier battle. Under these conditions, he concluded, even given a highly optimistic rate of advance of 20 kilometers per day, the two sides could not expect to encounter each other somewhere along the frontier before two weeks.⁴⁰

If on the other hand, one of the belligerents has adapted itself to the new methods of waging war, while the other has not, then it will be able to disrupt the latter’s strategic concentration. In this case the side that has gained the initial advantage will be able to deploy its main forces somewhere along the frontier, while the loser will be forced to do the same deep in his own territory, some 250 kilometers away. Tukhachevskii calculated that in this case the sides’ main forces would encounter each other after a week’s approach march, but already well inside the territory of the losing party. According to this scenario, it is possible that succeeding echelons might be deployed on the latter’s territory.⁴¹

In the event that both sides are equally prepared to wage such a war, the outcome of the initial fighting will be decided by the success of their respective air strikes. Should one side gain the upper hand during this phase of the frontier battle, it will be in a position to disrupt its enemy’s strategic concentration and compel the latter to carry out these measures on its own territory, much in the way described in the previous paragraph. Should the initial air battle end in a draw, however, he claimed, the sides’ strategic concentration of their forces will take place under conditions completely unlike those foreseen in the preceding scenarios. In this case, it was expected that the two sides would concentrate their main forces in any number of ways in what was likely to be an extremely fluid situation. This meant that in some cases the sides would be forced by local conditions to detrain deep in their own territory, while in others this might take place near the border.⁴²

Based upon these assumptions, Tukhachevskii concluded that the country’s main forces could no longer successfully wage the battle for the frontier. What was needed, he claimed, was a separate “forward army” (*peredovaia armia*), based permanently along the frontier and maintained at full strength in order to meet any eventuality. The forward army is a combined-arms formation, equipped with such long-range and mobile strike weapons as aircraft, mechanized, cavalry, and motorized units, much along the lines of the shock army, although smaller. This army had as its chief task upon the outbreak of war the launching of air and ground strikes against the enemy’s covering forces, rail junctions, and other assembly points. Ideally, the forward army would be capable of disrupting the enemy’s mobilization and concentration along the border and forcing him to carry out these measures deeper in his own territory and thus sacrificing his frontier zone, as well as forcing him to commit his forces into the subsequent operations at a disadvantage.⁴³

Mezheninov took upon himself the task of drawing up the operational assignment for the Red Army and ordered Isserson to do the same for the “blue-brown” side, which included Germany, Poland and the Baltic States.⁴⁴ The war game was to be played out essentially

within the bounds of the Belorussian Military District, where he had recently been stationed. This area lay squarely astride the traditional Minsk-Smolensk-Moscow invasion route and at the time was considered the most likely axis of attack, and the Red Army's strategic deployment between the Western Dvina River and the Pripiat Marshes served as the basis for the war game. As military district commander, Uborevich was to command the game's Western Front, while Tukhachevskii agreed to command the enemy forces.⁴⁵ The marshal was no doubt eager to accept this challenge, for only by defeating the Red Army forces could he hope to shake the high command out of what he believed to be its complacency and force it to adopt his ideas.

The war game regarded as secondary operations along the Ukrainian and Baltic strategic directions, which were considered of importance, only insofar as the presumed Southwestern and Northwestern fronts were able to successfully coordinate their activities with Uborevich's command.⁴⁶ The command of the war game's Northwestern Front was entrusted to Shaposhnikov, who as commander of the Leningrad Military District would be the natural choice for the post in the event of war. The Red Army's Southwestern Front was commanded by Division Commander Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Kuchinskii, who then served as chief of staff of the Kiev Military District. His chief, Army Commander First Class Yakir, was Tukhachevskii's deputy for the enemy forces. The commanders of the internal military districts and the heads of various military academies commanded individual armies on both sides.⁴⁷

However, Isserson recalled, if the Red Army's deployment for the war game was based upon existing plans, arriving at a clear idea of enemy strength and intentions was far more difficult, as Soviet military intelligence lacked reliable data on these matters. This was as much a political calculation as a military one, as Germany at the time had no common border with the Soviet Union and could only make war on the latter in collusion with Poland and/or the Baltic States, using their territories as a staging ground for an attack. Isserson maintained that these were realistic considerations, and at the time there was no reason to think that Germany would "completely swallow up" Poland and deprive itself of the support of more than 50 Polish divisions in a war against the USSR.⁴⁸ While such considerations may have indeed have existed, Isserson's explanation is less than straightforward. In retrospect, it would have been more correct to say that there was no reason to think that in 1939 Germany and the Soviet Union would conspire to divide up Poland between them, thus giving them a common frontier from which Hitler would launch his invasion in 1941.

The game's organizers preferred a scenario by which Nazi Germany, through a combination of military and diplomatic pressure, compelled the Poles to join an anti-Soviet alliance. Tukhachevskii was in basic agreement with this assumption, Isserson wrote, which ultimately formed the political-military background for the war game. He added that in a private conversation during the war game's preparation, the marshal expressed "a number of interesting and deeply thought-out ideas" on the ability of the German army to secretly concentrate its forces along the Soviet Union's frontier.⁴⁹

As regards Isserson's first point, Tukhachevskii, as events would show, could not have been more wrong about Poland's eventual participation in an anti-Soviet crusade. That the latter could even entertain such a notion is simply further evidence of the Soviet regime's deeply set institutionalized paranoia, which saw the country surrounded by hostile neighbors, among which no anti-Soviet combination was too far-fetched. As for the second point, Tukhachevskii was no more prescient, although Isserson attempts to portray the marshal's remarks as evidence of the latter's strategic foresight in predicting the German army's

attack in June 1941. While the marshal must be credited with some insight, the fact remains that there was no “surprise” attack in 1941, as one usually understands the term, and that the Soviet leadership possessed ample information as to the strength and organization of the Axis forces massing along the country’s borders, the magnitude of which could not be disguised, regardless of elaborate German deception measures. Rather, the German “surprise” was due entirely to Stalin’s willful misreading of the information at his disposal and his unswerving belief in his own infallibility as regards his estimate of Hitler’s intentions.

According to Isserson, this basic political assumption underlying the war game was the subject of some controversy, although he did not elaborate as to the specific points of disagreement. Its resolution delayed matters for nearly a month, only after which he could proceed with drawing up the game’s military-strategic assumptions. The latter problem, he added, proved to be no less knotty and came down to determining the size of the forces to be allotted to the enemy. He stated that the game’s organizers used as a base Hitler’s public intention of building a post-Versailles army of 36 divisions, which given a German mobilization coefficient of 1:3, would eventually yield some 100 fully mobilized divisions. It was further assumed that for the purposes of the game that the Germans would deploy 50 to 55 of these divisions to the north of the Pripiat Marshes. There they would be joined by 30 Polish divisions, out of more than 50, for a total of about 80 divisions along the western strategic direction. Isserson cites this latter figure as proof of the war game’s accuracy, adding that in 1941 the Germans alone deployed 79 divisions north of the marshes in two army groups.⁵⁰

Tukhachevskii, however, objected to this figure, and held that it seriously underestimated Germany’s mobilization capabilities. He argued that if the Germans were able to mobilize 92 divisions at the start of World War I, a new conflict would see them capable of deploying some 200 divisions, without which capability they would hardly dare to enter a major war. To do any less, he argued, would be tantamount to suicide, as such a European-wide war would inevitably become for them a two-*front* affair demanding total mobilization. On the basis of these calculations, Tukhachevskii believed that the Germans alone would be able to deploy some 80 divisions north of the Pripiat Marshes, for a force, with the Poles, of 110 divisions along that direction. Isserson later lauded the marshal’s estimate as being very close to the total number of Axis divisions (190) deployed against the Soviet Union in June 1941, and saw it as further evidence of Tukhachevskii’s genius. He added, however, that at the time the marshal’s prediction struck the game’s designers as “unjustified,” and that it would have created “too much of an unfavorable correlation of forces for us at the beginning of the war.”⁵¹ This statement implies that Marshal Yegorov, who as chief of the General Staff was in charge of conducting the game, rejected Tukhachevskii’s revised numbers.

Yegorov, for his part, had his own ideas on the proper course to be taken upon the outbreak of a war and dwelled upon the subject at some length on the subject in his 1932 report. To be sure, he was not a particularly deep thinker, and the ideas laid out in the report primarily reflected the thinking of his more gifted subordinates, particularly Triandafillov. However, as chief of the RKKA General Staff, the organ most directly concerned with the mobilization, concentration and deployment of the country’s armed forces, his views, for better or worse, assumed a decisive importance.

Yegorov saw the beginning period of war as that period immediately following the declaration of hostilities, when both sides would attempt to steal a march on each other in order to gain a decisive advantage during the opening operations. Yegorov placed his hopes

during the beginning period of the war on the creation of special “invasion groups” (*gruppy vtorzheniia*), made up of large mechanized and cavalry formations permanently stationed along the frontier and ready at a moment’s notice to enter the enemy’s territory in order to disrupt the latter’s mobilization efforts. Powerful aviation units, capable of striking targets deep in the enemy rear, in turn, would support these forces. This would take the form of air raids and airborne landings to a depth of 400 to 600 kilometers, so as to inflict “significant damage” to the enemy’s railroad system, as well as his air and naval forces.⁵²

Yegorov identified the invasion groups’ chief task during the opening operations as destroying the enemy’s covering forces along the frontier, which would open the way for a penetration into the enemy’s interior. At the same time, the invasion groups would disrupt the enemy’s mobilization measures in these frontier areas by destroying new units and supply depots designed to maintain them. These actions, if successful, would push the enemy forces back sufficiently so as to compel him to complete the deployment of his main forces well in his own rear.⁵³ The attacker, on the other hand, gains the immense advantage of completing his mobilization, concentration and deployment on his own territory and without significant disruption. In particularly favorable circumstances, he might be able to complete these measures on the enemy’s territory, thus gaining an additional advantage in bring his main forces to bear that much further forward for future operations.

The depth of the invasion groups’ penetration into enemy territory would be determined by a variety of factors, among which Yegorov cited the correlation of forces at the start of the operation, the presence of natural and man-made obstacles along the line of march, and the attacker’s supply situation. He did speculate, however, that a successful invasion along the western theater of military activities might reach as far as 200 to 300 kilometers into enemy territory.⁵⁴ This would be sufficient to remove the Baltic countries of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia from the war in a single blow, while a drive of such depth into Romania would make it virtually impossible for the latter to continue the war. The case of Poland was more problematical, although a penetration of this depth might bring the Soviet armies as far west as the Bug River, which would certainly put the defenders at a disadvantage for the war’s next decisive phase.

Yegorov cautioned against excessive optimism, however, adding that the invasion groups would only be able to create a “series of crises” within the enemy camp by defeating the enemy’s covering forces, by which he clearly meant Poland. The task of defeating the enemy would be left to the next stage of the fighting, once the two sides’ operational concentration was complete and their main forces went into action.⁵⁵

At first glance there does not seem to be much difference between the two marshals’ views. Isserson, however, clearly favored what he obviously regarded as Tukhachevskii’s more muscular approach to the problem, which promised a deeper and more offensive opening of hostilities. Yegorov’s ideas, on the contrary, reminded Isserson of the German army’s capture of the Belgian fortress of Liege at the beginning of the First World War, which was hardly inspiring.⁵⁶ This amounted to no more than a pin prick, after which a considerable amount of time would have to transpire before the invader’s main forces arrived on the scene.

One junior participant in this game puts the Red Army’s strength along the western direction at two “mixed” covering groups and five armies, although he provides no breakdown as to the number of tanks and artillery available to these forces. Soviet forces did dispose of considerable air power, however, of which 1,250 aircraft were subordinated to Uborevich’s Western Front, with another 500 machines assigned to the high command reserve.⁵⁷ Enemy forces were organized into an army group of two armies, plus a strategic

reserve. According to the game's designers, this force was to deploy along the line Ostrolenka-Kaunas, between the Narew River and the mouth of the Neman River, with the bulk of its strength along the left flank. Isserson wrote that this distribution of forces did not predetermine either the operational plan or the direction of the main attack, which is hardly correct, as the allocation of strength along the front inevitably goes far in determining the nature of the opening operations. Nonetheless, he maintained that the initial distribution of forces left the enemy commander complete freedom of action, a condition about which Tukhachevskii was particularly insistent upon. In fact, the war game's only requirement for the enemy forces was that they defeat the Red Army north of the marshes and take Smolensk, which would then be used as a springboard for an advance on Moscow.⁵⁸ This scenario also eerily foreshadowed the events of June and July 1941, when German forces quickly routed the Red Army in Belorussia and captured Smolensk in less than a month, although Isserson chose not to elaborate on this point.

Tukhachevskii objected strenuously to this latter requirement as well, and insisted that his forces' concentration between the Narew and Neman be considered only "preliminary," following their disembarkation from their trains. He felt that his forces should then be allowed to move up and deploy along the frontier before the Red Army's mobilization was completed, and attack first.⁵⁹ This was a perfectly reasonable demand and reflected more than just the marshal's desire to win. The game's scenario had Tukhachevskii's forces concentrating some 300 kilometers west of the Polish-Soviet border, after which they would march east for their first engagement with the Red Army. The General Staff's scenario created a patently ridiculous situation which put the marshal's forces at an immediate and serious disadvantage and all but guaranteed that the first clashes would take place somewhere between Minsk and Brest, deep in what was then Polish territory. This scenario also flew in the face of past experience, and, as World War I had shown, Russia, of the major powers, had been the slowest to mobilize.

No matter, according to Isserson, and Tukhachevskii's proposal was rejected by Yegorov, who evidently sought to vindicate the General Staff's strategic deployment plan by creating artificially favorable conditions for the Red Army's entry into war. This meant that not only would the enemy forces not have an initial superiority in strength, but also that they would reach the frontier only after the Red Army's major forces had deployed.⁶⁰ To be sure, this is hardly the first instance of a military bureaucracy "stacking the deck" in a war game in order to achieve a desired outcome. However, the General Staff's conduct in this case seems particularly egregious and may be explained as much by considerations of personal and bureaucratic prestige, as by Yegorov's dislike for the dynamic Tukhachevskii, with whom he had been on poor terms since they commanded separate *fronts* during the Polish War.

Given these multiple restrictions, the game, which was played out from April 19 to 25, 1936, could only have one outcome.⁶¹ Instead of the deep thrusts and broad maneuver envisioned by Tukhachevskii and the army's leading operational theorists, the war game, played out instead as a series of frontal collisions along the lines of the "Battle of the Frontiers," in 1914, resulting in no strategic decision for either side. Isserson later wrote that Tukhachevskii was "obviously disappointed" at this turn of events, which had deprived him of the opportunity to test his theories.⁶²

Whether or not this would have made any difference in 1941 is doubtful, and one should be careful not to overestimate the extent of Tukhachevskii's strategic foresight, as Isserson was wont to do. In retrospect, for all of the undoubted superiority of the marshal's proposals to the scenario preferred by the General Staff, his ideas still relied to a great extent

on the traditional unfolding of events at the start of a war: mobilization–concentration–deployment. This is not to criticize Tukhachevskii so much as to point out that no one could possibly have foreseen the events of the first half of 1941, when the Germans were able to deploy, completely unhindered, an invasion army along the Soviet Union’s western frontier and achieve complete strategic “surprise.” That they were able to do this with impunity constitutes, in the final analysis, a massive failure on the part of the Soviet political leadership.

Technically speaking, Tukhachevskii and the others who wrote on this topic were correct regarding capabilities of the “new forms’ of battle” to disrupt an enemy’s mobilization process in a future war. Their argument, however, was a strictly military one that posited the clash of two essentially equal powers, such as the Germans and the Western Allies in 1914, and did not take into account differences in military strength or the vagaries of politics. In fact, the 1939–41 period would witness several examples of an attacker successfully mobilizing and concentrating an invasion army against an opponent who was unable or unwilling to prevent it. For example, a technically superior German army that was fully deployed for war along their borders swiftly crushed Poland and Yugoslavia.

However, the Poles and Yugoslavs were much weaker than the Germans, even when mobilized, and were effectively isolated from immediate outside assistance from a major power. Much less understandable is the attitude of Britain and France during the so-called “Phony War” of 1939–40, during which their complete lack of urgency not only enabled Germany to defeat the Poles unhindered, but also allowed the former to fully deploy and prepare for the shattering blow which came the following spring. The inaction of the Soviet Union in the face of Germany’s obvious intent to invade also defies rational explanation and can only be understood in light of Stalin’s fear of Hitler and his wish not to anger him by undertaking such “provocative” measures as mobilizing the country for war against imminent aggression. Stalin was on seemingly firmer ground in believing that Hitler would not be so stupid as to attack the USSR before the end of the war with Great Britain, although here, too, he miscalculated badly by giving his fellow dictator too much credit. In the end, the Soviet dictator, so skilled in the art of treachery, proved too clever by half and was himself outwitted.

Meanwhile, Isserson’s tenure at the General Staff was coming to an end and did not long survive the war game, and for the same reasons that had so often dogged his career: not being able to get along with his superiors. This time the reason was a run-in with Corps



Marshal Aleksandr Il'ich Yegorov (1883–1939), ca. 1936. Isserson served briefly under Yegorov during the latter’s tenure as chief of the RKKA General Staff (courtesy Central Armed Forces Museum).

Commander Vasilii Nikolaevich Levichev, who at the time served as one of Yegorov's deputies. The two men had had sporadic contact in the latter half of the 1920s, when Isserson served in the Leningrad and Moscow military districts. Isserson later described their professional relations as "normal" and "without incident," although they did not socialize.⁶³ The two men did share similar academic interests and Levichev was the editor of a 1933 book, *War and Military Affairs*, which dealt with various aspects of the new forms of combat. It was perhaps significant, however, that for all of his identification with these issues, Isserson was not among the contributors to this work.⁶⁴

According to Isserson, the break between the two men was sudden and unexpected. He later testified that in the spring of 1936 he had been reviewing the army's mobilization and deployment plans, the compilation of which was one of the most important aspects of the General Staff's work. He said that this work revealed a number of "discrepancies," particularly dealing with support and rear units. He then drew up a report for Levichev, in which he requested that the latter appoint him or someone else to head a committee for reviewing the matter. Isserson stated that Levichev "did not like" this initiative, although he said that he failed to see how this disagreement could harm their relations. However, just a few days later he found himself precipitously transferred to the newly established General Staff Academy.⁶⁵

This move evidently surprised Isserson and later caused him to reevaluate his brief service on the General Staff. He later testified that he was soon "convinced" that his report had played the "chief role" in his transfer, as it was "met by Levichev very negatively, as touching upon his area of work."⁶⁶ Uborevich, who was aware of his former subordinate's quarrelsome ways, guessed at the true reason. At a meeting between the two men which took place shortly afterwards, he inquired of Isserson about the latter's sudden departure from the General Staff, and whether or not he had fallen out with someone. Isserson replied that his departure had been "unexpected," and that he was evidently an "undesirable person" in the General Staff.⁶⁷

This reply, while somewhat evasive as to the details of the conflict, is pure Isserson and reproduces in some ways his departure from the General Staff some ten years earlier. By claiming to be an "undesirable" element, he was thus able to portray himself in the most favorable light possible — that of a selfless martyr for the truth who was brought down by the jealous intrigues of his boss. However, if Isserson's version of events is true, he was certainly treated shabbily for merely trying to do his duty.

The General Staff Academy

As the war game had so obviously revealed, there existed very little in the way of unity of ideas in the army regarding operational-strategic issues. Defense Commissar Voroshilov responded to this problem earlier by convening an expanded meeting of the Military Council on February 15, 1936, which included not only high-ranking members of the Defense Commissariat and General Staff apparatus, but the military district commanders and the chiefs of various military academies as well. Many of those who spoke criticized the existing level of academic instruction for senior commanders, arguing that the Frunze Academy's predominantly tactical focus was chiefly concerned with preparing regimental and division commanders, while mostly ignoring questions of operational art and strategy. To be sure, the Academy's operational department had performed yeoman service in its nearly

five years of existence. However, the department's small capacity and its narrow focus were insufficient to meet the armed forces' growing need for a large contingent of commanders with theoretical training at the operational and strategic levels. The meeting concluded that a new institution of higher military education be established to address these concerns.⁶⁸

The party and government approved this recommendation and on April 11 Voroshilov issued the new General Staff Academy's charter. According to this document, the Academy was to be directly subordinated to the Chief of the RKKA General Staff, who was made responsible for setting up the institution and selecting the student body.⁶⁹ Practically speaking, this involved the annexation and expansion by the new academy of the Frunze Academy's operational department, including most of its existing faculty.

Isserson was fortunate that his latest brush with authority occurred when it did, as it gave him another opportunity to display his talents as an educator. His previous academic services had evidently been highly appreciated; despite his troublesome character, and on May 8 he was appointed to head the academy's department of army operations.⁷⁰ He later strenuously denied that his new job represented a demotion from his previous duties, although he admitted that his academic position involved less responsibility.⁷¹

Isserson threw himself into his new job with a zeal that a later generation would call "workaholic" in its intensity. According to his daughter, Isserson worked and wrote a great deal and spent little time with his family during these years. She recalled how a car would pick her father up in the morning for work and then bring him back at lunchtime. After a 20-minute repast, he would be taken back to work and would not return until nine in the evening, after which he would sit down at his desk and began to write. His work habits and demanding nature were known even in the top ranks of the Red Army. At the time of Isserson's appointment to the General Staff Academy, Voroshilov was heard to exclaim in mock horror that "he [Isserson] works like an animal and doesn't let anyone loaf. It's the end of freedom in the academy!"⁷²

It was while preparing for the coming academic year that Isserson made his second and final trip abroad. This time he traveled to France, which had moved closer to the Soviet Union after Hitler's accession to power in Germany. France, fearing German rearmament, had concluded a mutual assistance pact with the USSR in 1935, although the utility of this agreement was sharply reduced by the Nazis' remilitarization of the Rhineland in March 1936. The pact was further undermined the following year, which saw the beginnings of the Red Army's massive blood purge, which not only cast doubt on its political reliability, but which seriously degraded its combat value as well.

Isserson later testified that his primary task was to study the French military academy's methods of work, particularly during the summer, which implies that the trip probably took place sometime between May and August. He was also to take part in a staff ride and examine the French army's handling of operational documents. His companion for the trip was a Col. Shpilevskii, who headed the French section of the Red Army's intelligence apparatus.⁷³ Isserson returned the favor by reading a series of lectures at the academy, although in what language, is open to question. His daughter states that he also knew French, although not as well as German, and thus probably gave the lecture in French, without benefit of a translator.⁷⁴ This is open to some dispute, however, as Isserson indicated that he could read French with a dictionary, but spoke and wrote it "poorly."⁷⁵ It is not known what topics he spoke on, although one can presume that this had to do with his views on the deep battle and the deep operation. It was probably at one of these lectures that a French colonel paid Isserson the compliment of informing him that excerpts of *The Evolution of Operational Art*

had been translated into French and had been “studied attentively.”⁷⁶ However, to judge by the French army’s performance in 1940, the lessons of Isserson’s work were completely lost on his hosts.

While in France, Isserson also spent some time shopping for consumer goods, a common practice for those few Soviet tourists who were allowed to sample the forbidden fruits of capitalist society. This meant that he was able to indulge his passion for music by purchasing some records to add to his collection. He was also able to satisfy a more piquant interest — pornography, which came in the form of several magazines, which he was somehow able to get past the Soviet customs officials. Isserson’s daughter, who is the source for this story, said that because she was only eight years old at the time she was not allowed to see the materials, although her cousin (Galina Ivanovna’s daughter) and others did.⁷⁷ As this story indicates, Isserson may not have been quite the dour ascetic that he seems.

Isserson’s work on the tactical field manual evidently impressed his superiors, and upon its completion he was given another and even more responsible task. At the end of the summer of 1936 Yegorov entrusted him with compiling an operational manual to complement the forthcoming tactical document. A similar project had been attempted two years earlier, but the results must have fallen short of expectations, and the General Staff rejected it. Isserson called this assignment “significantly more complex” than the work on the tactical manual and also had serious doubts as to the expediency of the work. While he was only too glad to place the deep operation at the manual’s center, he nevertheless felt that it was too early to codify its principles in a field that was changing so rapidly. Moreover, he recalled, this assignment was further complicated by its lack of a definite strategic context, such as the beginning period of a war and its likely course of development. As a result, he lamented, the manual’s draft was nothing more than “an exposition of the technique of conducting an operation, its support and direction.”⁷⁸

Isserson recalled that the chief of staff urged him to complete the draft as quickly as possible, and by the autumn of 1936 it was ready. For unknown reasons, however, Yegorov did not make any decision and the draft remained with him throughout the winter of 1936-37. The beginning of the military purge in the spring of 1937 further complicated matters and Yegorov was soon transferred to other duties and his place taken by Isserson’s nemesis, Shaposhnikov. One copy of the document was later transferred to the General Staff Academy, where it served as “the basis for the teaching of the academic course of operational art.” Certain of its chapters were later printed as an “unofficial” textbook under the title of *The Fundamentals of Conducting Operations*. After this there were no more attempts to produce an operational manual before the war. Despite the lack of a theoretical guide, he nevertheless maintained that the basic principles of operational art were “well known” to the army high command by 1941.⁷⁹

The General Staff Academy opened its doors on November 1, 1936, at its new location on Bol’shoi Trubetskoi Lane (now Khol’zunov Lane) in the southwestern part of Moscow, not far from the Frunze Military Academy. Among those attending the opening was chief of staff Yegorov, who gave the inaugural address, in which he outlined the academy’s tasks in the increasingly dangerous international atmosphere of the time. Other guests included high-ranking members of the defense commissariat apparatus, as well as representatives from other academies, as well as from the various military districts.⁸⁰ The Academy’s first chief was Kuchinskii, previously chief of staff of the Kiev Military District. Isserson held a very high opinion of Kuchinskii, and later praised his “lively and practical mind,” calling him a “great organizer.”⁸¹

The overall number of students had been set at 250, with the first intake to consist of 125 commanders for the 18-month course of instruction. The students were chosen from among those commanders who had already graduated from the Frunze Academy and who had expressed a desire to further their military education, as well as those who had displayed an aptitude for command and staff work at a higher level, but who lacked formal training. The first intake actually consisted of 137 students.⁸² The academy's first class was particularly impressive and included a number of commanders who would later rise to great heights during World War II. Among these were the majors Leonid Mikhailovich Sandalov, Mikhail Il'ich Kazakov, and Aleksandr Nikolaevich Bogoliubov, colonels Antonov, Ivan Khristoforovich Bagramian, Vasilevskii, Nikolai Fedorovich Vatutin, Zakharov, and Aleksandr Petrovich Pokrovskii, and brigade commanders Govorov, Pavel Alekseevich Kurochkin, and German Kapitonovich Malandin, among others.⁸³ Vasilevskii, for example, served as chief of the General Staff for most of the war, as well as a *front* commander and chief of a strategic direction. The others served as *front* commanders or *front* chiefs of staff.

Isserson's department of army operations was described as the academy's "leading department," and was initially tasked with offering instruction in preparing and conduct-



Left: Brigade Commander Isserson, ca. 1936–39. This picture may have been taken while he was teaching at the General Staff Academy (courtesy Russian State Military Archives). *Right:* Lt. Gen. Ivan Khristoforovich Bagramian (1897–1982), 1943. Bagramian studied under Isserson at the General Staff Academy and praised the latter's abilities (courtesy Central Armed Forces Museum).



Left: Lt. Gen. Matvei Vasil'evich Zakharov (1898–1972), 1942. Zakharov served with Isserson in Belorussia and studied under him at the General Staff Academy (courtesy Central Armed Forces Museum). *Right:* Marshal Aleksandr Mikhailovich Vasilevskii (1895–1977), 1944. Vasilevskii studied under Isserson at the General Staff Academy (courtesy Central Armed Forces Museum).

ing army operations and the “fundamentals” of the *front* operation, the theory of military strategy, the conduct of independent air operations, and the organization of land and sea forces in a theater of military activities. Other departments included the department of the tactics of higher formations, which taught the theory and practice of conducting the battle by rifle, cavalry, mechanized, and air corps, as well as these formations’ training. The department of organization and mobilization was concerned with the armed forces’ concentration, deployment and supply at the level of the military district and theater of military activities. The department of military history studied warfare from the 18th century to the present, before it was disbanded in 1937. The department of foreign languages offered instruction in English, French, and German, the languages of possible allies and the probable enemy. In 1937 the department of socio-economic disciplines was created, offering instruction in Marxist-Leninist theory and the history of the communist party.⁸⁴

The academy’s course of instruction was divided into three semesters, punctuated by brief vacations. The first involved the detailed study of various weapons systems, the equipment of the combat arms and their employment in the battle and operation. The students also attended lectures on the tactics of higher formations, and in groups of 12 to 15 students conducted map exercises rifle, cavalry, and mechanized corps. The second semester was chiefly concerned with operational questions, in which the students sought to master the complexities of conducting army offensive operations according to the tenets of the deep bat-

tle and operation. The first intake's students also conducted map exercises with military district commanders Uborevich and Yakir on such topics as "The Breakthrough of an Enemy's Prepared Defense," and "The Commitment of a Mechanized Corps into the Engagement."⁸⁵

The students were granted an extended six-week vacation in early June 1937, although this may have been due to the beginning of the army-wide purge. Upon their return they began the third semester, which included a two-week trip to the Baltic or Black Sea fleets to acquaint the students with naval matters and the peculiarities of conducting combined operations along a maritime axis. This was followed by further practical training and participation in field exercises. They then traveled to Ukraine to take part in a major military exercise hosted by the Kiev Military District, in which the students worked in staffs at various levels. Upon their return to Moscow they took two weeks to prepare for their examinations.⁸⁶

Opinions of Isserson's work in the new academy varied among his students and colleagues. This is hardly surprising, as his brilliance as a theorist and lecturer, combined with his abrasive personality were bound to generate conflicting views. One student who recalled Isserson was Sandalov, who later went on to a distinguished career as an army and *front* chief of staff during World War II. He later stated that Isserson, Shilovskii, and Melikov "enjoyed the students' particular love," adding that to attend their lectures, "brilliant in form, and distinguished by a deep ideological and scientific content, was a real pleasure for us."⁸⁷ Another was Petro Grigor'evich Grigorenko, who entered the academy in the fall of 1937. Grigorenko stated that while Isserson "was not a dynamic lecturer, his exposition was so logical that one did not want to miss even one link of his chain of unity."⁸⁸

One student who highly valued Isserson's contribution to the academy's program was Bagramian, who later went on to a stellar career as a high-ranking staff officer and later as an army and *front* commander during World War II. Bagramian described Isserson as a "known figure" in the academy, and as an "all-round, erudite military theoretician." He wrote that Isserson was considered the "leader" of the new generation of young military talent which had arisen under the Soviet regime, and the Red Army's most "most qualified theoretician in the field of operational art" following Triandafillov's death. According to this account, Isserson's "Sharp analytical mind and brilliant memory, combined with literary talent, enabled him to create works which were distinguished by their soundness, strict scientific cogency, and originality," which "aroused a good deal of interest." He also praised Isserson as a speaker, writing that the latter "laid out his views in an extremely intelligent and interesting manner in exercises, lectures and critiques." He singled out Isserson's written works for praise as well, citing in particular *The Evolution of Operational Art* and *The Fundamentals of the Deep Operation* as books that influenced him and other students deeply. Bagramian had a particularly high opinion of *The Evolution of Operation Art*, which, he said, "was worth several weighty tomes" for the "profundity of its thinking and logic of its exposition." He added that "All of the important works and studies on operational art" then used in the academy were written by him.⁸⁹

To be sure, Bagramian continued, Isserson had his faults, which were mostly of a personal nature. Isserson, he wrote, was inclined to "overestimate" his own importance, which, judging by what others have said, plus Isserson's own admissions on this score, is not an unfair statement. "Unfortunately," he continued, Isserson "loved to show off, attempting to portray himself as practically the founder and head of the Soviet school of operational art." He did add, however, that despite this all too human fault, "I personally maintained forever a feeling of sincere respect for him as a military theoretician."⁹⁰

Others were far less complimentary in their remarks. One of these was Val'demar Karlovich Vul'f, a military historian, who was arrested during the course of the 1937–38 purges of the armed forces, and who was soon testifying against his former colleagues.⁹¹ Vul'f later blasted Isserson for his haughty ways and derisively called him a “lord” (*barin*). He claimed that Isserson “considered himself better than others” and often dismissed dissenting opinions with the phrase “there’s no need to consider all this rubbish.” In fact, so full was Isserson of himself that he would refuse to take a seat in a public bus if he noticed that other commanders were already sitting there. According to this account, academy chief Kuchinskii had to humor this quirk and requisition a separate bus for him.⁹²

Unfortunately, there is no way to verify this claim, which if true, certainly does not reflect well on Isserson. However, it must once again be recalled that Vul'f was under arrest at the time and may well have felt that the best way out of his predicament was to implicate others in order to win points with his interrogators. If this meant settling purely personal scores, then so much the better. However, his claim that Isserson was intellectually arrogant certainly rings true. Isserson admitted as much years later, when he stated, “I reacted very painfully to criticism of my views, and often did not consider the views of the other teachers and my superiors, while I stubbornly put my ideas into practice.”⁹³

Aside from Isserson, the academy’s instructors included such well-known figures as Corps Commander Mikhail Ivanovich Alafuzo, the head of the department of organization and mobilization. Others included such colleagues as Division Commander Vakulich, head of the department of the tactics of higher formations; and Melikov, who headed the department of military history. Melikov was probably the closest thing to being a friend Isserson had and, among other works, was the author *The Problem of Strategic Deployment according to the Experience of the World and Civil Wars*, which appeared in 1935. Unfortunately for his later reputation, he also later wrote an embarrassing paean to Stalin’s military “genius” entitled *The Defense of Tsaritsyn (1918)*. Vul'f described Isserson and Melikov as “great friends,” adding that “neither of them would undertake any steps nor make any decisions in their academic work” without consulting each other. The two were “an inseparable pair,” he concluded, and were a “very close advisor and friend to each other.”⁹⁴



Maj. Gen. Vladimir Arsen'evich Melikov (1897–1942, or 1946), ca. 1941. Melikov and Isserson served together at the General Staff Academy and shared academic and musical interests (courtesy Central Armed Forces Museum).

Isserson’s other academic colleagues included Brigade Commander Tsiffer.⁹⁵ Still others included Division Commander Yan Yanovich Alksnis, Karbyshev, Division

Commander Svechin, Gotovtsev, Brigade Commander Yan Matisovich Zhigur, Aleksei Vladimirovich Kirpichnikov, N.A. Levitskii, A.I. Shtromberg, and Shilovskii.⁹⁶ Unfortunately for Soviet military science, many of these individuals would fall victim to Stalin's purge during the next two years.

Isserson warmly greeted the establishment of the General Staff Academy as representing "the highest stage in the development of Soviet military science before the war," and which "raised the training of our command cadres to the highest operational level" as opposed to the Frunze Academy, which prepared commanders for conducting the combined-arms battle.⁹⁷ It was also, he added, the place where "the theory of the deep forms of combat acquired their further, deeper development."⁹⁸ Nevertheless, he was quick to point out what he believed were the academy's shortcomings, the most serious of which he considered the lack of a course on strategy, which would reflect these deep forms. This, he would maintain, was the result of the Red Army's military theory failing to keep pace with the political changes occasioned by the appearance of a rearmed and aggressive Nazi Germany.⁹⁹

Isserson later recalled that during the first half of the 1930s the army's theorists simply had no opportunity to work on problems of strategy. This was because they had been far too busy elaborating and testing the new theories of the deep battle and the deep operation, which belonged, respectively, to the spheres of tactics and operational art. The deep battle involved combat chiefly at the division and corps level and dealt with the immediate task of breaking through the enemy front. The case with the deep operation's development was more complicated, and for the first few years the theoretical research in this area was chiefly confined to the army level. Isserson stated that this was because the Red Army at the time possessed only a few of those mechanized corps to which theory assigned the main role in the deep operation. Because of this scarcity, they could not be immediately combined into larger units, but, combined with mechanized divisions and cavalry, would be allocated to those armies carrying out offensive operations along the entire front. This circumstance served for a few years to restrict operational investigation to the operations of a single shock army.¹⁰⁰

Isserson maintained that it was only toward the middle of the decade that the appearance of sufficient numbers of modern weapons and their organization into operationally meaningful units, which he saw as the forerunners of the large tank armies of World War II, that the army's theorists could begin to think in terms of conducting the deep operation at the *front* level.¹⁰¹ The elevation of the deep operation to the competence of the *front* meant that by 1936 "the theory of the deep operation had achieved such a level of development" that the "strategic sphere of its employment could no longer be excluded," and that only "strategic scales and the strategic situation in a given theater of military activities" could give it the necessary grounding in reality.¹⁰² At this stage, he argued, it was necessary to "strategically animate" the theory of the deep operation "as a means of carrying out a definite strategic task and to impart to it a concrete direction, depending upon that strategic situation in which it might unfold in a given theater of military activities." Only on the basis of these "strategic premises" could the theory of the deep operation achieve its realization. For the operation, being a tool of strategy, and carrying out its tasks, "is always determined by conditions of strategic significance."¹⁰³

However, strategy, which is closely tied to larger political questions, was an area that was closely guarded by the country's leadership. Isserson recalled, "the slightest hint at the necessity of introducing, in one form or another, a course on strategy in the academy, as the basis for operational art, ran into objections from above." He recounted that Kuchin-

skii broached the question in a meeting before the institution opened. Marshal Yegorov, then chief of the General Staff, took umbrage and brusquely dismissed the proposal, asking: "Well, what are you going to study in strategy? The war plan? Strategic deployment? Or, the conduct of war? No one is going to let you do that, because that's a matter for the General Staff." Kuchinskii, faced with such powerful opposition, had no choice but to abandon the idea.¹⁰⁴

Isserson stated that Yegorov had completely misunderstood the proposal, and that the academy did not seek to impinge on the General Staff's prerogatives for drawing up mobilization and deployment plans. Rather, he maintained, the aim was "to bring the course on operational art closer to the real military-political situation" which had arisen in Europe by the mid-1930s as the result of Nazi Germany's aggressive rearmament drive. To do this, he claimed, it was necessary "to evaluate the new correlation and grouping of forces on our western frontier; to analyze and study the possible environment for the outbreak of a war and its beginning period."¹⁰⁵

Indeed, he added, such was the level of opposition from the General Staff that many high-ranking commanders refrained from speaking on strategic matters in the academy, although there was no shortage of those who were willing to lecture on the deep battle and the operation. According to Isserson, the only exception to this rule was Tukhachevskii, who delivered a single lecture on strategy in early 1937. Even in this case, however, the marshal's address was confined to the "general problems of modern war" and he presumably avoided those other issues that might have caused a fight with Yegorov.¹⁰⁶

This restriction caused Isserson to ruefully conclude that the General Staff Academy, for all the hopes surrounding its creation, had "not changed anything in our system of higher military education with respect to strategy, and this field remained to a significant extent a *terra incognita* for the General Staff's higher officers."¹⁰⁷ The consequences of this willful ignorance were not long in making themselves felt, he added, and "in 1941 we paid for our narrow view of the task of training General Staff officers and for the insufficient development of our military-theoretical thinking in the field of strategy."¹⁰⁸

Isserson's version of these events is certainly open to dispute, either as the result of a faulty memory, or an overly partisan approach to the entire question. Vasilevskii recalled that toward the end of the first intake's study period it was planned to "acquaint" them with the mechanics of the *front* operation and a "theoretical course in strategy."¹⁰⁹ However, the wording of this statement makes it unclear whether this was to be accomplished within Isserson's department, or separately. A Soviet-era history of the academy sheds more light on this question, when it states that the department of army operations originally offered instruction in the "fundamentals of the *front* operation" and the "theory of military strategy," among other subjects. However, this soon proved to be an unwieldy arrangement, and in 1937 Isserson's department was reorganized and given the narrower task of instructing the students in the techniques of army and *front* operations. At the same time, a separate department of strategy was established to deal with higher questions of military art.¹¹⁰ Thus it may be that Isserson was more miffed that the course on military strategy had been taken out of his domain. To someone as self-centered as he was, this may well have been tantamount to believing that such a course simply did not exist.

Indeed, the relationship between strategy and operational art was one that gave Isserson little peace during the academy's early years. In the winter of 1936-37 he and Vakulich approached Tukhachevskii for some insight into the questions that troubled them and to receive the marshal's recommendations on strategic questions.¹¹¹ The pair's approach to

Tukhachevskii was more than a little “subversive,” as the General Staff Academy was under the purview of the RKKA General Staff and was governed by that latter as regards course development and content. Moreover, the personal enmity between Tukhachevskii and Yegorov was well known and it is doubtful that the latter would have approved of his subordinates going to Tukhachevskii for advice on matters under his jurisdiction. Nevertheless, Isserson went ahead, which indicates how much he valued the marshal’s opinion, in spite of their previous differences. It also indicates that the differences were not as great as Isserson would later make them out to be.

Isserson was evidently still seeking a strategic foundation for his young department’s operational instruction and it was only natural that he would turn to the Red Army’s leading strategist for advice. During the course of their conversation he put to Tukhachevskii three basic questions regarding the contours of a future war, the answers to which would have great bearing on the department’s operational exercises. The first question concerned the Soviet Union’s probable opponent in a future war, to which Tukhachevskii unequivocally replied Nazi Germany, citing the technical development of the German army, as well as its tactical and operational views.¹¹²

The second question dealt with the likely operational situation at the beginning of a future war. Tukhachevskii called this the “most complex” problem and said that under current conditions it was impossible to predict the exact contours of such a war. He was certain, however, that the outbreak of the next war would be sharply at variance with the conditions that obtained in August 1914. As opposed to the previous conflict’s clearly defined phases, which saw the belligerents’ first concentrate their armies on the frontiers and then deploy for an advance into enemy territory, he predicted that the next war would see both sides undertaking major land, air, and naval operations by existing forces immediately upon the outbreak of hostilities. He also cautioned that under certain circumstances the enemy might pre-empt the Red Army and strike the first blow.¹¹³

Tukhachevskii recommended that the government undertake a number of peacetime measures to lessen the consequences of such a development, which were an extension of his earlier-expressed views on the subject. He proposed the construction of an elaborate network of fortified areas (*ukreplennye raiony*), which would have the effect of channeling an enemy invasion along certain axes favorable to the Red Army. A number of permanent “covering armies” (*armii prikrयीiia*) would further guard these axes. These armies would be held in a high state of readiness for immediate action upon the outbreak of war. Ideally, they would occupy a masked flanking position along the enemy’s most likely axis of advance. As Isserson summed up these thoughts, “the fortified areas were to be the shield, taking upon itself the enemy offensive, and the secretly concentrated border armies — the hammer delivering the flanking blow.” In fact, Tukhachevskii stated, one may foresee the war’s opening operations unfolding as large meeting operations of the opposing armies along certain axes, punctuated by holding and defensive operations along others.¹¹⁴

Tukhachevskii cautioned, however, that the covering armies, being merely the tip of the country’s overall mobilization effort, couldn’t by themselves achieve a decisive result against a large army such as Germany’s. Instead, their primary function would be “to occupy an advantageous strategic line,” which Isserson called the “chief objective” of the war’s opening operations. Once this task had been completed, the country’s main forces would eventually deploy along this advanced position, which would offer a convenient line from which future large-scale offensive operations could be launched.¹¹⁵

Isserson’s third question concerned the character of operations during the war’s open-

ing phase. Tukhachevskii reduced this to the problem of whether maneuver or positional warfare would predominate, and praised Isserson's *The Evolution of Operational Art* as being essentially correct in coming down in favor of maneuver operations. He then proceeded to chide his younger colleague, however, for what he felt was the latter's too-optimistic prognosis regarding the heightened prospects for maneuver in the future. Instead, Tukhachevskii declared, "operations will be incomparably more intense and difficult than in the First World War. Then the Battle of the Frontiers in France took 2–3 days. Now such an offensive operation at the beginning of a war might last for weeks." He went on, adding, "the fighting will be stubborn and drawn out; during this time great fluctuations in the front may occur in this or that direction and to a great depth." Tukhachevskii said that in such a situation the victory would go to the side possessing moral superiority and deep operational reserves. Here he lauded Isserson's idea of maintaining a deep operational formation for sustained fighting ability, which the latter had detailed in *The Fundamentals of the Deep Operation* a few years earlier. "If we had had such deep echelons during our approach to the Vistula in 1920," he mused out loud, "then the operation's outcome might have been quite different."¹¹⁶

It should be noted here that Tukhachevskii did not mention Isserson's previous harsh criticism of his conduct of the drive on Warsaw in 1920, which Isserson later maintained had soured their relations. This further calls into doubt Isserson's version of events when, under arrest, he attempted to distance himself from the disgraced marshal. From this one may surmise that Tukhachevskii either had come around to admitting the justice of his subordinate's criticism, or at least chose not to dwell on the subject. Such forbearance certainly speaks well of his patience.

Tukhachevskii concluded his two-hour discussion by stating that future operations "may play out as large-scale maneuver actions in space and extended in time." However, he cautioned, "stagnant" periods are likely to ensue, which may result in positional conditions more reminiscent of the previous war. Such periods, he said, "cannot be excluded, and it is likely they will be inevitable."¹¹⁷ Here the marshal showed himself to be especially prescient. And although the German-Soviet war of 1941 to 1945 is remembered primarily as a war of broad-ranging maneuver and deep offensive drives, there were nevertheless extensive periods of positional warfare, particularly along the secondary axes.

Isserson recalled that he and Vakulich left Tukhachevskii's office feeling "enriched and knowledgeable." He later credited his conversation with the marshal as having "injected clarity and definition in the understanding of many important problems." The conclusions they took back with them, he said, later "formed the basis" for the academy's course of operational art.¹¹⁸

These conclusions formed the theoretical basis for many of the academy's operational-level war games for the next few years, despite the fact that Tukhachevskii and many of his followers had only a few months to live. These games were all built around the conduct of a deep offensive operation by a single army along the Soviet border with Poland north of the Pripiat Marshes. The war games were organized and conducted by the entire staff of the department of operational art as a means of testing the deep operation's premises, and Isserson doubtlessly played a leading role in this activity. He was assisted in the 1937 game by his acquaintance from Belorussia, Zakharov.¹¹⁹

Isserson later wrote that one of the major goals of these exercises was to work out various scenarios for the commitment of the army's breakthrough development echelon following the piercing of the defender's tactical position. The first scenario posited an offensive against a weak defensive system lacking adequate reserves, in which case the ERP would be

committed at the beginning of the attack, or before the rupture of the enemy's tactical defense. In such an event the ERP would itself take part in the tactical breakthrough before moving into the operational depth. This was certainly the simplest option, although Isserson cautioned that it could only be employed against a weak opponent. The second variant was considered the most likely and foresaw the infantry achieving the tactical breakthrough, followed by the commitment of the ERP. It was further assumed that given a moderately strong enemy defense this might be accomplished at the close of the first day of the ground attack. The third scenario was considered the most difficult and involved an attack against a heavily fortified defensive position, which might involve several days of hard fighting. In such a case, the ERP might be committed into the fighting early in order to strengthen the initial attack and complete the tactical breakthrough. Isserson called this option the "least desirable," as it risked exhausting the ERP before it could embark on its main task in the enemy's operational depth.¹²⁰

The war games' participants also played out a number of scenarios for the employment of the ERP in the enemy's operational depth. The first, or "short," option foresaw a "comparatively weak" breakthrough development echelon operating against a defender lacking significant reserves. In this case, the ERP, having broken through the enemy's second position, would quickly turn inward in order to surround and destroy the enemy's forces still at the front. According to this scenario, even the ERP's forward detachments would advance no more than 50 kilometers into the enemy's rear. A "deep" option posited the exploitation by a powerful ERP, in order to destroy the defender's operational reserves in conjunction with air strikes and airborne landings in his rear. This attack might reach as deep as 100 kilometers, leaving the isolated enemy defenders still at the front to be eliminated by the attacker's motorized infantry. The third, or "combined," scenario saw one ERP operating in tandem with its counterpart in a neighboring army. Following their commitment, the two echelons would then drive toward each other along intersecting axes, thus trapping large enemy forces and destroying them.¹²¹

Isserson later declared that "in one way or another all of these variations later found employment in the Great Patriotic War."¹²² This statement, while no doubt self-serving, is nonetheless essentially correct. This fact, he added, was testimony to the high degree of sophistication that the theory of the deep operation had achieved by 1936–37, which he described as the theory's years of "new flight and animation. Unfortunately," he recalled, "this upsurge did not continue for long."¹²³

A Domestic Interlude

Isserson's transfer to the capital in early 1936 corresponded with what was a relatively happy period in Soviet history. By this time the horrors of collectivization were behind, along with mass starvation in the countryside and food rationing in the cities. The tumult caused by the party's forced industrialization policies had subsided somewhat as well, and the country now seemed embarked on a more rational and less frenetic course. Fueled by the quantitative successes of the Soviet Union's second Five-Year Plan, by the end of 1937 the USSR was producing 28.5 million tons of oil, and 128 million tons of coal per year. In 1937 the USSR produced 17.7 million tons of steel, or nearly three times more than in 1932. Automobile production rose in the same year to 199,900, which represented a nearly eight-fold increase over 1932.¹²⁴ According to some quantitative indices the Soviet Union was

already the leading industrial power in Europe and ranked only behind the United States in overall industrial production.

The armed forces were the chief beneficiary of this campaign and by the middle of the decade the Red Army, at least on paper, was easily one of the strongest forces in Europe. By 1935, for example, the army possessed 83,922 light and 53,492 heavy machine guns, 13,837 artillery pieces, 76-mm and larger, as well as 6,672 aircraft. The army could also boast of 10,180 tanks and tankettes, which made it easily the largest armored force in the world.¹²⁵ Nor did the Soviet military industry show any signs of slowing down, and by the end of the second Five-Year Plan in 1937 the Red Army could field some 15,000 tanks and tankettes.¹²⁶ Overall, the Red Army grew at a slower rate, although it did increase from 885,000 men in 1933 to more than 1,500,000 men by the end of 1937.¹²⁷

This period was also the high-water mark of the prewar Red Army's power and influence in Soviet society. The officer corps enjoyed unprecedented prestige, although the term "officer" would remain politically taboo until the Second World War, while the state propaganda machine labored mightily to portray the military in a positive light. As a result of the 17th party congress in 1934, military members of the Central Committee included Yakir, Army Commissar First Class Gamarnik, the head of the armed forces' Main Political Directorate, as well as defense commissar Voroshilov, who was also a member of the ruling Politburo and one of Stalin's closest associates. Candidate members of the Central Committee included Marshal Bliukher, commander of the Special Red Banner Far Eastern Army, Marshal Budennyi, the Red Army's inspector of cavalry, marshals Tukhachevskii and Yegorov, and Gamarnik's deputy, Army Commissar Second Class Anton Stepanovich Bulin.

The military's exalted position had its material perquisites as well. While much of the Soviet Union's urban population lived in cramped communal apartments, or worse, the higher command element was, by comparison, well housed. For example, Division Commander Vol'pe enjoyed at one time a large apartment, which contained four rooms, which was an enormous luxury for the times.¹²⁸ Isserson, as a brigade commander, received a four-room apartment in the Chistye Prudy area of Moscow upon his return to the capital, and during these years the family even employed the services of a live-in maid.¹²⁹ Of course, these apartments and many other items did not belong to them personally, but were entirely dependent upon their position. No matter, as such privileges were highly appreciated in a society characterized by chronic scarcity; in this way Stalin earned the loyalty of the army and other members of the Soviet Union's new ruling class.

This situation led to the appearance of a Soviet high society, inhabited by artists and other members of the "creative intelligentsia," high-ranking party members, and even senior military commanders. Voroshilov, for example, was known as a patron of the opera, while Stalin himself enjoyed masquerading as a friend of the arts. The Issersons, being at the lower levels of the senior military leadership, may have had passing contact with this group from time to time. Not that the initiative for socializing would have come from Isserson, whose dour and no-nonsense demeanor did not lend itself to such "frivolous" behavior. Isserson was certainly no *bon vivant*, a quality that his daughter attributed to his extreme "pedantry." This carried over into most social situations, adding, "flies died from his merry making," which was another way of saying that her father was a "wet blanket."¹³⁰

What socializing the family did was doubtlessly the result of Yekaterina Ivanovna's natural charm and zest for life. The Isserson's sometime got together during these years with the Vol'pes, mainly due to the sisters' close ties and despite the bad blood that existed between the two heads of the families. Vol'pe at the time was chief of the RKKA Admin-

istrative-Mobilization Directorate. He had become somewhat of a historian in his own right and in 1931 had published *The Frontal Blow*, an examination of offensive operations during World War I. Isserson's daughter stated that the family also paid visits to the family of Corps Commander Zhan Fritsevich Zonberg, then an inspector with the civil-military preparedness organization (Osoaviakhim).¹³¹ Isserson may also have socialized with Krasil'nikov, whom he claimed to have known "quite closely" from their mutual work at the General Staff Academy.¹³² As has been shown, Isserson also seems to have been close to Zakharov.

Irena Georgievna described her mother as a "strikingly beautiful" woman who "danced amazingly" and was much in demand on the social circuit.¹³³ Budennyi, her husband's former pupil at the Frunze Academy, openly admired her. Another who paid court to her was Georgii Mikhailovich Dimitrov, a Bulgarian communist, best known as the man accused by Nazi authorities of setting fire to the Reichstag in early 1933. He was acquitted of these charges the same year and left for Moscow, where he headed the Comintern (Communist International) from 1935 to 1943. Following World War II he was also head of the Bulgarian government from 1946 until his death three years later. As flattering as this attention may have been, however, Yekaterina Ivanovna remained true to her husband.¹³⁴

More serious were the attentions of the young Tito (Iosip Broz), the postwar president of Yugoslavia, who at the time was a minor party functionary working in the Comintern apparatus. According to Irena Georgievna, Tito wanted to marry her mother, even though he was still married to his second wife. This proved to be too much for Isserson, who threatened to take away their daughter and denounce his wife as "one of the former ones" (*iz byvshikh*).¹³⁵ This was no idle threat, as the "revolutionary justice" of the time would almost certainly have sided with a high-ranking military commander against the daughter of a member of the former "exploiting class." Following Stalin's purge of the foreign communist community, Tito rose quickly to become head of the Yugoslav communist party and headed its resistance movement during World War II. In 1948 Tito broke with Stalin and for several years was ostracized from the international communist movement.

Isserson's attitude toward the attentions paid his wife is particularly striking, considering his history of affairs with other women. Irena Georgievna said that "Papa wasn't very tall, but he loved the ladies," elsewhere describing him as someone who "really catted around."¹³⁶ This seems to have been a common vice among the elite and one that he shared with his nemesis Vol'pe, who courted the ballerinas of the Bol'shoi and Stanislavskii theaters.¹³⁷ Yekaterina Ivanovna knew of these betrayals, her daughter stated, but because she was so scared, she "sat and endured it."¹³⁸ No doubt, much of her fear was due to the threat that Isserson might take away their daughter.

As these passages indicate, Isserson was very much the domestic tyrant and he took advantage of his wife's retiring personality in order to impose his will on his family. His daughter described Isserson as a "stern man" with a "very difficult character." With Isserson this sternness seems often to have crossed the boundary into outright selfishness and a lack of regard for the needs of others, who, by rights, should have been dearest to him. His daughter recalled that Isserson was something of a gourmet and that he "loved to eat, but only what he loved." This meant, she added, that the family only ate those foods which were acceptable to her father, saying, "God forbid that it should be something he didn't love."¹³⁹ Irena Georgievna said that as a child she would be in bed with a fever while her father listened to his favorite music, and her mother would approach Isserson and ask him to turn down the volume, and he would turn up the volume, out of spite. "He evidently didn't have a speck of familial love," she concluded ruefully.¹⁴⁰

Isserson's single-minded devotion to his work inevitably took a toll on his long-suffering family. He was so consumed by work, his daughter recalled, that he could not stop thinking about it even during their rare moments of "quality time" together. The two sometimes took long walks together in Moscow's Sokol'niki Park, the scene of the famous Khrushchev-Nixon "kitchen debate" nearly a quarter-century later. "I hated those walks," was how she described the outings, "because I had to walk silently beside him," so as not to disturb his thought processes. "Imagine an eight or nine year-old child and she has to remain silent. Of course, this meant no kicking up your feet or anything. And he would walk for hours, mulling things over."¹⁴¹ In reading this passage one gets the impression that at times during these "forced marches" Isserson would forget about his daughter altogether. Indeed, a photograph taken of the two at the Caucasian resort of Kislovodsk that year shows an unhappy little girl who wishes that she were anywhere else.

To do the man justice, however, many of his shortcomings as a husband and a father may be attributed to his virtues as a thinker and a writer. His daughter noted that "nature loves the middle path, and if she rewards you in one thing she shortchanges you in another."¹⁴² Such devotion to duty certainly accounts for his phenomenal productivity in the academy, where he produced a number of outstanding works in various fields.

For all of his personal shortcomings, Isserson's vices at least did not include heavy drinking, a failing that was all too common among his and succeeding generations of Red Army commanders. With him quite the opposite was true, and his daughter flatly stated that her father "did not know how to drink" and "did not enjoy doing so." According to her, Isserson attended a Kremlin reception during this time at which Stalin himself was present. The dictator, as other witnesses have testified, enjoyed seeing his guests intoxicated, either as a means of loosening their tongues, or because he enjoyed seeing others embarrass themselves. Stalin evidently noticed that Isserson was not imbibing and ordered his underlings to get him drunk, which they succeeded in doing, so that by the time he arrived back home he was far gone. He must have presented quite a sight as he got out of the car in full dress uniform and medals, which included two orders of the Red Star. At this point Isserson noticed a puddle and set down beside it. He then took out a clean handkerchief,

and removing his hat, proceeded to daub his aching head with water from the puddle.¹⁴³

Isserson was known to his close acquaintances as "Georges," pronounced in the French manner.¹⁴⁴ The choice of the term "acquaintances" in this case is significant, and it would appear that Isserson had no real friends, as one generally understands the term. For the most part, even these acquaintances seem to have been work-related and built on the basis of mutually shared interests in military



Isserson and his daughter, Irena, in Kislovodsk, 1936 (courtesy Russian State Military Archives).

affairs, which might quickly change. As the acrimonious falling out with Vol'pe reveals, Isserson could be extremely harsh in judging those with who he felt had let him down.

Perhaps the closest thing Isserson had to a friend was Melikov, a fellow instructor from the General Staff Academy. The two men shared a passion for classical music, and Isserson's daughter recalled that her father had amassed a collection of more than 500 records before the war. The pair would sometimes gather at the Issersons' apartment, where they would turn on the record player and pretend to conduct an orchestra. She still laughs at the memory of her father, who at 5'4" was dwarfed by the tall and gangly Melikov, and the two men waving their hands in time to the music.¹⁴⁵ However, despite the two men's undoubted enthusiasm, their activity nevertheless has a sad air of enforced gaiety about it.

This story has a tragic ending, however, as was often the case during these years. Melikov was arrested after the start of the war as a member of a "military-fascist plot," and was shot in 1942.¹⁴⁶ Isserson's daughter said that her father later blamed Melikov for "denouncing" him, and claimed to have seen documents to this effect.¹⁴⁷ In fairness to Melikov, however, there is nothing in Isserson's arrest file that would substantiate this charge.

The explanation for the short-lived nature of even his professional relationships was his single-minded attachment to his work and the demands he placed upon himself and others. Isserson was also utterly fearless in defending those positions he believed to be right, and as the incidents involving Tukhachevskii reveal, rank had no meaning for him in these disputes. His unbending insistence on the rightness of his views and his forthrightness in expressing them made Isserson many enemies during his career. As has been shown, his relations with his superiors at a particular assignment often began on a positive note and then would later go rapidly downhill due to his unyielding devotion to the truth as he saw it. Isserson's unwillingness to compromise and his lack of qualms about expressing his views got him into hot water on more than one occasion, and may have ultimately lead to his downfall.

It was probably while Isserson was in France that his family spent the summer at a government-owned summer home, or *dacha*, which offered them some respite from the stifling heat of their apartment. Their house was located in the Serebrianyi Bor area, then just outside the city and still a popular recreation area. Issersons' daughter Irena recalled that last pre-purge summer with particular fondness, as only a child could see it. The Tukhachevskii's had the *dacha* next door, she said, and told how she and the other children used to sneak through the fence dividing the two properties and steal apples from the marshal's trees.¹⁴⁸

However, even as the armed forces basked in their newfound status; events were already afoot which would shake the military establishment to its core. In December 1934 an assassin shot and killed Sergei Mironovich Kirov, the Leningrad party leader and stalwart supporter of Stalin's policies, in a murder that the dictator himself may have had a hand in. Stalin proceeded to skillfully use this crime in order to settle old scores with his vanquished political rivals and those segments of the party that he suspected, rightly or wrongly, of being opposed to his rule. By 1936 the party and state apparatus were increasingly buffeted by a growing cycle of denunciations and arrests on various bizarre charges of "anti-Soviet activity." This campaign culminated in a series of notorious show trials during 1936-38, during which a coterie of "Old Bolsheviks" publicly confessed to fantastic charges of economic sabotage, plotting to kill the country's leadership, and planning to restore capitalism in the Soviet Union with the assistance of such hostile foreign powers as Germany and Japan. In August Stalin engineered the first of his great show trials; this one against the "Trotskyite-

Zinov'evite Unified Center," as the result of which his erstwhile former comrades Zinov'ev and L.B. Kamenev were convicted of treason and executed, along with a number of lesser individuals. This was followed in January 1937 by the trial of the "Parallel Anti-Soviet Trotskyite Center," in which Yurii Leonidovich Piatakov and a host of others were also found guilty and executed.

All of this seemed far away, however, and the armed forces apparently felt that they had no reason to be concerned in what was widely viewed as an intraparty struggle.

It was during the latter trial, however, that Tukhachevskii was fleetingly implicated in a plot, although the accusation was soon withdrawn. This should have put the military on notice that Stalin was preparing to move against it, but it failed to act. Yet how could it? After all, it was indebted to Stalin for all the meager privileges it enjoyed, which it had repaid by unswerving loyalty to the dictator. In any event, it was probably already too late. By late spring the number of arrests of high-ranking commanders was assuming alarming proportions. In May Tukhachevskii himself was relieved of his post as first deputy defense commissar and appointed to command the Volga Military District, in what was a clear demotion. The hand was raised to strike the blow that came close to destroying the Red Army.

CHAPTER 7

The Purge Years

The Military Purge

Given this buildup, Soviet citizens should hardly have been surprised to learn in June of 1937 that the investigative organs of the NKVD (secret police) had uncovered a “treasonous, counterrevolutionary, military fascist organization” within the Red Army. This group, allegedly headed by Tukhachevskii, also included among its members Yakir and Uborevich; Army Commander Second Class Avgust Ivanovich Kork, the chief of the Frunze Military Academy; Corps Commander Eideman, then chairman of *Osoaviakhim*; Corps Commander Boris Mironovich Fel’dman, chief of the RKKA Main Directorate; Corps Commander Vitalii Markovich Primakov, deputy commander of the Leningrad Military District; and, Corps Commander Vitovt Kazimirovich Putna, lately the Soviet military attaché in Great Britain. Voroshilov, who had reason to fear and dislike many of these men, triumphantly announced that this band of “loathsome traitors” had confessed to charges of treason, found guilty and been executed by order of a special military tribunal. A related victim was Garmarnik, the armed forces’ chief political commissar. Voroshilov denounced as “cowardly” Gamarnik’s recent suicide, which, he implied, was due to his ties to this group.¹

The charges against these commanders were patently ludicrous. To believe that a group of senior commanders, many of whom had risked their lives for Soviet power during the civil war, would sell out the system they had helped create to its enemies is nothing short of incredible. This was particularly the case with Tukhachevskii, who for all his revolutionary bombast, remained a Russian patriot at heart and was no more willing to betray his country to Germany than his imperial predecessors. Nor were they all that opposed to Stalin himself, although many may well have resented the dictator’s brutal ways and his growing penchant for settling political feuds with blood.

There does appear, however, to have been something of a “plot” against Voroshilov, or at least sufficient dissatisfaction within the armed forces to prompt some to think of his removal. Galina Ivanovna Vol’pe, Isserson’s sister-in-law, later wrote that her husband told her that there was some “talk” within the high command “against Voroshilov, or more exactly, against his leadership.” She recalled that her husband once had met one of his close friends, the very same Fel’dman mentioned in the indictment, coming out of Voroshilov’s office after having delivered a report. Fel’dman complained that the war commissar contin-

ually “slighted” him, hindered his work, and finally declaring that he “had no more strength to work under such tension.”²

The execution of Tukhachevskii and the others was only the beginning, however, and the purge quickly expanded beyond this modest slaughter to envelop the entire armed forces, reaching its crescendo in 1937–38, before tapering off, but never entirely halting during the rest of Stalin’s rule. The bloodletting was ultimately on such a scale that accurate figures are almost impossible to come by, and estimates of the total losses incurred vary considerably. One source states, for example, that some 40,000 individuals had been “purged” from the armed forces by the end of 1938, although this figure includes those who were discharged for non-political reasons as well.³ Another source puts the armed forces’ “real loss” at 20,000 to 25,000 men, a “conservative estimate” which takes into account the reinstatement of individuals previously arrested.⁴

Whatever the true figure, there can be no doubt that the losses inflicted on the armed forces during the immediate prewar years were enormous. A post-Soviet source calculates the loss for the 1937–41 period as follows: of five marshals in 1936, two, Tukhachevskii and Yegorov, were shot, while another, Bliukher, died while undergoing “interrogation”; of 15 army commanders first and second class in 1936, 19 were executed, while one returned from prison, the discrepancy due to the fact that some men were promoted to this rank to fill the gaps caused by the purge, only to become victims themselves before it was over; of four fleet flag officers first and second class in 1936, five were shot, while five of six flag officers were shot, with one returning from prison; of 62 corps commanders in 1936, 58 were shot outright, four died in prison, two committed suicide, and five were later released, with the difference once again due to promotions to this rank followed by further executions; of 201 division commanders, 122 were executed, and another nine died in captivity, while 22 were later released from jail; and, of 474 brigade commanders, 201 were shot, 15 died in prison, one committed suicide, and 30 were eventually released.⁵

The bloodletting was particularly severe within the central administrative apparatus, where, for example, all 11 deputy defense commissars were executed during 1937–38.⁶ Of the 85 men who comprised the defense commissariat’s Military Council in 1934–35, only eight escaped arrest, while another 68 were shot. Five were arrested, but were later released, while three members committed suicide. Only one of these, Army Commander First Class S.S. Kamenev, the former commander-in-chief of the Red Army during the civil war, died a natural death, and even he was posthumously denounced as an “enemy of the people.”⁷

During the 1930s no branch of the RKKA had been more lionized than the air force. However, this did nothing to save its upper echelon from Stalin’s murderous suspicion. From 1938 to 1941 four air force chiefs were executed, as well as six chiefs of staff. From 1937 to 1940 11 military district air commanders, two air army commanders, nearly all of the air corps commanders, 12 air division commanders, and more than 50 percent of air regiment commanders suffered “political repression.” The navy fared no better, despite being accorded organizational independence from the army at the end of 1937 with the creation of a separate naval commissariat. Between 1937 and 1940 four naval chiefs in succession were executed, as well as four others who had headed the navy between 1917 and 1931. All four fleet commanders also perished during these years.⁸

The toll was equally deadly among the ground forces’ upper echelons. For example, 15 serving military district commanders were shot during this period, as well as seven others who had previously held this position. Some military districts were particularly hard hit, with the Belorussian and Trans-Caucasus districts losing two commanders each to the

executioner, while the Urals Military District saw three of its commanders shot. Another 16 deputy military district commanders and eight assistants were also executed, while many districts lost one or more chiefs of staff.⁹

To give the reader a better picture of the extent of the slaughter, one should compare the Red Army's losses among the higher command cohort during the immediate prewar years with those it suffered during the 1941–45 conflict against Germany and its allies. During the latter conflict the army lost 180 officers from division commander up — 112 division commanders, 46 corps commanders, 15 army commanders, four *front* chiefs of staff, and three *front* commanders. The prewar Red Army, on the other hand, saw the "repression" of over 500 commanders (brigade commander and up), of which 29 died in prison and 412 were shot.¹⁰

A disaster of this magnitude could not help but touch in some way the life of every commander, and Isserson was no exception. Aside from Tukhachevskii, Yegorov, Uborevich, and Eideman, other victims with whom he had served included Corps Commander Gittis and Kuz'min, whom he had known from his service during the civil war.¹¹ Also among the fallen were Army Commissar Second Class Berzin, who had authorized Isserson's visit to see his parents in 1926, as well as Mezheninov and Levichev.¹² Army Commander Second Class Sediakin, who had rendered such assistance to Isserson and his allies at the Frunze Military Academy, was shot in 1938, as was Kuchinskii, the first chief of the General Staff Academy.¹³ Isserson may have taken some pleasure to learn that his bitter enemies from the Belorussian Military District, Corps Commander Gribov, division commissars Gornostaev, and Zel'dovich, were all swept away in 1938.¹⁴ Zhukov, another acquaintance from Belorussia, came within a hairsbreadth of being arrested, but somehow managed to survive.¹⁵ Promotion was swift for those lucky enough to survive, and within five years Zhukov had risen from the rank of brigade commander to military district commander, chief of the General Staff, and second only to Stalin himself in the military hierarchy.

In this atmosphere no commander was safe from denunciation and arrest. And although Isserson was spared, for the moment, the terror did come uncomfortably close and swallowed up members of his extended family, including his old nemesis Vol'pe. Isserson later recounted their last meeting in a detailed letter to the party commission of the Moscow Military District, which had requested an account of the two men's relations following Vol'pe's arrest.

According to Isserson's daughter, the incident had its origins in Gamarnik's suicide on May 31. Irena Georgievna said that soldiers arrived to put the commissar's body in a coffin, before loading it onto a truck. The general atmosphere was now such that people were already so frightened that they were even afraid to look out of the window. Not Felitsata Pavlovna, who was so overcome with compassion that she grabbed a pot of flowers and ran out to the courtyard and placed it on the coffin, as it lay in the courtyard. Galina Ivanovna immediately telephoned her husband about the incident and told him to come home immediately. There they set about packing Felitsata Pavlovna's things in a suitcase and carried her to the train station, where they bought the first available ticket to Karelia, in the far north.¹⁶

The choice of Karelia was not accidental, and the Vol'pes probably felt that the further away Felitsata Pavlovna was from Moscow the safer she'd be. She would not be without companionship, however, as her youngest child, Innokentii Ivanovich had been living there for some years. The latter had not had an easy life under the new regime. Upon his father's death in 1922 rumors had immediately begun to circulate that Ivan Ivanovich had

buried his valuables to avoid expropriation by the Bolsheviks. The authorities afterwards arrested his son in the hope of extorting the information out of him, but as he knew nothing, he had nothing to reveal. He was nevertheless sentenced to a term in a labor camp in Karelia, evidently calculating that this would “bring him around.” Following the end of his term he continued to work there as a free laborer in the Medvezh’e’gorsk area and even managed to marry.¹⁷

Isserson stated that Vol’pe and Galina Ivanovna came to his apartment on May 28 or 29, in order to see off the latter’s mother, who had been staying with the Issersons. As his guests were leaving, Isserson suddenly brought up the topic of Fel’dman, whose arrest had just been announced. “What does it mean, them taking away your friend Fel’dman?” he asked more than a little maliciously, knowing of the two men’s friendship. Vol’pe, who had every reason to fear this latest turn of events, replied, “Do you really think that they won’t demand an account from me? After all, Fel’dman and I had various conversations.” Isserson, who was evidently enjoying his in-law’s discomfort, replied “It depends on what kind of conversations. If you talked about things you shouldn’t have been discussing, then, of course, you’ll be held to account.”¹⁸ This was doubtlessly Isserson’s way of reminding his brother-in-law of their own unfortunate conversation ten years before.

Vol’pe was arrested almost immediately afterward. It is unlikely, however, that this was in connection with his mother-in-law’s alleged indiscretion, but rather his ties to the doomed Fel’dman.¹⁹ In any event, Vol’pe’s arrest was probably already being prepared even as the above-described events were unfolding. His wife left a riveting description of her husband’s arrest, followed by her own descent into the Stalinist hell. The story is important not only as an account of the author’s personal tragedy, but as a record of the times, as well, and deserves to be quoted here at length.

Galina Ivanovna wrote years later that the late spring of 1937 was an especially anxious time, as the machinery of repression began to move into high gear. At times she would go out at night onto the balcony that overlooked the courtyard of their apartment building, which housed a number of military families. What she saw there filled her with horror; the courtyard was full of NKVD automobiles, which arrived each night to carry away the latest group of arrestees. Some of these, she wrote, left under their own power, while others were rudely pushed into the waiting cars, sometimes half-dressed, as it was standard practice to arrest people at night, when they would be disoriented and less capable of offering resistance. “The building was full of terrible rumors,” she recalled, as the inhabitants sought to make sense of what was going on around them. Vol’pe tried to reassure her, but his explanations had little effect, and Galina Ivanovna could see that he was terribly nervous. “Everyone began to be afraid of each other,” she continued, and people started to withdraw more and more into themselves.²⁰

The Vol’pe’s spent their last evening as a family in separate locales, when the division commander left to see a performance at the Bol’shoi Theater. Galina Ivanovna and her 14-year-old daughter, also named Galina, had already seen the performance and decided to stay home, particularly as the young girl had an important test in school the next day. By the time Vol’pe arrived home around midnight, his wife and daughter were already asleep.²¹

Galina Ivanovna recalled that she was rudely awakened in the middle of the night by a flashlight being shined in her face. Once she recovered she saw five men gathered around the bed — two in civilian clothes and three in the uniform of the border guards. They dragged her husband out of bed, frisked and dressed him, and began to lead him away toward the door. Galina Ivanovna called out to her husband and the guards allowed him to go back

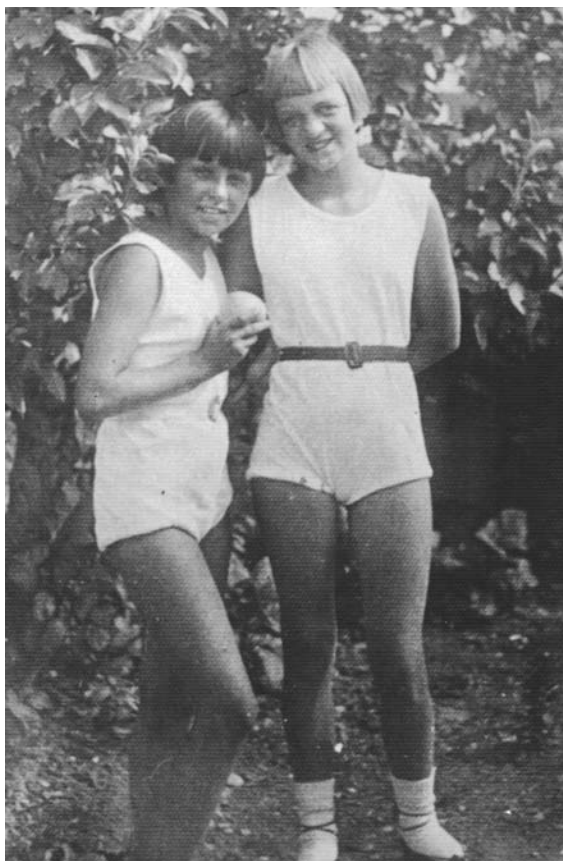
and kiss his wife goodbye. His last words to her were: “Galina, you’ve lived with me for 18 years and have been a friend to me. Don’t worry; it’s all a misunderstanding. Wait for me. I’ll come back.”²² This was not to be, however. Unknown to his wife, Vol’pe was sentenced to death on July 14 and executed the same day.²³

After Vol’pe had been led away, the remaining investigators set about searching the apartment from top to bottom. They paid particular attention to the library, carefully combing through each volume until seven o’clock in the morning, with Galina Ivanovna sobbing uncontrollably all the while. But the “most horrible” moment came, she recalled, when it came time to search her daughter’s room and she had to wake her up and tell her what had happened. After the arrest party finally left, Galina Ivanovna and her daughter went out on the balcony to compose themselves. “The city had awoken,” she wrote. “As always, streetcars and people were moving about, but all this was no longer ours, and it was as if we no longer had any right to any of this. We had become outcasts.”²⁴

The morning brought further shocks to the shattered family. Galina Ivanovna’s daughter brought in the morning papers, where for the first time she read about the discovery of an anti-Soviet “plot” in the armed forces. Among the “conspirators” mentioned were people she had known for years through her husband’s work. Not only were these people whom she “respected” and “believed in,” but some of them were also “very old friends of our family.”²⁵

That day brought further and more tangible evidence of the extent of the purge, which was really only getting underway. At about ten in the morning Mariia Oshlei, the wife of Corps Quartermaster Petr Matveevich Oshlei, unexpectedly dropped in. The Oshleis occupied the apartment above the Vol’pe’s and had evidently become close. “Galina,” (the diminutive of Galina) she said excitedly, “Don’t come to see us and don’t call. Petya” (the diminutive form of Petr) “was arrested last night.” Galina Ivanovna had to tell her friend that she had intended to call her and warn her of the same thing.²⁶ As it was, Oshlei perished along with thousands of others.²⁷

At about the same time another friend, Klavdiia Kovaleva, called, just back from her vacation in the southern resort of Sochi. Her husband, Brigade Commander David Mikhailovich Kovalev, had commanded the 48th Rifle Division after Vol’pe and was in Spain serving as a military advisor to the Spanish Republican army in that country’s civil war.



Galina Abramovna Vol’pe, left, and Tamara Yanovna Alksnis on vacation in the Crimea, 1934. Vol’pe’s father was shot in 1937, while Alksnis’s father died in a labor camp in 1943 (courtesy I.G. Yeremina).

Galina Ivanovna was forced to ask her friend to “forget for the time being about our friendship” and to stay with Army Commander First Class Ivan Fedorovich Fed’ko, another acquaintance. None of this did any good, however, as Kovalev was arrested upon his return from Spain, an all too common fate for those Soviet participants in that conflict.²⁸ He was later shot, as was Fed’ko.²⁹

As a result of Vol’pe’s arrest, his wife and daughter were evicted from their spacious apartment to a “half-basement” on Moscow’s Sadovaia Street. Their apartment, in turn, was taken over by Army Commander Second Class Nikolai Dmitrievich Kashirin, the head of the RKKA Combat Training Directorate. Kashirin had most recently “distinguished” himself as a member of the military “court” which had sentenced Tukhachevskii and the others to death. This deed did him no good, however, and before long he, too, was arrested and shot.³⁰

Galina Ivanovna was arrested on July 16, 1937, as a “ChSIR” (*chlen sem’i izmennika rodiny*), or “a family member of a traitor to the Motherland.”³¹ This was a common practice during Stalin’s time, when the spouses of those convicted were considered culpable as well. It was often worse, and the wives of Tukhachevskii, Uborevich, and Gamarnik were later executed, as were two of the marshal’s brothers. Three of his sisters were arrested and sent into exile, as was his daughter. One of these sisters died there, as did Tukhachevskii’s aged mother.³² Galina Ivanovna was more fortunate and she, along with several other wives, was sentenced to eight years in a “special” camp “without the right of correspondence,” which meant that she was not allowed any communication with the outside world.³³ In fact, her mother in Karelia only found out later that her daughter had been arrested. She learned this from the wife of the camp commandant, where Galina Ivanovna was serving her sentence.³⁴ Felitsata Pavlovna remained in Karelia with her son until 1940, evidently fearing that she would be arrested should she return to the capital.³⁵

Isserson’s reaction to the destruction of his sister-in-law’s family was a harsh and unfor-giving one, perfectly reflecting the brutal times in which he lived. He declared in his letter to the party commission that contact between his family and the Vol’pes had ceased and that even his wife had given up visiting her sister after the division commander’s arrest.³⁶ The initiative in this case most likely came from Galina Ivanovna herself, who wished to spare her sister’s family the danger of continued association with the relatives of an “enemy of the people.” If this was not the case, Isserson was just the man to pressure his meek wife to sever her ties with the ruined family, if only to save his own. Isserson admitted that the Vol’pes’ daughter, now quite alone, had occasionally been allowed to stop by. He quickly added, however, that “any kind of help and support” for this unfortunate had “ceased entirely.”³⁷ The latter was lucky not to have been arrested herself. She was later taken away to the Danilov distribution center and afterwards sent to a camp for juvenile “offenders” in Serdobsksk, in Saratov province. Some time afterward, thanks to the efforts of Yekaterina Ivanovna, she was allowed to return to Moscow and be raised by her grandmother.³⁸

The purge inevitably affected Isserson’s relations with other commanders as well and made him more cautious in his choice of acquaintances. One of these was Brigade Com-mander Bronislav Venediktovich Petrushevich, whom Isserson had known since 1923, when the former replaced him in the Western Front’s intelligence section. Their careers crossed again in the late 1920s in the Leningrad Military District, where Petrushevich was chief of the staff intelligence section, and the two would visit each other. They met again in Belorus-sia in 1934, where Petrushevich served as chief of staff of the 5th Corps. Shortly afterwards Petrushevich was transferred to the Trans-Caucasus, and their paths crossed again only in

the fall of 1936, when he enrolled as a student in the General Staff Academy. Isserson later recalled that Petrusevich, at the end of 1937 or the beginning of 1938 had arrived from Leningrad and stayed at his apartment for five days, which confirms Isserson's statement that their relations were "friendly." Petrusevich returned later, he said, and spent an hour and a half with his old friend at the latter's apartment. However, this time Isserson told him that he should stay at a hotel, after which they parted, never to meet again.³⁹ Petrusevich was arrested on January 31, 1938, and later shot.⁴⁰ Could Isserson have gotten wind of something and thought it the better part of valor to break off relations with his old friend?

As the months passed the terror reached such proportions that many people simply expected to be arrested, and each man prepared for the possibility in his own way. Isserson's daughter related one telling incident from the period that involved her own family. One night the family's maid returned from a date and suddenly had a hysterical fit in the apartment. The family had to summon a doctor, who gave the maid an injection to calm her, after which the family turned in for the night. Suddenly there was a knock at the door at four o'clock in the morning, which boded no good, as people in the same apartment building were already being arrested. Isserson got out of bed, gave his wife his watch, and told her that he was innocent. He then grabbed his service revolver and went to open the door, although his daughter does not know to this day whether he planned to shoot himself or go down fighting. Irena Georgievna was asleep at the time and heard nothing, but remembers her father telling her afterwards that he opened the door only to see the doctor who had been to their apartment a few hours before. "Excuse me," she said. "I didn't happen to leave my galoshes, did I?" Isserson later told his wife that he thought he was going to shoot her. "That's what the times were like," she concluded.⁴¹

This macabre story aside, Isserson was in constant danger of arrest, as were all commanders during these years. In fact, the NKVD was working overtime to gather "incriminating" material on every commander against the day when this "evidence" would be needed to justify an arrest. Their task was eased immensely by the vagaries of military life and the paper trail that followed each commander from one posting to another, whereby it was a simple matter to determine with whom the suspect served and whether or not any of these individuals had been "unmasked" as "enemies of the people." In the reigning atmosphere of guilt by association it was quite easy to become a suspect based upon a favorable performance evaluation by a superior later "implicated" in some plot, or by the simple fact of having served with that individual. Isserson, given his previous association with Tukhachevskii, Vol'pe, Uborevich, Mezheninov, and others, was particularly vulnerable on this score.

The means of obtaining confessions from those caught up in the terror were many and varied, and had been honed by the secret police to a high degree of perfection over the years. Among the methods used, the least odious was an appeal to communist party discipline, based upon the bizarre notion that a subject, by implicating himself and others as traitors, would actually be doing his duty to unmask real enemies. Other methods were more direct and included sleep deprivation and a system of continuous interrogation by teams of interrogators, known as the "conveyor." If these methods failed to produce the desired result, the NKVD would resort to beatings and other forms of torture, and, against particularly reluctant suspects, threats against their families, which often proved to be the trump card in breaking down a suspect's resistance to self-incrimination.⁴² Given this arsenal of weapons, it is little wonder that very few individuals were able to resist pressure from their interrogators for long.

These methods seem to have been immediately employed against Vol'pe. Family legend has it that during interrogation Vol'pe had his genitals crushed, but still would not confess to non-existent crimes. His tormentors then threatened to have his fourteen-year-old daughter raped by a platoon of soldiers.⁴³ This did the trick and as early as June 1 he was giving "evidence against his brother-in-law. When his interrogator demanded to know whom he had recruited into an "anti-Soviet, military-Trotskyite conspiracy," Vol'pe replied that he personally had received no such instructions from Tukhachevskii or Fel'dman. He did admit, however, that he had "prepared" Isserson and Brigade Commander Tsiffer, another instructor at the General Staff Academy, for recruitment, knowing their "anti-Soviet inclinations."⁴⁴

Other denunciations soon began to pour in from arrested commanders who had known Isserson in one capacity or another. One of those who testified against him was Col. Pavel Fomich Yanushkevich, who before his arrest served as chief of staff of the Vladivostok Fortified Region, and who was probably shot sometime in 1938.⁴⁵ As early as July 1937 he had implicated Isserson in a lack of vigilance, naming the latter as one of a group of people from whom "I did not hide my Trotskyite views," and with whom he had had "frank conversations on anti-party matters."⁴⁶ Another was Col. Grigorii Aleksandrovich Vetlin, whose last position was head of the department of military geography at the Frunze Military Academy.⁴⁷ Under interrogation, he "recalled" that in 1934 he had recruited Brigade Commander Kit-Viitenko into an "anti-Soviet, military-Trotskyite plot." He quoted the latter to the effect that he had suspected the existence of such a plot based upon his conversations with Isserson and Brigade Commander Viktor Mikhailovich Voronkov.⁴⁸ Still another was Sediakin, who had been so supportive in Isserson's academic spats. Sediakin admitted to his interrogator in December 1937 that in 1935 Tukhachevskii had praised Isserson and called him "a useful person for us."⁴⁹ This innocent compliment, however, takes on a far more sinister meaning in light of the accusations against Tukhachevskii of planning a military coup.

One of those who implicated Isserson directly in this "plot" was Admiral Vladimir Mitrofanovich Orlov, who before his arrest had been chief of the RKKA navy and a deputy defense commissar. Orlov claimed under interrogation that during 1935-37 he had had a number of plot-related conversations with Isserson, on Tukhachevskii's instructions. He added that during these talks Isserson had laid out the marshal's "new ideas" for training commanders, which he claimed "came down to the transfer of fascist German methods of education and instruction" to the Red Army's officer corps.⁵⁰ Another witness was Col. Fedor Leonidovich Grigor'ev, who at the time of his arrest was chief of the foreign languages department of the Military Academy of Mechanization and Motorization.⁵¹ Grigor'ev cited Division Commander Mikhail Mikhailovich Ol'shanskii as telling him of the existence within the army of a conspiratorial group headed by Tukhachevskii, Yakir, Kork, and Uborevich, who had been "carrying out large-scale work in the army in preparing an armed uprising against Soviet power." Among the participants in this plot he named Corps Commander Ivan Ivanovich Gar'kavyi, formerly the commander of the Urals Military District, as well as a number of others, including Isserson and Alafuzo.⁵²

Another "witness" was the previously mentioned Voronkov, who at the time of his arrest was in command of a motorized division in the Volga Military District. Voronkov stated on July 13, 1937, that while Isserson had not been a direct member of a "counterrevolutionary organization" at the time, he had nevertheless been one of those who "to one degree or another" had aided this organization in its subversive work. He called Isserson Uborevich's

“personal agent,” under whose orders he had practically brought about the “disintegration” of the 4th Rifle Division.⁵³ Voronkov’s cooperation, however, availed him nothing and he was shot in early 1938.⁵⁴

Isserson’s recent colleagues within the General Staff gave no less damning testimony against him. Mezheninov, for example, “admitted” to giving the German military attaché two scenarios for an operational war game played out in the General Staff in 1936, to which reference has already been made. The scenarios contained classified intelligence data on the state of the German armed forces, which was used in the war game to determine the “enemy” side’s strength. This information, he said, had been compiled by Isserson, who had been his deputy at the time.⁵⁵ Levichev added further fuel to the fire. On June 17, 1937, he named Isserson as a member of an “anti-Soviet military plot,” which included Uborevich, Mezheninov, and Corps Commander Meretskov, among several others.⁵⁶

Other denunciations came from Isserson’s colleagues at the General Staff Academy. One of the most damaging of these was delivered by Alafuzo, who was giving “evidence” as early as June 25. During this particular interrogation, Alafuzo stated that he had drawn Isserson into a plot in 1936, when the latter was serving in the General Staff apparatus. He said that he considered Isserson a “suitable person for us,” as the latter had expressed his “sharp dissatisfaction with the Staff’s leadership.” Alafuzo added that he sought to take advantage of Isserson’s “negative attitude” by extolling Tukhachevskii and counseling him to approach the marshal for help with his troubles. Alafuzo continued that he was aware that Tukhachevskii was “selecting dissatisfied people” for his plot, and hoped that the marshal would be able to “finally recruit and employ Isserson for his own purposes.”⁵⁷ Another was Brigade Commander Georgii Georgievich Kellerman, who testified that he had “prepared” Isserson’s recruitment into an anti-Soviet plot during their joint service in the academy. However, he stated, his own arrest had prevented him from completing the job.⁵⁸

Oddly enough, the number and severity of these charges only serve to undermine their validity in the eyes of any sane observer. After all, it stands to reason that if these charges contained the slightest bit of truth, then Isserson would have been arrested immediately and shot. Instead, he remained at liberty for nearly four years, during which time he held a number of responsible positions, including that of army chief of staff during wartime. This strongly implies that even those interrogators who so assiduously beat “confessions” out of their prisoners knew the truth, although this more than sufficed to send thousands to their deaths. In Isserson’s case, it was only later, when the command came from above to set the machine of repression in motion that these charges were resurrected and put to use against their intended target.

Holding the Line in the Academy

Nor did the executioner spare the armed forces’ intellectual cadres. Aside from Kuchinskii, during these years all five chiefs of the Naval Academy who held that position from 1930 to 1937 were executed, as was every single chief of the army’s higher tactical courses (“*Vystrel*”) from 1923 to 1937.⁵⁹ Other victims included such leading military intellectuals as Svechin, Verkhovskii, Alksnis, Semon Markovich Belitskii, Kakurin, Varfolomeev, Movchin, and Zhigur, among others.⁶⁰ Many of these included those with whom Isserson had worked closely, such as Trutko, Sergeev, and Vakulich. Fedotov, Isserson’s deputy at the Frunze Academy’s operational department, was arrested while serving as chief of staff of the

Leningrad Military District and later perished.⁶¹ Army Commander Second Class Vatsetis, once chief of the armed forces, was even arrested during a break between lectures at the Frunze Military Academy.⁶²

Isserson vividly described the atmosphere in the academy during this period, as denunciations and arrests swirled about him. The Red Army, he stated, was “essentially beheaded,” and those senior commanders who had done so much to move Soviet military theory forward had been declared “enemies of the people” and executed. Nor did the purge end with the physical destruction of these individuals, but extended to their ideas as well, and theories on the conduct of the deep battle and the deep operation “were put into doubt and practically declared to be sabotage.” During this campaign, “all textbooks, official and unofficial military literature,” written by these people, were removed from circulation. In this climate of fear the situation grew so bad that no one knew “what military theory we could and could not be guided by. It was a difficult year,” he concluded, recalling these events.⁶³

A student at the academy during these years supported Isserson’s view. Grigorenko wrote that as a result of the purge “The highly qualified teaching staff assembled by Tukhachevsky was almost totally annihilated” and their places taken “by untalented or inexperienced people.” The latter were so terrified of being arrested in turn that they “filled their lectures with faddish dogmas.”⁶⁴ One of the few individuals to buck this trend was Isserson, whom Grigorenko singled out for special praise in fighting the forces of obscurantism. He recalled that one of the chief casualties of the purge was the “theory of the battle in depth,” by which he clearly meant the deep operation. “Great bravery was required of proponents of this theory,” he noted, and “Isserson possessed such bravery. His lectures, problems and war games were permeated with the concept of battle in depth, even though he never called the theory by name.”⁶⁵

Given this climate, and his abrasive personality, it is hardly surprising that Isserson more than once ran afoul of the powers that be. Indeed, Isserson would not be Isserson if his tenure at the General Staff Academy had not involved him in some sort of conflict with its leadership. This propensity to quarrel with superiors seems to have been one of his dominant character traits. As his daughter noted many years later, Isserson encouraged subordinates in their studies and other endeavors, but he possessed a “terrible personality” when it came to dealing with equals or superiors.⁶⁶

Isserson’s chief nemesis at the academy was Brigade Commander Ivan Timofeevich Shlemin, who had been appointed to succeed Kuchinskii. Isserson had an especial dislike for Shlemin, and later described him as someone who “began to sound the retreat” regarding the chief tenets of the deep operation, and a toady who worked to “discredit the destroyed cadres.”⁶⁷ His student Grigorenko basically agreed with this assessment, adding that while Shlemin managed to cope with his administrative duties, “as academy chief he failed to distinguish himself.” Unfortunately, “dissatisfied people kept comparing him with Kuchinskii, who had possessed a comprehensive military and general outlook and who was tremendously erudite as well.” Grigorenko also confirmed the Isserson-Shlemin rivalry, ascribing it to bureaucratic infighting and professional jealousy. He stated that Shlemin “took a great interest” in operational art and “tried to compete with Isserson, both as a lecturer and in the organization and conduct of war-operational exercises, but Isserson stood his ground.”⁶⁸

A less impassioned evaluation of Isserson’s activities during this time came from Sergei Matveevich Shtemenko, who entered the academy in the fall of 1938. Shtemenko named

Isserson as one of the academy's "leading lights" and praised the latter's "austere" lectures on operational art and strategy, which he described as "profound and rich in content," despite their "academic" tone.⁶⁹ Isserson's efforts in this instance did not go unrewarded and during the war Shtemenko quickly rose in the General Staff apparatus and eventually became chief of its operational section. He became chief of staff after the war and was eventually appointed chief of staff of the Warsaw Pact.

Significantly or not, the height of the Red Army purge coincides with Isserson's second "disappearance" within the defense commissariat apparatus. A September 21, 1937, order by Voroshilov listed Isserson and several other commanders among those to be removed from their present position and placed at the disposal of the Command Personnel Directorate.⁷⁰ Once again, just as in 1927, there is no indication as to what Isserson's duties were during this nearly eight-month period. It seems unlikely that Isserson was in any serious trouble at this stage, despite the growing case against him. He may have carried out temporary assignments within the central apparatus in order to fill a gap created by previous arrests, or he may have been engaged in more academic duties. Whatever the reason, Isserson was restored to his previous post, now styled the department of operational art, on May 10, 1938.⁷¹

In spite of the horrors being visited upon the Red Army, Isserson continued to put forward his views, albeit in a more veiled fashion. One such effort was his article, entitled "The Meeting Engagement of the Future," which appeared in the July 1938 issue of *Military Thought*, the Red Army's newly established military-theoretical journal. The article was subtitled "By Way of a Discussion," which means it was to serve as the starting point for a deeper analysis of the operational contours of a future war. The wording of the subheading is significant and probably represents the editorial board's attempt to cover itself in the event of a negative reaction. Under the circumstances, this was a bold move. To be sure, there is nothing particularly controversial in the ideas Isserson laid out here, which were in many ways merely a repetition of what he had been writing for years concerning the problem of depth in modern war. This was, however, 1938, and while the pace of the killings in the armed forces was beginning to slacken, the fear of committing even the slightest "deviation" was probably enough to give the editorial board pause.

Isserson began his argument by briefly describing three possible scenarios likely to arise at the beginning of a war. One involved an attack against an enemy who is still concentrating his forces, which have not yet assumed a definite operational formation. He called this scenario the most favorable for the attacker and therefore the most unlikely to occur, as it would allow the attacker to defeat his opponent in detail. There also existed the possibility that the enemy might immediately assume the strategic defensive and deploy his forces behind fortifications built before the war, which would necessitate a breakthrough operation. Another was the meeting engagement, in which both sides move toward each other and collide on the battlefield while pursuing an offensive strategy. Isserson called the meeting engagement the "most controversial problem" facing the Red Army, according to two basic questions: was a meeting engagement still possible in a future war and, if so, what forms would it take?⁷²

Isserson's answer to the first question was a qualified affirmative. The vastly increased range and mobility of modern weaponry, he wrote, had actually brought about the paradoxical situation in which the "*distances between the contending sides entering the battle are close to disappearing*" (emphasis in the original). This means that in those relatively shallow theaters where the limited room for maneuver is further constrained by the presence of siz-

able covering forces and permanent fortifications, such as the Maginot Line, the likelihood of a meeting engagement is small. On the other hand, the deeper the theater and the less constrained the belligerents are in their maneuver capabilities, the greater the likelihood of a meeting engagement, and he cited the Soviet Union's western and Far Eastern frontiers as most likely to host a meeting engagement. This was all the more probably, he concluded, as any future war involving the Soviet Union would see both sides pursuing a decisive offensive strategy.⁷³

The same factors also determine the forms the modern meeting engagement, the most significant of which is the scale at which it will likely be conducted. Given the new weapons' extended reach, the meeting engagement is no longer a purely tactical endeavor confined to the advancing army's vanguard echelon. This echelon, in fact, now serves as the "*first, vanguard echelon of the offensive's operational formation*" (emphasis in the original). This means that "*the opening of the meeting engagement will now take place on an operational scale, and the phenomenon of the meeting battle passes to a higher stage, from the sphere of tactics — to the field of operations*" (emphasis in the original).⁷⁴

Isserson divided the meeting engagement into three consecutive phases, according to the forces engaged and the goals pursued. According to this outline, the engagement will open with the attacker launching deep air strikes against the approaching enemy force, even before the sides' respective ground forces have come into contact. These strikes will be directed chiefly against that portion of the enemy force designated as the initial objective of the ground attack. The purpose of this attack is to scatter or pin down the enemy's columns in the area, after which they will come under a concentrated assault from the army's vanguard echelon, consisting of a high proportion of armored, cavalry, and motorized forces.⁷⁵

The vanguard echelon's attack, he wrote, should resemble a "sharp wedge" directed against that part of the enemy front slated for immediate destruction. Isserson allowed that in certain cases the enemy might oppose this movement with a vanguard echelon of his own. In such a case "*the destruction of the enemy's highly mobile units, if they appear ahead of the front, will always be the vanguard echelon's first task,*" only after which it can assume its primary mission of destroying the enemy's main body (emphasis in the original). During this time the vanguard echelon's activities may play out to a depth of up to 100 kilometers, or the original distance between the approaching armies. The vanguard echelon can generally cover this distance in a single day, which means that the echelon will engage the enemy single-handedly for approximately two days before the arrival of the army's main forces.⁷⁶

It is clear from this statement that Isserson considered the vanguard echelon's successful activities at the start of the engagement the linchpin of the entire effort, without which the preceding air strikes and the main echelon's follow-on attack would serve no purpose. However, for the vanguard echelon to achieve its full effect it is imperative that it move toward the battlefield ahead of the main body, in order to engage the enemy's forward elements before they can deploy and organize a positional defensive front. For this to become a reality, he warned, the Red Army must rid itself of the fear that the vanguard echelon, thrown into the meeting engagement well ahead of the main body, risks being defeated in detail. On the contrary, he insisted, by operating ahead of the main body the vanguard echelon is less likely to encounter large enemy forces than if it advanced to the battlefield along with the rest of the army. Nor should there be any fear for the vanguard echelon's open flanks as it lunges forward, as its speed and maneuverability will more likely enable it to threaten the enemy's flanks. This is all the more likely, as the vanguard echelon is apt to

encounter the enemy still on the march and less capable of resisting a determined attack. If on the other hand, the vanguard echelon attacks in a single line with the main body, it will most likely encounter an enemy already deployed for battle, in which case it would be deprived of the capability to maneuver or attack rapidly in depth.⁷⁷

Meanwhile, that part of the enemy force which is not immediately engaged will most likely continue to move forward through inertia, as he is unlikely at this early stage to halt forward movement along the entire front. As a result, one portion of the enemy front will likely be extended well forward, while that of portion being assailed by the vanguard echelon will lag behind, thus exposing its flank to a turning movement. However, the modern flank attack is fundamentally different form that of its predecessor during the ear of the linear strategy, during which an opponent's flank was gained merely by extending one's line. In an age of continuous fronts echeloned, Isserson declared, "*it is necessary to first create the flank*" though a preliminary attack, followed by the rapid exploitation of its success (emphasis in the original).⁷⁸

The meeting engagement's second phase begins with the arrival of the bulk of the main echelon's forces in the area where the vanguard echelon's progress has been most pronounced, in order to take advantage of its success and develop the flank attack further. Smaller forces will be left behind the hold the remainder of the front against those enemy forces now arriving on the battlefield. The latter, meanwhile, will attempt to reconstitute his ruptured front by shifting forces to the threatened area. The attacker will attempt to prevent this by focusing his air attacks against such movements either along the front, or against the depth of the enemy's march order. At this point the engagement may develop in one of two ways. In a case where the vanguard echelon's attack has been particularly successful, it will continue its advance into the enemy's flank and rear, which will enable the main echelon to develop its attack in depth virtually unimpeded. Isserson considered such an event unlikely, however. More probable was a situation in which the enemy's reserves are able to create the semblance of a front against the vanguard echelon, which in any event is being rapidly worn down through equipment losses. In such a case, the latter would cover the arrival of the main echelon to the front, after which it would be briefly withdrawn for refitting.⁷⁹

The third and final phase will see the attacker increasingly shift his air attacks from the front to the entire depth of the enemy's position, including his rear storage areas, supply lines, reserves, and command centers. The main echelon will push aside the newly arrived enemy forces and continue its attack against the enemy's flank and rear, assisted by the refurbished vanguard echelon, which spearheads the attack along the extreme enveloping wing. By this time airborne landings in the enemy's rear will have further weakened his capacity to resist. The meeting engagement would conclude at this point with the envelopment and destruction of the main enemy force.⁸⁰

Isserson, of course, was wise enough to realize that events rarely unfold, as we would like and that the enemy's response will inevitably affect the course of the battle. For example, the enemy might mount a determined assault against the attacker's weaker covering forces, even as his own front is being hard pressed by the vanguard echelon elsewhere. Should the enemy succeed in breaking into the operational depth it might well unhinge the entire attack. To ward off such a development, he recommended the creation of a reserve echelon, which would advance to the battlefield behind the main echelon in order to secure the army's rear. This was to be no passive task, however, and as soon as it was safe to do so the reserve echelon will be thrown forward on trucks to the area of the army's flanking movement to take part in the battle's culmination.⁸¹

Of all the forms the deep operation might take, the meeting engagement was the least predictable. Isserson concluded that a situation might even arise in which the fighting would unfold simultaneously at three distinct levels of depth, with the attacker's vanguard echelon advancing in the enemy's operational rear, while the main echelon engages the main enemy force, and the reserve echelon fights off the enemy's mechanized attack in the army's rear, all to a depth of 100 kilometers.⁸² The only thing that was certain was that if either side failed to gain a decisive victory during this most mobile phase, then a positional front was likely to be the result. This failure might come about as the result of the collision of both sides' vanguard echelons, ending in a stalemate. The attacker's failure to achieve air superiority over the battlefield might also have the same effect, transforming the meeting operation into a grinding struggle with little prospect for a decisive success. Finally, the enemy may choose to halt his advance short of the battlefield in order to meet the attacker's vanguard echelon with a prepared defense. Whatever the reason, all three scenarios would probably lead to the formation of a solid defensive front and the inevitability of organizing a breakthrough.⁸³

In many ways the article is a disappointment and there is little that Isserson had not stated in much greater detail earlier. Isserson's decision to return to the subject probably reflected his fear that much of what had been achieved in the area of operational art in the first half of the 1930s was in danger of being lost in the hunt for "enemies of the people," many of whom were associated with these developments. Some passages, however, evidently struck the editorial board as controversial, and the latter noted in an aside that it considered "a number of tenets put forward by the author to be debatable," and probably had in mind Isserson's ideas on the role of the vanguard echelon.⁸⁴ As we have seen, this was not the first time that Isserson's views had been partially disavowed or otherwise called into question by various editorial bodies. In this case the editor's diffidence is probably due to purely political reasons.

The authorities took a much harsher view of the article and its publication ignited a major controversy among his colleagues. The academy's leadership reacted by convening a gathering of the academy's Military-Historical Society to discuss the article. The term "discussion" is hardly an accurate description of the procedure, however, and "kangaroo court" would be a more fitting term to describe a setting in which the outcome was usually a fore-gone conclusion and the accused was expected to publicly admit his mistakes. In this instance, the case for the "prosecution" was made by Aleksandr Vasil'evich Golubev, another theorist in the field of operations, whom Isserson later accused of "having settled in the academy in an undefined capacity." Golubev proceeded to lay out his "case" against the article in question, with what Isserson called his usual "breeziness" and "incompetence in military affairs." However, he continued, the latter's "flashy phrases" failed to disguise his lack of knowledge and his adherence to "backward and conservative ideas."⁸⁵

Not surprisingly, Isserson refused to recant. What was even more astounding was that the majority of those in attendance supported his position. Faced with this unexpected opposition, he wrote, the academy leadership was forced to retreat and offer a compromise resolution, as opposed to the condemnatory one that they had prepared. The final resolution adopted by the assembly recognized Isserson's idea of committing a mobile group into the breach in a maneuver operation as an "individual case." What constituted a "general case," he wrote, was never made clear, acidly noting that what the academy leadership evidently had in mind was the advance of motor-mechanized formations, using their brakes, in a single line with the infantry formations.⁸⁶

This incident goes far to show just how the expression of ideas which had for years been in the Red Army's intellectual mainstream was now sufficient to arouse suspicion. This was particularly the case with the academy's new leadership, which evidently considered itself the guardian of the new orthodoxy, raising doubts "regarding the fundamental questions of the deep operation, objecting to the activities of motor-mechanized formations ahead of the front and against their employment for the development of the breakthrough in depth," as Isserson charged years later. This situation was all the more reprehensible, he added, as it occurred only a year before the German invasion of Poland revealed the possibilities inherent in such operations.⁸⁷

Isserson's courage in defending his views was not entirely without consequences, however, and on September 23, 1938, the academy's party commission "severely reprimanded" him for voting for the "Trotskyite" resolution in 1923, and for covering up this fact during an exchange of party documents in 1935.⁸⁸ The timing of the reprimand indicates that it was a sort of "consolation prize" for those in the academy who wished to condemn his theoretical views. Given the climate of the times, this was a fairly lenient measure and Isserson was lucky to get off with what amounted to a slap on the wrist.

Ever undaunted, Isserson followed up this effort a month later with another article, "Operational Prospects for the Future," which sought to develop some of the ideas laid out in the previous issue of *Military Thought*. The article's overall tone indicates that Isserson continued to be deeply troubled by a number of trends in the army's thinking, among the most disturbing of which was the growing tendency to substitute empty sloganeering for clear-headed thinking in military affairs. Recalling this period over a quarter-century later, he wrote that at the time "we were bound by fixed declarative tenets as to the offensive waging of a war: that our army will be the most offensive army; that we will transfer military activities onto the enemy's territory, etc., etc. These tenets," he continued, "were handed down from above as indisputable guiding directives" and "were not subject to discussion in theory." As a result, he concluded, the Red Army's "entire military outlook imagined a future war as none other than an immediate resort to the offensive."⁸⁹ To struggle effectively against this tide of bombast would be no easy task, and by no means without risk.

Nevertheless, Isserson took to his task with a will and began by throwing cold water on the more extreme arguments then making the rounds; namely that a future war would be a cakewalk. Quite the opposite, he wrote, and any operation, whether a meeting engagement or a breakthrough, will require that the enemy front be smashed with overwhelming force. Modern weapons are not in themselves enough and must be concentrated in sufficient numbers for full effect. "*Without an obvious and decisive superiority along the axis of the main blow,*" he wrote, "*not a single offensive task can be resolved*" (emphasis in the original). Anything less, he warned, would inevitably lead to a defeat of the operation and the formation of a positional front.⁹⁰

The insistence on massing an overwhelming amount of men and materiel at the decisive point naturally led him to reject the notion that an attacker may find it more expedient to launch several such efforts along different sectors of the front, which could only have arisen under conditions of the reigning offensive euphoria. Such attacks, he argued, would be launched with correspondingly weaker forces, thus increasing the likelihood that they would fail. Such an operational spacing of offensive efforts had not been witnessed since Moltke's time and was, under modern circumstances, an "historical anachronism." Isserson did allow that an approach might be valid for secondary theaters, although this would in no way lessen the need to achieve a decisive superiority within the confines of those the-

aters. However, along the main directions the need to accumulate an overwhelming superiority over the defender retained its validity.⁹¹

This caution coincided with his less than optimistic view of the deep operation's prospects in a future war. In his previous writings, Isserson had consistently interpreted the appearance of the "new means of combat" in a way that obviously favored the offensive. Now the emphasis, while still decidedly offensive, had shifted toward a more sober realization of the benefits the new technology had conferred upon the defensive. This does not mean that maneuver will have no place in a future war. In fact, maneuver will occupy a prominent place in operations, although it will differ greatly from that seen in previous conflicts. For example, the nearly uncontested advance of armies to a depth of 400 to 600 kilometers, as had been the case in 1914 and 1920, is highly unlikely. Now, even armies separated from each other by a great distance at the beginning of a war will encounter increasing resistance as they approach each other.⁹²

Under these conditions, a future war will begin almost immediately with a series of meeting engagements along the front. During this phase, the speed of the advance becomes a critical operational factor, as even the slightest delay in mobilizing and concentrating one's forces may have deleterious effects on the eventual conduct of the operation. Speed is also vital during the shock army's approach to the battlefield for the meeting engagement, for which the preliminary occupation of an advantageous position may have important consequences. This does not mean, he cautioned, that the armies will be capable of advancing to the limits of their technical capabilities, as they will be inevitably constrained by the presence of large numbers of the enemy, as well as their own technical capabilities.⁹³

If the meeting engagement's outcome is indecisive, a positional front will quickly form, making it necessary to conduct a full-scale breakthrough operation in order to restore maneuver.⁹⁴ In such an event, the factor of speed "will have to yield its place to force." By force, Isserson meant the strength of the breakthrough blow, which he called the "basic factor" in the "new forms of combat."⁹⁵ This will find its expression in the conduct of the breakthrough operation, as previously described.

Even should the meeting engagement end successfully; the attacker will only be able to continue his maneuver within the depth of the enemy's position for a short time. Sooner or later his advance will encounter a new enemy front, further in the rear. This, in turn, would require the organization of a breakthrough operation in the hope of once again restoring the armies' maneuver. This pattern would continue, driving deeper into enemy territory, until final victory is achieved.⁹⁶ This was Isserson's formula for the conduct of a series of consecutive operations, a theory more closely identified with the technically backward Red Army of the 1920s. His contribution was to refurbish the theory by adapting it to the requirements of a modern mechanized force, leaving the "stop — go" essence of the original idea fundamentally unchanged. That Isserson felt to defend the strategic assumptions underlying the theory indicates just how much he believed thinking in this area had regressed.

Isserson was sufficiently cautious to note that his was no universal formula, applicable to all circumstances. The new forms of combat required for their realization large numbers of tanks, long-range aircraft, and heavy artillery, backed by motorized infantry and cavalry. Moreover, this mass of men and materiel must be concentrated along the future war's main axes. In those areas where this is not possible, he added, a return to the linear forms of combat is not only possible, but also likely. However, in those theaters where the opponents are abundantly supplied with modern weapons the deep operation will inevitably play itself out along the lines previously described.⁹⁷

In retrospect, the article was no more controversial than his piece on the meeting engagement. However, given the climate of fear which then pervaded the armed forces, Isserson may well have felt it the better part of valor to avoid dwelling on the virtues of the deep operation in too great detail. On the other hand, he also had a great intellectual and emotional stake in the defense and dissemination of his ideas and saw himself as fighting a holding action against the obscurantists who had gained the upper hand.

Nor did Isserson's work spare him further run-ins with the academic authorities. While under interrogation he recalled with particular rancor one such turf battle with Shlemin. This latest clash came about as the result of a war game, which he and the department's instructors organized for their second-year students in May 1939. According to Isserson, the war game was a problem from the "first imperialist war" (World War I), and had been drawn up at the department's initiative, with no particular instructions from the academy leadership. As chief of the department of operational art, he was named to supervise the game, an appointment that was approved by Shlemin and the academy's political commissar.⁹⁸

However, only a few days before the start of the war game, Isserson was summoned to Shlemin's office and informed that in accordance with orders from the chief of the RKKA General Staff, Shaposhnikov, he had been replaced as the game's supervisor. Now, Shlemin was to run the game, with Isserson as his assistant. To a proud man like Isserson this was a slap in the face, and he said that he was "extremely insulted" by the move. As the war game's chief organizer, he saw himself as the natural leader and believed that he had been unfairly removed from its conduct.⁹⁹

Isserson suspected that Shlemin himself was behind this move, which he believed had its roots in their past service together. He said that Shlemin had twice been subordinated to him — once as a student, and the other time at the General Staff. It was at the latter assignment, Isserson testified, that he had given Shlemin orders which the latter disagreed with and which may have soured their future relations. When the interrogator pointed out that it was Shaposhnikov who had removed him from the war game's leadership, and not Shlemin, Isserson replied that this was what the academy chief told him. He added that he "deeply believed that Shaposhnikov could not have done this," which was an interesting statement in light of their earlier disagreements at the Frunze Academy. And while Isserson said that he did not doubt that it was Shaposhnikov who had relieved him, he maintained that this was because Shlemin had "incorrectly informed" the chief of staff as to who had actually drawn up the plan for the war game. He was forced to admit, however, that he had no facts with which to back up this assertion.¹⁰⁰

Whatever the truth of this matter, there is no doubt that the entire episode was extremely unpleasant for Isserson. He claimed that at a meeting held before the start of the war game, Shlemin did not even allow him to speak about the game's goals, and also prevented him from making introductory remarks to the students concerning their tasks and the theater of military activities, which, he said, deprived him of the "opportunity of influencing the preparations for the game's conduct." During the game, he continued, Shlemin paid no attention to his ideas, at which point he voluntarily removed himself from the game's leadership "in order not to exacerbate relations with Shlemin" and remained on the sidelines as an observer with the students. The final insult came at a critique following the war game, during which Isserson was once again not allowed to speak, although his position as department chief certainly warranted this.¹⁰¹

It is an excellent comment on the times that Isserson's interrogator classified his actions

as “sabotage” and further evidence of his pursuit of a “Germanophile” line at the academy.¹⁰² This implies that Isserson picked as the basis for the war game a particularly difficult army/*front* operation from the Great War, such as the East Prussian operation of 1914, with which he hoped to test his students’ skills. When Shlemin intervened, perhaps to ease the situation for the Russian side, Isserson effectively withdrew from the game in disgust, thus leaving him open to the charge of “sabotage.”

This was no idle charge, as similar allegations against Isserson had been making the rounds for some time. One of these came from the previously mentioned Vul’f. By far the most damning part of his testimony dealt with the purportedly close ties between Isserson and Kuchinskii. Vul’f claimed that Kuchinskii had carried out “wrecking” work within the academy’s system of instruction and directly implicated Isserson in these activities, which were tantamount to treason. He claimed that Isserson personally drew up the scenarios for operational-level exercises in such a way that no matter what decisions the students made, they were always defeated, particularly if the opponent was the German army. To Vul’f this meant that Isserson was carrying out a systematic policy of “inculcating in the students the idea of the RKKa’s defeat by the Germans and the uselessness of waging war against them.”¹⁰³

When his interrogators accused him of carrying out a “Germanophile line” in his work, Isserson replied that he often used examples and quotes from German military literature in his lectures. This practice, he admitted, may have created the impression among some that he was a “great adherent” of the German military system. Nothing could be further from the truth, he maintained, adding “in my lectures I always tried to show the strong aspects of the German military system, because I considered Germany the USSR’s most likely opponent.” He also dismissed Vul’f as a “technical worker” in the academy, with whom he had nothing in common. He further accused him of lying, and said that there was nothing in his lectures and written work to justify the charge that he was a “Germanophile.”¹⁰⁴

However, the charge of being pro-German would not go away and was probably motivated as much by Isserson’s German-sounding surname as any deliberate misreading of his academic record. To make their case, his interrogators presented the testimony of one V.V. Lobkovets, a former instructor of tactics, who had been arrested in 1937. In the fall of that year he called Isserson an “obvious worshiper” of the German army and recalled that in December 1929 Isserson had delivered a lecture to troops quartered in the provincial city of Vladimir, in which he openly praised German methods. In fact, Lobkovets added, Isserson’s pro-German views were so obvious that there was no need to recruit him as a spy.¹⁰⁵ Isserson, when confronted with this “evidence,” called Lobkovets a liar and repeated his assertion that to highlight the German army’s strong points was not the same as being a “worshiper” of Germany.¹⁰⁶

The absurdity of these accusations is immediately obvious to any rational observer. To think that Isserson, an ethnic Jew and committed communist, could sympathize with the Nazi regime is to severely test the bounds of credulity. However, under the Stalinist regime even such glaring incongruities as these were rarely taken into account, and the patently ludicrous nature of a particular charge was no impediment to a conviction. Equally senseless was the accusation that Isserson’s teaching methods undermined the Red Army’s morale. In this regard, he was only behaving as any good teacher would, by pushing his students to the limits and repeatedly confronting them with new challenges. To be sure, this was contrary to official pronouncements that the Red Army was the most technically and morally powerful army in the world and that nay future clash with the capitalist world

would be a nearly bloodless affair. The utter groundlessness of these statements would be revealed soon enough, although vindication for Isserson could only have been bittersweet.

The Defensive Operation

Isserson later wrote that by the late 1930s, although the question of organizing the tactical defense had been worked out to a high degree, neither the Frunze or General Staff academies had so much as conducted an exercise around the theme of an army defensive operation. He went on to explain that the army's reluctance to tackle the problem of operational defense was due to the prevailing belief that to even raise the issue was "considered somehow indecent" and at odds with the army's loudly proclaimed offensive doctrine. Nor was it entirely safe to do so, he added, and any attempt to broach the subject involved the risk of being accused of "political unreliability."¹⁰⁷

Nevertheless, the question of conducting an operational-level defense was first raised within the General Staff Academy in 1938. The reasons for this about-face were not openly discussed, Isserson recalled, due to the prevailing climate of fear. However, it was understood among the academy's operational theoreticians that in a future clash with a powerful and aggressive German army, the resort to an operational defense at certain periods and along certain axes was an "inevitable form of activity" along certain sectors of the front.¹⁰⁸ As might be expected, Isserson was in the forefront of this movement to cure the Red Army of its one-sided reliance on the offensive operation. His contribution took the form of a small (70 pages) but well-reasoned work, entitled *Fundamentals of the Defensive Operation*, which appeared in the form of an internal academy document in December 1938.

As was his wont, Isserson devoted the first half of his latest work to a theoretical examination of the problem, detailing its place in military affairs, its evolution and current status, as well as the means involved and their probable organization. He admitted, for example, that the problem of the defensive operation had heretofore been shortchanged in military-theoretical works. This was because the offensive operation, the success of which depends upon the organization of an overwhelming superiority in men and materiel, is inherently more complex and demands greater study than its defensive counterpart, which draws its strength from its own inherent qualities. Even the relative stoutness of the defense in recent wars (Ethiopia, Spain, and China) had only served to further concentrate the armies' theoretical attention on ways to better organize the offensive operation, once again leaving the defensive operation the poor relation.¹⁰⁹

Despite these problems, Isserson was quick to affirm that the Red Army's military doctrine remained unabashedly offensive in nature, and sought to destroy the enemy's forces in the most decisive manner possible. "It would be, however, a great mistake," if one were to interpret this offensive doctrine as the uninterrupted conduct of offensive operations to the exclusion of all other forms, and favorably quoted Lenin to the effect that such wars have been rare or non-existent. In fact, the more decisively one pursues an offensive strategy by concentrating overwhelming forces along the most important directions, the more likely it is that a bare minimum of men and materiel will be available to man the secondary sectors of the front. This is even more likely along the expected broad fronts of a future war, and the intention of adopting a defensive posture along certain sectors may even be inherent in a country's strategic deployment.¹¹⁰

Isserson went on to identify three kinds of operational defensive situations likely to be

encountered in a future war. The first arises when one side elects not to pursue the offensive, for whatever reason, along a particular sector. The second case is the result of a decision to carry out a *front*-level strategic offensive operation along a particular sector. According to this scenario, the less-favored secondary sectors must temporarily adopt the defensive and await the outcome of the offensive operation. Finally, a third possibility arises as the result of a successful offensive operation along the main direction, which has exhausted its initial impulse. In this case, a temporary halt and reversion to the defense is called for, while the attacker accumulates the forces necessary to renew the assault. He cautioned, however, that a prolonged pause is pregnant with the possible formation of a positional front.¹¹¹

The retention of a politically or economically important area often constitutes a defensive operation's main goal and may even rise to a factor of strategic importance. As an example of such an operation he cited the Republican forces' ongoing defense of Madrid in the Spanish Civil War. However, while the retention of strategically vital terrain may be an end in itself, it ultimately cannot be achieved without defeating the enemy, as the area cannot otherwise be held. The insistence on the attacker's defeat as the defender's prime goal implies a more vigorous conduct of the defensive operation than was generally the case. Using the limited means available to it, the defense must nevertheless "*pursue decisive goals*," which meant exhausting the attacker, followed by a counteroffensive to restore or even improve the situation (emphasis in the original).¹¹²

The highly offensive cast given to defensive endeavors was particularly apparent in Isserson's division of the defensive operations into various types, each with an offensive component to one degree or another. The most striking of these was the defensive operation that actually unfolds as a decisive offensive. The most notable recent example of this was the German defense of East Prussia in 1914, during which the defenders vigorously attacked and defeated two Russian armies, but did not advance appreciably beyond their own territory. Only slightly less aggressive is the defender's holding action, followed by a counteroffensive. The Allies against the German right wing along the Marne had most recently adopted this form in 1914 and by the Red Army against Denikin's White forces at Orel in the autumn of 1919. The third form involves a defensive along a prepared position, which may or may not be followed by a counteroffensive, although it should be noted that even this most "pacific" option held out the possibility of an offensive outcome.¹¹³

Isserson further singled out the mobile defense, built around successive positions in the rear, as another form. Such a defense is possible only at the operational level, he wrote, as the tactical defense is always conducted with an eye toward holding ground. The more aggressive form of the mobile defense calls for gradually exhausting the attacker along the various fallback positions, thus setting the stage for a counteroffensive to conclude the operation. He strongly distinguished this form of mobile defense from the other, which while also mobile in form, seeks to avoid defeat by falling back on prepared positions deep in the defender's strategic rear. This, he claimed, was maneuver by retreat, which seeks no more than to delay the enemy advance long enough to prepare the next defensive position. The most notable example of this form was the defeated German army's fighting withdrawal through Belgium and France during the summer and fall of 1918.¹¹⁴

A remarkable aspect of the Great War's military art, he noted, was that the organization of a defensive position, despite its ever-increasing depth, never extended beyond the sphere of tactics, and that the great battles of the war were primarily conducted within the confines of the tactical defensive zone. To be sure, operational reserves existed, but these were employed to shore up the tactical defense, and an operational defensive zone, as such,

did not yet exist. As a result, in those few cases where the tactical defense was successfully breached the defender was forced to immediately adopt any number of strategic measures in order to restore the front. In fact, Isserson speculated that had the British constructed a well-organized operational defense at the army level in March 1918 the great German offensive would probably have been halted well short of Amiens.¹¹⁵

By far the greater part of the war's battles had been fought under conditions in which the overwhelming superiority of the defense forced the attacker to adapt his methods accordingly in order to achieve a breakthrough. Developments in the war's final year suggested a way out of the positional stalemate, but the war ended before this could be fully realized. Since then advances in military technology had shifted the balance of power in favor of the offensive. Now it was the defensive that increasingly had to adapt itself to the new offensive possibilities. These possibilities are most clearly expressed in the ability of the attacker's tanks and aircraft to strike immediately to a great depth, which meant that the conduct of the defense could no longer be confined to the tactical sphere alone. The spread of the fighting into the operational depth, he wrote, now makes it imperative to organize an operational-level defense capable of withstanding this onslaught.¹¹⁶

The modern operational defense is now called upon to resolve a number of tasks. First of all, the enemy must not be allowed to approach the army's defensive area unhindered. This task fell to the "forward defense zone," or "obstacle zone," which Isserson recommended organizing to a depth of 20 to 25 kilometers. This zone, although lightly held, would be crisscrossed by defensive strong points, anti-personnel and anti-tank obstacles, and chemically contaminated areas. The defender's forces in this zone were to delay the enemy's approach as long as possible by forcing him to expend time and blood in passing through it, as well as confusing the enemy's reconnaissance as to the true contours of the army's main defensive position.¹¹⁷

Upon passing through this area, the attacker would then encounter the "main defensive zone," which constituted the heart of the army's tactical defense. This zone would extend back from the front line some 15 to 20 kilometers and consisted of two parts: the "main defensive position" and the "blocking position." The main defensive position extends back from the front line to a depth of 5 to 6 kilometers and contains the lion's share of the army's forces, which are entrenched or fighting behind permanent fortifications. This position, as its name suggests, constitutes the bedrock of the army's defense and is charged with inflicting the maximum loss on the attacker. Some 8 to 12 kilometers behind lies the blocking position, which constitutes, in effect, the tactical defense's second echelon. This position would not be as heavily manned as the first, but rather serves as the main position's backstop and the final barrier before the army's operational rear. As such, it may serve as the fallback position for those defending forces along the immediate front, or as the springboard for a counterattack. Isserson cautioned, however, that these two positions should not be viewed in isolation, but rather represent a "unified defensive zone," tasked with exhausting and channeling the attack to the defender's advantage.¹¹⁸

Immediately behind this lies the "operational defensive zone," this extends back from the blocking position 20 to 25 kilometers. This zone contains the army's reserves and most of its mechanized forces. This zone will also be studded with anti-tank defenses and switch positions, constructed so as to localize an enemy armored breakthrough along a particular axis, from which it can then be taken in the flank by a counterattack. At the very rear of this zone lies the "army rear line," which forms a non-continuous fortified position, the main function of which is to protect the army's deep rear.¹¹⁹ The latter constituted the army's

“rear defensive zone,” which extends some 50 kilometers behind the army’s rear line. This zone contains the army’s rear supply depots, railroad terminals, airfield, and army headquarters, which are protected by fortifications and permanently garrisoned.¹²⁰ In all, the army’s operational defense area, from the forward zone to the end of the rear defense zone, could reach a depth of 125 kilometers.¹²¹

Isserson calculated that an army on the defensive would be required to hold a front approximately 100 kilometers in width, although he added that in many cases the frontage would be greater. It was also understood that the army in question would be considerably inferior in strength to the attacker, who might number as many as 30 divisions in his first echelon alone. In such a case, it is necessary for the defender to maintain a 1:3 ratio of forces *vis-à-vis* the attacker along the latter’s main axis of advance, and a 1:5 ratio along secondary axes. In order to achieve these ratios, the army on the defensive would ideally consist of some 15 rifle divisions, plus attachments, yielding an overall 2:1 advantage in favor of the enemy’s first attack echelon.¹²²

However, the resulting disparity in forces is not as favorable to the defender as might appear at first glance. First of all, the attacker enjoys the luxury of picking his target and can easily concentrate overwhelming forces at the point of decision. Moreover, the first echelon is likely to be followed by another, thus increasing the attacker’s advantage along the main axis. The defense, on the other hand, can never be entirely sure as to where the main blow will fall, and is thus compelled to distribute its forces more or less evenly along its front. This inherent weakness is further exacerbated by the necessity of constructing a defense in depth, which requires the subtraction of a significant part of the army’s strength from the front line in order to “flesh out” the deeper defensive echelons.¹²³

These echelons would be manned as follows, with allowances for the specifics of terrain and situation. The forward defense zone would be held by cavalry formations or by forward detachments drawn from the main defense zone. The latter, as already mentioned, constitutes the main defensive echelon and the bulk of the army’s forces are deployed in this area. These might number as few as seven or eight rifle divisions along terrain favorable to the defender, and as many as ten divisions to man a front that is everywhere open to attack. The second defensive position, he wrote, should contain, on the average, two or three rifle divisions, which would enable it to deploy two divisions against the main axis of the enemy’s attack. The operational defense zone should contain one or two rifle divisions and include the greater part of the army’s mechanized, cavalry, and motorized units. These forces, along with those in the second defensive position, will lead the counterattack against those enemy units which succeed in breaking through the main defensive echelon. By contrast, secondary and other rear units would lightly man the army’s rear zone.¹²⁴

Isserson recommended increasing the army’s prospects by adding a number of attached units. Among the most important of these was artillery, and he advised reinforcing the army with two or three artillery regiments, or more, from the High Command Artillery Reserve (ARGK). Tanks were another vital element, particularly when employed against the enemy’s armor and in a counterattack, and the army would have to have one or two brigades of medium tanks. The army’s organic air assets were to be further strengthened by the attachment of four or five air regiments, with the emphasis on fighter support. The army would also be able to count on further support from the *front’s* air arm. Engineering support for the operation was essential and Isserson calculated that the total length of the fortified sectors along the front and rear could reach 350 kilometers. Thus aside from its organic engineering units, the army would also require six to eight engineering battalions, and a number

of smaller units for ensuring water supply, camouflage, road and airfield construction, and bridging units as well. Other attachments included chemical, anti-aircraft, and ground transportation units.¹²⁵

The key element in the organization of the army's operational defense comes down to ensuring the impregnability of the tactical defense zone, and Isserson devoted a good deal of attention to the subject. For example, even such purely tactical considerations as the contours of the front line assume a decisive importance, as it was considered far more expedient to halt the enemy attack in the tactical zone than have it spread to the operational zone. Thus he cautioned against deploying the tactical defense along a straight line, as this would reduce the chance of organizing enfilading fire against the attacker's troops and tanks. Moreover, reducing the length of the front, while it would conserve the defender's forces, would also aid the attacker in concentrating even more men and materiel along the main axis. On the other hand, a front that is too winding and long requires more forces to hold it, which the army might not have.¹²⁶

Some two-thirds or more of the army's infantry strength would be concentrated along the tactical defense zone's main position. However, these forces are by no means to be distributed evenly along the front, but would instead be concentrated along the expected axis of the enemy attack. It was along these most vulnerable sectors that Isserson recommended deploying the lion's share of those rifle divisions slated to hold the first defensive position. Normally, densities along these sectors should be 8 to 12 kilometers per rifle division, or some 30 kilometers for a three-division corps. Along the threatened sectors this may be reduced to less than eight kilometers per rifle division, or 20 kilometers for the corps. Such a concentration of force would yield an artillery density of 14 guns per kilometer of front, relying only on the corps's organic weapons, of which six would be heavy. Should the corps in question be reinforced with two artillery regiments from the ARGK, this figure would rise to 18 guns per kilometer, of which ten would be heavy pieces. Divisions along a more than 12-kilometer front, with consequently lower artillery densities, would occupy less important sectors.¹²⁷

The corps occupying the first defensive position will generally dispose of reserves made up of regiments drawn from its subordinate rifle divisions. These reserves will be deployed among the various intermediate lines between the first and second defensive positions. In certain situations, a corps might have as its reserve one of the second position's rifle divisions, in which case the corps's area of responsibility would extend throughout the tactical zone.¹²⁸

For Isserson, the tactical zone's second defensive position had an inherently dual role. For example, should the divisions deployed here confine their activities to this position; they will fulfill the strictly tactical mission of providing a reserve for those forces occupying the first position. In such a case, he added, it would be more expedient to subordinate these divisions to the corps whose zones of control they fall in. If, on the other hand, the second position's rifle divisions are deployed along the probable axis of the enemy attack, then it is likely that they will be drawn into the counterattack along with the deeper army reserves. In such an event, these divisions automatically acquire operational significance and should be subordinated directly to the army commander.¹²⁹

The reserve zone will generally be occupied by two or three rifle divisions, and will also include all of the army's tanks and cavalry formations, as well as its mobile artillery, plus chemical and engineering units. If the defender's forces in the tactical zone have been successful in localizing the enemy attack, then the reserve echelon's forces should be con-

centrated immediately behind the second defensive position in the expectation of shortly spearheading the counterattack along with troops from the tactical zone. However, should the enemy attack in great strength and threaten to break through the tactical zone, followed by an exploitation into the operational depth, then the reserve echelon's forces should be held further back, lest they be drawn into the fighting too soon. In this case, the reserve echelon will later counterattack, using its own forces, plus those reinforcements provided by the *front* command.¹³⁰

Isserson knew it was impossible to foresee exactly how the defensive operation would unfold. Nevertheless, given the deep and layered nature of modern defensive arrangements, he felt that the operation would develop successively in several predictable stages. The first of these involved the battle for the forward defense zone, the goal of which is to prevent the attacker from reaching the main defense zone before the latter is ready, while at the same time inflicting as many casualties on the enemy as possible. To this purpose, the rifle and cavalry units holding this area will be supported by chemical and engineering troops, who will attempt to render certain axes impassable for the enemy's forces. The later will also be harassed by air strikes and may even find its advancing columns the target of lightning raids by small groups of the defender's tanks.¹³¹

The battle continues with increasing intensity immediately in front of the main defense zone, where the defender's "counterpreparation" measures come into play. These will take the form of an artillery bombardment against those leading enemy units already deployed for the attack, as had been the case during World War I. The artillery preparation is now augmented by air strikes to disrupt the enemy's preparations in order to delay or weaken his attack. In some cases, the defender may launch armored raids from the main defense zone, provided the enemy's artillery has been temporarily neutralized by air attack.¹³²

As the enemy forces move into the main defense zone, the fighting becomes multi-dimensional, according to the depth of the attack and the forces engaged. It is the task of the forces along the first defensive position to hold at all costs against the enemy attack. If this proves impossible, however, the army commander must authorize their withdrawal to positions deeper within the main defensive zone. Here these forces may be joined by the rifle divisions of the second defensive position, in an attempt to localize the enemy penetration and create the conditions for a counterattack. In certain cases the army commander may even commit his reserve to the battle for the tactical defense zone. Isserson stressed, however, that the army's operational reserves should never be committed into the fighting for the first defensive position, as was the case during the First World War, but should instead be employed to create a new defensive line further back, in order to exhaust the attacker. This will generally occur along the second defensive position, where the defender's rifle divisions will be joined by the army's mechanized reserve.¹³³

Should the attacker nevertheless succeed in breaking into the operational defense zone the army commander must immediately take measures to blunt and/or eliminate the penetration. For Isserson it was a given that any such breakthrough would be spearheaded by the enemy's mechanized forces, and it was against these that the defense must direct its efforts. Based upon his oft-stated belief that modern defense must be anti-tank in nature, he recommended falling back on the operational zone's various anti-tank areas and switch positions and, if necessary, as far back as the army's rear defensive position. Relying on a combination of maneuver and fixed positions, the defense will attempt to channel the breakthrough along favorable axes and lure his tanks into a trap, from which they can be more easily destroyed. This is the task of the army's air units, tank formations, and its mobile

anti-tank artillery reserve. The enemy's stranded armored units would also be systematically attacked by special anti-tank infantry detachments operating at night.¹³⁴

During this time the army commander will also be faced with the problem of maintaining an adequate reserve, in order to parry any new threats. This can be done only by constantly shifting troops from the front's passive sectors and throwing them into the battle where needed.¹³⁵ In this way, so the theory went, the conditions would be created for a decisive counteroffensive.

It is a measure of just how deeply the offensive mentality had been inculcated in the Red Army that Isserson considered the defender's counterblow the high point of the defensive operation, the object toward which it must bend its efforts. He identified three likely types of counterblows, according to the conditions in which they are launched and the goals they pursue. The first involves an enemy breakthrough in a vital area. In such a case, the counterblow is launched with no greater objective than to restore the situation. Given this limited objective, the attack can generally be carried out by the corps' reserves and the second-echelon rifle divisions, although in certain cases the army's reserves may be drawn in. A second case involves a serious breakthrough by the attacker to the extent that it threatens to disrupt the defender's entire operational defense. In such a situation, the army commander, using his operational reserves, organizes the counterblow, although he does not seek to bring about a complete reversal of fortune along the front. The third and most radical scenario foresaw a situation when the attacker's initial breakthrough has been halted with heavy losses. Here the counterblow is launched with all available resources, with the decisive goal of destroying the attacker and seizing the initiative along the front.¹³⁶

Depending upon the situation and the overall defensive plan, the counterblow may be launched within either the tactical or operational zones. In the first case, the enemy attack will first be hemmed in along the flanks by the various switch positions between the two tactical positions and halted at its apex along the second defensive position. This will be followed by a counterattack against one of the penetration's flanks, led by armored units and including rifle divisions from both the tactical and operational zones. If, on the other hand, the attacker has committed major forces into the breakthrough operation, he will likely penetrate into the operational defense zone, from where the counterblow must then be launched. In such a case, it is vital that the defender not attack prematurely an opponent who is still considerably stronger than he. On the other hand, however, to delay the counterblow will doom the defender to "passive exhaustion" or complete defeat.¹³⁷

Isserson recognized that the counterblow from the defender's operational depth would be much more difficult to organize, given the inherently greater complexity of the deep operation, which would unfold simultaneously along several levels. For example, even as the defender seeks to contain the enemy attack within the operational defense zone, his forces might still be holding along positions in the second defensive position, now well in the enemy's rear. It is also possible that other units might even remain in the passive sectors of the first defensive position, even further back. These disparate elements, separated by distance and capabilities, must somehow be organized into a smoothly working whole for the purpose of carrying out the counterblow. Thus once the attacker's offensive momentum has been exhausted by the defender's resistance in the operational zone, those units remaining in the tactical zone will be expected to join in the counterblow. In some cases, these latter units' position along the flanks of the enemy penetration might serve as the ideal jumping-off point for launching attacks deep in the enemy rear. In fact, he added, the counterblow might be so successful as to usher in a general counteroffensive, which would carry the army

beyond its original position. In this case it would be necessary to reinforce the army from the *front's* reserves.¹³⁸

The *Fundamentals of the Defensive Operation* was certainly a useful antidote for an army steeped in the offensive ideology. However, there is some question as to just how widely it was distributed outside of academic circles, particularly to those who would be expected to command armies and *fronts* in a future war. Nevertheless, even though the academic authorities found Isserson hard to deal with, they nonetheless valued his contribution to the armed forces' intellectual development. On December 12, 1938, he was credited with having completed the General Staff Academy course of instruction, with all the prerogatives inherent therein.¹³⁹

To a Higher Level — the Front Deep Operation

Isserson was soon back on more congenial offensive ground with the publication, for internal academic use, of a short work (31 pages) entitled "Fundamentals of the Operation." The work is actually a chapter from the ill-fated operational manual which he had drawn up on Yegorov's orders in 1936, but which for unknown reasons was never issued. The work itself bears all the marks of having been intended as part of a manual and is itself conveniently divided into chapters and articles. Unfortunately, this chapter seems to be the only part of the larger work to have survived. For example, although it is listed as the second chapter of *The Fundamentals of Conducting Operations*, the first chapter dealing with a future war and the "fundamentals of our operational art" is missing.¹⁴⁰ Even more disheartening is the notation, evidently in Isserson's own crabbed handwriting, that chapters three through six have been lost as well. These include sections on the meeting engagement, the breakthrough operation and its exploitation, the defensive operation and the subsequent counterstroke, as well as the organization of the operational rear and the work of the army and *front*-level staffs during the operation.¹⁴¹ One suspects, however, that the loss what not as innocent as the author's laconic phrasing would lead one to believe. Such things happened often in those days.

Despite the work's origins as a manual, Isserson was quick to point out that his recommendations should not be taken as immutable laws, but rather as guides to be followed or not as the situation required. He then proceeded to further narrow the focus of his work by declaring that it primarily had relevance for operations conducted in the Soviet Union's western theater of war, by which he meant the border area between the Gulf of Finland and the Black Sea. This definition necessarily excluded such areas as the territory north of Leningrad, the Trans-Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Far East, where considerations of terrain and distance rendered unlikely the "deep forms of operations" which Isserson favored. Moreover, he added the further caveat that his recommendations dealt primarily with operations conducted along the western theater's "main directions," meaning the area along the Polish frontier north and south of the Pripiat Marshes.¹⁴² Secondary directions would lack the resources to conduct the kind of war he had in mind and they would likely be condemned to conduct operations in a more traditional manner.

Isserson's comments on the nature of modern operations indicate a good deal of continuity in his views, as well as some evolution since the early 1930s, although his faith in the basic tenets of the deep operation remained unchanged. For example, he now divided military operations into four types as to the kinds of forces involved: land, air, sea, and

combined. The first type of operation is conducted against specific enemy forces and is supported by air power and, where applicable, river flotillas. Air operations may be carried out in direct tactical support of the ground forces' attack against the enemy, or they may be restricted to operational tasks against his reserves, supply lines, as well as his air assets along a particular direction. Independent strategic air operations may also be conducted against the enemy's deep reserves, as well as his military, political and economic centers, his naval forces and seaports, and his air force in the battle for air superiority.¹⁴³

His comments on naval operations, while few, are interesting if only because he had never addressed the subject in his previous writings. Naval operations, he wrote, are conducted in conjunction with the air force against the enemy's naval and shore assets, for the purpose of blockading his ports and disrupting his maritime communications, as well as to protect one's own coastline from enemy attack. Combined operations involving the services were also a new field for Isserson, and would be conducted by ground, sea and air forces in support of a ground attack along a coastal axis. Other activities might include launching or repelling an amphibious landing.¹⁴⁴

Operations are conducted in a theater of military activities, or TVD, which encompasses the entire territory in which a particular strategic task is pursued. The boundaries of a theater of military activities may vary considerably and are determined by the strategic goals being pursued, the enemy's location, and natural features. In some cases the theater of military activities may coincide with the entire territory of the enemy country, or the latter may include more than one such theater. By this he clearly had in mind Poland, the territory of which is divided into two theaters of military activities by the Pripiat Marshes. On the other hand, a single theater of military activities may encompass several small countries, such as the Baltic States. There also exist maritime theaters, of which the most obvious examples are the Baltic and Black seas.¹⁴⁵

Land operations conducted by large forces throughout the entire or greater part of the theater of military operations are known as *front* operations.¹⁴⁶ Isserson called the *front* a "strategic instance," charged with carrying out strategic tasks as formulated by the supreme command.¹⁴⁷ And although Isserson did not elaborate on this point, given the *front's* close identification with the theater of military activities, one may assume the creation of at least five *fronts* in the event of an all-out war between the Soviet Union and its western neighbors. These would include a Northern Front against Finland, stretching from the Barents Sea to the Gulf of Finland. A Northwestern Front would cover the territory of the Baltic States from the Gulf of Finland south to the Dvina River. The Western and Southwestern fronts would be responsible for conducting operations against the Poles, just as they had been in 1920. Finally, in the event of war with Romania, a Southern Front would carry out operations from the Polish border to the Black Sea coast.

The *front's* composition may vary greatly; depending upon the relative importance of the given theater of military activities, and the strategic mission is tasked with. This is only natural, as the size and structure of a *front* operation in the Karelian swamps and forests would be markedly different from one attacking across the Polish plains. As a rule, however, the *front* would include several armies, plus a number of air formations made up of fighters, bombers, and assault aircraft. During an operation the *front* may also be reinforced by the high command's aviation reserves to form an air army capable of carrying out strategic missions. Other combat arms might include airborne units, tank, artillery, chemical and engineering attachments, as well as reserves representing the various combat arms.¹⁴⁸

In organizational terms, a *front* operating in an important theater of military activi-

ties would probably consist of three types of armies, according to their strength and the tasks assigned them. The first of these is the field army, a relatively weak formation of three to five rifle corps, although smaller cavalry, tanks and artillery units may reinforce it. Like the other types, the field army will also have at its disposal an army aviation group (AGA), consisting of light-bomber, assault, fighter, and reconnaissance aircraft. Given its relatively weak composition, the field army will most likely carry out a supporting role in the *front* operation.¹⁴⁹ A more responsible role is entrusted to the shock army, which is a field army, heavily reinforced with mobile and other units for carrying out operations along the main operational direction. Depending upon the specific task, the shock army might include four or five rifle corps (12 to 15 rifle divisions), a cavalry corps (two or three cavalry divisions), three or four tank and one or two motorized rifle brigades for deep maneuver, with another four or five tank brigades for directly reinforcing the rifle corps, 10 to 12 ARGK artillery regiments, four or five air brigades, an airborne detachment, and other units. Such a significant reinforcement, he maintained, would enable the shock army to defeat the enemy throughout the entire depth of his operational position.¹⁵⁰

Front operations in a particularly important theater of military activities might also include a “cavalry-mechanized group” (*konno-mekhanizirovannaia grupp*a), or KMG. Despite the name the cavalry-mechanized group is actually an army, whose approximate strength Isserson put at six to eight cavalry divisions and several tank and motorized rifle brigades, organized into tank groups. Other units might include several air brigades, as well as a number of other attachments such as reinforcements and logistical support units.¹⁵¹ The first cavalry-mechanized group had been organized only the previous year in the Kiev Special Military District, and its inclusion indicates that this part of the 1936 manual had been updated since then.

Obviously impressed by its size and capabilities, Isserson described the KMG as a “formation of strategic significance.” This should not be taken to mean, however, that he considered the cavalry-mechanized group capable of carrying out strategic missions relying purely on its own resources. Rather, it was a case of the KMG carrying out the principal shock and maneuver functions in a *front* strategic operation. For example, the KMG may serve as the *front’s* forward echelon as it moves toward the enemy in preparation for the meeting engagement. In this case the KMG will engage the enemy first and will attempt to gain a decisive victory that may then be more fully exploited by the *front’s* succeeding echelons. The KMG will also spearhead this movement by sweeping around the enemy’s flank and attacking his rear. In a breakthrough operation, on the other hand, the cavalry-mechanized group would serve as the *front’s* breakthrough development echelon for a deep exploitation of the tactical success.¹⁵²

The very idea of a *front* operation in pursuit of strategic goals presupposes an effort along a broad front to a considerable depth. For Isserson, the ultimate depth of such an operation is determined by the distance to “important strategic lines” in the enemy rear, the capture of which will either force the enemy to fall back or deprive him of the ability to wage war further in the theater of military activities. Such strategic lines included a fortified defensive area, a major river barrier, and a mountain barrier or swamp and forest tract. Other targets might include the enemy’s road and rail junctions, as well as his political and economic centers. The location of these points would vary from theater to theater, although Isserson calculated that some of these might be as much as 200 kilometers behind the front line.¹⁵³

Upon the outbreak of war the *front* operation will likely unfold along the lines already

described in Isserson's comments on the meeting engagement, although on a considerably larger scale. As mentioned earlier, the *front's* cavalry-mechanized group may also constitute its forward echelon, providing there is sufficient room for maneuver between the approaching armies. In such a case, the KMG will deploy ahead of the *front's* main body, along the axis of the planned turning movement. In those cases here the maneuver possibilities are more limited; the KMG will be deployed to the *front's* second echelon, to be held in readiness to exploit any breakthrough achieved by the first echelon. The *front's* reserves will be located along major rail and road arteries some 100–200 kilometers behind the first echelon, thus facilitating their rapid commitment into the fighting when and where needed. In those cases where the reserves are already slated for commitment along a particular axis, they will form part of the *front's* second echelon and advance to the battlefield a few days' march behind the main body. The *front's* air assets complete the picture in depth and will be stationed at airfields some 200 to 400 kilometers behind the front line.¹⁵⁴

Ideally, the *front's* forward and main echelons will be so constituted as to carry out the deep operation in the meeting engagement without extensive regrouping prior to the start of the battle. Indeed, the outlines of the main effort and turning movement will be visible in the march order itself. The most pronounced element here is the presence of the *front's* "shock group," which may consist of from one to three shock armies and the cavalry-mechanized group. These forces will spearhead the *front's* main effort, which may take several forms, according to the forces available and the goals being pursued. These forms include the turning movement launched along a single wing of the *front's* advance, after which it would turn inward against the enemy's flank and rear, or a single blow launched along the center of the front for the same purpose. Another and more ambitious maneuver is to launch two separate attacks along both wings of the front, which would then converge in the enemy rear. To strengthen the force of the attack, the *front's* shock armies would be allotted attack frontages of 50 to 80 kilometers. Elsewhere weaker "holding armies" would attack along broader fronts ranging from 80 to 100 kilometers, in an attempt to tie down as many of the enemy's forces as possible and prevent him from shifting forces to meet the main attack. As the *front's* chief maneuver element, the KMG is assigned not so much a front as a direction of advance.¹⁵⁵

The meeting engagement will begin in the air, even as the two sides' ground forces are still some distance apart. This will include attacks against the enemy's forces and rear targets to a depth of 200 to 300 kilometers, as well as the suppression of his air assets in order to achieve air superiority over the battlefield. If need be, *front* aviation will also be responsible for carrying out airborne landings in the enemy rear along the planned axis of advance. Meanwhile, the main ground attack will have closed with the enemy and will seek to outflank him, while at the same time constantly feeding the assault with fresh forces from the interior. If all goes well, the cavalry-mechanized group will outflank the enemy along one wing and move to link up with the airborne landing in the enemy rear. This would place the defender in such a critical situation that he will have little choice but to withdraw, or risk being surrounded and destroyed.¹⁵⁶

As we have seen, Isserson was less than confident that a decisive victory could be achieved as a result of the meeting engagement — a conviction that extended to the *front* level as well. Eventually, he concluded, even the most successful outcome will most likely come up against the enemy's superior ability to rapidly move forces up to the threatened sector and begin to construct the semblance of a new front. "Even an insignificant break in the operation," he wrote, is fraught with the danger that the attack's original impetus will

be lost and that positional forms of warfare will assert themselves, just as they had in the autumn of 1914. In such a case, the attacker has no choice but to reorganize his forces for carrying out a breakthrough operation.¹⁵⁷

The most important measure the *front* command can take during this period is to withdraw the cavalry-mechanized group into the second echelon, where it will serve as the *front's* breakthrough development echelon. In those cases where the *front* lacks its own ERP, it will assign the task of exploiting the breakthrough to the ERPs of its subordinate shock armies. Such an extensive regrouping will inevitably take some time and may last several days or more, particularly if the operation involves breaking through the defender's permanent fortifications. This is not to suggest that the enemy should be granted anything suggesting a respite, or that he be allowed to carry out his defensive preparations unmolested. Thus during the run up to the breakthrough operation it is the responsibility of the *front's* air arm to "soften up" the enemy through systematic strikes against targets in his defensive zone and air assets, as well as deeper strikes against his operational reserves and rear supply installations.¹⁵⁸

The *front's* shock group, consisting of several shock armies, will either attempt to pierce the enemy's tactical defense along a single portion of the front, or along separate axes. In either case, a holding group from one of the less-powerful armies will join in the attack along the shock army's boundary, so as to secure its flank as it moves forward. Once the shock group has penetrated to a depth of 15 to 20 kilometers, the *front* ERP will be committed for the exploitation in depth. Isserson further recommended that this penetration encompass the enemy's second defensive position and be at least 20 to 25 kilometers in width, so as to avoid the enemy's enfilading artillery fire. The ERP may be committed in separate groups in the breach, or as a single mass, along the boundary between two shock armies. Screened by *front* aviation and its flanks protected by the shock armies, the ERP will immediately penetrate to a depth of up to 100 kilometers, encompassing the area of the defender's operational reserves. As the attack moves forward, the KMG will attack and destroy these reserves and otherwise paralyze the functioning of the enemy rear. At the same time it will turn inward against one of the enemy's flanks and, in conjunction with those shock armies attacking from the front, surround and destroy those enemy forces still holding out along the original position. The air force, meanwhile, will sweep the skies over the battlefield, isolating the enemy's operational zone and attacking his deep reserves as they attempt to reach the threatened sector.¹⁵⁹

The pace of the advance will vary according to such factors as the force of the initial blow, the enemy's strength and the extent of his engineering preparations, the terrain, the availability, and the rate at which the rail network can be repaired. Nevertheless, he felt that the daily rate of advance for the shock group's combined-arms formations might be as much as 20 to 25 kilometers, while the success development echelon might advance as much as 50 kilometers per day. Overall, the *front's* rate of advance during the operation would probably vary from 12 to 15 kilometers per day.¹⁶⁰

Upon reaching its main objective, however, the *front* will likely have exhausted, at least temporarily, its offensive capabilities. Even given the attacker's impressive rate of advance, the enemy will probably still succeed in establishing a new defensive front in this area. To push the offensive beyond its natural limits is to invite a counteroffensive that might go far toward negating the results already achieved. Isserson thus recommended halting the operation at this stage in order for the attacker to replenish and regroup his forces, concentrate new reserves and supplies, and put his rear supply services in order. This operational pause

may last some time before the offensive can be resumed along this direction.¹⁶¹ This, in turn, will confront the *front* command with the problem of conducting a series of consecutive operations, each one proceeding from the other, until the strategic objectives of the war are achieved.

Isserson's comments on the conduct of the army offensive operation were quite brief and limited almost entirely to an examination of the army in a meeting engagement. These cursory remarks are in contrast to his extensive examination of the *front* operation, and may be indicative of the author's growing interest in conducting operations at a level that was still considered to be within the realm of strategy. They may also reflect Isserson's belief that the fundamentals of the army operation, as he saw them, were now so thoroughly ingrained within the Red Army that there was no reason to belabor the point. If such was indeed the case, it would seem that he was more confident of his theory's viability after 1937–38 than later pronouncements would indicate.

Purely operational objectives are still the province of the combined-arms army, which Isserson called the "*basic operational formation*" (emphasis in the original).¹⁶² As such, it is usually subordinate to the *front*, which pursues strategic objectives in a theater of military activities. The army, on the other hand, due to its limited capabilities, is able to pursue a purely operational task along a single "operational direction," of which there may be several in a TVD. Thus during the course of strategic operation, the *front* will achieve any number of intermediate objectives along the way; these unfold as army operations, conducted by the individual commanders at the behest of the *front* command.¹⁶³

Whether or not Isserson sought to update his other ideas in the succeeding chapters will probably never be known, as these materials seem to have been irretrievably lost. This is particularly regrettable, as *The Fundamentals of Conducting Operations* was likely his final attempt at an applied theory of operational art before the war. This was an omission that the Red Army would sorely miss.

CHAPTER 8

The Last Years of Freedom

The War with Finland

By the summer of 1939 the time for war games was coming to an end, as these exercises were being rapidly overtaken by events elsewhere in Europe that would eventually embroil the Soviet Union in war. During the latter half of the 1930s German foreign policy, backed by a growing army and air force, was becoming increasingly aggressive. Hitler's remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936 was followed by the annexation of Austria and the German-speaking Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia two years later. By the spring of 1939 he was openly threatening Poland, which subsequently received guarantees of military support from Britain and France. The two western powers also sought to forge an anti-German coalition with the Soviet Union, which would confront Germany with the prospect of waging a two-front war. However, negotiations toward this end ultimately foundered over the Poles' refusal to allow Soviet troops to enter the country in the event of a German attack. Instead, Stalin opted to sign a non-aggression pact with Hitler, which left the latter free to attack Poland and engage Britain and France in the west without fearing for his eastern flank. The agreement also assigned large parts of Eastern Europe to the USSR's sphere of influence, including eastern Poland, which the Red Army proceeded to occupy in the latter half of September 1939. Isserson took no part in this operation, although he followed with great interest the German army's rapid conquest of Poland.

Among the territories that had been promised to the Soviet Union were the Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, as well as the Romanian province of Bessarabia, and Finland, all of which had achieved independence or were otherwise wrested from Russia during the civil war. The Baltic States and Romania came under increasing pressure from Moscow, and by the summer of 1940 these territories had been absorbed into the Soviet Union. Finland proved to be a much tougher case, and the USSR's relations with its northern neighbor went rapidly downhill in the fall of 1939. The Soviets demanded a number of territorial concessions from the Finns, particularly along the Karelian Isthmus, where the frontier was only a few kilometers north of Leningrad. The Finns rejected these demands as obvious threats to their security and independence, and both sides began to prepare for war. Following a number of Soviet-inspired border incidents, the Red Army attacked in force on November 30, 1939.

The Soviets had begun preparing for war as early as June.¹ A particular feature of these

preparations was that the RKKA General Staff was effectively excluded from this process. Chief of Staff Shaposhnikov was all too aware of the difficulties inherent in a winter campaign against Finland. Not only would Soviet troops have to advance through deep snows in sub-zero temperatures, but also they would have to do it against a tough and determined opponent who could make good defensive use of the lakes and forests that cover much of the country. This caused the chief of staff to view the upcoming war as “by no means a simple affair,” which would require several months of hard fighting, even if other powers did not intervene.²

Such caution, however, was not to Stalin’s taste, and he instead turned the task of planning the campaign over to the staff of the Leningrad Military District, commanded by Army Commander Second Class Meretskov.³ Meretskov’s plan was to attack the Finns at several points along the lengthy frontier, so as to disperse the latter’s already-meager forces. One army was to attack from the Murmansk area toward Petsamo in order to cut off the Finns’ access to the Barents Sea; to the south another army would move across the waist of Finland to cut the country in half at Oulu, on the Gulf of Bothnia. Another army would advance north of Lake Ladoga in order to outflank the Finnish forces along the Karelian Isthmus. It was here in the narrows between the lake and the Gulf of Finland that Meretskov proposed to make his main effort. Here the 7th Army was to break through the Finnish fortifications along the frontier toward Vyborg (Viipuri), followed by an advance into the enemy heartland. It was estimated that the latter operation would take eight to ten days.⁴ As events would show, this proved to be a wildly optimistic forecast.

At first glance, the odds were certainly in favor of the Soviets. The Red Army initially threw more than 500,000 men into the war, a figure that increased considerably before it was over.⁵ The Soviets also possessed a near absolute advantage in the number of tanks, aircraft, and artillery, while their Baltic Fleet would command the Gulf of Finland from the outset and be in a position to make amphibious landings in the Finnish rear. Against this force the Finns could muster an army of only about 260,000 men, according to Soviet estimates, although their level of training for all ranks far exceeded that of the Soviets.⁶ Moreover, they would be fighting in terrain that was highly favorable to the defense in a patriotic war for their country. The most the Red Army could offer by way of motivation was the hollow prospect of performing one’s “international duty” to “liberate the Finnish proletariat.”

However, the Finnish proletariat showed no sign of welcoming their “liberators” and



Division commander Isserson, ca. 1939. This picture was probably taken shortly before his posting to the front in Finland (courtesy Russian State Military Archives).

the first ten days of the Soviet offensive showed just how badly Stalin had misjudged the situation. On December 9 he removed the Leningrad Military District from control of operations and placed the entire campaign under a newly created *Stavka* of the High Command, consisting of himself, Voroshilov, Shaposhnikov, and the naval commissar, Nikolai Gerasimovich Kuznetsov.⁷ Meretskov was placed in command of the 7th Army. He evidently found the incumbent chief of staff unequal to the task, for on December 9 Isserson was appointed to the position; that same day he was promoted to the rank of division commander.⁸ Isserson later testified that he had lobbied Voroshilov to be sent to the front, although he did not specify in what capacity.⁹ The defense commissar then probably broached the idea of appointing Isserson to Meretskov, who presumably gave his approval. The two men probably knew each other from their mutual service in the Belorussian Military District, where Meretskov served as chief of staff under Uborevich from 1932 to 1935. This means that Meretskov must have been privy to the various disputes that Isserson claimed to have had with the military district chief and his other superiors. This either did not give him pause, or Isserson exaggerated the extent of these conflicts. There is reason to believe, however, that Meretskov may have come to regret his choice, as his memoirs make no reference to Isserson as a division commander during these years, although the names of several commanders of equal or lesser rank are included.¹⁰ In fact, nowhere does Isserson appear in this book, despite the fact that the two men's paths crossed more than once over the years. Such consistent "forgetfulness" implies that the omission was deliberate.

Grigorenko, his former student, offered another explanation for Isserson's appointment. Grigorenko decried Isserson's transfer to this "ordinary military post," which he considered unworthy of a "great military theoretician" at the country's premier military-educational institution. He added that "all Isserson's former pupils viewed this as revenge" for his criticism of those Soviet commanders who had served in Spain and who sought to popularize the experience of that war within the Red Army.¹¹ This explanation seems far-fetched; however, as any commander worth his salt would welcome the chance to cross swords with the enemy. Moreover, the fact of Isserson's promotion hardly qualifies the assignment as a "punishment." In fact, further evidence of the regard in which Isserson was held had come on October 17, 1939, when he was awarded the prestigious title of professor.¹²



Army Commander Second Class Kirill Afanas'evich Meretskov (1897–1968), ca. 1939. Isserson served briefly under him during the war with Finland (courtesy Central Armed Forces Museum).

Unfortunately, Isserson did not leave an account of his service in the war with Finland, just as he had passed over in silence his participation in the Soviet-Polish War. Whether this omission sprang from his understandable reluctance to dwell on the details of two badly conducted wars, or from higher considerations of official censorship, is unknown. Nor is the official record of much help, as nearly all of the documents generated by the 7th Army during the war are unavailable. What little information there is comes from the testimony of a disgruntled commander who served under Isserson on the 7th Army staff, as well as the minutes of Isserson's own interrogation on the subject. For this reason, both accounts, while revealing in their own right, should be treated with the proper amount of caution.

Isserson stated that he arrived at 7th Army headquarters on December 10.¹³ By this time the Soviets had crossed the border and, having pushed back the light Finnish covering forces, had arrived at the latter's main defensive system along the isthmus. This was the so-called "Mannerheim Line," named in honor of Field Marshal Mannerheim, the former czarist officer who had led the country's fight for independence from Soviet Russia in 1918. Meretskov called the Mannerheim Line a "powerful, long-term defensive system," which had been compared to the Germans' West Wall fortifications, or the French Maginot Line, although his inflated evaluation speaks more to his own shortcomings as a general than being an objective analysis of the position's strength.¹⁴ Field Marshal Mannersheim, on the other hand, called these fortifications "very modest" and consisting of only 66 concrete "nests," most of which were outdated. The position had been further strengthened shortly before the war by barbed wire entanglements and anti-tank obstacles, but nevertheless was "completely lacking in depth."¹⁵

Nevertheless, the Soviet advance immediately ran into trouble upon encountering this position, which was further buttressed by the numerous lakes, rivers, forests, and swamps of the area. Here the difficulties stemmed as much from the Red Army's failure to achieve even a modicum of coordination between the various combat arms as the Finns' resistance. Meretskov described one such incident, which occurred on December 12, as the Soviets attempted a "reconnaissance in force" against the Mannerheim Line. This effort was preceded by a heavy artillery bombardment, which caused the defenders to abandon their trenches and move forward towards their own barbed wire. When the Soviet artillery switched its fire to the wire entanglements, in order to blast holes for the infantry attack, the Finns quickly fell back to their original position. The Soviet tank commander, he wrote, "failed to grasp the situation" and concluded that the retreating Finns were actually Soviet troops who had penetrated the enemy position and were now being shelled by their own artillery. The commander, instead of sending his tanks forward, telephoned defense commissar Voroshilov, who in turn ordered that the artillery preparation be halted immediately. While the commanders on the spot tried to sort things out, Meretskov concluded that "the moment was lost." In any event, he continued, an investigation into this incident revealed that the Soviet artillery had concentrated its fire almost exclusively against the entrenchments between the enemy's pillboxes, leaving the latter completely unscathed. This meant that the attacking infantry would not have advanced in any event, or could have done so only at the cost of "extremely high casualties."¹⁶

One commander who worked closely with Isserson during this period was Talenskii, who knew Isserson from the Frunze Academy. Talenskii had been attached to the 7th Army in order to study the experience of the war as deputy chief of the staff's information department.¹⁷ According to Talenskii, Isserson was a kind of "control freak" who refused to dele-

gate responsibility to his subordinates. He stated that this trait manifested itself most clearly during one of the planning sessions for the 7th Army's December 17 attack against the Manerheim Line, at which he had been present. Isserson "took everything upon himself," which essentially reduced the staff's operational section to a "purely technical" role. For example, as Isserson had already made the necessary calculation for regrouping the army's units for the attack, there was nothing for his subordinates to do for several hours but to write down his instructions as he dictated them. Other commanders, each requiring some of the chief of staff's time; were constantly interrupting this one-man performance and since Isserson held all the threads in his own hands, this meant that his subordinates were often reduced to idleness while their chief was busy with some other matter. This management style, Talenskii stated, inevitably disrupted the junior staffers' work.¹⁸

Talenskii further charged that Isserson's calculations contained major errors and that the chief of staff, in arriving at these figures, failed to take into account the difficulty of shifting units rapidly during the Finnish winter, thus rendering his figures "unrealistic." These mistakes occurred, he maintained, because Isserson was a desk-bound commander who never got out among the troops to learn their problems first hand. As a result, he "did not understand the true situation," at the front and, in any event, he "did not take into account the opinions of his subordinates" who had. Moreover, he added, under Isserson the army's rear services were poorly organized and "there was no order on the roads." As opposed to the purely operational side of things, he stated, Isserson had little interest in logistical problems, although such matters were his "direct responsibility." As the result of these various mistakes, Talenskii concluded, a number of units reached their jumping-off points only on the morning of the attack, although they should have occupied these positions before then. This circumstance "undoubtedly" had a negative effect upon the outcome of the attack, he said.¹⁹

Isserson, when faced with these accusations during his own interrogation, evidently decided that the best defense is a good offense, and sought to paint Talenskii as a disaffected commander with a personal grudge to bear. He said that he recalled Talenskii from their service together on the 7th Army staff; stressing that at first their relations had been "good." It was only later, he said, when Talenskii failed to carry out his orders to compile some General Staff reports, that he relieved him of his position.²⁰ Once again, the familiar pattern appears, as it had throughout most of Isserson's career. At first his relations with his subordinate were "good," after which they quickly soured, due entirely to the latter's failure to live up to his expectations.

Isserson was considerably less combative, however, as regards many of the particulars in Talenskii's account, and freely admitted that he had made mistakes. He admitted he had failed to properly organize the activities of the "army staff and subordinate staffs." This, he said, resulted in a "lack of coordination" and "control problems" which, in turn, adversely affected combat operations. He further admitted that although his calculations as to the time needed for units to move were based upon the "usual norms for winter conditions," they were nevertheless "compiled without taking into account the troops' true state. Not knowing the troops' condition," he continued, "I proposed an accelerated deadline" for the attack. He further admitted that the army's rifle divisions had been allotted too little time to prepare for the attack and that his own expectations had been "unrealistic."²¹ He did deny, however, Talenskii's assertion that due to his miscalculations, some of the army's units arrived at their attack sectors only on the morning of the attack. Isserson said that this was untrue and that all units designated to take part in the December 17 attack had occupied

their positions a day or two earlier. And while it was true that other units had arrived later, he said, they had not been scheduled to take part in the attack.²²

Isserson further admitted that he had neglected some aspects of his position. He said that he had been chiefly concerned with purely operational questions and had thus “left the remaining branches of work without proper leadership, including the rear.” He stated that he had been “insufficiently concerned” with the delivery and supply of reinforcements by rail.²³

However, if some of these mistakes could be charitably attributed to simple human negligence and Isserson’s own personal quirks, Talenskii’s statements took on a more ominous tone when he accused Isserson of systematically engaging in “deception” (*ochkoviratel’stvo*). He charged that his superior regularly sent out “incontrovertibly false” reports regarding the pace of the army’s advance, despite the fact that he and others continually cautioned Isserson that these reports should be based only on data that had been verified. For example, the staff once drew up a report in which it was noted that an attack had failed. Isserson crossed this passage out and ordered his subordinates to insert the phrase that the offensive was still continuing. Talenskii added that “Isserson made similar corrections in his reports several times and, as a rule, embellished reality and hid shortcomings in the organization of a number of operations.”²⁴

Talenskii recounted that in another incident the army staff briefly lost contact with a rifle division on the march, a fact that they indicated by noting that no information had been received from this unit. When Isserson read the staff’s report, he ordered this phrase be stricken and proceeded to dictate an entry reporting the division’s location as where it should have been according to plan, although this differed from where it actually was.²⁵

A particularly egregious example of this practice, he said, occurred when the army staff reported the arrival of several units from the army’s “shock group” at their jumping-off positions on the morning of December 17, the day of the attack. Talenskii said that Isserson ordered that the report be changed to indicate that the units had arrived at their designated areas the previous evening. He maintained that this was because Meretskov and Isserson had reported on December 14 or 15 to Shaposhnikov that the army was ready to attack, and all they needed were a few more hours “for polishing the coordination” between the infantry battalions and artillery batteries. Shaposhnikov expressed his displeasure with this latest of many such requests, citing previous postponements, and designated the morning of December 17 as the time for the attack. To Talenskii this meant that Isserson had earlier reported on the army’s readiness to attack, even though it was not.²⁶

Isserson replied to these charges by stating that a report had been sent to Moscow claiming that the 7th Army was ready to attack on December 17. He could not recall, however, on what day the report had been sent, or whether he or Meretskov had drawn it up. Nor could he remember who inserted the phrase about the army’s readiness, although he allowed that it might have been Meretskov, who “quite often made changes in documents going to Moscow.” However, when further pressed by his interrogator on this matter, Isserson admitted that on the day of the attack, “for a number of reasons, the 7th Army’s infantry units were not prepared,” and that the “troops’ condition” and their degree of readiness to attack were “reflected incorrectly.” When his interrogator asked if the sending of such reports did not constitute deception, Isserson replied that for his part he did not recognize it as such.²⁷

Isserson’s reply was curiously defiant for someone who had just admitted to submitting reports that disguised the true condition of his army’s units on the eve of a major offen-

sive. In his testimony he obviously sought to shift some of the responsibility for this on Meretskov by suggesting that the latter may have “inserted” the false information regarding the troops’ readiness.²⁸ This may have some basis in fact, in which case the army commander bears the lion’s share of the responsibility for submitting false reports to the high command. However, even if Meretskov was the driving force behind the reports, Isserson’s statement clearly indicates that he was aware of the subterfuge at the time and that he made no protest against this practice. Furthermore, as has been shown several times, Isserson never hesitated to take on a superior when he felt that he was in the right. That he evidently failed to do so in this instance indicates that he essentially acquiesced in this falsification.

Isserson stated that he had drawn up the plan for the army’s attack according to Meretskov’s instructions. The plan, he added, “did not essentially differ” from the one that the staff of the Leningrad Military District had previously developed at the direction of the RKKA General Staff. Isserson’s version called for breaking through the Finnish defenses, followed by an exploitation towards Vyborg, the enemy’s major stronghold along the isthmus. In this case, circumstances caused him to forego his favored turning movement and make a frontal attack, he said, because the Soviets lacked the forces to lengthen their flank and turn the enemy’s position along the Gulf of Finland. Moreover, he added, any advance along this axis meant first capturing the peninsula in the Koivisto area, and even then an attack would be hobbled by the fact that the ice along the bay leading to Viipuri had not hardened sufficiently to permit the passage of large numbers of troops and their equipment. The plan also called for a supporting attack by the army’s right flank forces, followed by an advance along the western shore of Lake Ladoga.²⁹

The plan called for the attack to begin at dawn, preceded by a four-hour artillery barrage and by air strikes along the designated breakthrough zone. Once the initial penetration had been achieved, a mechanized corps would move into the breach and strike toward Vyborg, “pushing aside enemy units into the forested and swampy terrain, followed by their encirclement and destruction.”³⁰

However, Isserson also noted that preparations for the attack were hurried and did not proceed smoothly in all the combat arms. The artillery was deployed and ready in a “timely manner,” he testified, as were the tanks. Here, once again, he was forced to acknowledge that the rifle divisions were not ready and “had not carried out the necessary training for breaking through a fortified line.” The same was true of the army’s air arm, although he added that the air force had done a poor job of conducting reconnaissance and did not know its targets well, thus reducing its effectiveness.³¹

Isserson stated that the situation was further complicated by Meretskov’s failure to understand the nature of the Finnish defense. He testified that the army commander believed that there were no permanent fortifications along the axis of attack. Instead, the enemy’s defensive position consisted of only “separate fortifications, with large open gaps between them,” through which the Soviets would attack. For this reason, he continued, Meretskov ordered elements of one of the rifle divisions to conduct a reconnaissance in force on December 16. The attack was a failure, however, and the division suffered heavy losses.³² Meretskov later wrote on this score that “some of our intelligence people” considered the Mannerheim Line’s defenses “nothing but propaganda.” He added that events would soon reveal that this was a “gross miscalculation.”³³ He failed to mention, however, whether or not he was personally taken in by this faulty intelligence.

Isserson stated that despite this bloody nose, Meretskov persisted in his error, first

reducing the attack's artillery preparation to two hours, and then canceling it altogether. The army's 800 artillery pieces "lay idle," he recalled. Also absent was the planned air support, as the attack began too early in the day for the bombers to see their targets. As a result, the Finnish pillboxes were not destroyed and the advancing infantry fell under a "ruinous fire." The attack on a nearby village was particularly badly handled, he said, adding, "there was no control of this movement on the part of the army commander or his staff," although he failed to mention his role as chief of staff. The Soviets once again suffered heavy losses, including tanks, significant numbers of which were abandoned to the enemy when the attackers withdrew.³⁴

Meretskov described the attack in somewhat different terms, although he agreed with Isserson that it was a failure. "The absence of experience and weapons for breaking through such fortifications" affected the outcome, he wrote, thus indirectly confirming Isserson's statement that the troops had not been properly trained for this kind of combat. He added that "it was discovered" that the enemy's defense "had not been suppressed," although he failed to elaborate whether this was the result of a poorly conducted artillery preparation, or the complete absence of the latter. The Soviet air effort was also ineffective, and bombed "only the rear of the enemy defense," thus rendering little support to the ground attack. The Soviets also committed the critical error of launching their attack from too great a distance, which forced the infantry to advance even further through the deep snow. The few passages through these defenses meant that the Soviet tanks had to be bunched up for the attack, making them easy targets for the Finns. The defenders added to the carnage by holding their fire until the tanks passed through and then opening flanking fire from their pillboxes against the Soviet tanks.³⁵

Marshal Mannerheim offered another view of the action, which is more comprehensive and objective. He stated that the Soviet attack on December 17 opened with "an intensive artillery barrage," thus directly contradicting Isserson's account. This was followed by the infantry attack, which was supported in one place by tanks and aircraft. This effort, he continued, made a slight penetration at a heavy cost in Soviet tanks, but by the end of the day the defenders had restored the situation. A five-hour artillery barrage the next day signaled the renewal of the attack, but this effort was stopped in its tracks. The Soviets undauntedly expanded the scope of the offensive on December 19, throwing in several more rifle divisions, backed by several armored formations and "large numbers of planes." Mannerheim wrote that this time the enemy committed "groups of twenty to fifty tanks, in furious assaults," which got as far as the village of Summa. The infantry, however, "attacked in close formation" and suffered "heavy losses." The fighting here "raged from morning till night of the next day," when the Soviets finally called off their attacks, without having gained their objectives. Elsewhere, the 7th Army's secondary attack near Taipale, along Lake Ladoga, gained some ground on December 25, but a Finnish counterattack the next day threw the attackers back to their original positions.³⁶ Thereafter, Soviet attacks along this front decreased in intensity until the start of their final offensive at the beginning of February.

Mannerheim, who had a great deal of respect for the combat qualities of the individual Soviet soldier, was nevertheless highly critical of the Red Army's commanders and the methods they employed during the December fighting along the Karelian Isthmus. The Finnish commander likened these methods to a "badly conducted orchestra, in which the instruments were played out of tune." The Soviets, he wrote, would throw "division after division" into the battle, "but the co-operation between the different arms remained bad.

The artillery kept up a heavy fire, but it was badly directed and badly co-ordinated with the movements of the infantry and armour.” The latter’s actions, he noted, were particularly puzzling, and the Soviet tanks “might advance, open fire, and return to their starting point before the infantry had even begun to move. Such elementary mistakes,” he concluded, “naturally cost the Red Army heavy losses.”³⁷

The various defects enumerated here are hardly the responsibility of Isserson or Meretskov, however. As proof of this, one need only point to the other Soviet armies’ lack of success elsewhere along the front, despite their overwhelming superiority over the Finns. Rather, they were the faults of the Red Army as an institution and, by extension, the entire Soviet regime, which the army so well personified. For nearly 15 years the army had chafed under Voroshilov’s incompetent direction, while the latter owed his position entirely to Stalin’s favor and his willingness to carry out the dictator’s slightest whim. As a result, sycophancy and unquestioning obedience to orders from above had become the army’s hallmark, often to the detriment of its combat performance. This tendency was further exacerbated by the wholesale bloodletting of the previous two years, during which the most authoritative and experienced commanders had been ruthlessly destroyed and replaced by a thoroughly cowed new generation of leaders which was primarily concerned with its own survival. Given these factors, the Red Army’s Finnish debacle was inevitable, and the campaign was only salvaged by the application of overwhelming numbers of men and weapons against a badly outnumbered opponent. The Soviet victory in World War II was secured in much the same manner, although at a far greater cost.

Such considerations were far from the minds of those in power, however, and as is often the case in such matters, a scapegoat was needed upon whom to pin the blame. Thus on December 31 Voroshilov ordered Isserson to be relieved of his duties and replaced him with Army Commander Second Class Ivan Vasil’evich Smorodinov and ordered him to report to Moscow.³⁸ In this ignominious fashion, Isserson’s stint as army chief of staff came to an end after only three weeks.

The true reasons behind Isserson’s removal are unclear, and there exist several possible explanations for this event. One is that Meretskov himself engineered his chief of staff’s transfer during a dinner engagement with Stalin. Meretskov related that during the dinner Stalin informed him of “certain changes” forthcoming in the Soviet command structure on the Finnish front. Here the dictator was referring to the decision to reorganize Soviet forces along the Karelian Isthmus into the Northwestern Front (7th and 13th armies) under Army Commander First Class Timoshenko, although Meretskov would remain in command of the 7th Army.³⁹ The *front* was established on January 7, 1940, which means that Meretskov’s conversation with Stalin took place before that date, perhaps even before the end of the year. If such was the case, then it is possible that Meretskov used this opportunity to request that Isserson be removed. This is speculation, to be sure, although once again Meretskov’s failure to mention Isserson in his memoirs implies that the two were not on the best of terms.

Grigorenko, whose respect and sympathy for his former professor sometimes led him to make unfounded statements, offered another explanation. According to this version, Isserson’s appointment as chief of staff “delivered him into the hands of his enemy, Marshal Timoshenko.” It will be recalled that Grigorenko had claimed that Timoshenko “had come to hate Isserson with a passion” during their service in the Belorussian Military District. “Now Timoshenko was commander of an active front,” he wrote, “and his hated enemy was serving in one of the armies subordinate to him. All he needed was an excuse

for taking revenge, and it turned up quickly enough.” According to this account, Timoshenko decided to send a division through the trackless winter wastes “into the deep rear of the Finnish forces.” Grigorenko stated that “Only Isserson opposed this mindless venture” and predicted that “the Finns would move against the division with ski troops, cut the column into pieces by sniper fire, and piece by piece destroy the entire division.” When Isserson’s warning was proved correct, he continued, “it became necessary to find scapegoats.” The division commander and several others were shot, while Isserson was cashiered “for not having given the division direction.”⁴⁰

This account, while intriguing, contains too many factual errors to be plausible. For example, Timoshenko was promoted to marshal only in the spring of 1940, and so could not have held this rank during the period in question. More substantially, Timoshenko assumed command of the Northwestern Front a full week after Isserson had been relieved, and thus their paths would thus not have crossed, for better or worse, in Finland. Furthermore, Grigorenko’s rendition of events is exceedingly vague and reads more like a composite account of the Red Army’s troubles during the Finnish war, with Isserson as the martyred hero. Finally, as will be shown by subsequent events, this account overstates the differences between the two men. Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine if Grigorenko heard this story from Isserson, or whether it is merely the product of hearsay.

Isserson’s daughter, who heard it from her father’s lips after his return from prison and exile in 1955, offers the most interesting theory explaining his dismissal. Irena Georgievna stated that the fateful incident took place about two weeks or less into her father’s assignment as chief of staff, which would coincide approximately with the 7th Army’s December 17 to 20 offensive. She said that Andrei Andreevich Andreev, a member of the Politburo and secretary of the Central Committee, suddenly telephoned army headquarters to demand an immediate breakthrough and a quick end to the war. Isserson, as has repeatedly been shown, was not one to suffer fools gladly, regardless of rank, and he quickly grew tired of Andreev’s militarily ignorant demands. Isserson finally told Andreev to “butt out” (*poslal ego na tri bukvy*), which brought the conversation to an abrupt end. This was a serious mistake, as Andreev, whose expertise, aside from political intrigue, had heretofore been in the country’s chronically unproductive agricultural sector, would hardly have made the call except at Stalin’s behest; the insult to Andreev became, by extension, an insult to Stalin as well. According to Irena Georgievna, the fallout from this incident led not only to her father’s removal a short while afterward, but also led to his arrest a year and a half later.⁴¹

Isserson was naturally more circumspect in his account of his removal and carefully limited his remarks to the official record. He stated that he left for Moscow on the evening of January 1, 1940, although upon his arrival he had to cool his heels for the better part of a month while his fate was being decided.⁴² The wheels of the Red Army’s bureaucracy turned slowly, however, and it was not until January 12 that an order was issued accusing Isserson and another commander of failing “to organize not only the staff work of corps and divisions” under their command, “but of their own army staff” as well. The order further charged that neither commander knew his “units’ true condition,” and that in their proposals to the army commands they “proceeded from a non-specific and unrealistic appraisal of the situation.” The order further reduced both men to the rank of colonel and directed that they be reassigned to less responsible positions “servicing the front.”⁴³

Toward the end of January Isserson was finally granted an interview with Corps Commissar Yefim Afanas’evich Shchadenko, the chief of the Red Army’s command person-

nel directorate and one of the more odious military figures in a period which had more than its share of such men. One junior officer who encountered him later recalled Shchadenko's "tendency toward an administrative approach, which at times approached rudeness," as well as his "enthusiasm for unjustified severe measures in regard to subordinates."⁴⁴ Shchadenko essentially repeated the above-named indictment, although it was noted that by means of "energetic work" he might be restored to his previous rank.⁴⁵ Before parting, Shchadenko informed Isserson of the defense commissar's order, dated January 24, appointing him commander of the 8th Army's 656th Reserve Rifle Regiment.⁴⁶

At this time a curious incident was supposed to have occurred, which wonderfully illustrates the capricious nature of life under the Stalinist system. Years later Isserson supposedly told another political exile that while in Moscow he was "engaged in an urgent matter," when he was summoned to the Kremlin by Stalin himself. Not knowing what this could mean, he left immediately and was just as quickly admitted to the dictator's office. Stalin ushered Isserson to a large table covered with a map and told him: "Study this plan; it's special." Isserson said that he intently studied what he described as an offensive plan and finally told him: "Comrade Stalin, who presented this plan to you? This is no plan, but a paste-up job (*fil'kina gramota*); this is nonsense!" He was not even able to finish this last phrase before Stalin threateningly told him: "Get out of here!"⁴⁷

Isserson's daughter, who states that the incident took place while her father was in Moscow between assignments, obliquely confirms this bizarre story. She said that when her father returned home from the meeting and told Yekaterina Ivanovna what had transpired in Stalin's office, she told him to "Pack your bags," meaning that he would need them for his expected prison stay. She added that her father was summoned back to Stalin's office the next day and told to come up with a plan for breaking through the Mannerheim Line. This he did, she said, and her father's plan served as the basis for the Red Army's successful offensive during February and March 1940.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, there is no way to confirm the validity of this story, intriguing as it is.

On January 29 Isserson arrived at regimental headquarters in Spasskaia Guba, a small town west of Lake Onega.⁴⁹ And although his arrival coincided with the Red Army's final preparations for a renewed offensive against the Finns, Isserson and his regiment took no part in the fighting. To the south, Soviet troops launched a major offensive on February 11 along the Karelian Isthmus, which brought the war to an end a month later.

In Isserson's defense, it must be allowed that to a significant degree, the assignment in Finland had been a mismatch from the very beginning and seriously at odds with everything he professed to believe in. His own numerous writings on the conduct of the deep battle and the deep operation presupposed the existence of broad maneuver possibilities inherent in the broad and open terrain of Eastern Europe. Such conditions enhanced to an ideal degree the shock and maneuver capabilities of the motorized and mechanized formations, which lay at the heart of his views. However, once the scene shifted to Finland, where the numerous lakes, swamps, and forests sharply restricted the army's freedom of maneuver, Isserson's theories came a cropper.

On the other hand, a great commander is someone who rises to the occasion even under adverse circumstances. If viewed in this light, Isserson's performance in the Finnish war must certainly be rated a failure, although it should be stressed that as chief of staff he was primarily responsible for formulating Meretskov's orders and that the lion's share of the blame for the 7th Army's tactical-operational shortcomings in December must rest with the latter. Still, it is difficult to rid oneself of the suspicion that as a military practitioner, as

opposed to being a theoretician, Isserson may have been in over his head, thus adding weight to the old adage that “those who can’t, teach.”

A Last Hurrah

Isserson spent what must have been three very difficult months in this provincial semi-exile before being relieved. On May 5 he learned that he was being transferred back to Moscow in connection with his appointment as chief of the General Staff Academy’s department of operational art.⁵⁰ This must have been particularly pleasant news, following the humiliations of the Finnish campaign, and for a short while it must have seemed that he had been forgiven, despite his reduction in rank.

This was particularly fortunate appointment, as the military events of 1939–40 presented the army with a host of new challenges, which in its weakened intellectual and personnel state it was quite incapable of meeting. High on the list of these failures was the senior military leadership’s signal failure to correctly interpret the experience of these conflicts and to draw the proper conclusions regarding the nature of a future war. Perhaps in no other area was the post-purge leadership more remiss than in the false lessons it drew from the Spanish Civil War and the war with Finland.

A number of high-ranking Soviet commanders had served as military advisors to the Republican forces fighting the Nationalist insurgents under Gen. Francisco Franco, and had brought home their impressions of the conflict. Contrary to the proponents of the deep operation, the conflict very quickly became a positional one and witnessed not a single case of a breakthrough in depth. Instead, the war seemed eerily like that of 1914–18, in which small tactical actions predominated. This convinced many that a future war would be a repetition of the Great War’s positional phase. Nor did the civil war witness the employment of armored forces in operationally significant numbers, while the few tanks involved were used almost exclusively for infantry support at the tactical level. The Red Army’s disillusionment with large armored formations led to the decision in November 1939 to break up the existing tank corps and replace them with tank brigades and motorized divisions.

Isserson later wrote that “there could not have been a greater crime” than to disband the tank corps, although he continued to refer to them as mechanized corps. This decision, he continued “inflicted enormous harm on the army” and effectively “castrated the entire theory of the deep operation,” depriving the latter of its chief shock and maneuver element. He further denounced this “unjustified measure” as “playing into the enemy’s hands” on the eve of the war, just as the possibilities offered by the new deep strategy were becoming apparent.⁵¹ In retrospect Isserson’s anger was certainly justified. The mechanized corps, for all their faults, still represented the most powerful strike force the army possessed. To disband them in light of the German-Polish war was especially perverse and speaks much to the army’s intellectual degradation at the time.

The same incorrect conclusions were drawn from the Finnish experience, without regard to the highly specific terrain and other characteristics of the theater of military activities. If anything, the effect of the Finnish War on the Red Army was even stronger, and its deleterious effects were not long in being felt. One commander later complained that the war’s “one-sided” experience dominated the army’s training during the months preceding the German invasion in 1941. Gone from tactical training exercises was any hint of the deep battle or any follow-on committal of large armored forces. Instead, he continued, the

troops were now trained in “overcoming the enemy’s permanent defense by gradually accumulating forces and ‘gnawing through’ breaches in the enemy’s fortifications, according to all the rules of engineering science.”⁵²

There is no telling how long this fool’s paradise might have continued had it not been for the German army’s stunning triumph in the West in the spring of 1940. The German army’s lightning armored advanced across the Meuse River to the English Channel overthrew in a fortnight many of the Red Army’s ossified views regarding the nature of a future war. One positive result of this sea change was the Red Army’s decision in 1940 to once again overhaul its armored park by creating nine new mechanized corps, consisting of two tank and one motorized divisions each, for an authorized strength of between 1,031 tanks of various types, including more than 500 of the latest KV heavy and T-34 medium tanks.⁵³ This was followed by the creation of 20 more such corps in early 1941. However, in their zeal to imitate the German army the high command went too far and authorized the formation of units which even the Red Army’s enormous tank park could not hope to supply with vehicles for several years. Moreover, the constant tinkering with the armored forces’ structure was hardly guaranteed to improve their combat performance. As a result, on the eve of the war few of these corps were even worthy of the name and none were capable of carrying out the decisive sorts of operations envisaged by Isserson.

The upheaval caused by these events afforded the army’s surviving progressive thinkers the opportunity to reexamine a number of questions that had lain dormant since the purges. Easily the most outstanding of these was Isserson, and although his star was clearly on the wane, he quickly seized the opportunity to restate his views. These were most clearly expressed in *The New Forms of Combat*, which appeared in the summer of 1940. Subtitled *The Experience of Studying Modern Wars*, the book was a highly partisan attempt to rehabilitate the deep operation, based upon the latest military developments in Europe. The first volume was devoted to operations in the Spanish Civil War and Germany’s recent invasion of Poland. The war in Western Europe, which he regarded as the most significant of these conflicts, as well as the one most supportive of his thesis, was to be covered in a succeeding volume.⁵⁴

Isserson’s choice of wars was fortuitous and ran the gamut of possibilities under which a land war might be waged. On the one hand, he noted, the Spanish Civil War began as a war of maneuver, became a positional conflict, and concluded with the victor overcoming the enemy’s defensive front. The German-Polish war, on the other hand, was a more homogeneous conflict, and “began, unfolded and ended as a maneuver war.” Finally, the war in the West began as a war of position, known as the “Phony War,” which was brutally cut short by the massive German offensive of May 1940, which quickly developed into a war of maneuver.⁵⁵

Isserson significantly failed to include any sort of discussion of the Soviet-Finnish War. There are probably several reasons for this, the chief one being that this conflict offered little grist for his mill as to the continued relevance of the “new forms of combat.” On the contrary, he wrote more than 20 years later, “the Mannerheim Line was pierced by a method more reminiscent of the breakthroughs of 1918.”⁵⁶ He therefore would have been duty bound to belittle the war’s significance and to dismiss it as not having any particular relevance for the conduct of operations in a modern war. This would have been very much at odds with the official view, which hailed the Red Army’s ham-fisted conduct of the war as evidence of the superiority of its military art. Moreover, it would have been viewed as a direct attack on Timoshenko, the new defense commissar, who was credited with organizing the break-

through of the Mannerheim Line. Given Isserson's own shaky position and his less than stellar performance in the Finnish War, he may well have decided that to ignore the topic was the better part of valor.

Isserson's prejudices were most evident in his treatment of the Spanish Civil War of 1936 to 1939, which he slighted with faint attention, preferring to highlight the German-Polish conflict, which was far more congenial to his point of view. Because the war in Spain was primarily a positional struggle, he wrote, its individual operations "are not particularly interesting in and of themselves," and "do not represent anything new in comparison with the war of 1914–1918."⁵⁷ Knowing Isserson's views, one can hardly conceive of a more damning indictment.

He wrote that the establishment of a positional front in Spain occurred despite all the outward factors favoring a war of maneuver. The most important of these were the extended length of the front and the extremely small forces which both sides could muster to man it. For example, from the summer of 1937 the front reached a length of 1,500 kilometers, which was twice that of the Western Front at the beginning of 1918. The Republican forces, however, could field only 500,000 to 600,000 men, which was approximately one eighth of what the Allies could deploy to man the front in the West from 1914 to 1918. This rendered the establishment of a continuous fortified front out of the question, and nowhere were these positions constructed to any significant depth, while only screening forces held many secondary sectors. Nonetheless, a lengthy period of positional warfare ensued from the fall of 1936. This unexpected development, Isserson maintained, caused many observers to jump to the extreme conclusion that the positional stalemate of World War I was not an isolated phenomenon, and that if a "solid front" was possible in Spain, then "it is inevitable in any modern war."⁵⁸

However, Isserson maintained that the primary reason behind the origin of a positional front in Spain lay in the absence of a "penetrating strike power" to break through the defender's front, and in the lack of "highly mobile means for the development of maneuver" once a breakthrough has been achieved.⁵⁹ Since the Nationalist forces enjoyed an advantage in the small numbers of tanks and aircraft that were available, as well as an overall superiority in the number of personnel, they held the initiative throughout the greater part of the war. Nevertheless, these means were still inadequate to ensure a breakthrough of the enemy defense and the attack's subsequent development into his operational-strategic depth. As a result, the Nationalists were forced to pursue a purely linear strategy, which consisted of conducting "a series of separate operations with limited aims," along various axes until they were halted by a combination of enemy resistance and materiel exhaustion. Upon the completion of each operation, the attacker then had to spend considerable time regrouping his forces in order to repeat the process along another sector of the front. In the end, the Nationalists won due to the exhaustion of their enemy's reserves, which rendered the maintenance of such an extended front untenable.⁶⁰

Isserson called the war in Spain "a complete repetition" of the First World War. This was hardly surprising, he added, for if one "fights using old ways, then old events are repeated."⁶¹ Far more worrisome, however, was the baleful influence of those Red Army advisors who had concluded from the conflict that a recurrence of positional warfare was inevitable and that the only way to overcome the stalemate was to conduct operations to wear down the enemy's resistance. Such a method, he charged, marked a return to the strategy of exhaustion, whereby the stronger side eventually crushes its enemy by virtue of its materiel superiority. Such a prospect, he warned, meant a return to the "hopeless break-

through methods” of the Great War’s final year. Isserson, in his usual *ad hominem* style, attacked these views as a “crutch for a lame mind.”⁶²

For his part, Isserson concluded, the war in Spain was at best a proving ground “for the technical testing of individual types of modern weapons,” an opinion he shared with many foreign observers. “In no way,” he added, could it be considered “a general rehearsal for a major war,” or a legitimate test of the new forms of combat in action. Indeed, the latter had never been put to the test, due to the belligerents’ technological backwardness and the small numbers of modern tanks and aircraft at their disposal. Thus one should thus approach the war’s experience “very carefully” and refrain from any sweeping conclusions as regards its validity for future conflicts involving the major powers.⁶³

If the war in Spain was not a referendum on the validity of the new forms of combat, the war that began on September 1, 1939, with the German attack on Poland was an entirely different matter. Here the Germans skillfully employed strategic and ground-support aviation and massed tank formations to strike deep into the rear of the backward and numerically inferior Polish army. So rapid was the German advance that large Polish forces were surrounded during the war’s first two weeks and most organized resistance had ended by the time Soviet troops entered Poland from the east on September 17. In fact, so rapid and complete was the Polish state’s collapse that Isserson could only compare it to Napoleon’s rout of the Prussian army in 1806, and for many of the same reasons.⁶⁴

For all of his obvious enthusiasm regarding the purely military conduct of the German-Polish war, Isserson was nevertheless discerning enough to see that the conflict did not necessarily lend itself to any far-reaching generalizations about a major war between the Great Powers. For one, the forces engaged were too unequal, with the fully mobilized German army having a clear superiority over its Polish counterpart, which had begun its mobilization too late and whose subsequent efforts along these lines were completely disrupted by the pace of the German attack. Moreover, the great mass of modern tanks and aircraft were German, as was the skill to use these weapons to best advantage. He further noted that neither side was forced to undertake anything approaching the full-scale mobilization of its human and economic resources; because the Poles did not succeed in doing so, and because the Germans didn’t need to. This was certainly contrary to the experience of the First World War, as well as to all expectations for a future conflict. Thus instead of a major war, with its pauses and changes of fortune, he wrote, the German-Polish war “had more of the nature of an individual march or campaign,” which was conducted as a “single overall strategic operation” of a larger war.⁶⁵

Despite these caveats, Isserson nevertheless believed that the recent war still offered valuable insights as to the possible contours of a future conflict. Few lessons from the war were more important than the manner of its beginning. As he noted, “The manner of entering a war usually determines the basic lines along which the war develops, at least during its beginning period.” He then added, “Because each subsequent development flows from the preceding one, in this way the manner of entering into a war determines its lines of development as a whole.”⁶⁶

As we have seen, one of the Red Army’s responses to the problem of the beginning period of war in the age of modern deep-strike weapons was the “invasion army.” Isserson described this army as a formation under whose cover “the country’s main forces must then deploy and enter into the fighting.” However, even according to this theory, the country’s main forces would still begin their mobilization and concentration only upon the outbreak of war, just as they had in 1914, thus maintaining the temporal gap between a declaration

of war and the collision of the belligerents' main forces. The entry of the country's forces into a war, he continued, "thus takes on an echeloned aspect: first the invasion army moves forward, and then the masses of the main forces." However, as Isserson acknowledged, the idea of the invasion army had been heavily criticized and nowhere was it adopted, including the Soviet Union.⁶⁷

The German-Polish conflict, on the other hand, offered the prospect of a fully deployed Wehrmacht launching an all-out offensive at the very beginning of the war. This was because the Germans had skillfully gathered their forces along the Polish border in the months preceding the outbreak of war, taking advantage of the Poles' desire to avoid provoking Hitler into war by carrying out similar measures themselves. This was radically different, Isserson wrote, from the practice of World War I, during which the belligerents' mobilization, concentration, and deployment phases were "marked by quite definite boundaries in time." However, in examining the German-Polish war, "No one can now say when mobilization, concentration, and deployment began," as these formerly separate events merged into a single continuous act. In fact, "the German-Polish war began with the very fact of Germany's armed invasion on land and in the air," thus bypassing those "preliminary stages" so common to past wars.⁶⁸

The opening phase of the German-Polish war caused Isserson to label it a "new phenomenon," which at a single stroke had swept away all previous notions of a war's opening period.⁶⁹ "War is no longer declared," he stated unequivocally. Instead, "It simply is begun by previously mobilized forces," which have been gradually mobilized and concentrated along the enemy's border. Of course, he admitted, it is impossible to "completely disguise" preparations of such magnitude, and they must eventually become known to the intended victim to one degree or another. "However" he continued, "there always remains a step between the threat of war and entry into war," and this may be sufficient to create doubt in the enemy's mind as to whether these preparations are the prelude to war or a diplomatic bluff.⁷⁰ In the case of Poland the degree of uncertainty was enough to dull the government's vigilance and enable the Germans to achieve an overwhelming strategic surprise.

Isserson devoted a good deal of space in his treatment of the war to an operational description of the fighting. He was particularly intrigued by the actions of the German air force, which opened the war with a series of devastating raids against the enemy airfields. These attacks caught the Polish air force completely off guard, and within a few days it had been eliminated as a factor in the war, thus giving the Germans complete air superiority. Nor did the Germans neglect other targets in the enemy rear, paying particular attention to his rail network and other transportation arteries. The bridges over the Vistula were singled out for special attention, and soon the country was isolated into non-supporting halves. "This crushing blow from the air played a decisive role for the operation's development," Isserson, wrote, referring to the free hand that the Luftwaffe now enjoyed in supporting the ground attack. To him the German air force's operations at the beginning of the war were a confirmation of everything he had been advocating over the years, adding that these actions "should dispense any doubts as to the significance of deep, independent air actions in modern war," provided they are directed against the "viability and stability" of the enemy army.⁷¹

Simultaneous with events in the air, the ground attack got underway along the front. This immediately took the form of a gigantic frontier battle, which Isserson called "a new and modern general engagement," "according to its scope, decisiveness, significance, and the number of forces committed" into the fighting.⁷² The result of this general engagement

was an “enormous defeat” for the Poles and, Isserson added, the “beginning of the collapse.” Indeed, the defeat had been so severe, he continued, that the only chance for the Polish army was to withdraw and attempt to establish a positional defensive front along some natural barrier, and suggested the line of the Narew, Vistula and San rivers as the natural fall-back position.⁷³

To be sure, the Poles certainly withdrew under the growing German pressure, although this increasingly took on the aspect of a disorganized rout. The German air force, now almost completely unopposed, only heightened the confusion in the defenders’ ranks. As the front moved deeper into Polish territory, German bombers were able to extend their range further east from newly captured airfields and they continued to pound away at the enemy’s rail lines, supply depots, and command centers. This was hardly the end of the Poles’ troubles, however, as large numbers of German fighters and assault aviation constantly harried their retreating columns, attempting to cut off their path of retreat.⁷⁴

On the ground the German exploitation drive slipped into high gear all along the front. Polish troops, isolated in the Corridor, were quickly destroyed. Along the Narew the Poles did manage to slow the enemy advance somewhat, north of Warsaw. Things were different to the south, however, where German armor raced through the shattered Polish rear to reach the outskirts of the Polish capital on September 8. The tanks, lacking infantry support (a consequence of their success) and being unsuited for fighting in large urban areas, withdrew shortly afterwards. This check, however, did little to curb Isserson’s enthusiasm, and he praised the German advance as “the first example of the independent employment of armored troops” operating well ahead of the front. The rapid German thrust also caused the Polish government and general staff to flee the capital. As a consequence, the army’s system of command and control, never very good since the start of the war, began to rapidly fall apart. Elsewhere large numbers of Polish forces had been surrounded near Kutno and Radom, while the army’s shattered remnants were everywhere in full retreat. Soon the Polish army “no longer represented an organized, controlled mass.”⁷⁵

The utter defeat of the Polish army in the first ten days of the war inevitably raised the question of why they had never been capable of establishing a recognizable defensive front. After all, there were plenty of examples from recent history of one side suffering an initial defeat and yet being able, at least temporarily, of stabilizing the situation. This is because, Isserson observed, under modern conditions even a lightly held front quickly “begins to display the strength of modern firepower,” thus creating the conditions “necessary for even a temporary stabilization of the situation.” Under these conditions, “Even the attacker’s temporary halt affords the defense opportunities and so changes the situation that a maneuver war often comes to an end, and it is replaced by a difficult and exhaustive positional struggle.” He called this tendency a “regularity” (*zakonomernost*) in military operations, which could easily arise again, should one or both sides wage war employing “the old methods.”⁷⁶

The war in Poland had been fundamentally different, both as to the rapidity of its conclusion, as well as to the manner in which it was waged. Here the Polish army was “simply torn to shreds” and defeated in detail before it could even organize any kind of effective resistance behind a defensive front.⁷⁷ For Isserson, the key to the swift Polish collapse lay in the interaction of three main factors. These were: 1) the paralysis of the Polish system of command and control through the joint action of German air and mechanized forces; 2) the paralysis of the Polish transportation system and the “general chaos” in their rear caused by the Germans’ systematic bombardment, and; 3) most importantly, the activities

of the German tank formations, which tore deep rents in the Polish front and advanced to cut off the enemy retreat and prevent him from organizing a new defensive front. Under these conditions, he concluded, the Poles had no opportunity to establish a defensive front, due to the deep character of the German advance. In such a case, he wrote, "The front cannot be created, because it has already been destroyed from the rear. After all," he concluded, "one cannot put up a fence if its foundations have been cut down from within."⁷⁸

Following the massive rupture of the Polish front the war was essentially over and it remained only for the Germans to gather the spoils. Isserson called this final phase of the conflict "a grandiose engagement for the destruction of the enemy's already surrounded groups."⁷⁹ These pockets, which eventually yielded over a half-million prisoners, were gradually eliminated during the next two weeks, although Warsaw managed to hold out until September 27, while smaller groups did not surrender until early October. Elsewhere, since the front no longer existed, the remaining fighting centered on a few strong points deep in the Polish rear, "operationally unconnected and quite independent, according to their tactical significance."⁸⁰ Such actions included the capture of Brest on September 17 and Lvov a few days later. In light of these events, the Red Army's occupation of eastern Poland was anti-climactic.

The German-Polish war represented many things for Isserson. For one, the conflict was a clear triumph for the strategy of destruction, which had been a cornerstone of Soviet strategic thinking for over a decade. The swift and shattering German victory in Poland gave new heart to the advocates of a destruction strategy, which seemed to justify so much of what they believed in. Among these was Isserson, who made his preferences known by declaring that "the strategy of destruction was always the highest manifestation of military art throughout history," although its implementation took a variety of forms, depending upon the conditions in which a particular war was fought. Now, he held, the "conduct of decisive encirclement and destructive operations," has endowed the strategy of destruction with "new prerequisites for its most decisive realization."⁸¹

Above all, however, the conflict's significance for Isserson lay in the fact that it was the "*first war of the new forms of combat in action*" (emphasis in the original). This need not necessarily have been the case, he added, as in Poland the length of the front was much less than in Spain, while at the same time the number of troops engaged was much greater. The higher density of forces thus outwardly created the conditions for a positional conflict. Nevertheless, the war in Poland was a highly mobile affair from beginning to end, due chiefly to the large numbers (at least on the German side) of aircraft and tanks.⁸²

However, even the presence of these weapons need not necessarily have been decisive, he warned. After all, earlier models of these weapons had been employed in large numbers on the Western Front toward the end of World War I without having a decisive influence on operations, which still relied on gnawing through the enemy's positional defense. In order that the new weapons are employed to their full potential, a sea change in the thinking of the commanders is needed. This involves, he wrote, the realization that "the forms and methods of the outmoded age of the linear strategy have crossed over into the new age of the deep forms of combat."⁸³ This the German command had certainly done, and Isserson was obviously eager for the Red Army to make the same mental leap.

However, this would prove to be Isserson's last major published work, as the machinery of oppression that had somehow been set in motion began to inexorably pick up speed. In a sudden reversal of fortune, he was ordered on August 8 to the Frunze Military Academy to assume his new duties as a senior instructor of army operations.⁸⁴ For Isserson, who

had achieved the prestigious title of professor at the General Staff Academy, this must have been a shattering blow and a clear signal that the downward trajectory that his career had taken since Finland was still on course. His new posting was, in effect, a sort of military exile. This demotion followed a practice common to the Stalin era, in which it was often deemed insufficient to arrest a man, but that the intended victim should be publicly humiliated as well. In such a case the doomed man might be allowed to perform his new duties in an agony of suspense, for a few days, weeks, or even months, before the final blow fell.

There is good reason to believe that Isserson's transfer to the Frunze Academy was a mere formality and that he never actually assumed his duties there. He later testified that he was on medical leave from July to October, and from the latter month until January 1941 he "had no position," but instead "carried out work as assigned by the defense commissar's secretariat."⁸⁵ This was evidently a reference to the work he performed for Marshal Timoshenko, who had been appointed defense commissar in May in place of the disgraced Voroshilov. Timoshenko had almost no grounding in the theoretical principles of modern war, which he proved on several occasions during World War II. For all his backwardness, however, the new defense commissar had the good sense to call upon Isserson's services when he had an address to deliver in the latter's area of expertise. Isserson's daughter said that her father dutifully carried out these assignments, although he did not have a high opinion of the marshal's abilities.⁸⁶

The Deep Operation Redeemed

Under Timoshenko's tutelage the Red Army set out feverishly to make up for the wound inflicted during the purges. One of the seminal events in this process was the December 1940 conference of the Red Army high command, which Isserson later described as one of the most important milestones in the armed forces' recovery from the previous years' bloodletting.⁸⁷ The conference was attended by as nearly 300 high-ranking field commanders and staff personnel, as well as numerous representatives from the central military apparatus. Other participants were members of the country's political leadership, including Stalin himself, who was more than ever concerned over the state of the army following the German triumph in the West. Conspicuous by his absence was Isserson, who, following his Finnish debacle, was already well along the path to oblivion. Nevertheless, his influence was felt throughout, particularly in the lengthy reports delivered on a variety of tactical and operational questions, which formed the core of the eight-day gathering.

Among the most important of these efforts was Gen. Zhukov's report on modern operations. Since his service with Isserson in Belorussia, Zhukov's career had been nothing short of phenomenal, thanks in large part to the military purge, which opened up dazzling prospects for promotion for those fortunate enough to survive. In 1938 he had been appointed deputy commander of the Belorussian Military District, and a year later he was dispatched to Mongolia, where he decisively defeated a major incursion by the Japanese Kwangtung Army along the Khalkhin-Gol River. Following this triumph, Zhukov's star continued to rise and in 1940 he was appointed to command the critical Kiev Special Military District, a sure sign of Stalin's favor. For all of his undoubted accomplishments in the field, however, Zhukov was no theoretician and his academic background was limited. Instead, he entrusted the writing of the report to Col. Bagramian, an acquaintance from their time together as young cavalry commanders. Bagramian had entered the General Staff

Academy when it opened its doors, and after graduation had remained there for two years as an instructor. This gave Bagramian the opportunity not only to study under Isserson, but also to further imbibe the latter's ideas during their work in the academy's department of operational art, which Isserson headed at the time. Bagramian had had the good sense to bring his academic materials along with him to his new posting in Kiev and was immediately detailed to draw up a detailed report for Zhukov to deliver. By later September the address, entitled "The Nature of the Modern Offensive Operation," was ready.⁸⁸

Zhukov opened his remarks with a broad Isserson-like overview of recent military-technological developments. The massive introduction of modern weapons, he stated, had significantly increased the range and strike power of modern offensive operations to the point where they could be conducted to a great depth in pursuit of decisive strategic objectives. This is not to say that these developments had proceeded everywhere evenly, and local conditions could have a profound effect on the way these weapons were employed. In Spain, for example, he noted that the Republican army, among its many weaknesses, had been too wedded to the defensive and rarely took the risks necessary to achieve a decisive operational objective.⁸⁹ And although the German-Polish war had revealed the possibilities inherent in the new technology, Zhukov proceeded to undercut the conflict's significance by ascribing the Poles' defeat to their overall lack of readiness and the Germans' skill in employing air power and large armored formations. The same was true of the German army's breakthrough to the Channel coast in May 1940, which revealed just what could be accomplished with the new weapons. However, he went on to claim that in the Anglo-French alliance the Germans had not encountered a worthy opponent.⁹⁰ This sort of cheap shot was all too common at the time, and while no doubt satisfying for political reasons, served to mask the very real nature of the German military threat to the Soviet Union.

Zhukov, as had Isserson and many others before him, believed that the only way to achieve a truly decisive strategic success along modern broad fronts was to launch a massive blow along the greater part of a theater of military activities, which would immediately engage and defeat from one-third to one-half of the entire enemy force. This would require, he said, a force of 85 to 100 rifle divisions, four or five mechanized corps, two or three cavalry corps, and 30 to 35 air divisions, attacking along a 400 to 450 kilometer front. An undertaking of this magnitude could only be carried out by a *front*, which organizes its subordinate army operations in order to achieve its strategic goal. In this manner, the *front* operation will unfold as a series of consecutive army operations on the way toward fulfilling the *front's* intermediate and long-range objectives to a depth of 200 to 300 kilometers or more. A *front* of this size might number as many as three or four reinforced shock armies attacking along the main axis of advance, and two or three smaller armies carrying out lesser tasks along less important directions.⁹¹

Zhukov owed much to Isserson's previous calculations as to the shock army's strength to carry out its mission. Zhukov's shock army would consist of 15 to 16 rifle divisions, three to five tank brigades, eight to 10 attached artillery regiments, several regiments each of fighters, bombers and assault aircraft, anti-aircraft and other supporting units, as well as a reinforced cavalry corps or mechanized corps as the army's mobile group for exploiting a breakthrough. He calculated the shock army's overall attack frontage at some 50 to 70 kilometers, the greater part of which would be attacked by the army's shock group, consisting of two or three rifle corps reinforced with artillery, tanks, engineering and chemical troops, as well as anti-aircraft units. A weaker "auxiliary group" would support the main effort by attacking along a 20 to 30 kilometer front. The *front's* smaller armies might number no

more than two or three rifle corps, although they would be expected to occupy a front 60 to 100 kilometers in breadth.⁹²

Unlike Isserson, however, Zhukov seems to have had little use for the meeting engagement and certainly did not raise the issue in his address. The two men's positions on the conduct of the breakthrough operation were much closer, and here Isserson's influence is clearly visible, particularly as regards the forms of maneuver to be employed. As did Isserson, Zhukov believed that in most cases maneuver would be achieved only following the breakthrough of the enemy front, only after which could the attacker move against the defender's flanks and rear. Both believed in the efficacy of turning one or both of the enemy's flanks, and Zhukov urged that such a maneuver be attempted when even the "slightest prospect" for its success existed. Organizing a breakthrough along one or two wings of the enemy front, he stated, could create such a situation. The second variation was particularly promising, he added, as it offered the prospect of encircling large enemy forces by attacks along converging axes.⁹³

Like Isserson, Zhukov placed a great deal of emphasis on the successful breakthrough of the enemy's tactical defense, calling it the "decisive act of the offensive operation." He calculated that this could be achieved on the offensive's first day, provided the defender has no secondary position to fall back on. Given the presence of such a position and the enemy's reserves to man it, the breakthrough of the enemy's tactical defense might take as much as two to three days.⁹⁴ Such an estimate was considerably more pessimistic than Isserson had previously allowed for. As has been previously noted, Isserson's calculations as to the likely rate of advance during the breakthrough operation were probably too optimistic, and in this regard Zhukov's figures offer a necessary antidote. The greater degree of caution may also reflect the lingering effects of the Finnish campaign, particularly the Red Army's difficulties in breaking through a fortified zone.

Once the breakthrough has been achieved, the army commander will commit his mobile forces, which Zhukov called the "basic means of operational maneuver." This echelon will then race into the enemy's rear, destroying his operational reserves as they arrive to seal the breach, while at the same time attempting to seize the defender's rear army defensive position. This may be accomplished by a direct drive into the enemy's operational rear, or as the result of the mobile forces' turning movement to surround and destroy those enemy forces still at the front. This movement will be supported by army and *front* aviation, which will accompany the mobile forces and isolate the battlefield against the arrival of the enemy's strategic reserves to a depth of 150 to 200 kilometers. Airborne landings would also be carried out against vital transportation arteries in order to hinder the enemy's retreat and the arrival of his reserves to the battlefield. Zhukov opined that in a large *front* operation an airborne landing might serve as the "connecting link," or focal point, for several shock armies attacking along converging axes in order to encircle the enemy.⁹⁵

Zhukov's address occasioned a good deal of debate among the conference's participants, who took issue with several of the points he raised. Lt. Gen. Prokofii Logvinovich Romanenko, a mechanized corps commander who later commanded a tank army during World War II, made one of the more vigorous objections. Romanenko boldly criticized Zhukov's presentation of the offensive operation as outdated and reflective more of the technical and theoretical level of 1932 to 1934, thus underscoring the connection with Isserson. He also charged that Zhukov's analysis failed to take adequately into account the German army's recent experience in the West, where large armored formations had been decisive in securing victory. He proposed to update the shock army by increasing its strength to four or five

mechanized corps, three or four air corps, one or two airborne divisions, and 9 to 12 artillery regiments. The presence of two such armies on the internal and external flanks of two *fronts*, he claimed, would enable the attacker to transform an operational success into one of strategic proportions.⁹⁶

While Romanenko was technically correct in stating that Zhukov's exposition of the deep operation had its roots in the early 1930s, this does not mean that the theory was outdated. The theory of the deep operation was certainly in need of some technical refurbishing in the sense of larger armored and air units to realize some of its more ambitious tenets, and the new mechanized corps were certainly a step in the right direction. Romanenko went too far, however, and his proposed shock army would have contained an authorized strength of 4,000 to 5,000 tanks and would have been far too unwieldy to effectively control. Thus the basic principles of the deep operation remained sound, although it remained for the Red Army to fashion the proper instrument for putting them into practice.

Another commentator was Lt. Gen. Petr Semenovich Klenov, chief of staff of the Baltic Special Military District. In his otherwise undistinguished remarks, Klenov took the absent Isserson to task for the views he had expressed in *The New Forms of Combat*. He particularly disagreed with the latter's notion that the beginning period of war, as elaborated by earlier theorists, had disappeared. Instead, wars now begin by forces already fully deployed along a country's borders, which launch an all-out offensive from the very beginning. Klenov denounced such conclusions as "hurried" and "premature," and said that they were based too narrowly on the German-Polish war. Such a situation, he declared, could only arise in a state that "had lost all vigilance" and was not aware of the mobilization measures the Germans had been carrying out for months.⁹⁷ This statement is more than ironic in light of the Soviet Union's response to the German buildup along its borders in the coming months, of which it had very detailed information. In fact, events were to prove Klenov not just wrong on this score, but dead wrong. When the troops under his command collapsed at the beginning of the German invasion, Klenov was recalled to Moscow and shot in July 1941.

As was mentioned earlier, Isserson was working at this time as sort of an intellectual assistant to Timoshenko, who was woefully deficient in the ways of modern war. Certainly the most important service that he performed for the defense commissar was in helping to prepare the latter's closing remarks on the state of the army's tactical-operational theory. According to Timoshenko's biographer, the speech was prepared by a "large number" of General Staff workers and faculty from the General Staff Academy. Others from the same institutions then reviewed the draft, as well as from the Frunze Military Academy.⁹⁸ It is not clear which section of the speech Isserson worked on, or what supervisory functions he may have exercised, but as the army's leading operational theorist his contribution must have been substantial. Moreover, many of the other contributors were probably former students of his, or were otherwise familiar with his writings. The speech, which Timoshenko delivered at the close of the conference on December 31, was a distillation of the army's most progressive views at the time on the conduct of the army and *front* operation. It may also be viewed as Isserson's last hurrah before his arrest.

In his lengthy address, Timoshenko sought to analyze the World War's recent combat experience to determine its relevance for the Red Army. He was particularly concerned with the German army's lightning campaign in the West, which he saw as confirming in its essentials the army's theory of the deep operation. This meant the massed employment of tanks and motorized troops to a great depth, supported by air strikes and airborne landings in

the enemy rear, which would enable the attacker to isolate the battlefield from the arrival of the enemy's reserves and prevent the latter from forming a new defensive front.⁹⁹ There was nothing particularly new in this and the defense commissar's remarks on this score are nothing more than a recapitulation of what Isserson and others had been writing for years.

Timoshenko, or his ghostwriters, was nevertheless discerning enough to recognize a number of characteristics peculiar to the Germans' conduct of operations. Among these was their practice of deploying their armored forces in the first echelon for carrying out the breakthrough of the enemy defense, followed by the exploitation in depth. According to Timoshenko, this practice had transformed the infantry from a "shock means" into the "base of the armored shock wedge," the tip of which is now formed by the tank formations.¹⁰⁰ This was certainly in contrast to standard Soviet tactical-operational theory, which had always emphasized the combined infantry-armored attack to penetrate the enemy's tactical defense in a breakthrough operation, followed by the commitment into the breach of a cavalry or mechanized corps. However, in both cases Timoshenko was actually describing the Germans' combat order at the outbreak of war as they advanced to meet the enemy, in which case there was nothing to distinguish their methods from those advocated earlier by Isserson regarding the conduct of the meeting operation.



Marshal Semeon Konstantinovich Timoshenko (1895–1970), 1941–42. Isserson served under Timoshenko and was part of the latter's "brain trust" (courtesy Central Armed Forces Museum).

Timoshenko was frustratingly ambiguous in his remarks on the nature of future operations, particularly at the start of a war. He claimed that while wars had previously begun as a meeting engagement of the two sides, "this is now not always possible."¹⁰¹ Actually, the last time this had occurred was upon the outbreak of war in 1914, in conditions markedly different from those which obtained a quarter-century later. As the events of 1939–40 had revealed, wars are more likely to begin in a sudden attack by fully deployed forces, thus reducing the so-called "beginning period of war" to non-existence. Whether or not he was willing to admit the possibility of a surprise attack by a fully mobilized army is unclear, and his lack of precision on this point may reflect a hesitation to consider that such an attack could be launched against the Soviet Union.

The defense commissar then proceeded to compound this oversight by asserting that a war may now begin with one side attacking the enemy's long-term fortifications, as had been the case in the army's assault of the Mannerheim Line at the start of the war with Finland. This was not particularly new, and Isserson had raised the possibility of such an occurrence

some years before, although he had considered such a scenario among the least likely to occur. Nor could Timoshenko resist a bit of pointless bombast by charging that the Germans “had lacked the courage” to assault the Maginot Line directly, thus contrasting it with the Red Army’s supposed valor in bludgeoning through the Finnish position.¹⁰² Whatever his role in compiling the marshal’s address, it is difficult to imagine Isserson agreeing with such high-ranking nonsense.

These introductory remarks were followed by an extended foray into the fields of tactical and operational defense. Timoshenko stated the German army’s recent successes in conducting offensive operations had caused some observers to speak of a “crisis of modern defense,” and question its efficacy altogether. Nothing could be further from the truth, he declared, and the Wehrmacht’s lightning victories in Poland and the West could be easily explained away by a number of factors. In neither case, he continued, did the Germans encounter a “fitting rebuff” on the part of a defender capable of making the best use of the means at his disposal. Moreover, in France the Germans had not so much broken through the Maginot Line as they had bypassed it to the north. The hastily constructed “Weygand Line” along the Somme and Aisne rivers, he implied, was hardly worthy of the name. In fact, according to Timoshenko, the only recent example of a successful breakthrough of the enemy’s fortified front was the Red Army’s piercing of the Finnish defense along the Karelian Isthmus in February and March 1940.¹⁰³ He neglected to mention, however, that this had been achieved at tremendous cost against a numerically weaker and technologically inferior opponent.

Nevertheless, recent experience contained a number of valuable lessons for any defender who sought to withstand the overwhelming shock force of modern weapons. Isserson and others had laid some of these out even before the war began, and recent events had only served to demonstrate their continuing validity. Chief among these was the conviction that modern defense, if it is to halt the enemy’s deeply echeloned attack, must itself be constructed in depth. These considerations had the effect of removing defensive discussions from the narrow tactical sphere to the operational level, where it found its chief expression in the army defensive operation. Such a defense, Timoshenko maintained, would extend well behind the immediate tactical defense zone and include a second or even third operational echelon, “consisting of operational reserves, special anti-tank units and other means,” grouped into prepared anti-tank areas or lines in the rear.¹⁰⁴

Timoshenko’s formula for organizing an army-level defense owed much to Isserson’s *Fundamentals of the Defensive Operation*. As had Isserson, he favored the construction of a forward defensive zone some 25 to 50 kilometers ahead of the main position. This zone would be manned by mobile troops relying on a developed system of artificial obstacles. His description of the main or tactical defense zone, also had much in common with Isserson’s previous recommendations and consisted, as before, of a main and second position, which constituted the backbone of the tactical defense. The defense commissar also recommended organizing a new “security position” some 10 to 15 kilometers in depth immediately ahead of the main position. This new position would “delay and exhaust the attacking enemy” and enable the defender to put his main defense zone in order. In a departure from Isserson’s earlier views, he also spoke highly of recommendations that the main defense zone now also include a forward defensive position around two kilometers in depth and containing between one-quarter and one-third of the defender’s forces. Behind this lay the main position, where the bulk of the forces would be deployed. Behind the main position lay the divisional reserves, followed by the second defensive position. Still further back, as

we have seen, lay the operational defensive zone, which contained the army reserves, anti-tank obstacles, anti-tank strong points, and armored units for spearheading the counterattack.¹⁰⁵

Given the available information, it is impossible to determine to what degree Isserson concurred in these changes to his basic outline. In principle, he should have been at least in general agreement with Timoshenko's recommendations, as their net effect was to increase the depth of the defensive position, a development which should have met with his approval. In practice, however, the deepening of the army defense without a corresponding increase in forces to man it could only work to the detriment of the overall effort. This is particularly the case with the forward defensive position, the construction of which would serve only to drain forces from the main position, thus leaving both subject to destruction in detail.

Timoshenko displayed considerably less insight in his analysis of the chief threats to the modern defense. The most serious of these, he declared, was artillery, followed by tanks and air strikes.¹⁰⁶ This statement is very much at odds with Isserson's oft-stated position that tanks represent the most serious threat to the defense's stability. Isserson was absolutely right in his appreciation of the dangers posed by the tank in the offensive, as the Germans had demonstrated repeatedly in Poland and the West, although he may have been inclined to underrate the factor of close air support for the armored formations. Once again, it appears that the defense commissar's head had been completely turned by his breakthrough of the Mannerheim Line, in which the artillery suppression of the defenders had played a major role in the Soviets' success. In retrospect, it is hard to believe that Isserson, whose offensive and defensive theories were predicated on a high degree of maneuver in relatively unrestricted terrain, could have attached such importance to any conclusions based upon the cramped conditions of the Finnish theater.

Timoshenko's more extensive remarks on the conduct of the offensive operation were an interesting blend of old and new, and owed a good deal to Isserson's previous writings on the subject. This was particularly apparent in his analysis of the *front* operation, which in many areas was a faithful reproduction of the views Isserson had laid out the previous year in his *The Fundamentals of Conducting Operations*. For example, the defense commissar calculated that a *front* operation might be conducted to a depth of 250 kilometers. Any further advance along this particular direction would inevitably entail the organization of a new operation, implying the necessity of a pause in order to bring up the necessary reinforcements and supplies. This effort might be followed by further operations to an even greater depth, all according to the dictates of the theory of consecutive operations.¹⁰⁷

Other points of theoretical contact were brought out in Timoshenko's lengthy description of the various forms a breakthrough operation might assume at the *front* level. The first involved a single breakthrough by several armies along a relatively narrow portion of the front. This form had the advantage, he said, of delivering a concentrated blow, which would further ease the commitment into the breach of large cavalry-mechanized forces. Drawbacks included the difficulty of supplying such a massive effort, particularly if the transportation network is underdeveloped. Moreover, this form could only count on defeating a small portion of the enemy front, while its narrow width made it that much easier for the defender to concentrate forces against it. As second form involved multiple breakthroughs by several shock armies along a broad front, followed by the commitment of the *front's* mobile group into one of the breaches. However, its effectiveness depended to a great degree on a well-developed transportation network, which made it less appealing in most of East-

ern Europe. Finally, a third form saw the launching of several breakthroughs along the front, separate in space, but linked in time and goal with each other. Such a dispersed effort eased the problem of supply in an underdeveloped area, while the launching of multiple offensives would help to conceal the operation's aims from the enemy. Moreover, widely separated breakthrough fronts facilitate the conduct of encirclement operations along intersecting axes.¹⁰⁸

Timoshenko believed that the breakthrough might be accomplished in two ways, both familiar to students of Isserson's writings. The first was the more traditional approach of piercing the enemy's tactical defense in a combined-arms attack, followed by the commitment of a mobile formation to exploit the breakthrough in his operational rear.¹⁰⁹ This is the variant of the breakthrough operation that Isserson had been advocating for the better part of ten years. The defense commissar's opinion was less positive, however, and he seemed to consign it to those cases where the enemy's defensive system was highly developed. Here Timoshenko was more explicit in his preference for the new German method of placing the mobile units at the apex of the attack, where they would carry out the breakthrough using their own resources.¹¹⁰ What Isserson thought of this is unknown, although once again, it is hard to imagine him agreeing with his chief's newfound enthusiasm.

Another point on which the two men appeared to disagree was the notion of the *front's* proper role in a major war. As has been shown, Isserson had consistently adhered to the idea that the *front* was a strategic instrument, capable of undertaking the most far-reaching tasks in a theater of military activities. Thus by default the army operation was consigned to the sphere of operational art. Timoshenko, on the other hand, declared that "the modern operation most fully reveals itself on the *front* scale," thereby displacing the army operation as the centerpiece of the Red Army's operational art. Under modern conditions, he continued, "the *front* has tuned into an operational-strategic organization," directly responsible for the control of operations and the coordination of the various combat arms.¹¹¹ This marked a significant break with past theory, while at the same time offering a glimpse into a future where the Red Army deployed as many as 12 *fronts* along the Soviet-German front, with two or more of them responsible for a particular strategic direction. By the end of the war the *front* had become almost exclusively a tool of operational art.

Timoshenko developed this thought further in his remarks on the army operation. Under modern conditions, he stated, in which extended and heavily manned fronts are likely to be the norm, the army "is losing its significance as a self-sufficient operational quantity." Even the shock army at full strength, he continued, has "lost its independence in achieving large-scale operational objectives." This task is now the province of the *front*, and it is only in conjunction with other armies under the aegis of the *front* that the larger operational goal can be realized. The defense commissar did allow that along certain non-contiguous fronts, where geographical and other conditions serve to break up the theater into separate operational directions, the army would still enjoy a good degree of operational independence.¹¹² Here Timoshenko was clearly thinking of such removed theaters as the Far East or the Finnish border north of Lake Ladoga, among other areas. Such a situation, however, was extremely unlikely to arise in the western theater of military activities.

The *front* operation itself would be carried out by a number of armies of varying strength, depending upon the task they were assigned to carry out. Among these was the shock army, which would operate along the axis of the main blow, while weaker armies would cover the secondary directions. Despite its reduced status, however, the shock army was nonetheless expected to break through the enemy's tactical defense along a sufficiently broad

front and carry the offensive throughout his entire operational depth. Timoshenko placed the strength of such an army in the western theater of military activities at up to 14 to 18 rifle divisions, 10 to 12 artillery regiments from the high command reserve, six to eight tank brigades, two or three air divisions, as well as a powerful mobile group and additional forces doled out by the *front* command. In some cases the shock army might not dispose of its own mobile group, but instead would open a gap with another shock army for the commitment of the *front's* mobile group.¹¹³ This was actually a very forward-looking statement and foresaw one of the operational forms employed by the Red Army during the coming war.

The methods employed for carrying out the breakthrough were as varied as the armies themselves. Timoshenko believed that the breakthrough would most likely take the form of an assault along the center of the army's front, or along one of its wings. In each case, the army would contain "shock" and "holding" corps, as well as a mobile group for exploiting the breakthrough. Another form called for the shock army to be composed entirely of shock corps, which would open the way for the commitment of the army's mobile group. A third entailed the launching of an offensive along a single wing of the enemy's front, followed by the commitment of the mobile group. A fourth variant foresaw the shock army's breakthrough being achieved in the traditional infantry-tank attack along two widely separated sectors of the front, followed by the commitment of the mobile group and the encirclement of those enemy forces still at the front.¹¹⁴

Timoshenko's speech marked the end of the conference, after which most of the participants returned to their posts. Many of the higher-ranking commanders, however, remained behind to take part in two operational-strategic war games involving defensive and offensive operations at the *front* level, in which Germany was the clear enemy. One of the most prominent players was Gen. Zhukov, who shortly thereafter was appointed chief of the General Staff in place of Meretskov. Following the war games, Zhukov returned briefly to Kiev to wrap up his affairs before taking up his duties in Moscow. There he gave a brief summary of the conference to members of his staff, among them Bagramian. According to the latter, Zhukov spoke approvingly of how the conference had shown that the army's theory of the deep operation "had been completely justified in modern conditions," although it is difficult to determine if he was speaking of the war games' outcome or the German victories in the West.¹¹⁵ In either case, Isserson would have had cause to feel proud as to how events were bearing out the correctness of his views. Given his present status, however, he might have found such words cold comfort.

Limbo

It was probably after the conference that Timoshenko summoned Isserson to his office and offered him the job of supervising the construction of defensive fortifications along the new western frontier, according to Isserson's daughter, who cites her mother as the source for this story. Prior to 1939 the Soviet Union had invested heavily in the construction of a series of fortified regions along its western frontier, which were designed not only to halt an enemy attack, but also to channel any breakthrough along predetermined axes, where it could be cut off and destroyed through a counteroffensive. The territorial acquisitions of 1939–40, however, had moved the country's western frontier significantly to the west in many areas, leaving most of the fortified regions of little use deep in the rear. Irena

Georgievna said that her father at first objected to this proposal and told Timoshenko that he was an operational artist and strategist, and not an expert on fortifications. However, he added that he was willing to take up the assignment, provided that the old fortifications would not be destroyed until new ones had been built and outfitted with men and materiel. At this point Timoshenko told Isserson to “drop” his “academic ways,” at which the latter became offended and turned down the offer.¹¹⁶

There are a number of considerations, which cast doubt on this version of events. The most obvious is that it is highly unlikely that a mere colonel, particularly one who was so obviously under a cloud, would have been offered so responsible a task on the eve of war. Indirect proof of this is the fact that in March Shaposhnikov, a deputy defense commissar was appointed to oversee the construction of the new fortifications.¹¹⁷ Also suspicious is Isserson’s amazing foresight in demanding that the old fortifications be retained while the new ones were being built, although, to be sure, one did not have to be a genius to understand that demolishing the old fortifications before the new ones were built was a risky step, particularly given the extent of the German military buildup in the East. However, one cannot completely rule out this version of events, although it does smack heavily of wisdom after the fact. In a classic case of robbing Peter to pay Paul, the old fortifications were soon demolished and their equipment moved to the new fortified regions, the construction of which was only just beginning. As a result, the German invasion of June 1941 burst upon the Red Army before the new fortifications were ready, while the old ones were no longer of any use.

The two episodes described above are also interesting for the light they throw on the relations between the Isserson and Timoshenko. What immediately becomes apparent is that the defense commissar certainly did not “hate Isserson with a passion.” On the contrary, he obviously held his learned but difficult subordinate in high regard and sought to make the most effective use of the latter’s talents. One must even consider the possibility that Timoshenko, aware of the clouds gathering around Isserson, sought to protect him by giving him a responsible assignment in order to redeem him and perhaps get him out of Moscow until the danger passed. Whether or not such a ploy would have worked is problematic, given the fact that Stalin never forgot a slight, real or imagined. Still, Isserson’s rejection of the defense commissar’s offer was, under the circumstances, a serious mistake.

When trying to understand the reasons behind Isserson’s latest troubles, several possible explanations come to mind. Some of them may have been quite mundane and connected with a number of recent personnel shifts within the upper echelons of the Red Army. In August 1940, for example, Meretskov had been appointed chief of the RKKA General Staff, proving once again that mediocrity need not be a barrier to professional advancement. The General Staff Academy was directly subordinated to the chief of staff, who would doubtlessly have a major say in any of the academy’s personnel questions, should he chose to exercise that right. If it is true that Isserson and Meretskov had a falling out during their brief service together in Finland, could the latter have used his new post to sabotage his enemy’s career?

Isserson’s daughter, however, rejects this version of events and maintains that her father’s fall was due to other causes, petty and otherwise. She stated that there is no basis for assuming that her father and Meretskov had been at odds and attributes the latter’s silence on the subject of the mutual service to the fact that Isserson had been “repressed” and could therefore not figure in the marshal’s memoirs.¹¹⁸ Without conceding the point regarding the two men’s possible antagonism, there is nonetheless some truth in these statements.

Meretskov evidently felt sufficiently constrained by personal or censorship considerations to pass over in silence the details of his own arrest, torture, and release in the summer of 1941, and so can hardly be blamed for leaving out Isserson for the same reasons. On the other hand, Meretskov does mention such victims as Ubovich, and others, although he does not mention the fact or the cause of their deaths.¹¹⁹ This is probably because such individuals had already received the status of “martyrs,” which prevented the fact of their existence from being completely covered up, even during the post-1964 reaction.

It is Irena Georgievna’s belief that Zhukov played a part in her father’s downfall. She attributes this to Zhukov’s intense dislike of her father, which extended back to their days together in the Belorussian Military District, when Isserson bested the future marshal in a war game. Zhukov, she said, was a “very proud man and could not forget that.” Here the matter might have remained, had not Zhukov defeated Japanese forces in Mongolia in August 1939, to begin his meteoric rise to the top of the Soviet military hierarchy. Less than a year later he had been promoted to full general and entrusted with the command of the vital Kiev Special Military District. In February 1941 he replaced Meretskov as chief of staff, a position that he held through the end of the first month of the war with Germany. “Zhukov was in great favor then,” Irena Georgievna said, implying that he could have used his position to take his revenge on her father.¹²⁰

However, nowhere are the daughter’s assertions backed up by any documentary evidence, and the fact that her father may have later related his suspicions of Zhukov to her does not render them any more believable. Irena Georgievna’s charges also run into a number of practical objections, which seriously undermine their validity. For one, Zhukov could hardly have asserted his influence against Isserson from his Ukrainian posting during the summer of 1940, at the very time when Isserson was transferred to a lesser post at the Frunze Military Academy. As chief of staff from early 1941, he would certainly have been better positioned to move against Isserson, had he chosen to do so, and in fact the latter was arrested during Zhukov’s tenure at this post. However, once again there is no documentary evidence to support such a charge. Moreover, despite Zhukov’s many defects as a man and a commander, such as his tendency to order field executions on the spot for offenses real and imagined, he does not appear to have been the kind of man implied here.¹²¹

However, it should always be kept in mind that even if there is some truth to these allegations, Meretskov and Zhukov, in the final analysis, were nothing more than instruments of Stalin’s murderous will. Irena Georgievna summed this up well, when she said that Stalin “never forgot” what Isserson had said to Andreev in Finland, and in this way “he signed his own sentence.”¹²²

Nor should one ignore the possibility that petty jealousies among Isserson’s colleagues were the cause of his undoing. One high-ranking officer opined many years later that Isserson was “talented, but haughty, with a nasty personality; he had a lot of enemies, who revenged themselves on him.”¹²³

Whatever the reason for his troubles, Isserson was evidently aware that the tide had turned against him and it made him cautious. His daughter recounted an incident in the summer of 1940, when Isserson received a letter from his sister, Liusi, who had years before returned to her native Kaunas with her parents, and who continued to live there following their deaths, and began to raise a family. With the incorporation of Lithuania into the Soviet Union that summer, many of the previous barriers to communication with a “bourgeois” country ceased to exist, and brother and sister were able to resume a correspondence. Liusi Pokrovskaia wrote her brother that her son wished to enroll at the university in Mos-

cow and asked if the family would put him up for a few days while he took his qualifying exams. It seems the young man's prospects for being accepted were good, as he was a *Komsomol* (the communist youth organization) member and had been recommended by the local authorities. "But papa got frightened," Irena Georgievna said, and "He wrote a letter saying they shouldn't come." This caused some conflict in the immediate family, she added, as "Mama was categorically for him coming. But," she concluded, "papa decided, and that was that."¹²⁴ Isserson's refusal may well have had disastrous consequences for his nephew. The latter never made it to Moscow and, as a result, was at home in Kaunas when the war broke out and he perished with his mother in 1943.

It was probably following the interview with Timoshenko that Isserson was posted to the defense commissar's "reserve" on January 28 1941, in what was to prove to be, at the age of 42, his last military assignment.¹²⁵ His exact duties are unknown, although it is likely that he continued to perform occasional research and writing tasks for Timoshenko. Whatever the scope of these duties, it is likely that most of Isserson's time during this period was taken up in completing the second half of *The New Forms of Combat*, the first part of which had appeared the previous year. The new volume sought to examine the events of World War II in the West, including the Norwegian campaign, the German conquest of France and the Low Countries, and military operations in North Africa and the Balkans through the spring of 1941.¹²⁶ Everywhere he looked, Isserson felt that his ideas were being confirmed, albeit by the German army, and he hurried to bring these views to a Red Army sorely in need of instruction. He certainly had high hopes for this work and he later described it as being "more mature" than its predecessor in its approach to the "cardinal problems of the strategy of modern war."¹²⁷

As it turned out, his work on the manuscript was the only thing keeping Isserson out of prison, or worse, and his daughter stated that had her father not been engaged in writing this work for the high command, then he would have "sat" much earlier, employing the slang term for a prison sentence.¹²⁸ She recounted how years later Rudol'f Pavlovich Khmel'nitskii, who at the time was chief of Voroshilov's chancellery, told the family that in late April or May 1941 he had seen a list of commanders who were slated for arrest. Across from her father's name was the notation in Stalin's hand: "Don't touch him, let him finish his work."¹²⁹

The tension placed upon Isserson by his situation must have been enormous, and it is amazing that he was able to continue writing in an atmosphere where the possibility of arrest was a constant presence. Moreover, he was now completely alone and his inability or lack of desire, to maintain any sort of sustained personal relationships finally came a cropper as the storm clouds gathered around him. "No one else has been to see me lately, and I did not maintain a close acquaintance with anyone," was how he later described the state of his personal and professional relationships prior to his arrest.¹³⁰ During these final months of freedom, with his career in freefall, Isserson suddenly discovered that he had no one to turn to in his time of need. To take the charitable view, one may speculate that Isserson sensing the approaching danger, may deliberately have cut his remaining ties out of fear that whatever was about to happen might befall others as well. In the same vein, his testimony may also have been an attempt to distance himself from those acquaintances still at liberty, lest they be implicated by too close of an association with him. However, it was more likely that Isserson's former associates simply began to avoid him out of fear that they could be next. Mixed with this understandable human reaction was no doubt an ideologically driven belief that the secret police never arrested anyone without cause, and "where there's smoke,

there's fire." This was not an uncommon reaction to the mass arrests of the Stalin years and Isserson himself had been guilty of such behavior.

Nor was his family much solace, although this seems to have been almost an entirely self-inflicted wound. Certainly Isserson's single greatest failing as a husband and father was his history of affairs with other women, which are an extreme example of selfishness and lack of consideration for the ones closest to him. Yekaterina Ivanovna knew of these betrayals, which seem to have been common knowledge in the neighborhood, but her quiescent temperament kept her from taking any action for another ten years. Irena Georgievna also knew of her father's affairs and had once even caught him in the kitchen with the housekeeper, an incident that shook her to the core.¹³¹

Nor did his imperious attitude toward the other members of his family soften during this period. "I was brought up very strictly," his daughter recalled, and after more than sixty years the memories still rankle. "God forbid that I should go to the movies on a weekday," she recalled. "And at the same time, God forbid that I should go to school not dressed like the others." She added, "I had a velvet frock, a satin frock, a Pioneer [a youth branch of the Communist Party] uniform, and nothing more."¹³² Isserson evidently considered this wardrobe sufficient for his daughter's needs, not considering, or not caring that a young girl might aspire to something more. She attributed her father's attitude, in part, to his thwarted desire to have a son. He did, however, encourage his daughter to learn to ride a bicycle, as well as engage in other activities not often indulged in by young girls. "I learned to shoot at a very early age," she declared proudly.¹³³ He also encouraged her studies and helped her to learn German. "Father would speak with me one day in Russian, and one day in German," she later recalled, and thus later became fluent in the language.¹³⁴

Isserson's unbending attitude finally burst out on the eve of his arrest in a dramatic domestic scene. His daughter recalled that this occurred on June 6, as the school term had just ended. Irena Georgievna had distinguished herself during the school year and had completed the fifth grade with honors, and was even the chairman of her Young Pioneer group. That day the entire class went to the movies, which her father had strictly forbidden, even though summer vacation had already arrived. When she got home her father drove her out of the house for disobeying him.¹³⁵ It was in this gloomy atmosphere that the family spent their last night together.

CHAPTER 9

Descent into Hell

Arrest

Stalin was as good as his word, and Isserson was arrested the following day, June 7, after submitting the final pages of his latest work to the military publishing house. The arrest party, with an expertise honed by years of experience, picked him up not far from his home; not a mean feat, when one considers that as a Red Army commander Isserson was authorized to carry a sidearm. “It was all done efficiently,” his daughter recalled.¹ It also implies that the secret police were well informed as to the progress of Isserson’s work and his movements.

Unfortunately, Isserson left no account of his arrest and incarceration, although plenty of others did. Aleksandr Isaevich Solzhenitsyn, for example, who was arrested in early 1945 by Soviet military counterintelligence, called his arrest “a breaking point in your life,” an “unassimilable spiritual earthquake,” and “an instantaneous shattering thrust, expulsion, somersault from one state to another.” The two men who arrested him grabbed his epaulets, the star on his service cap, and his officer’s belt, before taking him away on a journey that would last many years and cover thousands of miles.² Another was Aleksandr Vasil’evich Gorbatov, a future army commander, who was arrested in his hotel room in Moscow in the fall of 1937. He later wrote that at two in the morning he was awakened by a knock at the door. However, as soon as he opened the door three military men burst in and began to rip the medals off his tunic, while another tore off the badges of rank from his uniform, and the third watched Gorbatov intently as he dressed. They confiscated his party card, identification, and other documents and led him out of the hotel under guard. “They pushed me into a car,” he wrote. “We rode in silence. It’s difficult to convey what I endured when the car whisked me through the deserted nighttime streets of Moscow.”³

Officially, Isserson was arrested for “being suspected of crimes” as specified by article 58–1, paragraph b, and article 58–11 of the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic) criminal code.⁴ This notorious article covered “anti-Soviet activity,” a catchall phrase for which millions of others were arrested during these years. Unofficially, Isserson’s arrest may have been the final installment in Stalin’s delayed vengeance for the proxy insult that Isserson had inflicted on him in late 1939. It is also possible that Isserson was picked up as part of a larger attack directed against a higher-ranking commander. This was a common practice during these years, as the intended victim’s subordinates would be arrested

and forced to give “evidence” against their superior, who would then be arrested himself. In this regard, it is worth noting that Isserson’s former superior in Finland, Meretskov was arrested on June 24, although he managed to survive his incarceration and return to active duty, although broken in health, later that year.⁵ Or it may simply be that after four years of good fortune, as he watched other, equally innocent commanders around him fall; Isserson’s luck finally ran out.

Nor was Isserson’s arrest an isolated incident, and although the wave of repression had receded considerably from the bacchanalia of 1937–38, Red Army commanders continued to disappear with depressing regularity. In fact, during the month of June there was a noticeable spike in the number of arrests of high-ranking commanders. Among these were Col. Gen. Georgii Mikhailovich Shtern, the head of the country’s air defense forces (June 7); Lt. Gen. Yakov Vladimirovich Smushkevich, a former air force chief (June 8); Col. Gen. Aleksandr Dmitrievich Loktionov, another former air force chief and most recently commander of the Baltic Special Military District (June 19). Other victims were already under a cloud before the war began and were arrested shortly afterward. These included and Lt. Gen. Pavel Vasil’evich Rychagov, yet another head of the Soviet air force (June 24), and Lt. Gen. Ivan Iosifovich Proskurov, the former chief of Red Army intelligence (June 27). All of these men were shot on October 28, 1941, in the provincial city of Kuibyshev/Samara.⁶

Under existing rules a Red Army commander’s arrest had to be sanctioned by the defense commissar, and Timoshenko’s signature dutifully appears on the arrest order, dated June 7.⁷ However, Isserson’s daughter maintains that the marshal authorized this after the fact and that he was at first not even aware of her father’s arrest. She concluded this based upon a phone call by one of Timoshenko’s aides the following day, ordering Isserson to come in and see him on some matter. Irena Georgievna answered the phone and told the aide that her father had been arrested, at which the latter snapped, “Don’t talk nonsense!” and then hung up. When he called a second time Yekaterina Ivanovna answered and confirmed that her husband had indeed been arrested.⁸

The defense commissar’s signature, however, whatever the date means little and should not be taken as evidence of his animosity toward Isserson. The sanctioning of arrests by the defense commissar had long since become a formality under Voroshilov, and Timoshenko was basically presented with a *fait accompli*. Moreover, the marshal, for all of his military shortcomings, was no fool, and he well understood that a refusal to authorize Isserson’s arrest might easily result in his own.

The documentary evidence of Isserson’s arrest on June 7 effectively puts to rest one unfortunate myth surrounding this incident. More than 50 years later Col. Fedor Davydovich Sverdlov, a former military academic and historian wrote that Isserson had told him that he had been arrested under completely different circumstances. According to this account, Isserson stated that he had actually delivered an address at the General Staff Academy in July 1941, some time after the German attack. Isserson supposedly said, “If the General Staff had taken into account only some of the recommendations laid out in *The New Forms of Combat*, we would have halted the enemy around Minsk. They grabbed me right then and there.”⁹

This is errant nonsense, as Isserson was by then already securely under lock and key and in no position to deliver an address to anyone but his interrogators. Moreover, even Isserson, for all of his undoubted personal courage — some would call it foolhardiness — would not have been so insane as to publicly accuse the General Staff, and by extension the country’s leadership, of incompetence in the face of an unprecedented military disaster.

Under the circumstances, it only remains to determine who was responsible for this fantasy: Isserson, who may have sought to enhance his status as a martyred prophet, or Sverdlov, who preferred a colorful story to the truth. Isserson's daughter, for one, indignantly dismissed Sverdlov's version as "murky," and asked rhetorically, "Do you really think that they're going to take him [Isserson] from prison to a meeting at the General Staff?"¹⁰

Isserson's family learned of his arrest when a group of military investigators showed up later in the day to carry out a search of their apartment. There they found his wife and daughter, as well as the Vol'pes' daughter, who had been living with them and was still asleep after her school exams. Irena Georgievna said that she remembers to this day the plaintive "rabbit cry" she uttered when the search party arrived. The son and daughter of Division Commander Alksnis, Isserson's former academy colleague, who had been arrested in 1938 and would die in camp in 1943, later joined the family.¹¹ They had dropped in quite by accident, not knowing of Isserson's arrest. This was a particularly unfortunate circumstance for the Alksnises, who now had to endure the horror and humiliation of a second search. However, such were the rule that once someone had entered the premises where a search was being conducted, they could not leave until it was over, and the visitors had to endure the lengthy procedure as well. Aside from the shock and the feeling of violation, the search party inflicted a good deal of humiliation as well. Even if someone wanted to use the bathroom, she said, a guard would follow him and not allow him to close the door to the toilet.¹²

The search was exceedingly long and thorough. The investigators were particularly interested in Isserson's academic pursuits and went through his book collection with a fine-tooth comb, tearing out the contents and leaving the covers on the floor. When he returned 14 years later he was particularly upset that the family had not been able to save these books, as if they could have done anything about it. The search party also confiscated his side-arms, family photographs, and other important documents, including his daughter's birth certificate, a circumstance that later caused the family numerous problems.¹³

Irena Georgievna noted that her father had always been a "bit cheap," and when the investigators went through his bankbook they found a notation for the amount of nearly 5,000 rubles, which, she added, was a "very large sum" for the time. The search party members were further astounded to find that Isserson had several suits among his personal possessions, while his wife and daughter had only two dresses apiece. The sight of this disparity evidently struck a sympathetic chord in even these hard-bitten men and they immediately made arrangements to have the bank account put in the daughter's name, which was evidence not only of an unexpected degree of compassion, but also that they knew that Isserson would not be coming back anytime soon. The gesture was ultimately for naught, however. Two weeks later the war began and the government restricted the amount an individual could withdraw from his account to 200 rubles, about the cost of a loaf of black bread.¹⁴

In another touching incident, one of the search party picked up a photograph in which Galina Ivanovna, who by then was completing her fourth year in a labor camp, was pictured standing with a friend. "Where are they?" he asked, evidently referring to where the picture was taken. Yekaterina Ivanovna defiantly replied that her sister was "there, where all of the major commanders' wives are," meaning in various prisons or worse. The investigator, apparently stunned by this answer, returned the photograph to its place, covered it with a napkin, and said, "I didn't see this." "You have to give them their due," Irena Georgievna said of the investigators, "there are people everywhere."¹⁵

She also noted that “in every tragic situation there is a bit of comedy,” referring to an unexpectedly light moment during the search. She recalled that when the eight-man team came across the pornographic materials that her father had brought back from France, to a man they “rushed to look at the magazines.” The journals were confiscated, she said, although they did not figure in the arrest inventory, leaving her to conclude that the secret police simply divided them up among themselves.¹⁶

The official arrest report states that the search of the Issersons’ apartment lasted from three in the afternoon until eleven at night. The list of confiscated items was extensive and included such articles as Isserson’s party membership card (no. 2660141), public transportation passes, two orders of the Red Banner, a medal commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the RKKA, a pistol and various types of ammunition, and a hunting knife. Also included were three letters to Shchadenko, totaling 28 pages, appealing for his restoration to duty, 14 notebooks, a few dozen letters, an address book, a large number of foreign military journals, nearly 300 pictures and a photo album, various notes, a guide book to Paris, two pairs of binoculars and their cases, a bank book, and a large amount of cash, among other items. The search party also placed under seal Isserson’s two covered bookcases, which contained various manuscripts, books, and military journals.¹⁷

Among the items not taken at this time was a copy of the second part of *The New Forms of Combat*. When the war broke out two weeks later Khmel’nitskii suggested that Yekaterina Ivanovna inform the authorities of this valuable document’s existence as a means of getting her husband out of prison. She dutifully wrote a letter to Stalin and gave it to her daughter to mail. The latter recalled that five or ten days later the search party returned to the apartment and confiscated the manuscript. Irena Georgievna said that she later learned from acquaintances in the military that the work was secretly published as a textbook in the General Staff Academy under someone else’s name, although she was not able to determine whose.¹⁸ Isserson later wrote that he undertook an extensive search for the manuscript in 1956, following his return from camp and exile, but that it had been “irretrievably lost.” He called this an “extremely heavy loss” which continued to weigh upon him, and he sorely regretted that age and infirmity had made it impossible to “reconstruct this work from memory.”¹⁹ He later asked a friend to scour the various academy libraries for a copy, but the latter’s effort proved futile.²⁰

Prison and Interrogation

Following his arrest, Isserson was taken a short distance to the notorious NKVD “internal prison” in the Lubyanka, in central Moscow. There he was forced to turn in his personal belongings, which included money in the sum of over 2,500 rubles, his service cap, his belt and the belt to his leather jacket, his pen, suspenders, wallet, coin purse, collar, and a toothbrush.²¹ The latter item implies that Isserson was either very fastidious about his oral hygiene, or that he may have suspected that he could be arrested at any moment and so thought it best to be prepared. He was also required to fill out a personal information form that, aside from the usual questions dealing with one’s name and date of birth, also contained a number of categories peculiar to the times and the Stalinist regime. Among the latter were questions regarding an individual’s party affiliation, “social origin,” social status prior to 1917, service in the czarist or white armies, and any connection with “anti-Soviet parties” and groups, such as the Mensheviks, Socialist-Revolutionaries, “anar-

chists,” “Trotskyites,” “rightists,” “nationalists,” and others. To all of these politically sensitive questions Isserson answered in the negative, although he did acknowledge his youthful indiscretion of 1923, when he voted for a “Trotskyite” resolution in the academy.²²

Isserson’s daughter recalled that for some time the family did not know where he had been taken. There were nine prisons in Moscow at the time, she said, and one could find out where a particular individual was being held only through a lengthy process of elimination. The family finally learned where he was being held by the now time-tested practice of delivering parcels and money. For example, she said, one might start at the Taganka prison, only to be told “there’s no such name on our list.” After this you might try your luck at Matrosskaia Tishina, Lefortovo, the internal prison, the Butyrka, Skhodnia, or the “Peresyilka” transfer prison. “The prison where they took your money is where your father is,” she stated.²³ Isserson later said that he had been held in both the Lubyanka and Butyrka prisons.²⁴

Unfortunately, Isserson left no record of his incarceration and his years in camp and exile. Nonetheless, one may still obtain a fairly accurate picture of this period based upon his arrest file, as well as the memoirs of Gorbатов, another commander who had been arrested some years earlier and who left an invaluable account of his travails.

Some differences in the two men’s treatment do emerge, however. For example, Gorbатов was summoned to his first session with the interrogator only on the fourth day following his arrest, while Isserson was first interrogated on the evening of his first day in prison.²⁵ The latter’s swift induction into this system was probably due to the fact that by the time of his arrest the great influx of prisoners from 1937–38 had long since passed. Another consideration may have been that by mid-1941 the machinery of repression had been refined to such a high degree that the prisoners could be processed much more efficiently.

Isserson’s first interrogation began at 7:45 P.M. on June 7 and ended at 9:30 that same evening. He was questioned throughout out by one Dobrotin, a lieutenant of state security and a senior investigator with the defense commissariat’s third directorate. During this session, Isserson admitted that as a student at Petrograd University he had flirted briefly with the Social Democratic Internationalists. He also admitted again his part in voting for a “Trotskyite” resolution at the Frunze Academy, a much more serious offense.²⁶ He then went on to answer questions regarding his activities in Petrograd at the time of the Bolshevik coup and his subsequent activities up to his decision to join the Red Army later in 1918. The interrogator ended the session by accusing Isserson of having engaged in “anti-Soviet activity,” and “suggested” that he tell the whole truth regarding his “crimes.” Isserson’s reply was, “I have not committed crimes against Soviet power.”²⁷

Gorbатов’s account of his first interrogation is more colorful than this sanitized version, although there is no reason to believe that the same methods were not employed against Isserson. Gorbатов wrote that he was taken to a room where his interrogator was already waiting for him. The latter proceeded to set him down, gave him pen and paper, and ordered him to write down an account of his “crimes.” When Gorbатов answered that he had committed no crime, the interrogator offhandedly replied, “No matter.... Everybody says that at first, and then they think it over, remember, and then write. You have time and we’re in no hurry.” He then left the room briefly. When he returned and saw that Gorbатов had written nothing, he exclaimed, “Did you really not understand me what is expected of you? Keep in mind that we don’t kid around. So, be so good as to do this. It’s not in your interests to get on my bad side. There’s never been a case yet when one of my

people didn't write. Do you understand?" Once again the interrogator left the room, this time for an hour. When he came back and saw that Gorbatov had still not written anything, he said disgustedly, "You're behaving badly from the very start. That's too bad!" Gorabtov was then taken back to his communal cell, where he described his ordeal to his fellow prisoners. From his account they concluded that the methods used in the ritualistic first interrogation had not changed.²⁸

Isserson's second interrogation took place on June 12, beginning at 9:45 P.M. and ending shortly after one the next morning. During this session senior lieutenant of state security Zarubin, joined Dobrotin, which suggests that the authorities may have wanted to apply more pressure on the prisoner. The two made Isserson describe his service in the Red Army from 1918 until his arrest. This seems to have been a *pro forma* exercise, as Isserson's account contained no particular surprises and his interrogators did not interrupt him. They were more interested at this stage in Isserson's circle of acquaintances, among whom he named Melikov, now a major general, and several others with whom he had worked or studied. Nowhere, however, did Isserson implicate these individuals in anything.²⁹ As has been previously mentioned, Melikov was later arrested, although this may well have been another case of an individual's luck having finally run out.

It was probably at this interrogation that Isserson was told that he had been discharged from the army, effective June 10.³⁰ This was done according to defense commissariat order no. 144 of September 22, 1935. Article 44; article V, which called for the dismissal of commanders from the RKKA for such offenses as "arrest by the judicial or investigative organs."³¹ Thus Isserson's 23-year military career came to an inglorious end. It was around this time that he was also expelled from the Communist Party.³²

Gorbatov wrote that his second interrogation was much like the first. This time, however, "the interrogator acted extremely rudely, cursed and threatened to send me to Lefortovo." He was then returned to his cell, only to be summoned once again to the interrogator's room, where a higher-ranking functionary tried to get him to sign. When Grobatov again refused, the mask came off and this investigator also began to curse and threaten him. "You have only yourself to blame," he said ominously. The next day Gorbatov was transferred to Lefortovo prison.³³

Isserson's next interrogation followed quickly on the heels of the preceding one and lasted from 9:50 P.M. on June 13 to shortly after one o'clock the next morning. Once again, the interrogator was interested in Isserson's acquaintances and, in fact, the entire session was devoted to this one topic. One of these was Triandafillov, whom Isserson had known from their time together at the RKKA Military Academy and subsequent assignments until the latter's death in the summer of 1931.³⁴ His comments were more pointed regarding his relations with Aleksandr Il'ich Ostrovskii, with whom he had become acquainted in 1925, when they served together on the RKKA Staff. The two had maintained friendly relations over the years and Ostrovskii had visited Isserson at the Frunze Military Academy while the latter was an instructor there. The two met for the last time in Kislovodsk, a resort town in the northern Caucasus, in the summer of 1936. However, Isserson now admitted that Ostrovskii had been a "rabid partisan" of Trotskii and in 1923, in Smolensk, had "actively spoken out" against the party line, a fact that he related to Isserson two years later.³⁵ This admission left Isserson, at the very least, open to the charge that he had displayed a lack of "vigilance" in combating the party's enemies, and many people had been convicted for less.

Isserson also mentioned in passing a number of other individuals, including acquaintances dating from his days as 10th Corps chief of staff, including Stepan Arkad'evich Bogo-

miagkov, the corps commander, as well as the political commissar for the corps, Ivan Prokof'evich Mikhailin.³⁶ He also mentioned several associates from his days at the Frunze Military Academy, including Tsiffer, Krasil'nikov, Vasilii Konstantinovich Mordvinov, Kirpichnikov, Vakulich, and Pavel Grigor'evich Ponedelin, the former chief of staff of the Leningrad Military District.³⁷ Ponedelin later commanded an army during the Great Patriotic War, but was captured by the Germans in the summer of 1941. He was arrested by Soviet authorities in 1945 and executed for treason in 1950.³⁸ To his credit, Isserson said nothing derogatory about any of these individuals, even though several had already been arrested.

The next interrogation took place on June 16 and lasted from 11:30 A.M. to 4:15 P.M. This time the interrogator quizzed Isserson about his service in the Belorussian Military District and his relations with the other commanders there. Isserson was forced to recount the story of his stay in Slutsk and the numerous conflicts with his superiors. However, whatever the dislike he obviously felt for many of these people, some of whom had already been arrested, he said nothing that could in any way be considered incriminating.³⁹

It was during this session that Isserson brought up his acquaintance with Zhukov during their days together in the Belorussian Military District, in which he described their familial visits. In throwing out this tidbit, Isserson may have hoped that his previous association with the general, then the Red Army's chief of the General Staff, might somehow save him.⁴⁰ If he did entertain such hopes, they were certainly misplaced.

On the other hand, his evaluation of Vol'pe was much less generous, particularly in his description of their final conversation shortly before the latter's arrest, and Isserson basically accused Vol'pe of engaging in "anti-Soviet" conversations with the recently arrested Fel'dman. Isserson related that he had asked Vol'pe how he viewed Fel'dman's recent arrest, knowing that the two were "close friends." Vol'pe, according to this account, replied that he might be arrested as well; due to certain conversations he had had with Fel'dman, perhaps alluding to the difficulties of working with Voroshilov. Isserson stated that from this exchange he deduced that the two men had held conversations of an "anti-Soviet character" and that Vol'pe now feared arrest. He said that it then became clear to him that Fel'dman and Vol'pe were "linked by their anti-Soviet activity," a judgment he added was "strengthened" by Vol'pe's arrest shortly afterwards.⁴¹

At this point Isserson's interrogator shrewdly asked whether he had divulged the details of this conversation to anyone, evidently hoping to snare his prisoner on charges of failing to report "treasonous" activity by another commander. Isserson admitted that he had told no one about the incident until requested to do so by the local party commission. When the interrogator asked why he had not divulged this information sooner, Isserson replied that once Vol'pe had been arrested it meant that the "question was clear," implying that any further effort on his part in the matter would have been superfluous.⁴² This was certainly true, after a fashion, although by the time Isserson wrote the party commission in August, Vol'pe was already dead.

However, for all of Isserson's retroactive "insights" into Vol'pe's "guilt," there is good reason to believe he was being less than truthful. In fact, his answers to the interrogator's questions regarding his failure to report the contents of his conversation with Vol'pe indicate that Isserson did not really believe in the latter's guilt, whatever his personal opinion of his in-law's character. This was certainly the opinion of the interrogator, who claimed that Isserson had not warned the authorities because he was a "participant" in a plot.⁴³

The interrogator also inquired about Isserson's relations with Voronkov and Alafuzo, with whom he had served in Belorussia and the General Staff Academy, respectively. He

described these relations as “normal” and not extending beyond the bounds of their day-to-day duties. The interrogator even tried to tie the executed Admiral Orlov to Isserson, based upon the admiral’s “confession,” in which he implicated Isserson in a “plot.” For his part, Isserson denied ever having met the man, although he knew him by reputation.⁴⁴

Isserson was summoned again on June 19 and his latest interrogation lasted from 11 A.M. until 3:30 P.M. This time the interrogator was primarily interested in his charge’s last, brief stint at the RKKA General Staff in early 1936. This chiefly took the form of questions regarding his personal and professional relations with Levichev and Mezheninov. Both of these men had already been arrested and shot, and although Isserson would not necessarily have been aware of the latter circumstance, he may well have suspected it. Once again, Isserson had occasion to testify at length about his poor relations with his superiors, although he said nothing to implicate them in anything.⁴⁵ The interrogator did at first show an unusual interest in some of the General Staff’s intelligence materials, which Isserson had employed to flesh out the 1936 operational-strategic war game, discussed earlier. When pressed, he admitted that he had used these same materials the following year, while putting together an exercise for his students at the General Staff Academy. Isserson emphasized, however, that he had taken these materials with Mezheninov’s permission, after which they were returned to the General Staff.⁴⁶ The interrogator seemed inclined at first to make something of this incident, but dropped the subject.

The interrogator also zeroed in on Isserson’s relations with Ol’shanskii, who, according to Grigor’ev, had named Isserson as a member of a military plot, and who was shot a few months later.⁴⁷ Isserson testified that he recalled Ol’shanskii from his time at the RKKA Military Academy, where the latter was an upperclassman, although they did not associate at the time. He said that in 1924, while he was undergoing instruction at the 40th Rifle Regiment’s training school, Ol’shanskii came on an inspection tour. The two men did not see each other for many years afterward, until they had a chance meeting in 1935 at the train station in Minsk, as Isserson and his wife were leaving for a vacation. The following year, he said, their families stayed at neighboring country houses outside of Moscow. Isserson stated that he never met Ol’shanskii personally during this time, although their wives exchanged visits.⁴⁸

Such was the state of Soviet jurisprudence during these years and later that the various denunciations of Isserson by people, who had been, for the most part, tortured and shot, were sufficient to bring charges against him, and thus he made the transition from suspect to accused. Under this system Isserson’s denials did not make a whit of difference, nor did the fact that his interrogators never really disputed his version of events beyond ritualized incantations of his complicity in one plot or another, based upon statements from people who, in many cases, were no longer alive. Nevertheless, this was considered more than sufficient to conclude on June 18 that Isserson had been “exposed as a participant in an anti-Soviet military plot.” The document was signed by Dobrotin and Zarubin and approved the same day by major of state security Osetrov, who was also the chief of the defense commissariat’s third directorate.⁴⁹ Isserson was made familiar with the document only on June 21, and dutifully signed it, just as he was required to sign the record of every interrogation.⁵⁰

Isserson was formally charged under article 58 of the RSFSR criminal code, under which millions of people were sentenced to lengthy prison terms or death during the Stalin years. The article dealt with two types of crimes — “counterrevolution” and “treason against the Motherland” in all their various permutations. The code defined the first as “any action

directed at the overthrow, subversion or weakening” of Soviet power at all levels, or the same actions directed at the “external security of the USSR and the fundamental economic, political and national gains of the proletarian revolution.” In an interesting wrinkle to the idea of “international proletarian solidarity,” the notion of counterrevolution was extended to “any worker’s state not forming a part of the USSR.”⁵¹ The crime of treason against the Motherland was more narrowly focused and included those “actions committed by citizens of the USSR against the USSR’s military might, its state independence, or the inviolability of its territory,” which might take the form of “espionage, revealing military or state secrets, defecting to the enemy,” or otherwise escaping abroad.⁵²

Specifically, Isserson was charged with violating the article’s paragraph 1b, which stated that these crimes, when committed by military personnel, “are punished by the highest degree of criminal punishment — execution, with the confiscation of all property.”⁵³ He was also indicted under paragraph 1l, which embraced “all kinds of organizational activity directed toward the preparation or the commission of these crimes,” as well as “participation in an organization formed for the preparation or commission” of these crimes.⁵⁴ The timing of these charges is particularly eloquent; on the eve of the German invasion the Red Army’s leading theorist was being held in prison and looking at a probable death sentence.

The tone of the interrogations, while never friendly, seems to have taken a turn for the worse from this time on. The interrogator began the June 21 session by once again accusing Isserson of being a “participant in an anti-Soviet military plot,” and asked if he admitted his guilt. Isserson replied defiantly that “I do not recognize myself guilty of participation” in any such plot and that he couldn’t “understand anything regarding this matter.” The interrogator then told him that investigators had “sufficiently complete materials” proving his “conspiratorial activity,” to which Isserson replied once again, “I was never a member of a conspiracy and have nothing to say in this matter.”⁵⁵ The harsher tone employed here, plus the issuing of formal charges against Isserson, implies that this is the time that the beatings began. Moreover, this 2½ hour interrogation was a particularly long one for just two pages of insignificant testimony. This was no isolated practice, however, and the employment of “physical means of persuasion” during interrogations had been authorized years earlier at the height of the purges.

Gorbatov wrote that following his transfer to the Lefortovo prison, the first interrogations there did not differ from those he had undergone at the Lubyanka. Only the interrogator here was “cruder,” he wrote, and that epithets such as “traitor” and “turncoat” were more widely used. “You’ll write,” the interrogator threatened. “We haven’t had and won’t have anyone who doesn’t write!” A few days later one of the higher-ranking functionaries asked Gorbatov, almost sympathetically, if he knew what he was getting himself into and whether he had thought through the consequences of his actions. When Gorbatov answered in the affirmative, the chief turned to his subordinate and said simply, “Yes, I agree with you,” and then left the room. “This time,” he wrote cryptically, “I didn’t return from the interrogation for a long time.” When Gorbatov was finally brought back to his cell his fellow prisoners exclaimed that this was “only the beginning,” and some even advised him to give in and confess before things got worse. He said that he endured five such “tortures” every two or three days, and that sometimes he was brought back to his cell on a stretcher. Following this initial round he was left alone for 20 days to “catch his breath.”⁵⁶

Isserson’s daughter was less explicit in her remarks, as her father, for obvious reasons, did not like to dwell on this period of his life. Irena Georgievna said that her father was

“tortured pretty well,” and that he suffered four heart attacks during his period of interrogation.⁵⁷ He carried the scars on his legs for the rest of his life.⁵⁸

Isserson was not summoned again to interrogation until July 6, so it is likely that he too was “catching his breath.” However, another factor in his 15-day respite was undoubtedly Hitler’s attack on the Soviet Union, which began in the early hours of June 22. Despite more than ample warning, the German invasion took the Soviet forces along the western frontier completely by surprise, due to Stalin’s unshakeable conviction that the German preparations were a diplomatic bluff and that he could avoid war by not “provoking” his fellow dictator. As a result, the onslaught was everywhere immediately successful, as the Wehrmacht’s air-ground attack rapidly moved into the interior of the country, all in accordance with the precepts of the “deep operation” as laid down by Isserson. By the day of this latest interrogation the Germans had decisively defeated Soviet forces in the Baltic States and had already covered nearly two-thirds of the distance to Leningrad. In Ukraine the Germans had defeated a massive armored counterattack by the Red Army and were not streaming toward Kiev. Neither of these crises, however, could compare with the Red Army’s debacle in Belorussia, where entire armies had been cut off and destroyed and Minsk taken within a week. By July 6 the Germans had already crossed the Dnepr River in force and were rapidly approaching Smolensk, astride the traditional invasion route to Moscow. Meanwhile, Isserson and many of the army’s best minds continued to rot in jail, some of them never to return.

The July 6 session, which lasted from noon until 2:40 P.M., was devoted entirely to Isserson’s relations with Tukhachevskii. This was particularly dangerous territory, as personal or professional association with the disgraced marshal had proven to be the literal “kiss of death” for many commanders, and Isserson was appropriately on his guard. He was thus non-committal about his early service with Tukhachevskii in the Western Front apparatus in the early 1920s, and called their working contact “episodic.”⁵⁹ He was more pointed in his comments in describing his clash with Tukhachevskii over an operational exercise during his period of service in the Leningrad Military District. This answer was not at all to the liking of his interrogator, who had obviously been hoping for a positive statement about the late marshal as a starting point for further accusations against Isserson. “You were asked the question so that you would tell about your ties to Tukhachevskii,” he said irritably. “What do you want to say in relating this episode?” Isserson replied, “I want to show that even then Tukhachevskii was hostile to me,” adding, “in later years this opinion was confirmed.”⁶⁰

The interrogator then tried another tack, returning to the question of Isserson’s appointment to the RKKA Staff apparatus in 1926. While he had probably welcomed the assignment at the time, with his own life now hanging in the balance, Isserson had every reason to see his appointment, with its connections to the disgraced Tukhachevskii, in a different light. Thus he was at pains to emphasize that as far as he knew, his friend Triandafillov had nominated him for the job. His interrogator, however, was quick to point out that while this might have been the case, he could hardly have been confirmed in this position without Tukhachevskii’s approval. No doubt feeling cornered, Isserson then sought to explain away Tukhachevskii’s decision to appoint him as a possible attempt “to tame me, so that I would not oppose him,” although he added that “I do not know his true aims.”⁶¹

Isserson further attempted to distance himself from this deadly connection by relating at some length the story of his next run-in with Tukhachevskii, in which Vol’pe had played such an unsavory role by betraying his confidence. In closing this tale, he made sure that

the interrogator knew that he had received a “disciplinary punishment” from Tukhachevskii personally.⁶² However, what benefit he may have derived from relating this episode was quickly dispelled by Isserson’s account of his work for the marshal in putting together the army’s 1936 field manual. The fact that Tukhachevskii had personally appointed Isserson secretary of the editorial commission and entrusted him with writing one of the document’s chapters implied a closeness that could only harm the latter in his present circumstances. Isserson was therefore at pains to minimize the connection, pointing out that his last conversation with Tukhachevskii had lasted a mere 15 minutes. The interrogator, for reasons of his own, seemed inclined to doubt this account, but upon hearing Isserson’s confirmation of the story, let the matter drop.⁶³

The interrogator was evidently dissatisfied with Isserson’s answers and did not summon him for a recorded interrogation for another 18 days. This may also have been standard practice, as Gorbatov wrote that after 20 days “they again began summoning me to interrogations.” He stated that he could still hear his interrogator hissing in his ear, “You’ll sign, you’ll sign!” as he was carried out of the room following his latest beating. “I endured this torment” another five times, he recalled, after which he was given another 20 days to recover.⁶⁴

Isserson’s next session took place on July 24 and lasted from 3:30 P.M. to 10:15 in the evening, an unusually long time. This time the interrogator was interested in Isserson’s relations with Uborevich, another of the more prominent victims of the military purge. The interrogator, having failed to implicate Isserson in any of Tukhachevskii’s alleged crimes, evidently placed great hopes on the Uborevich connection, in light of the two men’s extensive service together. Isserson dutifully related the history of their relations from their first meeting in 1919 on the northern front, to their last conversation in 1936. The interrogator was particularly interested in their service in Belorussia, where Uborevich commanded the military district and Isserson commanded a rifle division for more than two years. Isserson, realizing the stakes, stated that at first Uborevich treated him well and there were no apparent signs of enmity. However, he continued, after three to four months, “Uborevich’s attitude toward me changed,” and he “began to treat me significantly worse.” He attributed this change in attitude to negative reports that Uborevich had been getting from Gribov, the corps commander and Isserson’s immediate superior, as well as Zel’dovich, the corps commissar. And although this account was doubtlessly unpleasant for Isserson, as he was forced to own up to his own mistakes as a division commander, it was nevertheless a shrewd tactical move.⁶⁵ By relating in detail his poor relations with three men who had been shot, Isserson evidently hoped to avoid their fate.

The interrogator had his own marching orders, however, in which considerations of innocence carried no weight, and he gave Isserson’s defense short shrift. Dobrotin called Isserson’s version of his poor relations with Uborevich “far-fetched” and claimed that it “did not correspond to reality.” On the contrary, he maintained, he had evidence that Isserson had “enjoyed Uborevich’s patronage,” and demanded that he tell the truth. Isserson vigorously denied this charge, to which the interrogator mechanically replied that Isserson had been “a participant in a plot and was linked by criminal activity to Uborevich.” Isserson denied this as well, to which the interrogator countered that Levichev, who had “confessed” to treasonous ties with Uborevich four years earlier, had named Isserson as a fellow conspirator. Isserson repeated his assertion that he had never been a conspirator and called Levichev’s testimony a “lie,” although he admitted that he had no means of refuting his testimony.⁶⁶

Isserson's next interrogation took place on August 5 and lasted from 9:30 P.M. to 1 in the morning. This session focused on his relations with several of his former academic colleagues, most of who were already dead. One of these was Vornokov, with whom Isserson had said he had enjoyed "normal" relations, adding that there had been no "collisions" between them, although they were "not close." However, the interrogator repeated the charge that Vornokov had "exposed" Isserson as a "plot participant" and Uborevich's "personal agent in a counterrevolutionary organization," and demanded that he reveal how long he had been a member of this "conspiratorial organization." Isserson replied that Voronkov's testimony "did not correspond to reality" and that, furthermore, he had never had any conversations with Voronkov on "political matters." When pressured by the interrogator as to why Voronkov had testified against him, Isserson admitted that he was at a loss to explain this, adding that their relations were such that Voronkov had no reason to "slander" him.⁶⁷

The interrogator continued to press this point, saying that Voronkov's testimony had been confirmed by Levichev, adding, "Your denial is useless." He then added that Vetlin, who claimed to have heard this from Kit-Viitenko, had also confirmed Isserson's complicity in the plot. Isserson replied that he had never discussed politics with the latter, adding that their relations had been "purely official." He further stated that his relations with Vetlin had also been "normal" and that he "absolutely failed to understand" why the latter had said such things. The interrogator followed this up by citing the names of all those — Vetlin, Levichev, Voronkov, Grigor'ev, Orlov, and others — who had named Isserson as a member of this plot, and curtly demanded that he "Cease your disavowals and start talking about your conspiratorial activity." There was nothing for Isserson to do but say, "I'm not refusing to admit anything, and am telling the truth. I was not a member of a conspiracy."⁶⁸

This latest session with the interrogator was suspiciously long (three and a half hours) for the mere two pages of recorded testimony it produced. This implies that the beatings may have started again. Gorbатов wrote about this period of his imprisonment that following the second round of beatings he had been quite pleased with himself. He added that his cellmates "envied my resolve and cursed and condemned themselves" for being weak and signing false statements, condemning themselves and others. However, he continued, "When the third series of interrogations began, how I wanted to die as quickly as possible."⁶⁹

Isserson's was questioned again on August 13. This session lasted from 11 A.M. to 3 P.M. and fills only two pages of testimony, implying that he was still undergoing torture. This time Dobrotin was interested in Isserson's relations with Alafuzo, with whom he had most recently served in the General Staff Academy until the latter's arrest. Isserson related that he remembered Alafuzo from 1922 or 1923, when he was a student at the RKKA Military Academy and Alafuzo had lectured there, although the two men were not personally acquainted at the time. He said that they first met in the winter of 1936, when he was appointed deputy chief of the RKKA General Staff's first section, while Alafuzo was chief of the second. At the time he and Alafuzo met "very rarely" at work and never outside of the office. Those work-related questions that did arise were generally resolved with Krasil'nikov, Alafuzo's deputy. Isserson and Alafuzo were shortly afterwards appointed to head different departments at the General Staff Academy, and the two would confer from time to time on work-related matters. Isserson described their relations at the time as "normal," but strictly official.⁷⁰

The interrogator said that Alafuzo had named Isserson as a member of an "anti-Soviet military plot," and called Alafuzo "one of the active conspirators." He then demanded to

know when Isserson had “embarked on the path of treasonous activity.” Isserson wearily replied that he had never been a member of any conspiracy, a statement that he had already repeated on several occasions. He said that he could not explain why Alafuzo had done this, and that there was nothing in the previous relations that might cause him to make such charges. Dobrotin, by now completely exasperated with Isserson’s “intransigence,” turned on his captive, saying, “You continue to lie, Isserson. Alafuzo gave you up in his testimony. Answer me, who recruited you into the plot?” Isserson replied that no one had recruited him, although he did allow that Tukhachevskii might have had this in mind when he agreed to his transfer to the RKKA Staff in the 1920s. The interrogator countered that Alafuzo had already admitted to having recruited Isserson into the conspiracy, and asked if he was ready to confess to this. Isserson replied once again that such a charge did “not correspond to reality” and that he could offer no explanation as to why Alafuzo had made these claims.⁷¹

Dobrotin also chose this time to return to the subject of Isserson’s ties with Tukhachevskii, which was easily the most damning of his associations. By the time of this interrogation, however, Isserson was evidently less sanguine about his prospects and was ready to put a more sinister interpretation on his former chief’s actions. Thus he was ready, whether sincerely or for reasons of expediency, to buy into the charge that Tukhachevskii had stood at the head of a giant military plot to overthrow the Soviet state. He now admitted the possibility that Tukhachevskii had consented to his appointment in an attempt to “recruit” him into this fictitious plot, although Isserson would not go so far as to say that this was definitely the case. However, if such were his chief’s intentions, he declared, the latter “did not achieve his purpose.”⁷²

Isserson’s next interrogation did not take place until September 4, which suggests that once again he was being allowed to “catch his breath.” This session was a particularly long one, lasting from 8:40 P.M. until 1:15 in the morning and covers 11 pages of testimony, which also suggests that his interrogators were more “lenient” this time around. Unlike previous sessions, this interrogation contained no overt conspiracy charges or “treasonous” connections. Isserson was nonetheless on treacherous ground, as the interrogator wanted to know all about his various trips abroad and other foreign contacts, which was always a delicate topic under the xenophobic Stalin regime.

Dobrotin began the interrogation by asking Isserson to give an account of his internment in East Prussia in 1920. The two then proceeded to cover this ground step by step, citing names of individuals, units, and places of internment. The interrogator was especially interested in those incidents in which Isserson admitted to having served as a linguistic go-between for the camp authorities and the Soviet internees, although this line of questioning failed to reveal anything that was particularly damning.⁷³ He was also particularly insistent on learning how Isserson had managed to establish contact with his aunt in Königsberg and receive material support from her while still in an internment camp. Dobrotin was frankly amazed at the ease with which Isserson was able to do these things, perhaps reflecting that such “liberalism” would never be tolerated in the Soviet prison system.⁷⁴

Oddly enough, the interrogator was less interested in Isserson’s subsequent trips abroad, to Germany and France, even though these involved potentially damning contacts with foreign military personnel. This was probably because, as officially sanctioned trips, they were better documented than Isserson’s several months of semi-captivity in East Prussia. Nonetheless, Dobrotin seemed to feel that he was duty bound to call into question at least some aspect of these trips, and accused Isserson of hiding the extent of his contacts with

German officers and civilians, and of having held private meetings in France. However, as Isserson stuck to his story, the interrogator evidently had nothing to counter this with, and so dropped the subject.⁷⁵

Another interrogation took place only two days later and lasted from 8:40 P.M. to 11:40 P.M. this session was devoted to the various inconsistencies in Isserson's biography, which had aroused the suspicions of his tormenters. The first of these was his years-long habit of naming Leningrad as his birthplace, and not Kaunas. Isserson's inability to offer a coherent explanation of this subterfuge surely did him no good in his interrogator's eyes, but the latter chose not to make an issue out of the incident.⁷⁶ The same was true of his rather lame explanation of why he had for 20 years indicated in various documents that he had joined the Communist Party in 1918, and not a year later, as was actually the case. This explanation was somewhat more involved, but no less implausible, but again; the interrogator decided to let the matter pass.⁷⁷

The interrogator was far more concerned with previous contradictions in Isserson's testimony regarding his internment in East Prussia. Here Isserson was forced to admit that while in the Arys internment camp he had been held in solitary confinement for a week, and not the two weeks he had indicated in a 1936 biographical sketch. Once again, however, he could offer no plausible explanation for the discrepancy.⁷⁸ The same was true of his story regarding where he had been held with a large group of army political workers. He now recalled that he and the political workers had been held, for the most part, in the Lotzen internment camp, and only for a brief period in Hameln. He testified that he had previously neglected to mention the Lotzen internment, as he "did not consider it necessary to expound in detail on this question."⁷⁹

Isserson's interrogation of September 10 lasted from 9 P.M. until 1:15 in the morning and was exclusively concerned with his brief service in Finland. Isserson's lengthy recitation of his service as army chief of staff did him no good, however, and the interrogator accused him of "wrecking activity" and being the member of a conspiracy. Isserson denied this charge in an unusual fashion, stating, "I did not intentionally engage in wrecking activity." He did, however, admit his part in the failure of the 7th Army's December 17 attack against the Mannerheim Line.⁸⁰ This admission, however, was couched in terms of his own shortcomings as chief of staff, although in the Red Army of the time many men were condemned for less. This failed to satisfy the interrogator, who beside this "crime," proceeded to accuse Isserson of carrying out a policy of "deception" in his reports to the high command, a charge that he "categorically" denied. By this the interrogator clearly had in mind Talenskii's accusation that Isserson had regularly made changes in reports to Moscow in an effort to hide the army's true condition and his own complicity in its lack of readiness. Isserson replied that while he could not remember exactly what changes he had made, he did this "exclusively on the basis of reports arriving from staffs subordinate to me."⁸¹

However, Dobrotin refused to let the matter rest, and he returned to the question of "deception" during the next interrogation, which took place on September 15, the same day the German armored pincers closed around the Soviet defenders east of Kiev, in what was one of the largest encirclement operations of the war. The length of this session, which lasted from 8:50 P.M. to 1 o'clock the next morning and which yielded only two pages of testimony, suggests that the beatings had resumed. Whatever the truth of this matter, the interrogator obviously believed that he had Isserson trapped. He first got Isserson to admit that he had never reported to anyone that the units of the 7th Army designated to take part in the December 17 attack were not ready. However, this did not stop the army command

from reporting to Moscow that the troops were ready, and that all that was needed was a little time to resolve some coordination problems between the infantry battalions and the artillery. The interrogator insisted that this meant that reports which gave a false picture of the army's degree of readiness were indeed being sent, to which Isserson reluctantly agreed. He then asked if this practice did not constitute "deception," to which Isserson replied, "For my part, I don't admit that."⁸² If Isserson was tortured this session, this sort of obtuse answer was just the sort of thing to provoke his jailers.

Isserson may well have spent the next few days recovering from his ordeal, because he was not summoned to his next interrogation until September 19. This session was dedicated almost exclusively to the controversy surrounding the conduct of a war game at the General Staff Academy, and lasted from 12:30 P.M. to 3:20 P.M. By this time the interrogator may have been feeling pressure to bring this case to a close, as he opened their interview with the demand that Isserson give an account of his "act of sabotage" in conducting the war game. The latter proceeded to relate the details of this incident, including his falling out with Shlemin, the academy chief.⁸³ Isserson's reply clearly failed to please the interrogator, who immediately fell back on the standard fare of calling his captive a "participant in an anti-Soviet military plot." He further accused him of having sought to "inculcate in the students defeatist views in a war between the USSR and Germany," of "engaging in sabotage," and of "suppressing the operational initiative of the instructor's of the department which you headed." Isserson, who was by now probably aware of the German invasion, bristled at this charge. "I once again confirm that I was not a participant in an anti-Soviet plot," he said. Furthermore, he continued, "I never inculcated defeatist views in my students; quite the opposite, all my work was directed toward searching for those forms of combat, which would correspond to the task of preparing the Red Army for battle with enemies, particularly with Germany." In fact, the only part of the interrogator's accusation that Isserson did not dispute was the charge that he had stifled his subordinates' initiative at the academy. Here he admitted that he had been highly sensitive to criticism, and that in his single-minded pursuit of his goals he had not always taken other views into account.⁸⁴

What would prove to be Isserson's final interrogation took place on September 20, and last from 8:40 P.M. to 10:20 P.M. The decision had clearly already been made to wrap up Isserson's case due to his lack of "cooperation" and so this session was devoted to typing up various loose ends and acquainting Isserson with the final pieces of testimony against him. One of these was Kellerman, who had testified against Isserson four years earlier.⁸⁵ Isserson said that he remembered Kellerman from 1929 to 1930, when the latter was a student at the Frunze Academy. He added that it was possible that they had met briefly since then, although he couldn't be sure of the dates.⁸⁶ When the interrogator charged that he and Kellerman had conversed on "anti-Soviet subjects," Isserson "categorically" denied this and stated that they had never discussed politics together. The interrogator continued to press, however, saying that Kellerman "was preparing you for recruitment into a counterrevolutionary organization. Tell the truth, Isserson; when did you have anti-Soviet conversations with Kellerman?" "Kellerman is lying," Isserson replied. "I never had any anti-Soviet conversations with him. This is slander and calumny."⁸⁷

From here the interrogator segued into Isserson's relations with Vol'pe, who had earlier claimed to have had "anti-Soviet conversations" with Isserson and who had also been preparing the latter "for recruitment into a counterrevolutionary organization." To this charge, Isserson simply repeated his earlier statement that he had held no such conversations with Vol'pe, and that the unfriendly state of their relations "excluded the possibility

of a frank conversation on anti-Soviet subjects." He did admit, however, that during their last conversation they had spoken briefly about the arrest of Corps Commander Fel'dman, Vol'pe's friend. He said that from the tone of these remarks, "I should have understood Vol'pe's political character, namely that he, in one degree or another, was involved in those conspiratorial and anti-Soviet affairs, which were then being uncovered. However," he continued, "the absence of a certain political vigilance, evidently prevented me from properly judging his reply and informing the appropriate organs," by which he clearly meant the secret police. He closed by stating that he realized his error only after Vol'pe's arrest.⁸⁸

Yet another individual from the interrogator's arsenal of "witnesses" was Division Commander Konstantin Ivanovich Stepnoi-Spizharnyi, the former deputy chief of the army's armored directorate, who had been arrested in 1937 and was probably shot the following year.⁸⁹ Isserson admitted that he had met with Stepnoi-Spizharnyi at Vol'pe's apartment as part of a group that also included Corps Commander Ivan Kensorinovich Griaznov, Corps Commissar Second Class Aleksandr L'vovich Shifres, and Tsiffer. All of these commanders, Isserson said, "turned out to be enemies of the people, but I didn't have any kinds of conversations with them on political subjects." One night, he said, in the spring of 1937, Stepnoi-Spizharnyi arrived drunk at Isserson's apartment to unburden himself about the arrests that were just beginning to turn the Red Army upside down. The interrogator then asked if this wasn't the occasion when Isserson allegedly asked his guest, "Where are they going to get commanders from now?" which the interrogator classified as an "anti-Soviet remark." Isserson replied that while he and Stepnoi-Spizharnyi had indeed discussed the ongoing arrests, "I never uttered such an anti-Soviet remark."⁹⁰

As a parting shot, the interrogator brought up Corps Commander Maksim Petrovich Mager, who had most recently served as a member of the Leningrad Military District's military council, and who had testified against Isserson during his first arrest during 1938.⁹¹ Mager was later freed, but his cooperation with the authorities did him little good, and he was arrested in the spring of 1941 and shot that autumn.⁹² The interrogator stated that Mager had already implicated Isserson as a member of an "anti-Soviet organization" and urged the later to make a clean breast of his "anti-Soviet activity." Isserson admitted that he had known Mager, when the latter was a student in the Frunze Academy's "special group" during 1931 and 1932, although he had not seen him since then. He rather accused Mager of lying, adding that they had never had any contact outside of class and had certainly never discussed politics.⁹³

Presumably there is such a thing as professional pride even among secret police thugs, and Isserson's "recalcitrance" had clearly wounded Dobrotin, who had been trying unsuccessfully for more than three months to wring a confession out of his charge. On this day his frustration finally boiled over in a closing tirade, in which he told Isserson that "your anti-Soviet activity dates back to your time in the academy, when you voted for a Trotskyite resolution. In the ensuing years you had relations with Trotskyites and were then drawn into an anti-Soviet conspiracy." Once again, he demanded that Isserson cease his "disavowals" and confess to his "treasonous work." Isserson denied that he was holding back anything and that he had "no basis for doing so." He claimed that the 1923 vote in the academy was an isolated incident and that since that time "I have not had any relations with Trotskyites, nor have I aligned myself with any Trotskyite groupings." He admitted that while he "had not been an active member" of the Communist Party, "I have honestly stood for party positions."⁹⁴

Dobrotin brusquely rejected this defense and declared that Isserson not only "did not

share” the party’s views, but that he “had fought it” as well. To back up this charge, he referred to testimony by Yanushkevich, who had served under Isserson during the 1920s in the Leningrad Military District. The interrogator stated that Yanushkevich had already confessed to maintaining ties with Isserson “as a Trotskyite” and demanded one more time that he confess. Isserson, however, remained steadfast and denounced his former subordinate’s testimony as an “obvious slander,” and claimed that Yanushkevich had a personal grudge against him, because he had criticized the latter’s “poor work.” He concluded by declaring, “I repeat that I was not engaged in anti-Soviet activity.”⁹⁵ And with this final act of defiance, the first stage of Isserson’s long journey into darkness came to an end.

That same day Dobrotin submitted his report announcing the close of the preliminary investigation, which, in the absence of a confession by Isserson can only be regarded as a defeat. Nonetheless, he declared that the authorities possessed evidence “sufficient to present to a court.”⁹⁶ In the twisted world of Soviet jurisprudence, confessions were prized as lending a sheen of legality to what was otherwise an enormous criminal undertaking. However, the interrogator’s words illustrate the degree to which the lack of a confession was, in the final analysis, completely superfluous to the outcome of an individual’s case. In practice, a person might just as easily be convicted and executed after confessing to his “crime” as not, and the final result seemed to hinge as much on bureaucratic whim as on any rational calculus. Given the circumstances, one can only marvel at the tenacity of Isserson’s interrogator, who invested so many man-hours in questionings and beatings in order to extract a confession from him that would confirm the testimony of others, whose confessions had been obtained in the same manner. Since the accused’s trial would, in any event, be held behind closed doors, without benefit of counsel or fear of contradiction, one might well ask what had been the point of the entire exercise.

Whatever the bureaucratic imperative, Isserson never confessed to the various crimes attributed to him, nor did he really implicate anyone who was not already dead. This was no mean feat, considering the methods of “persuasion” available to his interrogators, and it was a rare individual who did not break. His daughter recalled that years later, when she was making the rounds of the party Central Committee to get her relatives rehabilitated, they told her that “you can be proud of your father, that he didn’t sign anything.” She attributed this to her father’s rigid code, which would not admit of a lie, and called Isserson “unbelievably honest and unbelievably principled.”⁹⁷

While certainly impressive, Isserson’s achievement is not entirely without blemish. As has been shown, he tried very hard to distance himself from Tukhachevskii and Vol’pe, and stated that the two were probably involved in some sort of treasonous activity. On the other hand, while disclaiming any particular intimacy with Uborevich, Isserson never implicated him in any alleged plots. Nor did he do this to any of the other commanders who had been arrested, despite a history of bad relations with many of them. The distinction between Tukhachevskii and Uborevich is particularly puzzling, as the two men were arrested and subsequently executed in connection with the same “conspiracy.” The only possible explanation for this apparent inconsistency is that Isserson may have sincerely believed Tukhachevskii and Vol’pe to be guilty of the charges against them, although his motivations for doing so cannot be ascertained. And although it is tempting to ascribe the latter instance to a history of personal rancor, this approach fails to explain everything. After all, Isserson’s litany of bad relations with Uborevich is as extensive as that with Tukhachevskii. On the other hand, Isserson’s long-standing enmity with Vol’pe doubtlessly helped him to accept the notion of the latter’s “guilt.”

Isserson throughout seems to have consciously followed a policy of steadfast honesty regarding the major questions of guilt and innocence, coupled with a certain tactical flexibility as regards many of the details in his biography, particularly as concern his relations with other accused commanders. This meant that while he remained unwilling to denounce anyone he believed was not guilty, he certainly did not attempt to defend them and, in fact, seemed to go out of his way to highlight his various conflicts with these doomed men. And while Isserson's conduct may not have met all of the requirements for heroism, his behavior was certainly understandable and not at all dishonorable. His conduct also indicates that despite the continuous campaign barrage against "enemies" and "wreckers," Isserson was no reflexive Stalinist, and that throughout his ordeal he retained a certain capacity for independent judgment. Under the conditions of a totalitarian system, this was also no small achievement.

Isserson was given the opportunity to amend his previous testimony before it was submitted for adjudication. This he did, making a number of changes that further underlined the poor state of his relations with several condemned individuals, without, however, implicating them in anything, as described above. For example, he now wanted his testimony of June 16 to indicate that his "normal" relations with Vol'pe "were only superficially normal, and that they were actually patently unfriendly." He also took pains to point out that despite his testimony of the same day that his relations with Voronkov were also "normal," they were colored by the fact that the latter "regarded me any my scientific works in an openly negative manner." Isserson also changed his testimony of June 19, where he stated that he had "no basis" for believing that his memorandum to Levichev had been the reason for his "sudden transfer" from the RKKA General Staff. He now declared that there could be only one explanation for this event, and that he was now "convinced that in reality this memorandum played the major role" in his transfer, because it was resented by Levichev as "touching upon his sphere of work."⁹⁸

Isserson also took the opportunity to further reinforce his previous testimony regarding his poor relations with Tukhachevskii, highlighting in particular his opinion that his criticism of the late marshal's campaign in Poland, as contained in *The Evolution of Operational Art*, had further soured their relations.⁹⁹ This statement, at best, is only partly true. As evidenced by the meeting between Isserson, Vakulich and Tukhachevskii, the latter actually acknowledged the validity of some of Isserson's criticisms. Isserson also requested that his August 5 testimony be altered to reflect his reevaluation of his relations with Vetlin. He now testified that he knew Vetlin from their occasional faculty encounters at the academy, and that otherwise he "did not have any official or personal relations with him."¹⁰⁰

In closing, Isserson repeated his oft-stated contention that "I never had close relations with any of these people who testified against me," adding that he did not even know Grigor'ev and had never even met Orlov. He requested that he be allowed to confront Alafuzo and Orlov, in order to "refute their testimony." Again, he had no way of knowing that both men had been executed years earlier, although he may have suspected as much. Finally, in another vain move, he requested that an "expert commission" be appointed to review his actions as 7th Army chief of staff, in order "to determine the true degree of my guilt in the failure of the December 1939 attack."¹⁰¹

Isserson received his official reply to this forlorn appeal the same day, which means that the court did not treat such matters seriously and that the defendant's exercise of his rights was, in this case, purely *pro forma*. The reply was just as could have been expected. On the first point, Isserson's request for a meeting with Alafuzo and Orlov was rejected on the grounds

that they were not in Saratov. Considering the fact that both men had already been executed, the investigator's explanation was misleading, to say the least, but was in accordance with the practice of concealing the fate of the great mass of the condemned from the general population. The authorities were at least on firmer ground in denying Isserson's request for an expert commission to examine his actions in Finland, "because of the ongoing events," by which they were clearly referring to the disastrous conduct of the war to date.¹⁰²

The mention of Saratov means that Isserson had been transferred to this city on the lower Volga, although there is no official record of this transfer and the exact date is unknown. Most likely, this occurred after the fall of Smolensk, which put the danger to Moscow in sharp relief. Given the intervals between interrogations, it is likely that he was transported between July 24 and August 5, or between the August 13 and September 4 interrogations. This was an action typical of the times; even as the country's military fortunes reached their absolute nadir in the summer of 1941, the regime still saw to it that the apparatus of repression continued to function.

The prosecution's indictment of Isserson was confirmed on October 7, even as the Germans were racing toward Moscow in a renewal of their offensive on the central part of the front. Commissar of State Security Third Class Victor Semenovich Abakumov, another odious specimen of the time, approved the indictment. Abakumov later rose to become the chief of wartime military counterintelligence (SMERSH), only to himself fall a victim the purge of the security organs following Stalin's death. The indictment stated that the basis for Isserson's arrest was the "confessions of arrested conspirators," who had "unmasked" the defendant as a member of an "anti-Soviet plot," as well as material concerning his "criminal acts on the front against the White Finns." Based upon this information, the document continued, it had been established that Isserson had "fought against Soviet power during the course of an extended period of time."¹⁰³ This was followed by a lengthy recapitulation of previously cited testimony from other arrested commanders. According to the practice of the day, the confessions of these dead men were deemed sufficient to indict Isserson on charges of participating in an "anti-Soviet conspiratorial organization" and working to "weaken the Red Army," and to bring him before a court for trial.¹⁰⁴

The indictment was then turned over to the office of the Main Military Prosecutor, where the acting chief prosecutor approved it. From there the matter was transferred to the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR, in Chkalov (Orenburg), to where it had been evacuated as the Germans moved closer to Moscow. On December 4, even as forward German units were probing the northern suburbs of the capital, the Military Collegium ordered the matter to be transferred to the Volga Military District's military tribunal in Kuibyshev for final adjudication.¹⁰⁵ In Saratov, Isserson received a copy of the indictment only on January 3, 1942.¹⁰⁶

Trial and Camp

After this, events moved swiftly. Sometime afterwards the Military Tribunal for the Volga Military District ordered that Isserson be conveyed under guard to Kuibyshev, by 10 o'clock on the morning of January 21, in order to stand trial.¹⁰⁷ Whether this meant actually delivering Isserson several hundred kilometers north to Kuibyshev is doubtful, particularly during wartime, when transport was at a premium. In this case, it is far more likely that the court was in assizes and expected in Saratov on that date.

Gorbatov wrote that his summons to trial caught him completely by surprise, and that at first he thought he was being set free. His mood soon changed, however, as he found himself shunted into a small room, where sat the three members of the military court. He recalled that the entire "trial" lasted for only four or five minutes, which was just enough time to go through the formality of crosschecking his personal data with that contained in his arrest file. The chairman then asked him why he had not confessed to the charges against him. When he answered that he was not guilty of any crimes, he was led out into the corridor, where he was made to wait for about two minutes. Once again the guards led into the room to hear his sentence: 15 years in prison and camp, followed by another five of "disenfranchisement" in internal exile. That same day he was transferred to another prison to await transport.¹⁰⁸

In outward appearance Isserson's "trial" was a less hurried affair than Gorbatov's, although no less an empty formality for being that. This was probably due to the fact that the tempo of arrests had declined considerably since 1937–38, and so the accused could now receive more "individual" attention. The tribunal consisted of Division Military Lawyer I.M. Zarianov (chairman) and military lawyers second-class Riabtsev and Nasedkin, which opened its proceedings at 2:25 P.M. on January 21. Following a few procedural preliminaries, the tribunal quickly got down to business. When the chairman asked Isserson if he admitted his guilt, the latter replied that "on the whole" he denied the charges against him, although he was ready to admit his culpability in the 7th Army's failures in Finland. He then added, "I never fought against Soviet power. I was not anti-Soviet."¹⁰⁹

Isserson then proceeded down the laundry list of charges against him, knowing that this would be his last opportunity to refute them. He sought to explain his vote for an "anti-party" resolution at the RKKA Military Academy as a product of his youth and inexperience in such matters, adding that once his mistake was explained to him, he changed his vote. He also declared Alafuzo's testimony against him to be "false," and maintained that Alafuzo and Levichev had forced him out of his position at the RKKA General Staff because he had pointed out "shortcomings" in the army's mobilization plan. Likewise, he continued, his problems with Tukhachevskii arose when he had the temerity to criticize the latter's work as chief of the RKKA Staff. After that, he said, "My relations with Tukhachevskii were bad, and we were rude to each other." In the same way, Isserson said, his initial good relations with Uborevich went quickly downhill when he criticized the latter's plans for the formation of frontier units.¹¹⁰

Isserson was much more ambiguous in his defense of his record as 7th Army chief of staff in Finland. On the one hand, he readily admitted that he had failed to organize the army and lesser staffs and the rear services to a "sufficient degree," which he said was "one of the reasons" for the army's unsuccessful December 17 attack. However, he maintained that his original calculations for the movement of troops to their jumping-off point for the attack had been correct, but that Meretskov had made major changes in these numbers. He added that the army commander did this because he believed that the Finns had no fortifications on the Karelian Isthmus, and therefore ordered the attack without an artillery preparation. Likewise, he now admitted that the two days allotted for preparing the breakthrough had been too little. He said that, in retrospect, he should have "demanded" more time for these measures, but that the deadline had been set down by Meretskov. Isserson once again maintained that his mistakes did not involve a "criminal design," and that in any event he had already been punished for them by being removed from his position and reduced in rank.¹¹¹

Following still more testimony from Isserson, the chairman declared the proceedings over and asked the accused if he had any final statement to make before the tribunal retired to render its decision. Isserson, summoning up all the eloquence he could command, began by saying that “my eyes were opened during the revolution. There have been blemishes on my life’s path. As a communist, I was insufficiently connected with the masses, but I never sinned against the party.” He added that he had been working on a “theoretical scientific work,” by which he evidently meant the second part of *The New Forms of Combat*, which he stated he had left on the table in his Moscow apartment. He did not know that the manuscript had been confiscated, and this passage was later crossed out of the official record. Throwing himself on the mercy of the court, Isserson then declared that “I will accept any verdict as fitting, but ask you to give me the opportunity to finish my work, which I could do right now. If the court should find it possible, I ask you to send me to the front to defend the land of the Soviets, where I will fight the enemy until his complete destruction.”¹¹² The latter indicates that from his prison Isserson had learned of the German attack.

At 3:35 P.M. the judges broke to consider their verdict, which, in any event, was a foregone conclusion. At 4:25 they returned and announced their decision, which had been hastily written in pencil on two sides of the same piece of paper. The verdict stated that since 1936 Isserson had been a member of an “anti-Soviet conspiratorial organization” within the defense commissariat, which had as its goal the “overthrow of Soviet power.” The document added that for “a number of years” Isserson had “carried out work, aimed at weakening the might of the Red Army,” and singled out in particular his tenure as army chief of staff during the war with Finland. His “Trotskyite” past was also thrown in for good measure. On the basis of these charges, the court sentenced Isserson to the “highest measure of punishment” — death by shooting. The court also decreed that he be stripped of his colonel’s rank and that his property be confiscated. In accordance with the practice of the time, Isserson was given 72 hours to appeal this verdict to the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR.¹¹³

Gorbatov wrote that his sentence was so unexpected that “I sank to the ground where I stood.”¹¹⁴ One can only imagine Isserson’s state of mind upon hearing his much harsher verdict. Not only had he been deprived of the opportunity to use his talents in the war against Germany, but also now he had been sentenced to death on false charges by the very system he had fought to create. It was a blow many other commanders had already experienced.

There is no record of Isserson’s appeal in his arrest file, and it is most likely that the only copy of this document is in the USSR Supreme Court archives. The only mention of such a document is a notation in Isserson’s file, which states that his appeal was sent to the chairman of the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR on January 29.¹¹⁵ In the past such appeals, when they were allowed at all, were routinely denied. Indeed, at the height of the purges appeals were not even considered and death sentences were carried out immediately.

The authorities may have been counting on Isserson’s fear of just such an outcome in order to prod him into confessing his supposed crimes. His daughter states that he later told her that for 51 days they led him out to be executed, but still he would not sign any confession. At the end of this period he was so fed up with these farcical proceedings that he wrote his tormentors a note, saying, “You sentenced me to be shot — shoot me!”¹¹⁶ Isserson’s treatment during this period recalls the time when the young Dostoevskii and several others were condemned to death by firing squad, a sentence that was commuted to exile

and imprisonment in a theatrically stage last minute reprieve by the czar. However, the latter incident took place only once.

On March 10, 1942, the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR, while acknowledging that the case against Isserson had been proven, nevertheless ruled that the use of the death penalty in this instance was “not justified by necessity.” Instead, Isserson was sentenced to ten years in an ITL (corrective labor camp), followed by five years of internal exile, with the sentence dating from June 7, 1941, the day of his arrest. The court did, however, decree that the forfeiture of Isserson’s rank and property would remain as previously ordered.¹¹⁷ An order to this effect was sent out on March 25 to the chief of the prison in Saratov, and it is not clear when Isserson received word of his reprieve.¹¹⁸ During this time Isserson presumably had to endure a few more mock executions.

What caused the court to display such uncharacteristic liberalism will probably never be known. The court’s leniency was certainly not motivated by military necessity, as Isserson’s new sentence indicates, and in any event there were still many commanders languishing in the camps who never got the opportunity to cross swords with the Wehrmacht. It may have been a case of having friends in high places, and someone like Timoshenko or Khmel’nitskii may have interceded for Isserson to the best of their limited ability, and there had been instances of successful intervention on behalf of a few individuals. Or, it may simply have been the luck of the draw and under the Stalinist system the caprices of fate could often have momentous consequences.

Following this reprieve, Isserson spent an unspecified amount of time in prison, awaiting transport to his camp. Nor is there any record of when Isserson was removed from prison for transportation to camp, so the date can only be guessed at. His daughter said that he later told her that he had received a parcel of items from the family while still in prison, but was robbed of these things while on a boat from Saratov.¹¹⁹ This implies that he and a number of others were probably transported sometime in the spring of 1942, once the melting of the ice made the Volga navigable again. Being robbed was a common hazard on these journeys, as Gorbatov’s memoirs attest.¹²⁰ This was because prison convoys were often made up of a mixed group of “political” prisoners, such as Isserson, as well as common criminals, many of them drawn from the Soviet underworld. The latter, being more adept at violence and possessing an existing organizational structure with its own laws preyed on the defenseless political prisoners and were often used by the authorities to keep the latter in a state of terrified submission.

Very little is known about Isserson’s ten years in camp, a subject about which he was naturally reticent. One acquaintance later recalled that “Isserson never spoke about his arrest, exile, or his death sentence,” and once through hand gestures indicated that such matters were “not a subject for conversation.”¹²¹ However, years later he did tell another acquaintance that he had served time working in the copper mines in Kazakhstan, as well as in the north of Krasnoyarsk province, a vast forested region in central Siberia. In both places winters are long and hard, particularly for an academic with little experience of physical labor. “How I survived,” he said years later, “I don’t know.” He then proceeded to answer his own question, stating, “I survived there because I literally landed in a warm spot,” speaking of his job as a stoker in the camp boiler room. Later the camp doctor found out that Isserson knew German and Latin and took him on as a medical orderly.¹²²

However, even in the harsh conditions of the labor camp regime, where survival often depended on maintaining good relations with one’s fellow prisoners, Isserson was unable to avoid conflicts. Irena Georgievna related the story of how in the Karaganda region of

northern Kazakhstan, her father was judged to be too weak to work in the coal mines. Instead, they put him to work as a production accountant to keep track of the prisoners' output. This was an extremely important position in the camp hierarchy, for one's level of production determined how much you would eat. "If you fulfilled the work norm by 50 percent they gave you a half ration and if by 75 percent, then three quarters," she said. Thus meetings one's norm was literally a matter of life and death, as any reduction of the already meager food ration could easily lead to succeeding cuts, ending ultimately in the prisoner's death by starvation or exhaustion. Because of this the accountants usually padded the figures so that the prisoners would receive a larger ration. "But not my dad," his daughter added sarcastically. "Papa couldn't do that," attributing his refusal to his iron principles. For this act of misplaced rectitude, she said, her father was given a beating by his fellow prisoners and assigned to another job.¹²³

The Home Front

The extended stay in the Saratov prison before transportation at least afforded Isserson the time to try and help his family. This indicates that despite his numerous failings as a husband and a father, he sought to do the right thing, or at least square accounts with them before what he believed would be his execution. Sometime in March that he wrote the chief of the prison, requesting his assistance in allocating the considerable amount of money (2,500 rubles) that he had on his person at the time of his arrest. Isserson requested that 2,000 rubles be transferred to his wife, while leaving the remaining amount for his personal use. To be fair, he had attempted to do the same thing in September, but the transfer had not gone through.¹²⁴

His family certainly needed the help, particularly as the war had made everyone's economic situation more perilous and none more so than the family of an "enemy of the people." The authorities were certainly not going to be of any help, as an August 1942 communication from the military tribunal of the Volga Military District indicates. In this message the tribunal chairman informed the city's military commissar of Isserson's sentence and the fact that the latter's family was to be deprived of any and all benefits accruing to it as a result of his conviction. The latter referred to the law of June 26, 1941, which established a system of benefits for family members of those in the military. According to this decree, Yekaterina Ivanovna and her daughter would be deprived of even their miserly stipend of 100 rubles per month.¹²⁵ This was followed by another blow that same month, when the military tribunal informed the people's court in Moscow of the decision to confiscate Isserson's personal belongings, with the proceeds to be paid into the state budget.¹²⁶ This was probably the time when Isserson's remaining books and records disappeared.

The family's situation was indeed dire following Isserson's arrest. Irena Georgievna said that after the war began the authorities requisitioned one of the rooms in their three-room apartment. This room was then used to house private radios, which had been seized from the civilian population as a security measure. When the cold weather arrived, all four women (Yekaterina Ivanovna, her mother, daughter, and niece, Vol'pe's daughter) abandoned one of the rooms and huddled together in the remaining one, because the building was heated so poorly, due to wartime shortages. As the Germans approached Moscow, more and more people elected to leave the city. The Issersons, however, had no money for the

journey, as their assets had been frozen when the war began. They were further burdened by the fact that Felitsata Pavlovna was suffering from a severe case of bronchial asthma, and could hardly be expected to make the journey on foot. They were saved when the wife of a wounded general came to their apartment and gave them money and a few loaves of bread for the trip.¹²⁷

The Issersons returned to Moscow only in 1943, following the Soviet victory at Stalingrad. The improvement in the military situation did not signify any lessening of the system's vigilance, however. Yekaterina Ivanovna had a great deal of difficulty finding work, even in wartime, when jobs were plentiful. No sooner would she be accepted at one job than the personnel department would discover that her husband had been arrested, and she would be summarily fired. This was an extremely serious matter, as she had to support not only herself and her ailing mother, but also her daughter and niece. She was finally able to find work at an industrial complex connected with the "Spartak" soccer team.¹²⁸

Even then, however, the family's problems were far from over. It was not uncommon for the wives of "enemies of the people" to be arrested in their turn, either as co-conspirators in their husbands' "crimes," or for failing to exercise the proper "vigilance" in not informing on them. Isserson's daughter recalled that not long after her mother began working at "Spartak" her fellow workers told her: "Yekaterina Ivanovna, get out of that building; some general will need an apartment, and they'll arrest you and sent Irena to a special prison for children." Through connections at work, she was able to secure an apartment on Moscow's Chaplygin Street. This meant, however, exchanging their three-room apartment for a one-room dwelling measuring only 16 square meters, for which they also had to throw in two rugs and the daughter's bicycle. Moreover, this was a communal apartment, in which the tenants on a particular floor shared kitchen and bathroom facilities. No matter, Irena Georgievna said, recalling these events. "We did exactly the right thing," and recalled a friend of the family who failed to leave her military apartment following her husband's arrest and who afterwards was herself arrested and her son sent to an institution for children of "enemies of the people."¹²⁹

Nor was Isserson's daughter immune from the threat of persecution in her own right. In 1944 she turned 16 and was required by law to apply for an internal passport of the kind required by all Soviet citizens. However, her birth certificate and other supporting documents had disappeared three years before, when her father was arrested and the NKVD searched their apartment. Given the harsh nature of the Stalinist regime and the fact that the country was at war, Yekaterina Ivanovna was afraid that her daughter might be arrested. It was at this point that Felitsata Pavlovna, who shared the small communal apartment with the family, recalled the name of the church in Kursk where Irena had been christened. They communicated this information to the police, who forwarded an inquiry to the local authorities. The city had been fought over twice between 1941 and 1943 and had been heavily damaged, but by a fortunate circumstance the church remained intact. This enabled the local authorities to establish the fact of Irena's birth through the church's baptismal register, and she was thus able to receive her passport and avoid any further trouble from a vengeful system.¹³⁰

However, the family's greatest problem during the war was one experienced by millions of other Soviet citizens — food. The loss of large areas of arable land in the southern part of the country in 1941–42 meant that the food ration for the general population was barely enough to ensure survival. Irena Georgievna recalled how in the fall of 1941 she would cross the streets and alleyways of Moscow in order to retrieve bones, so that the family could

use the marrow to make broth. This was a dangerous undertaking, as the city was under a state of siege and soldiers were authorized to open fire on anyone breaking the curfew. At about the same time her mother and cousin used curtains to make sacks, which they used to carry frozen cabbage from the countryside. One of the family's most common meals, she said, was a thin soup made from two small potatoes, half an onion, a teaspoon of non-dairy butter oil, and rice. The latter ingredient was a particular favorite, as it would swell up upon contact with water and give the diner at least the pleasant illusion of having eaten his fill. At one point, she said, things got so bad that the janitor of their building offered to bring her mother some horsemeat from a horse that had been shot or fallen down nearby. He later brought part of a leg, "and we ate it," she said. "In general, we ate anything that can be chewed."¹³¹

Things were naturally much worse in the camps, where the prisoners were always just one step away from starvation. The family first heard from Isserson in 1943, or the beginning of 1944, when his letters began to arrive. Isserson's letters to his wife invariably came down to the same request: "Yekaterina, you must understand that I need eight kilograms of dried bread per month." This was clearly impossible under wartime conditions, in which his wife received a worker's bread ration of 600 grams per day, her niece somewhat more, Irena Georgievna a student ration of 400 grams, and Felitsata Pavlovna a non-working dependent, a mere 350 grams. Irena Georgievna said that when she would bring the family's bread ration home the women would divide the amount equally into four parts, of which she and her cousin would immediately eat their share. Yekaterina Ivanovna and her mother would eat only half of their allotment, saving the rest to give to the girls for dinner.¹³² The situation was not as bad as in Leningrad, where untold thousands died of starvation, but that during the war Yekaterina Ivanovna and her mother each weighed less than 100 pounds. Nonetheless the family was able to render some assistance to Isserson and Galina Ivanovna. By dint of much hard work, the family was able to send two food parcels a year to each of them.¹³³

The situation eased somewhat as the war took a turn for the better. Not long after the family's return to Moscow Galina Abramovna married and moved out of the family apartment.¹³⁴ Galina Ivanovna was freed a year ahead of schedule in 1944, as a reward for her "high production indices and excellent conduct in daily life," and could now work as a free laborer. The years in camp had nevertheless been hard on her health, and one kidney had already failed her. However, she was not allowed to return to Moscow, but was instead sent



Galina Ivanovna Vol'pe, 1944, following her release from camp (courtesy I.G. Yeremina).

to the small town of Aleksandrov, just beyond the 100-kilometer limit from Moscow that had been established for political prisoners. Sometime afterwards she received her internal passport, an act that restored some of her civil rights, such as they were. This at least enabled her to move from her provincial exile and shortly afterwards she left for Leningrad where her daughter was studying.¹³⁵

CHAPTER 10

Vindication

The Beginning of a War

Despite the fact that Isserson sat out the entire war in either prison or a labor camp, his writings nevertheless had an immense influence on how the Red Army waged the struggle. At first glance this seems an odd statement to make about someone who had been so severely condemned by the system he served. However, in the bizarre world of the Stalin regime many men continued to make contributions to the war effort while still in prison. For example, Boris L'vovich Vannikov, then the People's Commissar of the Defense Industry, was, like Isserson, arrested in June 1941 and beaten severely while under interrogation. While in prison he was ordered by Stalin to draw up a plan for restructuring the country's armaments industry under wartime conditions. Vannikov's project pleased Stalin so much that Vannikov was freed shortly afterwards and was later able to resume his work in the armaments industry.¹ Equally telling are the fates of the famed aircraft designer Andrei Nikolaevich Tupolev and Sergei Pavlovich Korolev, the latter the father of the Soviet space program. Both men spent several years working in a scientific-research institute ("sharashka") while still prisoners. Isserson, however, lacked these individuals' organizational abilities and scientific expertise and was therefore deemed less useful to the war effort, and so had to serve out almost the entirety of his term while his more fortunate counterparts were achieving glory on the battlefield. Nevertheless, his theoretical presence was felt throughout, although never acknowledged.

The utility of any theory is measured by the degree to which it is able to predict outcomes or otherwise provide the solution to a problem. This is particularly the case with military theory, the validity of which is tested in the crucible of war. For the Red Army this laboratory was the Great Patriotic War of 1941–45, in which the tenets of its prewar strategy, operational art and tactics were put to the ultimate test. Isserson, to one degree or another, had been deeply involved in all three areas, and, to a great extent the Soviets entered the war imbued with Isserson's theories, particularly in the field of operations. In many cases the Red Army sought to apply his ideas, often imperfectly, while in others the war itself mandated that adjustments be made. How these theories fared and how the army's military art changed during the course of the war is a subject that requires a lengthy examination.

One of Isserson's most categorical prewar strategic assertions was confirmed at the very

outset of the conflict, although surely not in the way he had intended. This was his contention that “war is no longer declared,” a claim which was based upon his analysis of the Polish campaign in 1939.² It was, he maintained, now most likely to begin as a surprise attack by one side’s fully mobilized forces against an opponent who is often not prepared for the assault. Subsequent events in the West and the Balkans confirmed the overall correctness of these views. To be sure, an undertaking of this magnitude cannot be entirely hidden from the enemy, and a skillful aggressor will carry out his pre-invasion preparations in such a manner as to instill uncertainty in the mind of the intended victim as to the aggressor’s true aims, until it is too late and the war “is unleashed in its full scale.”³ The Germans’ various deceptive measures prior to the launching of Operation *Barbarossa* were certainly aimed at achieving this. However, the effectiveness of these measures, was nothing compared to Stalin’s own belief that the buildup along the Soviet Union’s western frontier was nothing more than a means to extort concessions from him, and that Hitler did not intend to go attack the USSR before the end of the war with Great Britain.

This delusion was not shared by the country’s military leadership, which included Isserson’s acquaintances Timoshenko and Zhukov, who were now, respectively, defense commissar and chief of the General Staff. Alarmed by the growing German buildup along the western frontier, they advocated a preemptive attack against the Germans in their assembly areas before they could deploy and organize any effective resistance. Isserson’s former student, Vasilevskii, who was then the deputy chief of the General Staff’s operational directorate, submitted a detailed proposal to this effect in May 1941.

The plan foresaw the deployment of four *fronts* along the western theater of military activities. The Northern Front (three armies) was tasked with defending Leningrad and the Karelian peninsula against a possible Finnish attack and, in conjunction with the Baltic Fleet, maintaining control of the Gulf of Finland. The same was true of the Northwestern Front (three armies), which would guard against a German offensive out of East Prussia in the direction of Riga and Vilnius. The Western Front’s (four armies) right-flank forces would assist in this effort by defending against a German breakthrough attempt toward Bialystok and Lida.⁴

The plan’s offensive core called for an extremely powerful Southwestern Front (74 rifle, 28 tank, 15 motorized, and five cavalry divisions, organized into eight armies and supported by 91 air regiments) to make its main effort north of the Carpathian Mountains in order to destroy the German forces concentrating in southwestern Poland. This would not only disrupt the enemy’s offensive preparations, but lead to the capture of the Silesian industrial basin, while at the same time cut off the Germans from their Balkan allies. Upon completion of this first stage, the *front* would then be in a position to continue the offensive to the north or northwest toward the Baltic, with the prospect of rolling up the entire German front in the East. Simultaneously, the *front*’s right-flank armies would cover the advance by attacking toward Lublin, from where it would assist the southern wing of the Western Front’s advance on Warsaw. To the south, the *front* was to guard against attacks from Hungary and Romania and be ready to launch “concentric attacks” against the latter from the Chernovtsy and Chisinau areas for an advance to Iasi.⁵

The plan dovetailed closely with Isserson’s recent strategic conclusions as to the advantage to be gained from launching a war with one’s fully deployed forces in order to preempt the enemy’s strategic deployment. Stalin, however, brusquely rejected the proposal for fear of “provoking” the Germans. Zhukov later admitted that this was just as well and that the undertaking of such a grandiose scheme was simply beyond the Red Army’s capa-

bilities at the time.⁶ In retrospect, Zhukov was certainly correct, and some time was to pass before the Soviets acquired the skills necessary to carry out an offensive on such a scale.

Stalin's dismissal of the plan's offensive goals did not put an end to its other recommendations, however, and several of these were later implemented in time to play a crucial role in the war's first few weeks. The most notable of these was Vasilevskii's proposal to create a high command reserve of five armies (27 rifle, 12 tank, and eight motorized divisions), which would be concentrated deep in the rear between Viaz'ma and Berdichev.⁷ This proposal was actually a reworking of the General Staff's May 13 decision to shift 28 rifle divisions and four army headquarters from the country's interior military districts to the west. Two of these armies were slated for deployment within the Kiev Special Military District, and two others for the Western Special Military District.⁸ These armies constituted, in essence, the USSR's second strategic echelon, as envisaged by Isserson nearly ten years earlier.

Another of the plan's components was the proposal to carry out a large-scale secret mobilization under the guise of a calling up reservists for refresher training. Simultaneously with this move, the border military districts were to secretly concentrate their forces closer to the frontier, in particular the armies from the high command reserve. Air units from the interior military districts were also ordered to concentrate in the western military districts in preparation for the attack.⁹ During May and the first part of June some 800,000 reservists were called up, which enabled the army to increase the strength of nearly 100 rifle divisions along the border, plus that of several fortified regions, some air units, and other combat arms.¹⁰

It should be noted that Zhukov's actions in May 1941 contradict in their entirety the version of events contained in his memoirs. There he wrote that "*the surprise attack by all available forces, all the more so by forces previously deployed along the strategic directions, was not foreseen*" by anyone in the country's higher military leadership (emphasis in the original).¹¹ He added elsewhere "the defense commissar and the General Staff believed" that a war between German and the Soviet Union "must begin according to a preexisting scheme: the main forces will enter the fighting a few days after the frontier battles."¹² Under these circumstances, the marshal's public version of events should be dismissed as politically inspired obfuscation.

Much has been made in recent years regarding Stalin's alleged plans for a preemptive strike against his erstwhile ally, Hitler.¹³ Whatever the dictator's long-range plans may have been, the strategic disposition of the Red Army's forces along the western frontier in June 1941 is evidence of his defensive intentions at the time. It also constitutes negative proof of the continuing influence of Isserson's ideas among the higher command echelon. In this regard, it should be recalled that he had earlier singled out the vanguard echelon, consisting primarily of tank and motorized troops, as the lead element in the *front's* movement toward the meeting engagement at the start of a war. These units would precede the *front's* main body, comprised of slower-moving rifle formations, and using their long-range shock power, create the conditions for the main echelon's successful employment against the enemy's flanks and rear.

However, at the beginning of the German attack, nearly all of the mechanized corps were stationed *behind* their parent combined-arms armies as part of the latter's second echelon. This disposition dovetailed perfectly with Isserson's other prescription for conducting a *defensive* operation, the only difference being that it was now on a much larger scale encompassing the entire western theater of military activities. According to this scenario,

the first-echelon armies' mission was a defensive one — to hold and wear down the attacker, with the second echelon's mechanized corps offering support by localizing enemy breakthroughs. This holding action would also protect the forward concentration and deployment of succeeding strategic echelons from the country's interior. Once the attackers were exhausted, the mechanized corps, supported by the recently arrived armies from the second strategic echelon, would spearhead a massive counteroffensive and throw the enemy back on his own territory.

As the magnitude of these prewar preparations indicates, the German attack on June 22 could in no way be considered a strategic surprise for the Soviets, although Hitler struck before they could be completed. The same cannot be said, however, for matters at the tactical and operational level. Here, Stalin's fear of provoking Hitler prevented him from sanctioning even the most elementary precautions to ensure that his own forces would not be caught off guard. Among these were such measures as bringing the forces in the western military districts into a state of heightened combat readiness and having them occupy their border fortifications. Consequently, the German attack came as a complete surprise to the country's first strategic echelon, where the armies along the border had no time to carry out any operational deployments prior to the attack, which caught many units in their peacetime encampments.

The Soviets responded to the German invasion in typically aggressive fashion, consistent with their offensive doctrine. On the evening of June 22 Stalin ordered a large-scale counteroffensive, even though the situation in many areas was unclear and, in most cases, misleading. The directive ordered the newly activated Northwestern Front to defend along the Baltic coast while organizing a counterblow south from the Kaunas area against the northern flank of the enemy penetration along the boundary with the Western Front. The latter was to hold along the Warsaw axis and to launch a converging attack north to destroy the enemy in the Suwalki area. To the south, the Southwestern Front was to hold against enemy attacks from the Krakow area and launch "concentric blows in the general direction of Lublin" against the German armored spearhead north of L'viv. These attacks involved the forces of two combined-arms armies and "no less than five mechanized corps," in order to "encircle and destroy the enemy grouping" and by June 24 occupy the area around Lublin.¹⁴ The import of this order was that the war's first battles would unfold as a series of *front* meeting operations.

This would not be a meeting operation as Isserson had foreseen, however, which saw the two opponents moving toward each other at the start of a war. In this case, the Germans attacked with fully deployed forces along the border, while the Soviet units were scattered back several hundred kilometers to the rear. Moreover, the Soviet forces would be advancing into battle without proper air cover. The German attack had caught the Soviet air force on the ground and destroyed some 1,200 aircraft on the first day, of which 800 had been caught on the ground.¹⁵ This gave the invaders immediate and decisive air superiority, which they proceeded to use with murderous effect against the columns of Soviet troops heading toward the front.

Moreover, organizing a counteroffensive of such magnitude was easier said than done; of the 20 mechanized corps already in existence or undergoing formation in the five western military districts, only a handful could be considered combat-ready and up to authorized strength. Almost all of the corps suffered from serious equipment shortages and an unwieldy and untried organizational structure. Most of these corps were deployed at a remove of 30 to 40 kilometers from the border, with the corps's individual divisions fur-

ther separated from each other by a distance of 50 to 100 kilometers.¹⁶ The three *fronts* all maintained a second operational echelon composed of combined-arms units and mechanized corps in various stages of formation, and generally located far behind the front. These and the other mechanized corps slated to take part in the counteroffensive would have to make a long and difficult march to their assembly areas. Moreover, this movement would be carried out in daylight over open country, under constant attack by German aircraft, which had quickly achieved superiority over the battlefield.

The Northwestern Front's counterblow was launched the next day by parts of two mechanized corps south of Siauliai. However, this effort was under strength and uncoordinated and achieved little. This failure rendered the entire effort stillborn and doomed the Western Front's counterblow from the start. Here the German advance, spearheaded by two *panzer* groups, had landed the hardest, which quickly led to a breakdown in the *front's* system of command and control at all levels. Nevertheless, the *front* command gamely strove to carry out Stalin's orders. However, one of the corps was already tied down in the defensive fighting, while the other would have to move a considerable distance to its jumping-off point for the attack. As a result, the attack failed to make any significant progress and succeeded only in slowing the invader in a few places. Soviet equipment losses in both attacks were extremely heavy, due to German air attacks, while many tanks and wheeled vehicles had to be abandoned when they ran out of fuel.

The projected counterblow south of the Pripiat Marshes promised greater success, at least on paper. Here the German surprise had been less complete and the Southwestern Front initially enjoyed a considerable advantage over the invader, which reflected another of Stalin's other erroneous beliefs that the main German effort would be made against Soviet forces in Ukraine. Here the Soviets had amassed 907,046 men, 14,756 guns and mortars, and 5,465 tanks and self-propelled guns, of which 4,788 were combat ready.¹⁷ Even the latter figure was more than the Germans were able to deploy for the entire invasion. Stalin obviously placed great hopes on this effort and dispatched the aggressive Zhukov to the scene as a high command representative to assist the *front* commander in carrying out the attack. The choice of Zhukov is significant, as he had been one of the driving forces behind the May proposal for a preemptive attack. By dispatching his chief of the General Staff to the Southwestern Front, it would appear that Stalin now wished to carry out a modified version of that plan in the form of a major counteroffensive.

From June 23 to 25 the Soviets were only able to commit into the battle the forward units of two mechanized corps along either flank of the German penetration, where they could do little to slow the enemy. Poor communications and the *front* and army commanders' misreading of the situation led to two other mechanized corps being marched to and fro along the front to no purpose but to wear out personnel and machines. Many tanks were abandoned during these wanderings due to mechanical breakdowns and lack of fuel. It was only on June 26 that all five mechanized corps — two in the south and three in the north — were able to launch anything resembling a simultaneous attack. At one point up to 2,000 tanks on both sides were engaged along a 70-kilometer sector of the front, in what was easily the largest armored battle up to that time.¹⁸ The Soviets resumed their attempts the following day, but were able to do little more than slow down the German advance. By June 30 even the *Stavka* admitted defeat and ordered the *front* to cease its attacks and withdraw to the pre-1939 frontier.¹⁹

The Red Army's next opportunity to conduct a *front*-level meeting engagement at the start of a war came during the brief Soviet-Japanese conflict of August and September,

1945. This time the Soviets enjoyed the advantage of surprise by attacking with a fully deployed force along a front that stretched more than 5,000 kilometers along the border of Japanese-occupied Manchuria. Soviet forces taking part in the offensive were organized into the Trans-Baikal Front (four combined-arms armies and a tank army), the First Far Eastern (four combined-arms armies), and the Second Far Eastern (three combined-arms armies) fronts. Each *front* disposed of its own air army, while other forces included a large number of artillery divisions, brigades, and regiments, as well as numerous tank and mechanized brigades, and tank and self-propelled gun regiments, as well as numerous other supporting units.²⁰ Other formations included the Pacific Fleet, the Amur Flotilla, and a small contingent of troops from the Soviets' Mongolian satellite. Soviet forces at the start of the operation numbered 1,577,725 men, 23,759 guns and mortars, 1,171 mobile rocket launchers ("Katiusha"), 5,556 tanks and self-propelled guns, and 5,336 aircraft of all types.²¹ This gave the Soviets a healthy superiority over their enemy, particularly in the quality of their equipment.

The Soviet plan called for the main blow to be delivered by the Trans-Baikal Front, the greater part of which was to attack to the southeast out of its Mongolian salient. Three combined-arms armies and the 6th Guards Tank Army constituted the *front's* first echelon, with another army in the second echelon along the main axis of advance. This attack was to push aside the weak Japanese forces along the border and cross the Great Khingan Range and debouch into the Manchurian plain before the main enemy body could organize a defense along the mountains line. A Soviet-Mongolian cavalry-mechanized group would secure the advance's southern flank. The First Far Eastern Front would attack with its four combined-arms armies in the first echelon in order to break through the Japanese fortified positions north of Vladivostok, according to a scenario more reminiscent of the army's practice in Europe. The *front's* success development echelon (a mechanized corps) would then be committed into the breach for the exploitation into the operational depth and the anticipated linkup with the Trans-Baikal Front in the Changchun area, thus splitting the Japanese forces in Manchuria into two. The Second Far Eastern Front had a strictly supporting role in the campaign and would advance south and west in support of its neighbors.

The positioning of the 6th Guards Tank Army in the Trans-Baikal Front's first echelon clearly hearkened back to Isserson's recommendations of a decade earlier for conducting a *front*-level meeting engagement. This represented a sharp break with the Red Army's accepted practice, perfected in the major offensive operations of 1943 to 1945, of echeloning one or more tank armies behind the combined-arms armies, to be committed into the breakthrough for the subsequent exploitation. The emplacement of the tank army in the *front's* first echelon was an organizational recognition of the fact that there were almost no frontier fortifications or large enemy units along this sector of the frontier. In this case, organizing a breakthrough along traditional lines would be superfluous and time-consuming.

Given the enormous distances to be overcome, the tank army was specially reconfigured to increase its staying power and ability to operate independently in depth. The tank army consisted of two mechanized and one tank corps, exactly the opposite of the ratio that obtained throughout most of the war in Europe. This increased the proportion of infantry in the army, which was further augmented by the inclusion of two motorized rifle divisions. Other additions to the army yielded an overall strength of 1,019 tanks and self-propelled guns, 950 guns and mortars, and some 950 motorcycles.²²

The Soviet attack began in the early hours of August 9 with air strikes in the Japanese rear, which singled out airfields, rail centers, and troop columns. Soviet forward units on

the ground were equally successful in pushing aside the thin screen of Japanese covering forces. The Trans-Baikal Front's progress was particularly rapid, as the Japanese command had not expected a Soviet attack in this area, given the inherent supply problems for units operating so far from any railhead. Success was greatest along the axis of the tank army's advance, and by the end of the day its forward units had reached the foothills of the Great Khingan range. Along the southern flank the cavalry-mechanized group made good progress through the Gobi Desert, while in the north the attackers began breaking through the Japanese defenses around Hailar. The First Far Eastern Front was slowed at first by heavy rains and the swampy, forested terrain. Nevertheless, the Soviets were able to make respectable progress against the enemy fortifications along the border, and on August 12 the mechanized corps was committed into the breach.

The next few days saw more of the same. The Japanese command, beset on three sides, soon lost control of the situation and never succeeded in organizing any effective resistance. This was particularly the case in the west, where the Trans-Baikal Front quickly cleared the mountain range and by mid-August the tank army had already covered two-thirds of the distance to Changchun. During the next few days the advance continued nearly unabated. In several cases a Soviet airborne landing preceded the capture of a major city, as at Harbin, Changchun, and Shenyang (Mukden). As early as August 18 the Japanese command agreed to capitulate. Its control over its scattered forces had been so disrupted by the Soviet advance, however, that many units continued to hold out. This gave the Soviets the excuse they needed to continue the offensive and advance as far as Port Arthur and the northern half of the Korean peninsula.

The meeting engagements along the western frontier in 1941 showed the Red Army at its worst. The surprise attack prevented the commanders from reacting to the crisis in any but an elemental way, and the positive aspects of the army's prewar theory in this area went for naught, and for reasons which had very little to do with the theory's utility. Four years later many of these problems had been overcome and the USSR entered the war with Japan with a tested command cadre whose equipment and experience was ideally suited to carry out the deep operation as a meeting engagement not only at the operational level, but also in pursuit of strategic goals.

The Offensive Operation

However, for all of his strategic prescience, it is as an exponent of the deep operation that Isserson is best remembered. However, the practical implementation of his views during the war was by no means easy or unqualified success, and the theory faced an exceedingly difficult journey before it could be fully realized toward the end of the conflict. This was due, in part, to some of the theory's inherent defects, and even more so to the shortcomings of those who were called upon to carry it out. Nor did the theory stand still, but rather evolved continuously throughout the war in accordance with the Red Army's growing capabilities and experience. This evolution can best be traced by examining the conduct of a number of wartime army and *front* operations. These are the breakthrough operation against an organized enemy defense and its subsequent exploitation in depth, and the defensive operation.

The Red Army's torturous path to the successful conduct of the deep operation was made all the harder by its shattering defeats at the beginning of the war. The force of the

initial German blow was so great that it swept away nearly everything in its path, including the new mechanized corps, which Isserson considered the linchpin of the deep offensive operation. The Soviet tank park's enormous losses during these early battles quickly led to the decision to disband the mechanized corps and to replace them with tank divisions, while most of the corps's motorized divisions were downgraded to regular rifle divisions. Even this organizational structure proved impossible to sustain, however, and nearly all the tank divisions were soon scrapped as well, to be replaced by tank brigades and battalions. Thus by the war's third month the organizational means for carrying out the deep operation no longer existed.

By the beginning of 1942 Soviet industry had recovered sufficiently to begin supplying the army with a growing number of tanks and other armored vehicles. This enabled the high command to return to the idea of creating large armored formations. In April the first tank four tank corps were created, which generally consisted of two tank brigades and a motorized rifle brigade, as well as smaller supporting units, although that same month another tank brigade was added. In all, 28 tank corps were created that year.²³ In 1942 a tank corps at authorized strength numbered 7,800 men and 168 tanks, and 30 guns and mortars although this tended to change considerably over the years. By 1945, for example, a tank corps at full strength numbered 11,788 men and 270 tanks, of which the great majority were medium T-34s, 42 self-propelled guns, and 174 guns and mortars.²⁴

Shortly afterwards the Soviets deployed their first tank armies, of which they would eventually have six. These early formations were not uniform in size, and the composition of each was individually determined by the high command according to immediate needs. As a rule, each tank army at this time included two tank corps, one or two rifle divisions, and any number of smaller support units, but was actually smaller in the number of authorized vehicles than the old mechanized corps.²⁵ Nevertheless, the composition of the tank army clearly marks it as a prime component in the deep offensive operations the Red Army hoped to carry out. Unfortunately for the Red Army, the quantitative and qualitative growth of its tank park was not matched at first by a corresponding increase in the commanders' skill in conducting operations. This was most vividly demonstrated during the summer's fighting during the Soviet counterblow near Voronezh in early July and west of Stalingrad a few weeks later. In both cases the tank armies could do little more than delay the German advance.

In September the first new mechanized corps appeared which contained a higher percentage of motorized infantry than did the tank corps. These generally consisted of three mechanized brigade and a tank brigade, or several tank regiments, as well as smaller units. By the end of the year six of these had been created.²⁶ In 1942 a mechanized corps at full strength numbered 13,559 men and 175 tanks, nearly evenly divided between medium and light vehicles. By 1945 a mechanized corps at authorized strength numbered 16,318 men, 183 medium tanks, 63 self-propelled guns, and 234 guns and mortars.²⁷ During this time tank brigades continued to be formed, while the tank battalions were gradually expanded to regiments. These would be used heavily in future offensive operations as infantry-support units.

Other important organizational innovations also appeared that year. In March of 1942 the Soviet bomber park was removed from direct Air Force control and reorganized into long-range aviation (ADD) and subordinated directly to the *Stavka*. By summer ADD counted seven bomber divisions and other units.²⁸ In May the first air armies were created, each subordinated to a *front*. It was initially calculated that each air army would number

some 200 to 300 aircraft.²⁹ Actual air strengths during this early period often fell below authorized strength, although this was more than made up as the war continued. Despite the initial teething pains associated with the reorganization, this proved to be a positive step which helped greatly to reduce the previous chaos in which scarce air assets were often frittered away by distributing them among the *front* and its individual armies. The more centralized organization enabled the *front* commander to better concentrate his air power for specific purposes.

Another innovation was the organization of the first artillery divisions in the fall of 1942. These units, each consisting of two regiments of gun artillery, three of howitzers, and three anti-tank regiments, had an authorized strength of 168 weapons.³⁰ These units formed part of the high command artillery reserve and were dispatched to critical areas of the front for critical offensive or defensive missions.

These various strands finally came together at Stalingrad, which was the furthest point of the German army's advance along the southeastern strategic direction during the summer-fall campaign of 1942. The latter's progress was more apparent than real, however, as the German troops quickly became bogged down in an enervating fight for the city, which drained scarce resources from other sectors of the front. As winter approached the attackers found themselves dangerously crowded into an extremely narrow salient along the Volga. Equally ominous, the salient's flanks were held by Romanian and Italian forces, whose equipment, training and general élan was much inferior to that of their senior Axis partner. Moreover, the defenses they constructed in this area were quite shallow, with few reserves to back them up.

The Soviets sought to take advantage of this favorable situation to launch powerful converging attacks on either side of the salient in order to encircle the sizable enemy forces in and around Stalingrad. This involved a simultaneous offensive by three *fronts*—Southwestern, Don, and Stalingrad, which together counted ten combined-arms armies, a tank army, and an air army each, plus another one on loan for the duration from the neighboring Voronezh Front. This force also included a number of independent tank, mechanized, and cavalry corps, which were distributed among the combined-arms armies operating along the main axis of attack. Smaller units included numerous independent rifle and tank brigades, plus a large number of attached artillery, anti-tank, mortar, rocket artillery, and anti-aircraft regiments.³¹ In all, Soviet forces in the area numbered 1,015,299 men, 6,582 artillery pieces, 11,546 mortars, and 1,560 tanks, of which slightly less than two-thirds were medium or heavy models.³² The *fronts'* air strength included 1,916 planes, of which only two-thirds were combat ready. The latter figure included nearly equal numbers of fighters, bombers, and assault aircraft.³³

The lion's share of these forces was concentrated with the Southwestern and Stalingrad fronts, which carried the operation's main offensive burden along the flanks. This was particularly true of the armored forces, which constituted the core of the two *fronts'* success development echelons.³⁴ Along the Southwestern Front's sector two separate shock groups (5th Tank and 21st armies) were to attack out of their bridgeheads south of the Don River. Following the breakthrough, their mobile groups would advance to the south and southeast in the rear of the German forces around Stalingrad. There they would link up with the Stalingrad Front's shock groups (57th and 51st armies), which would advance to the northwest from the area immediately south of the city. Two of the Don Front's armies were to organize breakthroughs along their sectors, although, the *front's* role was very much a supporting one.

Those armies that bore the brunt of the offensive burden were organized into two echelons, just as Isserson had advised. Their first echelons contained mostly rifle divisions, supplemented by independent tank brigades and regiments for direct infantry support during the fight for the enemy's tactical defense zone. The armies' second echelons contained the mobile formations (cavalry, tank, and mechanized corps) for commitment into the breach for the exploitation drive into the operational depth, as well as a handful of rifle divisions and brigades. For example, the 5th Tank Army's breakthrough development echelon contained a cavalry corps and two tank corps, while that of the neighboring 21st Army contained a cavalry corps and a tank corps. The Don Front's 24th Army also had in its second echelon a tank corps. The Stalingrad Front's 57th Army had a single tank corps in its second echelon, while the 51st Army's second echelon contained a cavalry corps and a mechanized corps.³⁵ The only exceptions to this deployment were the Southwestern Front's 1st Guards Army along the outer flank of the projected advance, and the Stalingrad Front's 62nd Army, which was defending a narrow strip of land in Stalingrad proper. Both armies held all their troops in the first echelon, with only a small reserve.³⁶

What is most striking to those familiar with later Soviet wartime practice is the lack of a *front* second echelon for a deeper exploitation drive. In this case, the *fronts'* entire force (the subordinate armies) was held in its first echelon, with only the Southwestern Front maintaining a reserve (a mechanized corps and two tank regiments) of any significant size.³⁷ The Red Army as yet lacked both the resources and skill to employ a *front* second echelon for the operational-strategic exploitation of a breakthrough, although both of these shortcomings would be made up before too long.

The counteroffensive by the Southwestern and Don fronts opened with a massive artillery barrage, although a thick fog grounded the scheduled air attack. The rifle divisions, backed by infantry-support tanks, then moved forward to assault the defender's first position. Progress along the Southwestern Front's breakthrough zone was respectable, but the rifle divisions proved incapable of piercing the enemy's tactical defense on their own. Sensing that the critical moment had arrived, the *front* commander ordered the commitment of the tank corps into the battle to complete the rupture of the tactical defense. By the end of the day 5th Tank Army's two tank corps had advanced 18 to 20 kilometers and were now poised to exploit the breakthrough in depth.³⁸ The army's cavalry corps followed in their wake and quickly moved to secure the advance's outer flank. The following day the *front* completed the tactical encirclement of those Romanian forces still at the front, although elsewhere its lead elements were slowed somewhat by the meager Axis reserves in the area. These were soon pushed aside as the tank corps continued to race into the enemy rear. On November 22 the mobile group's forward elements reached the Don, well in the rear of the German forces around Stalingrad. The Don Front's shock group did less well, but was soon able to take advantage of the breakthrough along its right flank. Its mobile group, however, could make no progress against German forces in the Don bend and these were later able to withdraw safely into Stalingrad.

The Stalingrad Front's offensive jumped off on November 20 with an artillery bombardment, although here too poor weather kept air support to a minimum. Here the combined-arms armies' rifle divisions made greater progress against weak enemy resistance and their mobile groups were committed early on, advancing by as much as 16 to 17 kilometers on the first day.³⁹ Here too a single cavalry corps was committed to shore up the advance's extended outer flank. The *front's* forces continued the advance the following day, meeting serious opposition only along the southern approaches to Stalingrad. On November 22 the

front's mobile units reached the Don, and the following day linked up with the Southwestern Front's lead elements, thus cutting off sizable enemy units in the city.

The Soviets were later pleasantly surprised to learn that they had trapped more than 300,000 Axis troops in the Stalingrad pocket, instead of the 85,000 to 90,000 they had previously estimated.⁴⁰ While this was a major strategic achievement with enormous consequences for the war in the East, it nevertheless presented significant operational problems for those Soviet forces in the area. For one thing, the Axis forces inside Stalingrad outnumbered the forces of the Don Front around them, and more than two months would pass before the pocket could be reduced. Moreover, Soviet forces holding the outer encirclement ring would have to contend with the enemy's inevitable relief attempt, which was launched in the middle of December. This attempt was halted two weeks later, although it delayed the final assault on Stalingrad by almost a month. A major factor in the relief attempt's failure was the launching of the Southwestern Front's new offensive operation along the middle Don on December 16, which a German officer later characterized as an example of "strategic insight of a high order."⁴¹ This attack destroyed the Italian forces in the area and was soon threatening the rear of the relief column, which had to withdraw rapidly in order to avoid being surrounded in its turn.

The campaign which followed, however successful, revealed a number of shortcomings in the tank armies' organization. Most critically, the number of rifle divisions within these units tended to slow down the mobile forces as they sought to exploit the breakthrough in the enemy rear. In January 1943 the high command ordered the creation of a new kind of tank army, consisting of two tank corps and a mechanized corps, plus supporting units, for an authorized strength of 46,000 men and some 650 tanks.⁴² This organizational scheme was not always adhered to and some tank armies had at times only two corps, while others had more. By the end of the war the strength of a tank army was generally somewhat more than 50,000 men, 850 to 920 tanks and self-propelled guns, around 800 guns and mortars, and more than 5,000 automobiles, although the armies were frequently at less than authorized strength.⁴³ Whatever the teething problems, however, the new organization proved to be a significant improvement over the previous one and went far toward providing the Red Army with a powerful operational-strategic exploitation tool.

In the spring of 1943 the artillery divisions were reorganized to include six brigades apiece, for a total of 356 guns and mortars. This was accompanied by the formation of the first multiple rocket launcher divisions ("Katiusha"). Two of the new artillery divisions and a multiple rocket launcher division were combined to form an artillery breakthrough corps, which had an authorized strength of 496 guns, 216 mortars, and 864 multiple rocket launchers. By the end of the year the high command artillery reserve disposed of six artillery corps, 26 artillery divisions, and seven divisions of multiple rocket launchers.⁴⁴ These units could be moved from one area of the front to the other, as the situation demanded. This enabled the Soviets to create crushing artillery densities along projected breakthrough zones and these units quickly came to play a major part in suppressing the enemy defense in offensive operations.

The extended fighting in the area of the Kursk salient in July and August 1943 gave the Soviet command the opportunity to demonstrate how well it had absorbed the lessons of the recent winter campaign. The first great test involved an enormous offensive against the German salient around Orel, which had to be eliminated before the Red Army could carry out its projected multi-*front* advance to the Dnepr. This took place even as Soviet

forces to the south were still deeply engaged in a life-or-death defensive struggle in the Belgorod area (see next section).

Soviet forces deployed for the offensive included the Central (five combined-arms armies and a tank army), Bryansk (three combined-arms armies) and two of the Western Front's combined-arms armies. Each *front* had its own air army, as well as a large number of attached units. These included seven independent tank corps, four artillery corps, and three multiple rocket launcher, and 11 anti-aircraft divisions. Other attachments included eight tank and four anti-tank brigades, as well as numerous independent tank, self-propelled artillery, mortar, anti-tank, rocket-propelled artillery, and anti-aircraft regiments.⁴⁵ Overall, Soviet forces in the area at the start of the operation numbered 1,286,049 men, and 11,429 artillery pieces, of which a third were anti-tank weapons. Other weapons included 10,646 mortars, 2,668 tanks, and 225 self-propelled guns.⁴⁶ The *fronts'* combined air strength included 3,023 planes, of which slightly more than a third were fighters, with the remainder divided nearly equally into assault aircraft and bombers.⁴⁷

The Soviet plan for the operation (code name "Kutuzov") called for the simultaneous launching of a series of blows by all three *fronts* along the perimeter of the Orel salient, with the aim of splitting the German defense at several points and defeating the enemy in detail. The Western Front would first attack to the southeast, where in conjunction with a supporting effort by the Bryansk Front, it would surround and destroy the enemy in the Bolkhov area. The *front's* armies would then resume their advance due south, deep in the rear of the German forces around Orel. The Bryansk Front would make its main effort against the apex of the salient, with the objective of capturing Orel. The Central Front's objective was more problematic, as it still had to contend with the anticipated German offensive out of the salient southward toward Kursk. It was expected, however, that the *front* would launch its counteroffensive to the southwest of Orel, in order to further isolate the garrison in that city.

The most striking feature of the Soviet plan was its failure to designate the encirclement of the German forces inside the salient as its objective, despite the very favorable geographical conditions for doing so. The Central Front commander later complained "it would have been simpler and more sure to launch two powerful main blows from the north and south toward Bryansk at the base of the Orel salient." However, he added, that would have meant delaying the offensive so that the Western and Central fronts could carry out the necessary regrouping of forces.⁴⁸ Time, however, was the one thing Stalin was not willing to grant. Zhukov later recalled that he and Vasilevskii, the chief of the General Staff, had raised the possibility of eliminating the salient through a converging attack, but Stalin rejected the idea. "Our task is to drive the Germans from our territory more quickly," he explained, adding that the time for carrying out encirclement operations would come, once the enemy was sufficiently weakened.⁴⁹ The dictator's hesitation on this score may well reflect his lingering resentment over the slow pace of the Stalingrad pocket's elimination, or perhaps a deeper-seated uncertainty as to the Red Army's ability to carry out such an ambitious assignment. Whatever the reason, it was a decision that Isserson would certainly have vigorously opposed.

The armies in all three *fronts* were organized into two echelons, although only those armies attacking along the Western Front's sector had a reserve, and these were very small. The armies' first echelons consisted mostly of rifle units, reinforced with a tank brigade in those areas where a breakthrough was planned. Those armies (11th Guards, 61st, 63rd, and 70th) assigned a breakthrough role disposed of powerful second echelons consisting of from

one to four rifle divisions and a tank corps each. The critical 11th Guards Army, in fact, disposed of two such corps for its mobile group. The Western Front's second echelon contained a tank corps, but no reserve, while the Bryansk Front kept only a rifle corps in reserve. The 2nd Tank Army constituted the Central Front's second echelon, just as it had occupied the same position during the defensive fighting along the northern half of the Kursk salient. This was the first instance of the employment of a *front* second echelon in an offensive operation during the war. The *front* also maintained a single tank corps in reserve.⁵⁰

The offensive began with a reconnaissance in force by the Western and Bryansk fronts on the morning of July 11, followed by the main attack the next day. Success was immediate along the Western Front's sector, where the 11th Guards Army managed to break through the enemy's second defensive position in some areas by the end of the first day. The army commander committed a tank corps into the breach that afternoon, followed by another a day later, by which time the tanks had penetrated as deep as 25 kilometers.⁵¹ The *front* command reacted to this opportunity by committing its second-echelon tank corps a few days later, and by the end of the first week Soviet forces in the area had driven a deep wedge in the enemy position, well in the rear of the German forces around Orel. Matters developed less favorably to the east, where the Bryansk Front's supporting attack toward Bolkhov failed to make much headway, despite the commitment of the 61st Army's tank corps into the fighting. The *front's* efforts fared little better east of Orel, where the commitment of another tank corps failed to make much headway against the layered German defense. On July 15 the Central Front had joined in the attack as well, but this effort immediately ran into trouble in trying to break through the densely arrayed German forces, which had so recently been attacking and were still deployed for battle. The *front* command sought to speed up the pace of the advance by committing the 2nd Tank Army before the tactical defense had been pierced. This effort failed to make much progress, however, and the Soviets suffered heavy losses.

By the end of the first week, despite considerable success along the Western Front's sector, the Soviet offensive was in danger of stalling out. The *Stavka* reacted on July 18 by reinforcing the Western Front with the 4th Tank Army and a cavalry corps, in addition to a combined-arms army committed a few days earlier. At the same time it sought to increase the force of the attack toward Orel by committing the 3rd Guards Tank Army into the fighting along that sector. However, all of these formations were initially located at some remove from the battlefield. As a result, they were slow in arriving and failed to exert a decisive influence on events. In fact, German counterattacks against the Western Front's penetration even forced the Soviets to pull back in places, while the Bryansk and Central fronts' progress continued to be painfully slow.

The sheer size of the Soviet effort gradually began to tell, and in late July the Germans decided to withdraw to a shorter and more defensible line immediately to the east of Bryansk. This was to be a fighting withdrawal, however, and the defenders were determined to exact the maximum price in men and equipment. Thus the remaining three weeks of the operation degenerated into a vicious, grinding struggle against successive defensive belts, which was a far cry from the sweeping sort of penetration envisaged by Isserson years before. On July 29, for example, Bolkhov was finally captured, followed the next day by Mtsensk. A week later Orel fell, as the Germans slowly withdrew from the salient. By August 18 the Germans were ensconced in their new defensive positions, effectively ending the operation.

Although outwardly successful, the Orel operation had been a hard slog, chiefly due to Soviet mistakes in planning and execution. During the course of 38 days of heavy fight-

ing the Red Army advanced only about 150 kilometers, while failing to cut off any sizable German forces, despite the very favorable conditions for doing so. Moreover, the cost had been extremely heavy, with the three *fronts* suffering 429,890 casualties, of which 112,529 were killed. Losses among the armored forces were particularly heavy, reaching a staggering 2,586 tanks and self-propelled guns.⁵²

Following the Battle of Kursk the Red Army began a series of large-scale offensives along the southern two-thirds of the Soviet-German front. Progress was particularly swift in Ukraine, where by year's end the Soviets had closed to the Dnepr along its lower course, and in some areas had established operationally significant bridgeheads along its western bank. The winter-spring campaign of 1944 saw the Red Army advance even further in this area, so that by mid-April the Soviets had reconquered practically all of Ukraine and were poised to carry the war into Poland and the Balkans. The advance also created an enormous salient in Belorussia, which threatened the flank of any further advance north of the Carpathians. Eliminating the salient would not only restore movement in this area, but fatally undermine the German position in the Baltic as well. Even more to the point, a victory here would open the most direct path to the enemy heartland. For these reasons the Belorussian operation was easily the centerpiece of the Red Army's summer-fall campaign, and therefore deserving of closer examination as to the state of the army's skill in conducting offensive operations.

This enormous undertaking encompassed four separate *fronts*: First Baltic (three combined-arms armies), Third Belorussian (four combined-arms armies, a tank army, and a cavalry-mechanized group), Second Belorussian (three combined-arms armies), and the right-flank armies of the First Belorussian Front (four combined-arms armies and a cavalry-mechanized group). This force also included a number of independent tank and mechanized corps, tank, mechanized, and self-propelled artillery brigades, and a large number of tank and self-propelled artillery regiments. Other units included artillery and anti-aircraft divisions, and numerous artillery brigades and regiments, as well as mortar brigades and regiments.⁵³ By the start of the offensive the Soviet forces in the area numbered 1,254,300 men, of which nearly two-thirds were concentrated with the Third Belorussian Front and that part of the First Belorussian Front north of the Pripiat' River. Other forces included 26,307 guns and mortars, 2,306 rocket launchers, 4,070 tanks and self-propelled guns, and 5,327 aircraft from the *fronts*' air armies, and another 1,007 bombers from long-range aviation. The lion's share of these weapons was concentrated with the Third and First Belorussian fronts.⁵⁴

The fundamentals principles of the Isserson-style deep operation were clearly visible in the organization of the Soviet forces for the breakthrough and subsequent exploitation. These were first and foremost the deep echelonment of efforts and the commitment of the army/*front* mobile group into the operational and strategic depth. Several of the *fronts*' combined-arms armies were deployed in two echelons. This was particularly true of those armies along whose sectors it was planned to commit a mobile group. These included the Third Belorussian Front's 11th Guards Army, and the First Belorussian Front's 3rd, 65th, and 8th Guards armies, all of which disposed of a single tank corps as their breakthrough development echelon. The First Baltic and Second Belorussian fronts were deployed in a single echelon, with the former maintaining a tank corps as its mobile group. The Third Belorussian Front disposed of a powerful second echelon (5th Guards Tank Army and a cavalry-mechanized group), while the First Belorussian Front had a cavalry-mechanized group in its second echelon.⁵⁵

The Soviet plan called for the First Baltic Front to break through the German defenses north of Vitebsk, after which its mobile group would be committed for the exploitation drive west. The Third Belorussian Front was to organize a breakthrough south of the city in order to link up with its neighbor and isolate the garrison. The *front's* cavalry-mechanized group would also be committed along this axis. The *front* would organize another breakthrough toward Orsha, followed by the commitment of a tank corps on the first day. Three days later it was planned to commit the 5th Guards Tank Army along this same axis in the general direction of Borisov.⁵⁶ The First Belorussian Front's armies would organize breakthroughs east and south of Bobruisk, followed by the commitment of their mobile groups for a concentric advance on the town. They were then to advance north for a junction with the Third Belorussian Front's mobile groups in the Minsk area. The First Belorussian Front's cavalry-mechanized group would be committed along its own sector further south, to secure the left flank by driving on Slutsk and Baranovichi. The Second Belorussian Front was, in effect, the "pinning" *front*, between the two "shock" *fronts*, charged with the mission of fixing the German forces along its front by attacking towards Mogilev.

On the morning of June 23, following a short artillery bombardment, the First Baltic Front's combined-arms armies moved into the attack. By the end of the first day progress was sufficiently good north of Vitebsk that the *front's* mobile group was committed into the breach. However, the poor state of the roads and the commanders' own mistakes delayed its crossing of the Western Dvina until the 25th. Once across the river, the tank corps began to drive to the northwest along its southern bank. The Third Belorussian Front, meanwhile, quickly punched a hole in the enemy line south of Vitebsk, through which the *front's* forces advanced to link up with the First Baltic Front's units west of Vitebsk two days later, isolating the garrison. The cavalry-mechanized group was committed on June 24 and by the morning of June 28 its forward units had advanced as far as the Berezina River, where they secured a crossing. Progress was much slower along the *front's* other projected breakthrough area north of Orsha, where the Soviets could not at first penetrate the enemy's tactical defense. As a result, the decision was made to commit 5th Guards Tank Army behind the cavalry-mechanized group on June 26. Two days later it reached the Berezina near Borisov. During the next few days the Soviets pushed across the river in strength and on July 3 they captured Minsk.

The offensive by the First Belorussian Front's right-flank armies began on June 24. The *front's* northern shock group found the going difficult in the swampy terrain, and its mobile group could not be committed until the early hours of June 26. The corps seized a crossing over the Berezina, north of Bobruisk, on the same day. The southern shock group had an easier time of it and was able to commit its tank corps toward Bobruisk that same day. The *front's* cavalry-mechanized group was also committed and quickly moved north and west toward Slutsk, which fell on June 30. Meanwhile, the shock groups' tank corps linked up near Bobruisk on June 27, trapping a sizable German garrison around the town, which was soon forced to surrender. Other units continued north toward Minsk, where they linked up with the Third Belorussian Front on July 3, thus completing the encirclement of large German force east of the city. The Soviets claimed this group numbered 105,000 men. By July 8 most of these had been eliminated.⁵⁷

The success of the Belorussian operation's first stage tore an enormous gap in the German front, which the Soviets did not hesitate to exploit. The First Baltic Front was by now far out in front of the *fronts* to the north and had to be heavily reinforced to cover its lengthening flanks and had to be reinforced with two combined-arms armies, the 5th Guards Tank

Army, and a mechanized corps. The three Belorussian *fronts* continued to stream westward, and by mid-July they had captured Vil'nius and Grodno and were approaching the prewar border with East Prussia. On July 18 the First Belorussian Front's left-flank armies attacked from the Kovel' area and quickly crossed the Western Bug and into Poland. A further thrust secured them two vital bridgeheads across the Vistula by the end of the month.

At this point the *Stavka* intervened on July 28 to order the First Baltic Front to advance along two diverging axes — north toward Riga and west to Memel'. The Second and Third Belorussian fronts were ordered to enter East Prussia and to seize bridgeheads across the Narew River, while the First Belorussian Front was to cross the Vistula and prepare to advance on Lodz and Torun.⁵⁸ As it transpired, this was far too ambitious a series of objectives for the four *fronts*, which by now had been engaged in continuous fighting for over a month and were badly in need of rest and reinforcement. It now seems that the *Stavka* had become so giddy with success that it tried to accomplish too much with too little. In retrospect, it would have been better to have halted the Third Belorussian Front's advance short of the East Prussian frontier. Once refitted, the *front* could then have spearheaded a renewed offensive between Königsberg and Memel, thus cutting off sizable German forces in the Baltic. Moreover, by clearing at least part of the East Prussian defensive zone, the advance would have left the Red Army in a far better position for the start of the 1945 campaign.

The three operations examined here illustrate the degree to which the Red Army had mastered the art of organizing and conducting the deep operation at the strategic level. Stalingrad in many ways was the army's first "mature" attempt at conducting the deep operation and represented a vast improvement over previous efforts. Despite delays in eliminating the surrounded Axis forces, the actual breakthrough and exploitation in depth indicate just how far the Red Army had come and the direction in which it was heading. The Orel operation, however, revealed that progress in this area was by no means uniform, despite the experience of the winter campaign and a number of organizational improvements. The operation's unsatisfactory outcome showed that unimaginative planning and poor execution could undermine even the most determined offensive undertaking. The Belorussian operation, on the other hand, showed just how far the Red Army had progressed, as the participating *fronts* advanced some 500 kilometers in a little more than a month, while simultaneously eliminating a large enemy pocket in their rear. The Belorussian operation revealed as no previous effort had done, the possibilities inherent in the deep offensive operation, and would serve as an inspiration to future theorists well into the nuclear age.

The Defensive Operation

The Soviets had a number of opportunities, particularly during the war's early months, to demonstrate their ability to conduct a defensive operation at the army or *front* level. One of the better-documented instances took place in the fall of 1941 along the Moscow strategic direction, where the German command planned to launch one final offensive in order to capture the Soviet capital before the onset of winter. This meant breaking through the Soviet defensive front and encircling the defenders' forces between Smolensk and Moscow, followed by an advance to the capital and beyond. The Soviet forces opposite them were deployed along a 760-kilometer front, stretching from the headwaters of the Volga

River to northern Ukraine. The Soviet forces along this direction were organized from north to south into the Western (six armies), Reserve (six armies), and Bryansk (three armies) fronts.

The impression of Soviet strength in the area was more apparent than real, however. The *Stavka* had failed to use the Germans' decision to temporarily suspend offensive operations along this direction wisely, and had frittered away much of its strength in a series of incessant attacks during August and September. And although these attacks had certainly bloodied the enemy, they had left many Soviet units in the area badly under strength. As a result, the three *fronts* among them could muster at the beginning of October a mere 1,252,591 men. A minuscule force of 849 tanks, of which the great majority consisted of light models, backed these up. The defenders were also able to muster 5,637 artillery pieces and anti-aircraft guns, and 4,961 mortars.⁵⁹ Air strength included 936 planes, of which only 545 were fit for service. The great bulk of these forces were concentrated in the Western and Reserve fronts, leaving the Bryansk Front dangerously weak.⁶⁰

The paucity of resources compelled the Soviet *front* commanders to concentrate the lion's share of their forces within their armies' first echelons. This was particularly the case with the Bryansk Front, which was almost completely lacking in second-echelon forces, although it maintained a small reserve. The Reserve Front's armies maintained a small second echelon, but no reserves. The Western Front's armies disposed of a small second-echelon force, backed by a sizable reserve.⁶¹ This was a clear violation of Isserson's prescriptions, which mandated a deeply echeloned operational defense, backed by mobile forces for a counteroffensive, to withstand the enemy's deeply echeloned offensive formation. To be sure, the *front* commanders tried to achieve this with the little they had by deploying their mobile forces (a handful of motorized rifle and tank divisions, and several tank brigades and independent tank battalions) in the armies' or *fronts*' second echelon to carry out counterattacks. In some cases these units were held in the first echelon in order to bolster the anti-tank defense.⁶²

The Soviets sought to alleviate this situation by the curious expedient of echeloning the bulk of the Reserve Front in depth *behind* the line. In this case, only two of the *front's* armies (13 divisions) were deployed forward between the Western and Bryansk fronts, while the remaining four (19½ divisions) constituted a separate defensive echelon behind the Western Front along a fishhook-shaped arc stretching from Selizharovo to Spas-Demensk.⁶³

In retrospect, this was a serious mistake. The creation of a *front* second echelon, while correct in principle, should only be attempted when it serves to strengthen the first echelon's powers of resistance. This was certainly not the case before Moscow, where the decision to create a separate echelon behind the Western Front needlessly drained already scarce resources from the Western and Bryansk fronts' first echelon, which was already seriously undermanned. Under the circumstances, these forces should have been fed into the first echelon, where they could have been put to better use in organizing a more resilient defense. Furthermore, the deployment of these forces so far in the rear rendered them helpless spectators to any breakthrough at the front, while at the same time leaving them open to defeat in detail during any subsequent enemy exploitation.

Army frontages varied considerably, depending on a given sector's relative importance. For example, the Western Front's 16th Army, which guarded the most direct approach to Moscow, occupied a 25-kilometer front with 4½ divisions, while the 22nd Army held an 85-kilometer front with six divisions. Army frontages within the Reserve Front were some-

what greater, with those of the second-echelon armies being especially broad. The widest frontages were in the Bryansk Front, which made this portion of the Soviet position particularly vulnerable.⁶⁴

Overall, this yielded a tactical density of one division per 9.1 kilometers of front along the Western Front and ten kilometers along the Reserve Front's two front-line first-echelon armies, and 9.1 kilometers along the Bryansk Front. Internally, these figures varied greatly among individual divisions according to the importance attached to a particular axis.⁶⁵ On paper this was not that far above accepted prewar norms ascribed to by Isserson. However, Soviet divisions in the area were severely under strength in both men and materiel. For example, the Soviets could deploy an average of only 7.6 guns and mortars per kilometer of front, with these densities being somewhat higher along the Western and Reserve fronts. The density of tanks here was also pitifully small — slightly less than one vehicle per kilometer.⁶⁶ As a rule, a rifle division's defensive formation consisted of three regiments in the first echelon, backed up by a battalion in reserve. Small artillery and tanks units were often held in reserve to impart some measure of depth to the defense.⁶⁷

The German assault on the Bryansk Front jumped off on September 30, catching the Soviets completely by surprise. Here the German armored spearheads broke through the porous front and advanced 180 kilometers in just three days, a feat which Isserson certainly would have admired.⁶⁸ On October 3 German forces entered Orel and three days later Bryansk, trapping part of two armies south of the city. The pocket's elimination was left to the slower-moving infantry, while the main body continued the advance on Tula, which guarded the southern flank of the Moscow defenses. However, a Soviet armored counter-attack southwest of the city gave the Germans pause, and, in the words of the German commander, "the rapid advance on Tula which we had planned had therefore to be abandoned for the moment."⁶⁹ By the time the advance did resume, the dissolution of the primitive roads in the autumn rains had reduced movement to a crawl, and the line here stabilized short of the city.

Further north, progress was just as impressive, as the full force of two German armored groups slammed into the overextended Soviet front. On October 7 the tank groups linked up east of Viaz'ma, trapping parts of four Soviet armies, although some of these units were able to slip through the porous encirclement and escape to fight another day. Nevertheless, the Germans later claimed to have taken some 600,000 prisoners during this period, which temporarily denuded the Soviet front west of Moscow.⁷⁰ In all, the two tank groups advanced between 240 and 270 kilometers in just two weeks.⁷¹ On October 17 the Germans actually crossed the Volga at Kalinin (Tver'), and ten days later took Volokolamsk, along the direct route to Moscow. Here, the same problems that affected the southern part of the advance intervened, and the advance halted to await the arrival of colder weather.

By early 1943 the situation had changed substantially. As a result of the Red Army's winter counteroffensive the Germans had been thrown back all along the southwestern strategic direction, when the spring thaw temporarily brought the fighting to an end. The most notable feature of the newly stabilized front was the large Soviet salient around Kursk. The German command sought to regain the strategic initiative in the East by launching converging attacks along the salient's northern and southern flanks, and by destroying the Soviet forces there disrupt the Red Army's anticipated summer offensive. The Soviets soon learned of the German plans and elected to defend against the expected assault and, having bled the attackers, launch a massive counteroffensive. This decision was made despite the fact that the Red Army by 1943 had achieved a healthy superiority over the enemy in

all categories of military equipment, and may well reflect lingering doubts within the high command as to the army's offensive capabilities.

The Central Front, which contained five combined-arms armies, a tank army, and an air army, held the northern half of the Kursk salient. The *front* further disposed of two independent tank corps, three independent tank brigades, and an artillery corps, as well as numerous other independent divisions, brigades, and regiments of artillery, anti-aircraft weapons, tanks, mortars, and self-propelled guns.⁷² By the beginning of July 1943 the *front* numbered 711,575 men, 1,694 tanks, 91 self-propelled guns, 11,076 artillery pieces and mortars, including 2,144 anti-tank guns, and 1,034 aircraft.⁷³

The *front* command sought to augment this considerable force by echeloning these units in a deep and mutually supporting manner that Isserson would certainly have approved. For example, the combined-arms armies, which constituted the *front's* first echelon, were themselves organized into two echelons, in which the number of rifle divisions in the second was nearly equal to the number in the first. This indicates that both Soviet capabilities and thinking had improved considerably since October 1941. The only exception was the powerful 13th Army, which was deployed astride the expected axis of the German attack. This army had a third defensive echelon of five rifle divisions, plus a tank brigade in reserve. The *front's* second echelon consisted of the 2nd Tank Army and a tank brigade, positioned directly behind the 13th Army. A further two tank corps constituted the *front* reserve.⁷⁴

As this arrangement indicates, the *front's* considerable resources were not distributed evenly along its 306-kilometer area of responsibility, but were rather heavily concentrated along the expected axis of attack. It was here along a 40-kilometer sector, which constituted a mere 13 percent of the overall frontage, that the *front* command massed 34 percent of its rifle divisions, 46.6 percent of its artillery and mortars, and 70 percent of its tanks and self-propelled guns.⁷⁵

The Voronezh Front, which was responsible for holding the salient's southern half, while somewhat smaller than the Central Front, closely resembled its neighbor in organization. The *front* here also counted five combined-arms armies, a tank army, and an air army, the latter of which was by now an organic component of every Soviet *front*. The *front* also included two independent tank corps, six independent tank brigades, and a large number of independent divisions, brigades, and regiments of anti-aircraft weapons, tanks, mortars, and self-propelled guns.⁷⁶ The Voronezh Front numbered at the start of the operation 625,591 men, 1,662 tanks, 42 self-propelled guns, 8,718 artillery pieces and mortars, including 1,795 anti-tank guns, and 881 aircraft.⁷⁷

The same principle of deep echelonment was evident here too, and to an even greater degree. Four combined-arms armies made up the *front's* first echelon, each of which held a greater percentage of its rifle divisions in the first echelon than in the second, as opposed to the more equitable distribution along the Central Front. Only one of these armies, however, maintained an insignificant third echelon. All of the first-echelon armies maintained a reserve of one or two tank brigades. The *front's* second echelon was particularly formidable and included a combined-arms army and the 1st Tank Army, which doubtlessly reflected the conviction that the main German blow would be launched in the south. The *front* also disposed of a powerful reserve of two tank corps and a rifle corps.⁷⁸

As to where the blow would actually land was less clear, and this uncertainty led to a greater, and consequently more risky, dispersal of defensive effort. Here a full 114 kilometers of the 244-kilometer front was believed to be in danger of attack, or nearly half. It was

along this sector that the *front* command concentrated 63 percent of its rifle divisions, 66.2 percent of its artillery and mortars, and 77 percent of its tank force.⁷⁹

The organization of the two *fronts*' defensive positions is further evidence of this fixation with depth, which was so central to Isserson's outlook. For example, each army sector was divided into three consecutive defensive zones—first, second and rear, which extended back from the front line and girded the entire length of the salient. The first of these zones along both *fronts* was seeded with 434,667 anti-tank mines, with the second and rear zones containing 68,996.⁸⁰ This arrangement speaks volumes of the Soviet determination to exhaust and halt the German attack within the confines of the army defensive zone. Behind this system of entrenchments lay a *front* defensive sector, which also consisted of three separate defensive belts, the last of which actually lay outside of the salient. By the start of the operation the total length of these defensive positions had reached an incredible 2,590 kilometers.⁸¹

The *Stavka*, mindful of previous German offensive successes, was leaving nothing to chance this time and sought to further bolster the defense by the formation of a powerful strategic reserve. This was the Steppe Military District (from July 9, 1943, the Steppe Front), which was arrayed along a broad front to the east of the salient. At the start of the battle the military district included six combined-arms armies and a tank army, plus numerous independent tank, mechanized and cavalry corps, with some units located as far back as the Don River. This force numbered by early July 573,195 men, 1,513 tanks, 126 self-propelled guns, and 8,510 artillery pieces and mortars, including 1,852 anti-tank.⁸² Part of this force lay behind its own defensive position, while to the rear, along the Don, lay a final strategic defensive line to which Soviet forces might withdraw in case of a complete disaster. Defensive considerations here were secondary, however, and the Steppe Military District's forces, particularly the mobile ones, could just as easily be used for the expected counterstroke.

The fighting in the northern half of the salient began on the morning of July 5 with a short Soviet artillery preparation aimed at disrupting the impending attack. The German assault jumped off a few hours later along the most heavily fortified sector of the Soviet defensive front. Not surprisingly, the German attack along this axis quickly bogged down in the welter of anti-tank and other obstacles, and in most areas failed to penetrate to the 13th Army's second position. The Central Front command reacted quickly, perhaps too quickly, to the threat by ordering a counterattack, spearheaded by two tank corps, for the next day. This effort, however, while it pushed the enemy back a short distance, failed to restore the situation. Moreover, the tank corps's premature commitment left them weakened and unable to play a major role as the battle continued. Meanwhile, the Germans kept up the pressure at various points along the front, but nowhere could they achieve a decisive operational breakthrough. How the fighting along this direction might have developed further is impossible to say, for on July 12 the forces of two Soviet *fronts* launched a major offensive against the German salient around Orel. This threat to the rear of the German attack toward Kursk caused them to break off the attack, which thus ended in failure after only a week.

The fighting was much more a near thing along the southern face of the Kursk salient, where the Germans had massed the greater part of their forces. Here they succeeded in breaking through the Soviets' first defensive position at several points on either side of Belgorod by the end of July 5. The *front* command reacted by moving up 1st Tank Army, plus two tank corps from the *front* reserve, to take up position along the second army defensive posi-

tion. At the same time a rifle corps from the *front* reserve, and the combined-arms army from the second echelon, began moving toward the battlefield. The Germans encountered these forces the next day, which occasioned some of the fiercest fighting of the war, as both sides alternately attacked and counterattacked along the front. As a result, the attacker's progress over the next several days was extremely slow, amounting to no more than 35 kilometers in depth. Nevertheless, by July 12 the Germans were threatening to break through the army rear position in the Prokhorovka area. With the Voronezh Front's reserves fully committed, the *Stavka* ordered the Steppe Front's combined-arms army and the 5th Guards Tank Army to spearhead the counteroffensive along this axis.

Actually, the use of the term counteroffensive is somewhat misleading, as the Soviets had hardly ceased counterattacking since the offensive began, and their efforts only increased in intensity as the Germans pressed forward. This latest effort was a spirited, if clumsy one, which soon came to encompass the greater part of the front in this area. However, instead of striking at the flanks of the German breakthrough, as Isserson had recommended, the Soviets threw in the bulk of their armored forces against its apex, precisely where the attacker was strongest. This quickly degenerated into a grinding meeting engagement, which led to unnecessarily high losses, especially in armored vehicles. This, in turn, rendered the planned counteroffensive stillborn. The heavy Soviet armored losses here enraged Stalin, who had counted on using the 5th Guards Tank Army for an immediate counteroffensive on Khar'kov.⁸³ In any event, the failure of the German attack in the north rendered the one in the south superfluous, and by late July the Germans had withdrawn to their original position.

The Moscow and Kursk defensive operations reveal just how correct Isserson had been in stressing the need for a deeply echeloned defensive arrangement in order to contain and destroy the attacker's armored assault. At Moscow the Red Army's lack of technical resources to do this was matched by the commanders' inability to make the most of what little they had, which resulted in a German breakthrough and the loss of several hundred thousand men in the encirclement battles that followed. By Kursk the pendulum had swung in the opposite direction and Soviet capabilities and skill in organizing an operational defense at the *front* level were more evenly matched. The Soviet conduct of the counteroffensive here, however, certainly left much to be desired, and the responsible commanders failed to properly take advantage of the situation. As a result, the Germans were able to withdraw unmolesed and restore their front, which then had to be broken through along more traditional lines.

Conclusions

As the preceding section indicates, by no means were all of Isserson's predictions borne out by wartime events. Some fared better, others less so, while some were only partly realized. For example, he had written as early as 1932 that following a period of maneuver at the beginning of a future war, the onset of positional warfare against a major opponent was likely, if not inevitable.⁸⁴ This prediction, to a great extent was actually confirmed by the course of the Great Patriotic War.

At first it seemed otherwise, and the first six months of the war saw the Red Army fall back deep into Soviet territory under the Wehrmacht's unrelenting pressure. However, even during this, the war's most mobile phase, a solid defensive front was beginning to reassert

itself. The most notable example of this tendency was the German decision to halt offensive operations along the western strategic direction in August, as they found it impossible to sustain simultaneous offensive operations along the entire front. The decision to resume the offensive two months later was, in fact, a desperate gamble which brought the German army to the brink of disaster as the result of the Soviet counteroffensive. This effort, despite impressive territorial gains, also quickly petered out, and by the spring of 1942 a positional stalemate had ensued all along the front. Significantly, the German summer offensive was conducted along a single strategic direction — the southwestern, while remaining on the defensive along the remainder of the front. The Soviets, for their part, launched a number of unsuccessful offensives along the western and northwestern directions that summer. These failures only served to confirm that by the autumn the war in the East had essentially become a positional struggle.

The Red Army's Stalingrad offensive marked a decisive new phase in the war's development. This was quickly followed by a series of offensive operations along the Don River and the Northern Caucasus, which by the spring of 1943 had driven the Germans back to their positions of the previous year. However, it should be remembered that for all its spectacular achievements, the Soviet general offensive was confined almost exclusively to the southwestern and southern strategic directions. Moreover, the failure of the major Soviet offensive at Rzhev, and the success of the German counterstroke south of Khar'kov, proved that the defense had lost none of its resilience. The failure of the Germans' summer offensive at Kursk only served to drive the point home. The Soviet counteroffensive that followed soon came to encompass the front from Smolensk south to the Black Sea, while the areas north of this point remained unaffected.

Soviet strategy for the 1944 campaign was radically different. By this time the Red Army's superiority over the Germans was such that the high command could undertake a conscious "dosing" of offensive operations along the entire front. Beginning in January, the Soviets conducted major offensives, often multi-*front* operations, south of Leningrad, on the Ukrainian right bank, the Crimea, in Karelia, Belorussia, western Ukraine, Romania, the Baltic States, the Balkans, and the Far North. However, it should be borne in mind that for all their impressive territorial success, the bulk of these operations were conducted consecutively, with only a few occurring simultaneously, which meant that no more than two strategic directions were engaged at any one time. Moreover, despite their tremendous personnel and materiel losses during the campaign, the Germans had nevertheless reestablished a defensive front by the end of the year, and in the Budapest area were even organizing a major counteroffensive.

The 1945 campaign was in many ways a repetition of the preceding year's, although more focused in time and space. The campaign began with a massive multi-*front* offensive in January, which quickly rolled up the German front in Poland and East Prussia, although isolated pockets of enemy forces held out until the spring. In Hungary the Soviets defeated a German attempt to relieve Budapest, and in March resumed their offensive along this direction. This movement coincided with the renewal of the Soviet offensive along the Berlin and Prague axes, which brought the war in Europe to a close.

On the basis of this brief outline, it is clear that despite the large-scale ebb and flow of operations, the conflict in the East was in many ways a war of position, in which intense bursts of maneuver warfare alternated with extended periods of inactivity along the front. This was particularly true along such secondary strategic directions as the northern and northwestern, where in many areas the front remained unchanged for more than two years.

Even along the decisive directions maneuver was usually purchased at the cost of grinding breakthrough battles, some of them reminiscent of the worst fighting on the Western Front during World War I. Thus Isserson was undoubtedly correct in predicting periods of positional warfare, although he certainly erred in his estimate of just how extensive they might be and what it would take to overcome them.

From this it is obvious that only an extremely powerful instrument combining shock power, mobility, and the capable of operating in depth can overcome modern defensive arrangements, lest the front assume the positional stalemate of the previous war. Isserson's solution was the shock army, a powerful combined-arms force of some 350,000 men and nearly 1,500 tanks, plus large numbers of artillery, aircraft, and supporting units.⁸⁵ Six years later his views on the matter had not changed appreciably, although by now the shock army had been joined by the cavalry-mechanized group as a prime component of the *front* offensive operation.⁸⁶ As late as the eve of the war, Zhukov was advocating the creation of shock armies essentially along the lines put forward by Isserson years earlier, testimony to the concept's durability.⁸⁷ It was partly realized through the operational subordination of several of the new mechanized corps to the combined-arms armies deployed along the USSR's western frontier in 1941.

However, most of the mechanized corps at the start of the war were far below authorized strength, which seriously undermined the main idea behind the shock army from the very outset. Furthermore, the enormous losses the corps suffered in the first weeks of fighting made their continued maintenance impossible, and they were quickly disbanded and their surviving resources dispersed to smaller units. Despite these setbacks, the Soviets actually created five designated shock armies in 1941 and 1942. While these were generally larger and better supplied than the other combined-arms armies, they nevertheless were a far cry from the powerful formations envisaged by Isserson and others.

The situation began to change only in the spring of 1942, with the creation of the first tank corps, followed later in the year by the mechanized corps. However, these new formations were much smaller than the prewar mechanized corps and could in no way be viewed as a replacement for the shock army. The latter came much closer to fulfillment with the creation of the first generation of tank armies, also in 1942. And while the tank army was still decidedly inferior in the number of armored vehicles prescribed by Isserson, they were undoubtedly much easier to control in combat than would have been the case with the sprawling behemoth he described. This was no small consideration in an army where the units and larger formations were often a good deal smaller than their German or Allied counterparts. One point in common with Isserson's notion of the shock army's composition was the early tank armies' higher complement of infantry and, in some cases, cavalry. Such an arrangement doubtlessly owed much to lingering notions as to the necessity of creating a more "balanced" combined-arms formation capable of carrying out a variety of missions.

This relic from the past was swept away in 1943 with the new tank army organization, which by removing the regular rifle divisions and other encumbrances to speed created a more narrowly focused but far more potent weapon. Their place was taken by the tank armies' organic mechanized corps, which were better equipped to keep pace with the advance and to hold the ground gained. In many ways the tank army's evolution corresponded to a growing trend toward specialization within the Red Army, as seen not only in the creation of tank and mechanized corps, but artillery divisions and corps, as well as other units. Whereas Isserson's "universal" shock army was responsible for conducting the breakthrough

of the enemy front *and* the exploitation in depth, the Red Army's offensive operations from the summer of 1943 involved a much more complex meshing of parts, typical of any sophisticated organism. Now it was the task of the heavily reinforced combined-arms army to carry out the breakthrough, while the tank or mechanized corps, or the tank army, were responsible for the exploitation drive. And although this evolution certainly represents a break with Isserson's notions of conducting the deep offensive operation, there is no reason to believe that he would have objected to this unfolding of events.

For several years Isserson had touted the combined-arms army as the "chief operational formation," as he wrote in 1933. The *front*, on the other hand, was a "formation of a strategic order," whose operations lie within the realm of strategy.⁸⁸ Isserson's views on this matter were no doubt influenced by the Russian army's experience during World War I, when a single *front* was responsible for conducting operations along a strategic direction (northern, western, and southwestern). This was also the case during the civil war, which cemented the *front*-strategic direction nexus even closer, and any number of *fronts* (Northern, Western, Southwestern, Southern, Southeastern, Caucasus, Eastern, and Turkestan) conducted operations along strategic directions of the same name. For several years afterwards it was assumed that this approach would be repeated in a future war.

By the eve of the war, however, a sea change was taking place in the army's thinking on the subject, as more and more commanders came to doubt even the shock army's ability to penetrate a modern positional defense with its own resources. One of these was defense commissar Timoshenko, who declared at the December 1940 command conference that the army "is losing its significance as a self-sufficient operational quantity," and that even the shock army has "lost its independence in achieving large-scale operational objectives."⁸⁹ Instead, operations were increasingly the responsibility of the *front*, with the individual armies therein playing a subordinate role. How Isserson reacted to this direct assault on his beloved shock army is not known, although one may engage in some informed speculation. It will be recalled that Isserson was one of several ghost writers assigned to compose Timoshenko's address, and as the army's leading operational theorist, it is entirely possible that he, in fact, played a role in inaugurating the shift in emphasis in favor of the *front*. Moreover, there is no evidence in Isserson's highly opinionated postwar writings that he ever objected to the new concept.

In fact, Timoshenko's statement was quickly borne out by wartime events, and then some. The Great Patriotic War's vast scale soon assured that aside from relatively minor army-scale undertakings, any defensive or offensive operations of consequence would be carried out under the aegis of the *front*. Moreover, it became immediately apparent that decisive results were more likely to be achieved through the strategic operation, involving two or more *fronts*. This was the case during the defensive phase of the Battle of Moscow, which saw, at one time or another, the employment of up to three *fronts* along the western strategic direction. The same was true of the defensive fighting around Kursk, in which two *fronts* sought to hold the salient, followed by the partial commitment of a third. This trend was even more pronounced in the Red Army's conduct of offensive operations, and multi-*front* efforts became increasingly common as the war went on. Among these was the Moscow counteroffensive, the Stalingrad, Kursk, Belorussian, Iasi-Kishinev, Vistula-Oder, East Prussian, Berlin, and Manchurian operations, just to single out the most outstanding examples.

One of Isserson's former students later remarked on the rapid devaluation of the single *front* and army operation during the war. "As operational-strategic organisms," he wrote,

“the *fronts* lost to a significant degree their earlier inherent qualities,” and instead “came to resemble operational formations” only, rigidly controlled by the *Stavka*. The armies, on the other hand, “were essentially becoming operational-tactical formations,” and in some cases, “played the role of higher tactical formations.”⁹⁰

One of the enduring tenets of Isserson’s various theories was his deeply held belief as to the importance of echeloning military efforts in depth. This sprang from his conviction that the overall “deepening” of modern war required a corresponding response, both on the offensive and defensive. In fact, so convinced was Isserson of the correctness of this proposition that he declared as early as 1932 that “*final success will go to the one whose operational formation is deeper*” (emphasis in the original).⁹¹

This was equally true of the other levels of warfare as well, and the Red Army’s experience in World War II offers countless examples of this principle in action. Throughout the war the tactical echeloning of corps, division, regiments, and battalions was the norm, both in the attack and on the defensive. And in both cases the rifle corps usually constituted the combined-arms army’s first echelon, supported by other units in a second echelon to the immediate rear. Strategically, the story is much the same, although the examples are necessarily fewer. The appearance of a second strategic echelon of five combined-arms armies along the Dnepr even before the outbreak of war is one case. Another was the creation of the Steppe Military District/Front in the rear of the Soviet defenses along the Kursk bulge, which formed an additional strategic echelon behind the operational and tactical ones nearer the front.

However, it was at the operational level that Isserson proved most prophetic, particularly as regards the conduct of the breakthrough operation, the signature feature of Soviet military art during the war. He had been one of the earliest and most persistent advocates of organizing the shock army into a separate attack echelon for smashing through the enemy’s tactical defense, followed by the commitment of a separate breakthrough development echelon/success development echelon for the exploitation into the operational depth. The latter also came to be known as the army or *front* “mobile group” (*podvizhnaia gruppа*), although its essence remained the same. And despite initial objections in some quarters, the concept soon gained wide acceptance in the prewar Red Army and was afterwards never seriously disputed.

However, the practical realization of Isserson’s ideas evolved considerably during the war years, reflecting not only the army’s burgeoning weapons park, but the growing operational skill of its commanders as well. Early breakthrough operations during 1942 and 1943 witnessed the piercing of the enemy front by rifle units, which often lacked adequate artillery, armored and air support. During these operations the mobile groups consisted of individual tank and mechanized corps echeloned behind one or more combined-arms armies, the latter of which carried out the tactical breakthrough. In a handful of cases (Stalingrad, Ostrogozhsk-Rossosh’) tank armies were employed in the *front* first echelon. In these instances the tank armies would carry out the tactical breakthrough of the enemy defense using their organic rifle divisions, after which their second echelon of tank, mechanized and cavalry corps would be committed into the breach. This was also the case during the Manchurian operation, although this was at the beginning of a war against extremely weak enemy defenses.

By the summer of 1943 this practice had been done away with and the heavily reinforced combined-arms armies were given sole responsibility for carrying out the breakthrough. This was followed by the commitment of a second-echelon tank or mechanized

corps into the breach as the army or even *front* mobile group. From this point on the tank armies were employed behind the combined-arms armies as the *front* second echelon in important offensive operations in pursuit of major operational or strategic goals. As the war went on the tank armies were more and more often joined by any number of independent tank and/or mechanized corps, a cavalry-mechanized group, or even a combined-arms army. In some operations (Belgorod-Khar'kov, Warsaw-Poznan, Sandomierz-Silesian, Lower-Silesian, East Pomeranian, and Berlin) two tank armies served as a single *front's* mobile groups. In others (Proskurov-Chernovtsy, Uman-Botosani, and Lvov-Sandomierz) a single *front* disposed of three tank armies.

Of the two echelons, Isserson had always devoted far more attention to the actions of the mechanized corps/ERP. Of particular concern was calculating the proper time for its commitment into the fighting. He had written as far back as 1933 that to commit the ERP too early into the fighting for the enemy's tactical defense is to risk leaving it too bloodied and weakened an incapable of carrying out its exploitation mission. On the other hand, to wait for the attack echelon to achieve a clean breakthrough on its own would leave the defender free to rush forces to the threatened area and seal off the breach, thus rendering the mechanized corps's effort stillborn. "As a rule," he recommended the ERP's commitment as early as the breakthrough of the enemy's first defensive position to a depth of 5 to 6 kilometers.⁹²

That this was more than empty speculation was amply revealed in the Red Army's disastrous conduct of the Khar'kov operation in May 1942. Here the Southwestern Front's 6th Army was to attack out of the Barvenkovo bridgehead across the Donets River southeast of Khar'kov. Following the breakthrough of the enemy's tactical defense, it was planned to commit two of the new tank corps (around 300 tanks) into the breach on the third day for the exploitation drive. To the army's left Gen. L.V. Bobkin's so-called "army group" would also attack and commit its mobile group — a cavalry corps — at a depth of 10 to 12 kilometers on the attack's second day.⁹³ The cavalry corps would cover the tank corps's flank as they drove west to rendezvous with another Soviet army attacking north of the city.

The Soviet offensive opened on the morning of May 12 and was initially so successful that the 6th Army reached the Germans' second position by the end of the day. Progress was so good along Bobkin's front that he committed his cavalry corps that very day. For unknown reasons, however, the commander of the 6th Army failed to take advantage of this opportunity to commit the tank corps, when they might have done the most good. As a result, the breakthrough of the enemy's first position was never pushed to completion and the army's mobile group remained idle, even as the Germans began to quickly move more forces into the area to shore up their defenses. At this point the infantry's rate of advance began to slow noticeably. Still, however, a number of opportunities for committing the tank corps presented themselves over the next few days, but each time the army commander hesitated, preferring instead to concentrate on deepening the tactical breach. *Front* commander Timoshenko finally demanded that the two corps be committed into the battle, which was finally done on May 17. That very day, however, the Germans launched a major assault against the base of the Barvenkovo salient. This caused Timoshenko to break off the offensive and order the tank corps southeast to meet the threat.⁹⁴ This move was undertaken too late, however, and the Germans quickly succeeded in cutting off the entire salient and destroying the Soviet forces inside. This defeat set the stage for the Red Army's disastrous summer campaign that followed.

Subsequent breakthrough operations indicate that the Soviet drew the proper conclu-

sions from the Khar'kov fiasco, and from this point army and *front* success development echelons were generally committed early in the battle. This was certainly the case at Stalingrad, where most of the armies' mobile groups were committed on the first day, some at very insignificant depths. This was also true of succeeding operations, to the point where the commitment of a tank or mechanized corps on the operation's second or third day became an increasingly rare occurrence.⁹⁵ The employment of tank armies in this regard was more complex, and the decision to commit them often reflected deeper operational and even strategic considerations, as well as the degree of enemy resistance. For example, the tank armies' frequent commitment on the first day in 1943 and early 1944 are indicative of the *front* commanders' desire to bring as much force as possible against the enemy's tactical defense. During 1944, however, the emphasis shifted to the deep exploitation of the breakthrough, which meant committing the tank army at a later date in order to conserve its strength. During the L'vov-Sandomierz operation, for example, the First Ukrainian Front committed its three tank armies into the fighting on the fourth, fifth and sixth days, respectively, of the operation, at depths ranging from 15 to 40 kilometers from the front line. By 1945 the Germans' declining powers of resistance enabled the Soviets to return, for the most part, to the practice of committing their tank armies on the first day, while at the same time retaining the ability to exploit the breakthrough in depth.⁹⁶

While the breakthrough of the enemy front and the commitment of the ERP could be calculated to a certain degree in terms of the width of attack frontage and the density of weapons, the question of its actions in the enemy's operational depth was less clear. This raised the question of whether the enemy should merely be pushed back, or should the breakthrough be employed to encircle his forces? Isserson suffered from no such doubts and was a devout believer in the necessity of carrying out encirclement operations. This might take the form of breaking up the ERP into two parts for exploiting the breakthrough along different sectors of the shock army's front, resulting in a tactical-level encirclement of those enemy forces caught between them.⁹⁷ On a much larger scale, he also favored the encirclement operation as part of a larger *front* effort, in which two shock armies, each with its own ERP, would launch converging attacks aimed at destroying an operationally significant number of enemy units.⁹⁸

The Soviets did carry out a number of army encirclement operations during the war, most successfully at Novgorod in early 1944, and at Akkerman that same August. These were mere sideshows, however, whose success ultimately depended upon the outcome of the larger *front* operation of which they were only a part. However, almost from the beginning it became clear that given the conflict's enormous spatial scope a decisive result could not be achieved at any less than the *front* level. Notable examples of this are the First Belorussian Front's encirclement of the German forces around Bobruisk, and the First Ukrainian Front's encirclement of the enemy around Brody in July, during the L'vov-Sandomierz operation.

Events quickly showed, however, that even encirclement operations conducted on this scale were often insufficient, and the multi-*front* encirclement operation quickly assumed the dominant place in Soviet calculations. Among these were the Stalingrad, Ostrogozhsk-Rossosh', East Prussian, Berlin, Prague, and Manchurian operations, which together netted hundreds of thousands of prisoners and vast quantities of materiel. In the notable case of the Belorussian strategic operation, involving four *fronts*, the larger effort consisted of several smaller *front* operations (Vitebsk-Orsha, Mogilev, Bobruisk, Polotsk, Minsk, Siailui, Vilnius, Kaunas, Bialystok, and Lublin-Brest), in much the same way individual army operations constituted the building blocks of the *front* operation.

To be sure, there were other attempts at encircling enemy forces that ended in failure, and for the usual reasons; hurried planning, insufficient forces, and the Germans army's amazing powers of resistance. In some cases (Toropets-Kholm, Kirovograd, Nikopol'-Krivoi Rog) the Soviets were simply unable to close the trap. In others (Demiansk, Berznegovatoe-Snigirevka, and Proskurov-Chernovtsy), the Soviets were able to complete the encirclement, but failed to maintain it against enemy attempts to break out. No doubt the most disappointing case involved the Red Army's repeated and costly attempts to pinch off the Rzhev-Viaz'ma salient during 1942, a classic case of the triumph of persistence over common sense.

Isserson had long been an advocate of the concept of conducting consecutive offensive operations at the *front* and army level. This was not an idea original to him, and such senior acquaintances as Triandafillov and Tukhachevskii, among others, had already done much to inculcate the notion into the Red Army's collective consciousness. Whatever his debts to these men, however, Isserson's ideas were considerably more up to date and better reflected the complexity of conducting such operations under modern conditions. According to this view, the conduct of consecutive operations in a future war would be a far more intensive undertaking than in the past. Here, Isserson was obviously thinking of the examples of 1914 and 1920, in which the attackers carried out a series of consecutive operations in depth, in which periods of intensive combat were punctuated by even more extended periods of pursuit, in which the level of fighting was minor. Given the overall "deepening" of the front since those days, modern consecutive operations were likely to encounter much more resistance as the attacker moved further into the enemy's operational and strategic rear, forming "an unbroken chain of operational efforts," lacking "any kind of noticeable boundary in time and space."⁹⁹

Isserson's prediction was, by and large, borne out by wartime events, and the conduct of consecutive operations in depth became a hallmark of the Red Army's military art. For example, the Western and Kalinin fronts conducted a number of consecutive operations during the course of the Moscow counteroffensive (December, 1941–April, 1942). The same was true of the *fronts* along the southwestern strategic direction from the time of the Stalingrad counteroffensive until the spring of 1943. The consecutive operations conducted by the various Ukrainian *fronts* along the Ukrainian left and right banks during 1943–44 are another example of this phenomenon in action. As has already been shown, the Belorussian operation of 1944 was divided into ten separate operations, of which five were directly related to the breakthrough and the encirclement of the German forces east of Minsk, and the latter half with the strategic exploitation in depth. Even the most successful operations confirmed Isserson's views, however, and the course of the fighting, with a few exceptions, was constant and fierce.

As a rule, these operations would eventually run their course and were usually halted by the high command upon meeting stiff resistance, particularly during the latter half of the war. In some cases, the Soviets pushed these operations too far and were brought up short by a combination of materiel exhaustion and enemy resistance. The most egregious example of this was the Southwestern Front's attempt in February 1943 to reach the Sea of Azov and cut off the German forces in the Donbass region. By this time, however, the Red Army's offensive impulse in the south had completely exhausted itself and the attempt was made on a shoestring. As a result, the two-pronged German counterstroke caught the Soviets at a serious disadvantage and only the arrival of the spring thaws prevented a serious defeat. Despite this lesson, the temptation to push an operation too far remained and sometimes spoiled the outcome of even the most successful offensive.

Finally, mention has been noted several times that a number of Isserson's students went on to hold responsible command and staff positions during the war. Given this fact, the question of his influence over these men cannot be overlooked. This is an inherently difficult proposition, however, for barring a specific statement to that effect, it is all but impossible to draw a straight line from the lecture hall to the battlefield, although such commanders as Vasilevskii and Sandalov gave Isserson a great deal of credit. Nonetheless, the attempt must be made and the operations already outlined in this chapter provide an excellent point of departure.

For example, Col. Gen. Fedor Isidorovich Kuznetsov, who commanded the Northwestern Front at the beginning of the war, completed the Frunze Academy during Isserson's tenure there and may have had him as an instructor. The same is true for his chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Klenov. Likewise, the Western Front's chief of staff, Maj. Gen. Vladimir Yefimovich Klimovskikh, graduated from the Frunze Academy in 1932 and the General Staff Academy six years later and doubtlessly attended Isserson's lectures. All of these men, however, completely failed to halt the German advance and both Klenov and Klimovskikh were soon recalled to Moscow and shot. The Soviet campaign in Manchuria was far more successful, and a number of Isserson's former students distinguished themselves there. Among these was the commander of the Trans-Baikal Front, Marshal Rodion Yakovlevich Malinovskii, who completed the course at the Frunze Academy in 1930. His chief of staff, Gen. Zakharov, studied under Isserson during the latter's tenure as head of the academy's operational department, and was also at the General Staff Academy. His counterpart with the First Far Eastern Front, Lt. Gen. Aleksei Nikolaevich Krutikov, completed both academies as well.

The Red Army's conduct of breakthrough operations was generally more positive, and Isserson's disciples played a prominent, although not always successful, role. The latter included the ill-fated Khar'kov operation of 1942, presided over by Southwestern Front commander Timoshenko, whose association with Isserson evidently taught him very little. The same could be said for Lt. Gen. Bagramian, who studied under Isserson at both the Frunze and General Staff academies. Unlike Timoshenko, however, he eventually developed into a competent commander. At Stalingrad the Isserson school was represented by Southwestern Front commander Vatutin, who completed the course at the operational department and attended the General Staff Academy a few years later. The Don Front's chief of staff was Lt. Gen. Mikhail Sergeevich Malinin, who completed the Frunze Academy's course of instruction in 1931, while Maj. Gen. Ivan Semenovich Varennikov, another graduate, headed the Stalingrad Front's staff apparatus.

The Western Front's chief of staff during the Orel operation was Lt. Gen. Pokrovskii, who had studied in the Frunze's operational department and the General Staff Academy under Isserson. Lt. Gen. Sandalov, who also studied under Isserson at both academies, headed the Bryansk Front's staff, as was Lt. Gen. Malinin, chief of staff for the Central Front. The Belorussian strategic operation represented what was probably the highest concentration of Isserson's former pupils during the war. Of the four *fronts*, two were headed by his former students — the First Baltic Front under Bagramian, and the Second Belorussian Front under Col. Gen. Georgii Fedorovich Zakharov, the latter of whom studied under Isserson at both the Frunze and General Staff academies. Even more impressive is the fact that all four *front* chiefs of staff studied under Isserson during the previous decade at both the Frunze or General Staff academies, and oftentimes both. These included the First Baltic Front's Col. Gen. Vladimir Vasil'evich Kurasov, Pokrovskii with the Third Belorussian Front,

Lt. Gen. Bogoliubov with the Second Belorussian Front, and Malinin of the First Belorussian Front.

The Red Army's conduct of defensive operations also shows Isserson's former pupils occupying key posts, although not always successfully. For example, the Western and Reserve fronts at the start of the Moscow defensive operation were commanded by Konev and Budennyi, respectively, both of whom had studied at the Frunze Academy during Isserson's tenure. The neighboring Bryansk Front's two chiefs of staff, G.F. Zakharov and Sandalov, were both Isserson's students at the Frunze and General Staff academies. The same was true at Kursk, where Malinin served as the Central Front's chief of staff and Vatutin commanded the Voronezh Front. The Steppe Front, which played a critical role in halting the German offensive in the south, was commanded by Konev and assisted by M.V. Zakharov as chief of staff.

Isserson's influence was no less profound at the operational-strategic level, where his former pupils played a dominant role. This was particularly the case regarding the institution of *Stavka* representatives, who included a number of high-ranking officers dispatched by the high command to various *fronts* in order to assist the local leadership in carrying out particularly important operations. Their activities included not only operational planning, but, in many cases, the actual coordination of two or more *fronts*, as was the case in the summer of 1944. Among these were Nikolai Nikolaevich Voronov, who headed the Red Army's artillery directorate and commander of the USSR's national air defense forces and a 1930 graduate of the Frunze Military Academy. Another was Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Novikov, the chief of the Soviet air force throughout most of the war, who completed the academy along with Voronov. Others included Govorov and Yakov Nikolaevich Fedorenko, the chief of the army's armored directorate, both of whom completed the Frunze Academy in the early 1930s, while Govorov also graduated from the General Staff Academy in 1938. Shtemenko, a 1940 graduate, also served as a *Stavka* representative in addition to his duties in the General Staff's operational directorate. After the war he was appointed chief of the General Staff and served in that position from 1948 to 1952.

Easily one of the most outstanding members of this group was the oft-mentioned Vasilevskii, who attended the General Staff Academy during Isserson's tenure, until his studies were cut short in 1937. Appointed chief of the General Staff in mid-1942, Vasilevskii actually spent the greater part of the war as a *Stavka* representative to the various *fronts*, where together with Zhukov; he oversaw some of the Red Army's largest offensive operations during 1943 and 1944. In all, during these years, he was charged with coordinating the Voronezh and Steppe fronts during the Battle of Kursk, the Southern and Southwestern fronts during the Donbass operation, the Fourth Ukrainian Front and the Black Sea Fleet during the Crimean operation, the Third and Fourth Ukrainian fronts on the Ukrainian right bank, and the Second and Third Belorussian and First and Second Baltic fronts during the summer of 1944. The capstone of his wartime career was his appointment as commander-in-chief of the Soviet Forces in the Far East, from which vantage point he conducted the Manchurian operation of August 1945.

During the first year of the war the General Staff was headed by Zhukov, briefly, and then by Isserson's old nemesis from his days at the Frunze Academy, Shaposhnikov. Upon the latter's retirement; Vasilevskii took up the position, which he held until his departure for a *front* command in early 1945. However, since Vasilevskii was so often away at the front as a *Stavka* representative, the chief of staff's day-to-day duties naturally devolved upon his deputy, Antonov, who aside from his regular duties had the extremely demanding task of

dialing briefing Stalin on the situation at the front. Antonov had previously run the entire gamut of Isserson's instruction at the Frunze Academy, the academy's operational department, and the General Staff Academy. Assisted by his deputy Shtemenko, Antonov quickly honed the General Staff apparatus into a smoothly functioning institution, which came to play a major role as the *Stavka's* executive organ *vis-à-vis* the *fronts*.

It was Isserson's personal tragedy that he was denied the opportunity to realize his theoretical views in command of troops during the Great Patriotic War. This does not mean, however, that his theories were ignored, as his was not the only instance of a man whose ideas were exploited by the Stalinist regime even while their author languished in prison. In fact, it was just as Isserson's personal fortunes reached their nadir that the war revealed the wisdom of those theoretical tenets most closely associated with him. In this regard, it would not be too far-fetched to say that the Red Army's activities during the latter half of the war were permeated with the notion of the deep operation and that the generation of officers which planned and conducted the various operations of 1943 to 1945 is deeply in his debt.

CHAPTER 11

The Prodigal's Return

Stalin's Last Years

The end of World War II found the Soviet Union triumphant from the Kurile Islands to the Elbe River, due to a great degree to the efforts of the Red Army and those of its leaders whom Isserson had taught. During the immediate postwar years the influence of this group remained strong. Antonov, for example, finished the war as chief of the General Staff, but was replaced by Vasilevskii the following year, following the latter's return from the Far East. Vasilevskii remained at this post until 1948, followed by his appointment as Armed Forces minister a few months later. Shtemenko, who served as chief of staff until 1952, succeeded him.

These men presided over a major overhaul of the country's armed forces during these years. In early 1946 the formerly separate defense and naval commissariats were united in a single armed forces commissariat, which was shortly afterwards designated a ministry. At the same time the armed forces were organized into three separate services — the Ground Forces, Air Force, and the Navy, each headed by a commander-in-chief. In 1948 the National Air Defense Forces were organized as a separate service, reflecting concern over the American strategic bomber threat. In early 1950 the navy was once again split off from the other services with the creation of separate war and naval ministries. The same reshuffle saw the Ground Forces lose their organizational independence and for the next few years they were subordinated to the war ministry.

One of the military leadership's most pressing concerns was the need to demobilize the armed forces and return millions of servicemen to civilian life. From a high of 11,365,000 men in 1945, the armed forces were quickly reduced in size to 2,874,000 by 1948.¹ The reduction was short-lived; however, as the wartime alliance with the Western Powers quickly fell apart in an atmosphere of mutual recriminations that soon became known as the "Cold War." As a result of growing tensions over Iran, Eastern Europe, and Berlin, the Soviets began to increase the size of the armed forces from this point, a process that continued well into the next decade.

Despite the devastation wrought by the war, Soviet industry continued to turn out large amounts of increasingly sophisticated military equipment. The Ground Forces were reequipped with a new generation of tanks and artillery, and by the early 1950s had been completely mechanized, significantly increasing their speed and striking power. Change was

less apparent in the Navy, due to longer construction schedules, although great efforts were made to introduce new vessels and modernize existing ones. The Air Force was almost completely made over during these years. Fighter aviation made the shift from propeller-driven to jet aircraft, while the country's bomber force relied on both types. By the early 1950s the National Air Defense Forces were being outfitted with the first generation of surface-to-air missiles.

The Soviets had been experimenting in atomic research before 1941, but the outbreak of war forced them to devote nearly all of their resources to the development and production of conventional weapons. The American employment of the atomic bomb in 1945, however, caused them to redouble their efforts to acquire their own nuclear capability. As a result, the American monopoly on atomic weapons came to an end in August 1949, when the Soviets detonated their own atomic device. For the time being, however, this achievement was of limited strategic value, as the Soviet Union as yet lacked the necessary delivery systems for striking targets in the United States. Nevertheless, ongoing developments in the area of ballistic missiles held out the promise that even such far-off targets would not remain inviolate for long.

These developments could hardly have failed to influence the development of Soviet military thinking in the immediate postwar years. Combined with the armed forces' rich wartime experience, this should have provided fertile ground for further theoretical speculation as to the contours of a future war in an increasingly complex technological environment. This effort was seriously hobbled, however, by Stalin, whom the military press lauded as "the greatest commander of our time," and the "founder and creator of Soviet military science."² Military theory during this period suffered from the dictator's tendency to hand down immutable laws that were binding on anyone who wrote in the field. These laws were known as the "permanently operating factors," which had first been enumerated during the war and which since then had been raised to the status of holy writ. These factors included the stability of the rear, the morale of the army, the quantity and quality of divisions, the armament of the army, and the organizing ability of the command personnel.³ Typical of the ritual obeisance required was the declaration by one officer who stated that the dictator's formula had "revealed the true reasons determining the course and outcome of modern wars."⁴

A case in point was the armed forces' studied avoidance of anything concerning the role of nuclear weapons in a future war. Outwardly at least, Stalin sought to play down the significance of atomic weapons, declaring in late 1946, "I do not believe the atomic bomb to be as serious a force as certain politicians are inclined to regard it. Atomic bombs are intended for intimidating the weak-nerved, but they cannot decide the outcome of war since atomic bombs are by no means sufficient for this purpose."⁵ Whether this statement was a bluff, or if it reflected the dictator's views is difficult to say, although indications are that Stalin indeed underestimated the impact of the new weapon. The dictator's dismissal of the significance of atomic weaponry settled the question as far as official policy was concerned, and no one dared to say otherwise. As a result, Soviet thinking in this area basically marked time and it was only with Stalin's passing that the problem could be seriously addressed.

The Soviet view of a future war during these years differed little from that of the 1920s and 1930s in its essentials. As before, a future war was seen as an historically inevitable clash between the communist and capitalist camps, leading to the defeat of the latter and the triumph of socialism throughout the world. A war of this scope dovetailed perfectly with the

Soviet army's own recent experience of conducting operations to a great depth along an extended front. As a result, theoretical studies during these years tended to focus on the conduct of strategic operations, involving the forces of two or more *fronts* along a single strategic direction. This led, in turn, to a singular preoccupation with the Red Army's conduct of strategic offensive operations during 1944 and 1945, which was reflected in the large number of articles on the subject, which appeared in the classified journal *Military Thought*.⁶ From this it is clear that the armed forces' leadership expected a future war to unfold much as it had during the latter stages of the previous conflict, in which the conduct of the deep operation reached its zenith, passing at times from the purely operational sphere into the realm of strategy.

Under this system, strategic operations could be either offensive, defensive, or involve a counteroffensive. Not surprisingly, the Soviets showed a decided preference for the former. Isserson's former academic colleague, Shilovskii, went so far as to declare, for example, that wartime experience had shown that "the objectives of a war can only be achieved as a result of a successfully completed strategic offensive."⁷ Elsewhere he defined the strategic offensive as "the chief means of waging war," by which the attacker may "destroy the armed forces of the enemy, capture his vital centers and areas, and break the resistance of the enemy state (or the enemy coalition) and attain final victory in a war."⁸ He elaborated that the strategic offensive could be conducted on land, sea, and in the air, simultaneously or consecutively in a number of theaters of military activities. Conversely, a strategic offensive operation might be more limited in scope and confined to a single land or maritime theater of military activities.⁹

This formulation represents a significant spatial growth in the scope of the strategic offensive operation in just a few years and corresponded to Soviet expectations as to the scale of the next war. One writer opined shortly after the war that the increasing range and mobility of modern weapons "will inevitably lead to the further expansion of the limits of future battlefields and to a growth in the pace of the development and an increase in the scope of operations." Under these circumstances, he concluded, the scope of operations during the Great Patriotic War "will undoubtedly be surpassed" in the next conflict.¹⁰ Given these spatial parameters, one could easily imagine the Soviets launching a major strategic offensive against Western forces in Europe, in conjunction with a smaller effort directed at Turkey, in order to close the Dardanelles to enemy naval forces.

Postwar Soviet notions on conducting a strategic offensive operation were remarkably similar to Isserson's earlier ideas, differing only in scale. As before, it was assumed that such an operation would begin with the breakthrough of the enemy's defensive front. This approach was summed up by one author, who declared that "the modern offensive operation is usually made up of the breakthrough of the enemy front by rifle formations, the commitment of mobile formations into the breakthrough, and the development of the blow in depth," and the gradual enlargement of the breakthrough zone to embrace the entire front of attack. This required the presence of several combined-arms armies, a mechanized army, and a powerful air component, all under the auspices of a *front*.¹¹ As before, the deep echelonment of offensive efforts was considered vital to success. Another observer, relying on wartime experience, recommended organizing the attack echelon into two, and even three, echelons, which would enable the attacker to overcome the defender's various positions in the tactical zone and to ward off expected counterattacks by his operational reserves.¹² Another endorsed the wartime practice of massing overwhelming amounts of men and materiel along the designated breakthrough sectors, although he did not expect these den-

sities to rise appreciably in the future. Instead, he argued, the attacker should strive to increase the force of the initial blow through improvements in his offensive weapons, as well as the methods of their employment.¹³

Following the breakthrough, the attacker should strive to encircle the defender's forces in the operational depth, either by means of separate attacks along converging axes, or by launching a single blow aimed at cutting off and pinning the enemy force against a natural obstacle. The Red Army's experience in conducting such operations was such that one commentator went so far as to maintain that decisive strategic results in a war could only be achieved as the result of strategic encirclement operations.¹⁴ Another declared that given the broad maneuver possibilities expected in a future war, encirclements were likely in "large-scale operations."¹⁵ This was particularly the case, he wrote, with the increasing motorization of the army's rifle formations, which was rapidly reducing the exploitation gap between these units and the more mobile mechanized formations. This development, combined with improvements in artillery, bomber and assault aircraft, "creates the materiel prerequisites for conducting offensive operations to a greater depth," making possible even more impressive encirclement operations.¹⁶

The anticipated scale of the strategic offensive operation inevitably raised the question of conducting a series of consecutive operations to an even greater depth than had previously been the case. Like the encirclement operation, the Red Army's conduct of consecutive operations reached a high level of development during the Great Patriotic War and continued to occupy the minds of many theorists in the immediate postwar years. According to one author, the war had revealed the existence of two types of consecutive operations — those that are conducted along a single strategic direction, in which each operation creates the conditions for the succeeding one, and those that are conducted successively along different directions. In the latter case, the enemy's defeat along one direction sets him up for a subsequent defeat along another portion of the front. He added that the latter form, of which the Red Army's 1944 campaign is the most notable example, was the "most typical for modern conditions and yields the most decisive results."¹⁷

As might be expected, Soviet theorists devoted considerably less space to the strategic defensive operation. Shilovskii defined the strategic defense as those activities "in a given theater or strategic direction," conducted in order to "exhaust and bleed the enemy, to slow down and halt his offensive, and to win the necessary time to create favorable conditions for going over to the counteroffensive."¹⁸ This was an understandable reaction to the bitter experience of the Great Patriotic War, whose opening campaigns found the Red Army unprepared to wage defensive operations on such a scale, resulting in enormous losses in men and territory during the summer campaigns of 1941 and 1942. Another factor may well have been the concern that in a war against a powerful coalition, led by the United States, it was unlikely that the Soviets would be in a position to mount simultaneous strategic offensive operations in all likely theaters of military activities, and would somewhere have to assume the strategic offensive. For example, the Soviets might conduct a strategic defensive operation in the Far East, while their main forces attacked in Europe and the Middle East.

The Great Patriotic War had also confirmed the primacy of the offensive over the defensive, much as Isserson and others had predicted. Technological developments since that time had only worked to increase the attacker's superiority. The new weapons could not only launch a more powerful initial blow against the defender, but their enhanced mobility now meant that the attacker was capable of conducting a more sustained offen-

sive in the operational depth. Despite these changes, the defender's task remained much the same as before. One author reduced these to three points: the successful defense against the enemy's massed tank attack; in the event the attacker broke through the tactical defense, to prevent him from developing the success further into the operational depth; and, retaining the ability to maneuver one's forces in response to a crisis along a particular sector.¹⁹

The war had also confirmed the Soviets in their prewar belief that the modern defense must be "deep, active and maneuverable," much as Isserson had demanded years before.²⁰ As with the case of the strategic offensive operation, this conclusion merely represented a quantitative increase in the scale of Isserson's writings on the defensive operation, which were focused on the army level. The author undoubtedly had in mind the Kursk strategic defensive operation, where the Soviets for the first time were able to accumulate the forces and firepower necessary to construct an operational-strategic defense in depth. It was probably with this example in mind that another author singled out the importance of maintaining large operational and strategic reserves to meet any eventuality.²¹

The third type of strategic operation was the strategic counteroffensive, "conducted for the purpose of seizing the strategic initiative from the enemy's hands and defeating his main grouping, which has already been weakened by the defense and thus create favorable conditions for the subsequent development of the counteroffensive into a general strategic offensive," in order to bring about a turning point in the war.²² Like its defensive counterpart, the Soviets' concern with the strategic counteroffensive is a direct outgrowth of their lack of prewar theoretical preparation for waging an operation of this scope. As a result, the Moscow counteroffensive of December 1941 and January 1942 was a hastily organized affair whose success owed more to the German army's exhaustion along the western strategic direction than to any particular skill on the part of the Soviet high command. The counteroffensive at Stalingrad was far better organized, although it too was the direct result of the Red Army's lack of defensive success during the preceding summer campaign. The strategic counteroffensive at Kursk more closely approached the ideal, in terms of preparation, conduct, and consequences for the further conduct of the war.

Given the expected large spatial scope of a future war, it was calculated that a counteroffensive would involve several *fronts* and the employment of large operational and strategic reserves.²³ This had certainly been the previous pattern and the Soviets were probably justified in believing that a war with an American-led Western coalition would involve shifting fortunes in which a period of defense might be followed by a counteroffensive along a particular theater of military activities, such as the Far East. According to this scenario, a strategic counteroffensive might begin as the result of a series of powerful counterblows, as had been the case at Moscow and Kursk. It might also be launched along a relatively stable front, along which the defender has already succeeded in halting the enemy's advance.²⁴

Naturally, Isserson was in no position to actively influence the development of his country's postwar military thinking from a labor camp. Nevertheless, he remained a powerful, if unacknowledged presence and the Soviet fixation on the experience of the Great Patriotic War, by extension, revealed how much the army was beholden to his previous work on the theory of the deep operation in the 1930s. To be sure, much had changed since then, particularly in the technological realm. Also, Isserson's writings had concerned themselves primarily with conducting the deep operation at the army, and later the *front*, level, and rarely ventured into the realm of strategy, a prerogative jealously guarded by the country's political leadership. Still, as the war had revealed, only the scope of these operations had grown, while the basic elements of the deep operation remained essentially unchanged.

It was probably after his stint in the Krasnoyarsk camps that Isserson was transferred to a camp in the Karaganda area of northern Kazakhstan, then one of the country's main punishment areas. On March 16, 1948, however, a decree by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of State Security, and the general prosecutor's office, ordered that certain classes of prisoners be transferred to "special camps." On May 20 a commission of the Karaganda camp administration judged Isserson eligible for transfer to one of these camps as an "extremely dangerous state criminal."²⁵ He was then transferred to the Lugovoi camp, near the village of Spassk, in northern Kazakhstan.²⁶ There he quietly served out the remaining three years of his sentence.

The practice of exiling prisoners to remote locations in Siberia was as old as the modern Russian state, and as early as the sixteenth century parties of condemned criminals were being sent east. This is hardly to be wondered at, as the trackless wastes of Siberia served as a daunting barrier to even the most hardened prisoners. During the late czarist times Siberian exile was often imposed for political offenses in lieu of a prison sentence, and several generations of revolutionaries served time there. All things considered, they led a fairly free existence, and their education and skills often made them an asset to the community where they were based. Under Stalin, however, this relatively loose system was tightened considerably, along with a significant growth of the camp system east of the Ural Mountains.

As the date for Isserson's release approached the authorities began to make preparations for his transport to a place of exile. A document dated May, 15 1951, ordered that upon his release Isserson be transported under guard to the city of Krasnoyarsk.²⁷ This was evidently carried out without incident, as an August communication from the state security authorities in Krasnoyarsk states that he had arrived at his appointed place on June 29.²⁸ This was the village of Nizhne-Angarsk, which as the name indicates, lies along the lower reaches of the Angara River, some 300 kilometers north of Krasnoyarsk.²⁹ Upon his arrival, Isserson immediately sought out work in order to support himself, for he still needed to eke out an existence, however poor. His first job was as a laborer in a local shop. During the next three and a half years he was variously employed as a driver, a member of a geological expedition, and a topographical worker, among other positions.³⁰

It was probably while in Nizhne-Angarsk that Isserson resumed his writing, following a ten-year hiatus. It's highly unlikely that he had access to any timely military-related literature in such a remote location, so his restless mind naturally sought other outlets. It was during this time that Isserson began writing his philosophical ruminations, which thereafter grew to several hundred handwritten pages on cheap paper.³¹ Some of these became the foundation for his unpublished manuscript entitled "The Theory of Knowledge." A later acquaintance recalled the work as "a defense of the views" of the nineteenth century philosophers Richard Avenarius and Ernest Mach, whose theories influenced some of the early Russian Marxists. Isserson's work inevitably contained criticisms of Lenin's *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, which was directed against the two men's views.³² That such an orthodox communist as Isserson would have challenged the founder of the Soviet state is nothing short of extraordinary and may be evidence of just how severely his arrest had shaken his world view. However, the manuscript was never even submitted for publication, the source stated, as Isserson feared the authorities' reaction to this deviation from communist orthodoxy.³³

It was while Isserson was scratching out a living in exile that Stalin died on March 5, 1953. Millions in the Soviet Union mourned Stalin's death and he was remembered by many

as a stern but benevolent father figure who had led the country to victory in World War II. Those less naïve welcomed his passing, although they could not of course give vent to their true feelings. A fellow exile later wrote that Isserson was at her residence in the small village of Usovo when the radio began to broadcast the details of Stalin's funeral. Isserson, who was evidently deeply moved by the event, immediately stood at attention and commanded the others to rise as well, shouting "Everybody stand up, we're burying the leader!" One of those present was Yakov Borisovich Shumiatskii, an Old Bolshevik and former member of the USSR Supreme Court, who was now serving out his sentence in exile. This experience seems to have opened his eyes as to the nature of the system he had once served. The source for this story stated that Shumiatskii defiantly continued to lie on the cot and told Isserson to go to hell.³⁴

Isserson's attitude toward the dictator's death is particularly curious, given his own passage through the various circles of Stalin's hellish system. And while ludicrous in retrospect, such an incident was by no means unusual and many victims of Soviet power continued to defend Stalin and the system he created, even after they became victims themselves. Examined from this point of view, Isserson probably felt that he had no reason to blame Stalin personally for his plight. Like many arrested at the time, he probably believed that other people's arrests had been justified, while his had been merely a "mistake, which would soon be cleared up." In this way he recalls Lev Grigor'evich Rubin from Solzhenitsyn's *The First Circle*, who was capable of performing all sorts of mental gymnastics to justify the fact that he had been falsely arrested and confined to a special prison for scientific workers.

The postwar years were also filled with hardship for Isserson's family. When the war ended their material situation family improved somewhat, as some of the more stringent wartime measures were lifted and millions of demobilized soldiers returned to the civilian economy. Nevertheless, the mark of Cain caused by his arrest continued to dog the family's steps. Irena Georgievna, like her father, had always been a diligent student and had even come in second in a citywide mathematics competition. However, the fact of her father's arrest continued to work against her. Moreover, by the time of her graduation from high school in 1947 the campaign against "rootless cosmopolites" (Jews) was gathering steam and her surname only added to the baggage she was already carrying as the child of an "enemy of the people." She said that at first she was not accepted into a single institution of higher education, despite having earned a prestigious gold medal upon completing high school. In despair, she said, she followed the advice of friends and submitted an application to a medical institute. Because of her grades she was not required to take the entrance examination and was immediately scheduled for an interview. At the interview she recited her brief biography and then noticed that one of the members was underlining something in her file with a red pencil. "I was very sharp-tongued," she said, and asked, "What are you underlining, that my father was repressed? Comrade Stalin said that children are not responsible for their fathers," employing one of the favorite aphorisms of the day. The committee member, somewhat flustered by the young woman's forward manner, denied the accusation, but they did everything they could to fail her. Irena Georgievna said that she was able to answer the committee's questions on physics and chemistry, and then they sought to trip her up on her knowledge of German. However, she passed this test with ease, thanks to her father's previous instruction. Frustrated, the committee dismissed her and she did not learn for another two days that she had been accepted. However, she said, the institute never gave up looking for an excuse to expel her while she was there.³⁵

It was shortly afterwards that the Issersons' marriage finally fell apart. Irena Georgievna

recalled later that the stark differences in her parents' personalities, plus her father's incessant betrayals, meant that their divorce was "brewing" even before the war.³⁶ Despite this, Yekaterina Ivanovna had remained faithful to her husband throughout the greater part of his sentence, although it was common enough in those days for wives to divorce their repressed husbands. This was because the life of a wife of an "enemy of the people" was not only hard but potentially dangerous as well, and some husbands even insisted on divorce as a way to lessen their families' sufferings. As has been shown, Isserson's wife had every reason to divorce him, although she resisted this move for some time.

It was toward the end of her husband's sentence that Yekaterina Ivanovna met Lev Vladimirovich Anastislavskii, the former chief architect for a small resort town. He had been arrested in 1937, and after his release he arrived in Moscow. Irena Georgievna said that when her mother met Anastislavskii, she quickly became convinced that this was the true love for which Yekaterina Ivanovna had so longed for, and set out to convince the gentle woman to divorce Isserson. When her mother objected, the daughter exclaimed, "All the same, you don't have a life with papa!"³⁷ The poor woman finally relented and agreed to a divorce, which was granted on May 3, 1951, a little more than a month before Isserson's release from camp.³⁸ The timing of the decision, nearly ten years into Isserson's sentence, proves that this was not an act of expediency on Yekaterina Ivanovna's part, but rather a belated realization that she had for so long wasted her love on a man not worthy of it.

The two married shortly afterwards. However, Yekaterina Ivanovna's poor luck with men continued to dog her. Anastislavskii's kidneys had been damaged during his interrogation in Moscow's notorious Lefortovo prison and he died from uremia in 1956. Nonetheless, Irena Georgievna concluded, the two "lived very well" during their few years together. "At least mama understood in her declining years what that was," was how she described her mother's brief moment of happiness.³⁹

At the same time other important changes were taking place in the Isserson family. In the autumn of 1951 Irena Georgievna married Yurii Georgievich Yerebin, a young naval officer. She followed her husband to Severomorsk, a naval base above the Arctic Circle, where she gave birth to a son, Aleksei, Isserson's only grandchild. Afterwards, Yerebin was transferred to Leningrad, where they lived for several years. Irena Georgievna completed medical school in 1953, and although Stalin was now dead many of his works remained in place, and she was denied the opportunity to continue her education and pursue her residency to become a doctor. As a result, she had to settle for a career as a radiologist, in which capacity she worked for 40 years.⁴⁰

Picking Up the Pieces

Upon Stalin's death the enormous edifice of terror he had built immediately showed signs of cracking. That spring riots broke out in some of the northern camps, and although they were brutally suppressed the mere fact of their occurrence was significant. Later that same year secret police chief Lavrentii Pavlovich Beria and several of his henchmen were arrested and later executed, as the party and state apparatus sought to regain control of the security organs, which had previously functioned almost as a state within a state. The new collective leadership that emerged after the dictator's death lacked Stalin's god-like status and quickly discovered that it could not continue to govern in the old manner. Almost by default, a noticeable sense of relaxation began to spread throughout Soviet society, and the

ensuing period later became known as “the thaw.” The feeble effects of reform even extended into the vast labor camp empire, and an amnesty was even declared for certain categories of prisoners, while those not immediately affected became emboldened with the hope that their sentences might be reviewed.

One of these was Isserson, who probably began petitioning the main military prosecutor’s office sometime around the end of 1953. The prosecutor’s office replied on February 6, 1954, stating that Isserson’s request for a review of his sentence had been received and was under review, and promised to inform him of the results. The office also requested additional information about the particulars of Isserson’s sentencing.⁴¹ Isserson evidently complied, and the prosecutor’s office replied on August 31, 1954, that his latest communication had been received, but that the review of his appeal had not yet been completed.⁴²

Isserson sought to bolster his case with a job evaluation from his service as a member of a geological party, whose chief described him as an “able and conscientious worker” “in the difficult conditions of the *taiga*,” referring to the area’s heavily forested terrain. Isserson also handled the surveying and cartographical work himself, which was rated highly by his superiors. The author closed by stating that Isserson performed his work “precisely and exactly.”⁴³ Even more important was the appraisal given by that old friend of the Isserson family, Khmel’nitskii, now a retired lieutenant general, who praised Isserson as a “steadfast and principled communist, devoted to our Motherland and the CPSU” [Communist Party of the Soviet Union].⁴⁴

However, the wheels of Soviet justice moved slowly, and the military prosecutor’s office was no doubt simply overwhelmed at the time by thousands of other requests for rehabilitation. The inevitable delay doubtlessly irritated Isserson to no end, and he continued to bombard Moscow with demands that it complete its review. The prosecutor’s office, no doubt feeling besieged, replied on March 4, 1955, that it had “taken steps” to “speed up” the review of Isserson’s case and again promised to inform him of the results of its investigation.⁴⁵

Isserson’s efforts were finally rewarded when the Military Collegium of the USSR Supreme Court met in Moscow on June 1, 1955, in order to review his case. The session opened with a brief recitation of the punishment meted out to Isserson and the charges that played a role in his conviction. Among the latter was the general charge that Isserson was guilty of being a member of an “anti-Soviet conspiratorial organization,” which had as its goal the “overthrow of Soviet power.” Among the particulars supporting this charge were Isserson’s alleged recruitment into this conspiracy by Alafuzo and his alleged organizational ties with Orlov, “one of the leaders of the conspiracy.” Also brought up was the charge that Isserson’s activity had been “directed at weakening the might of the Red Army,” citing his failures in the Finnish War, as well as his earlier support of a “Trotskyite” resolution while in the RKKA Military Academy.⁴⁶

However, upon completing this lengthy recitation, the military prosecutor unexpectedly requested that Isserson’s sentence be overturned and the case against him thrown out, due to what he called “newly revealed circumstances.”⁴⁷ Among the reasons cited were Isserson’s closing statement at his trial that he had never been a member of an anti-Soviet organization, and his explanation of his 1923 academy vote as a youthful indiscretion, which he afterwards corrected.⁴⁸ This was hardly a new circumstance, however, as the military tribunal had simply ignored Isserson’s previous objections to the charges and rendered a verdict which, in any event, had already been decided. More to the point was the revelation that while Alafuzo had admitted his guilt and implicated others during the preliminary inves-

tigation, he recanted his testimony before the court, declaring that he “had never been a part of any conspiracy and had never turned any documents over to Polish intelligence.” During his final statement, Alafuzo asked the court to review the investigation into his case, adding that he “did not want to die with such a shameful stain.”⁴⁹

As regards Orlov’s statement that he and Isserson were fellow conspirators, the Military Collegium determined that the admiral had indeed named Isserson as a co-conspirator, a statement that he confirmed at his trial. However, the report continued, an examination of Orlov’s arrest record revealed that he had “repeatedly denied his guilt and complained about the illegal activities of the investigator.” Orlov later complained that during the first interrogation following his arrest he had declared his innocence of all charges. However, he said, his interrogator then explained to him “no statements of innocence would be accepted from me, as the question of my guilt had already been proven, and that one thing only was demanded of me — a confession.” Orlov added that he had suffered a heart attack in his cell, and “being in a condition of severe moral and physical exhaustion,” resolved, “to take the guilt upon myself, so as to hasten the denouement and achieve death as quickly as possible.” He continued to deny, however, that he had been involved in a plot with Tukhachevskii, or that he had engaged in “espionage, terrorist, diversionary, or wrecking work,” and that he “never had been and could not be an enemy of the people.”⁵⁰ The report then noted, not without some satisfaction, that the investigator had himself been sentenced to death on January 21, 1940, for his “participation in an anti-Soviet plot.”⁵¹ The execution, however, was not for his investigative transgressions, but part of Beria’s wholesale purge of the security apparatus headed by his immediate predecessor, Nikolai Ivanovich Yezhov.

The report was equally dismissive of other commanders who had testified against Isserson. One of these was Grigor’ev, who had testified in 1937 that he had learned of Isserson’s participation in a plot from Ol’shanskii. However, a review of the latter’s file indicated that he had never implicated Isserson and that during his appearance before the court had renounced his previous confession and now denied his complicity in any “anti-Soviet military conspiracy.” The same was true of Levichev, who testified that Uborevich had told him about Isserson’s “belonging to an anti-Soviet plot.” However, a check of Uborevich’s arrest file revealed that he had never named his former subordinate as a conspirator. Elsewhere, it was shown that Yanushkevich had not named Isserson as a conspirator, while Voronkov, during his trial had recanted his entire testimony as “false.” Even Vol’pe, while he admitted his own participation in a conspiracy at his trial, failed to mention that he had recruited Isserson.⁵²

The Collegium also took at face value Isserson’s admission of his mistakes in organizing the 7th Army’s unsuccessful attack on the Mannerheim Line in December 1939, while noting his statement that his miscalculations had not been the result of any “criminal or malicious intent.” The report noted significantly that Isserson’s testimony on this score “had not been refuted by the investigation or the court.” In the same vein, the report further pointed out that Talenskii’s criticism of Isserson’s tenure as army chief of staff had touched only on “shortcomings” in the latter’s work and never implicated Isserson in any “anti-Soviet conspiracy.”⁵³

The Military Collegium concluded its session by declaring that the weight of the new evidence proved Isserson’s innocent of the charges against him, adding that this material had not been available to the court in rendering its original verdict. The latter statement was certainly a lie, as the Collegium’s members were surely aware of the methods used to extract confessions and how exculpatory evidence was simply ignored in reaching a prede-

terminated verdict. The Collegium then disaffirmed Isserson's sentence and announced the close of his case due to a "lack of evidence."⁵⁴ Isserson, after nearly 14 years of prison, camp, and exile, was about to be freed.

The main military prosecutor's office sent out the notification of the court's decision on June 9, 1955, although it is unknown when Isserson actually received the news.⁵⁵ Whatever the date, his daughter said; the shock nearly killed him, as he suffered a heart attack on the spot.⁵⁶ Isserson had already had a number of heart attacks while undergoing interrogation, and the subsequent years in camp certainly went far to undermine his health. The previous month Isserson had in fact spent some time in the clinic in Razdolinsk, a small town located along a tributary of the Angara River, where he was recovering from another heart attack. There he was diagnosed with emphysema and arteriosclerosis. The doctor further noted that given the state of his health, Isserson could only be employed in light work, "without long and extended walking."⁵⁷

Isserson got word to his family of his plight and the latter responded with all the means at its disposal. Irena Georgievna said that her mother was able to ship the necessary medicines to the clinic, adding in a separate telegram that the medicine was from Lt. Gen. Khmel'nitskii, figuring that her ex-husband would receive better treatment as a result of this high-ranking association. Yekaterina Ivanovna also managed to scrape together about two thousand rubles to support Isserson and pay for his transportation home, once his exile was revoked. Even her new husband contributed to this fund, as he too had spent several years in the camps and knew the problems Isserson was likely to encounter on his journey home.⁵⁸ The medicines evidently did their work and Isserson soon recovered. On July 14, 1955, he received the news that his sentence of exile had been lifted and that he was now a free man.⁵⁹

It is not known when Isserson left Nizhne-Angarsk, or when he arrived in Moscow, although the trip from his place of exile to the nearest railhead and the train ride to Moscow must have taken the better part of a week. The family was there to meet him at Moscow's Yaroslavskii Station, and Irena Georgievna even made a special trip from Leningrad to meet the father she had not seen in 14 years. She recalled that her father arrived carrying a knapsack, "just like a *zek*," using the slang term for prisoner. This was not an unusual sight during these years, as the Gulag began to disgorge its millions of victims. Obviously, Isserson could not stay with his family, and since he no longer had a residence in Moscow he was taken to the Khmel'nitskii's, where he was able to live while he got his affairs in order.⁶⁰

Other former prisoners were beginning to make their way back home as well, among them Isserson's former sister-in-law, Galina Ivanovna. In 1956, as the result of her husband's posthumous rehabilitation, she was awarded a pension and a room in Moscow. This was not accomplished without some difficulty; however, as she was forced to gather witnesses and prove in court that she was indeed Vol'pe's wife, as their marriage had never been officially registered.⁶¹ The mere recollection of her aunt's legal wrangling caused Isserson's daughter to observe indignantly that such proof was not deemed necessary when her aunt spent eight years in the camps because of her husband.⁶²

Isserson's return created a number of problems for his former wife. No sooner had Isserson returned to Moscow than Galina Ivanovna and her daughter began to press Yekaterina Ivanovna to return to her former husband, which was a particularly odd position to take given how coldly Isserson had treated them. Evidently their entreaties were beginning to have their effect, as Lev Vladimirovich began to worry that his wife of just four years

was preparing to leave him. It was at this point that Irena Georgievna stepped in from Leningrad and declared that she was not about to let her mother be put through such hell again, and there the matter ended.⁶³ Unfortunately, Lev Vladimirovich died the following year and Yekaterina Ivanovna was once again left alone.

Isserson spent part of that first summer in Moscow attempting to restore the position and privileges he had lost at the time of his arrest, of which the most important was securing an honorable discharge from the army. His family helped him by making the rounds of the defense ministry and gathering recommendations from such high-ranking generals as Andrei Antonovich Grechko, Bagramian, M.V. Zakharov and Sokolovskii, the latter of whom was then chief of the General Staff.⁶⁴ That such high-ranking officers would trouble themselves over a former prisoner speaks a great deal about the respect in which Isserson was held. Thanks to their efforts, Isserson was restored to the ranks, although not in the way he had hoped for. On August 19, 1955, he was discharged into the reserves with the rank of colonel, and given credit for the ten years from June 7, 1941, to June 7, 1951, although, not for the four years of internal exile.⁶⁵

Following his retirement, Isserson used his connections within the Ministry of Defense to secure a two-room apartment on the Berezhkovskaia Embankment, along the Moscow River. His daughter later described the apartment as “wonderful,” which it may well have been by the standards of the day.⁶⁶ However, as a colonel, Isserson could never hope to aspire to anything more, the dividing line between how general officers and their lower-ranking counterparts lived being very pronounced. In retirement Isserson often had occasion to mull over his reduced status, and it obviously ate at him. Irena Georgievna said that her father was “terribly indignant” that he had been retired as a colonel,” and for the rest of his life brooded over the injustice.⁶⁷ For example, Isserson once received a congratulatory letter from the editor of a military journal who had the temerity to address him as “colonel.” He angrily crossed out the insulting epithet and penciled in “Idiots?”⁶⁸

Strictly speaking, Isserson was wrong and he had held the rank of colonel for nearly a year and a half. Had he not been demoted from division commander following the Finnish war, he would surely have been appointed at least to major general when generals' ranks were introduced in the Red Army in June 1940. Even this setback need not have been fatal to his career prospects, however, and had it not been for his arrest the following year, he might well have advanced even further in rank during the war and earned himself a very comfortable retirement, at least by Soviet standards. Instead, despite his many services to



Isserson, following his return from exile, ca. late 1950s. Age and the rigors of camp have clearly taken their toll (courtesy Russian State Military Archives).

his country, he had to spend the rest of his life as merely one of thousands of retired mid-level officers.

Isserson also fought hard to have his party membership restored. His efforts were enthusiastically supported by one Nikolai Mikhailovich Tikhomirov, who in an August 5 letter to his local party organization, described Isserson as “one of the outstanding specialists in the field of the theory of tactics and operational art,” who “enjoyed great prestige among Soviet command and political circles.” Tikhomirov wrote that he had become acquainted with Isserson at the beginning of the 1930s, when their paths often crossed in various academies. He further praised Isserson as someone who had “fruitfully worked” to develop “new Marxist-Leninist fundamentals of operational art,” and that his every new printed work had been greeted as an “event in the field of Soviet military thinking, and was hotly discussed by the RKKA’s commanders and political workers.”⁶⁹ Tikhomirov singled out for special praise Isserson’s *The Evolution of Operational Art*, which he called “a bold attempt at reevaluating” several centuries of military events “from the position of Marxist-Leninist methodology.” Three things, he continued, had dominated Isserson’s life — scientific-literary research, his teaching duties, and party work, adding, “in everything comrade Isserson did, he first and foremost remained a communist.” In closing, Tikhomirov stated that he supported Isserson’s reinstatement in the party, from which he had been previously expelled through an “investigative error.” Such an action, he concluded, would return to the ranks a “valuable communist, military theoretician, and a mature Marxist, who will still contribute greatly to our Motherland and party.”⁷⁰ These and other appeals were evidently sufficient to persuade the party authorities, and Isserson was reinstated in December 1955.⁷¹

Isserson’s devotion to his communist principles may strike the rational observer as completely incomprehensible, particularly in light of his treatment by the Soviet system. He was not alone in his delusions, however, and many a returning prisoner found his faith strengthened following a stint in the labor camps. As the incident during Stalin’s funeral shows, once Isserson had staked out a position on a particularly issue it was nearly impossible to get him to change his mind. His daughter remarked that her father took his party obligations very seriously and that following his reinstatement he attended all the local party meetings, considering this a “sacred” task.⁷²

Another of Isserson’s priorities during the years following his return was to reconstitute his record collection, which had been confiscated during the search of his apartment. He was immensely proud of his recordings and he once boasted to a guest that his collection encompassed the entire range of classical symphony music. The record collection later came to take up five shelves in a large bookcase. Marshal Vasilevskii, then a deputy defense minister, knew of his former mentor’s love for music, and presented him with a new record player upon the latter’s return.⁷³

The following year Isserson married a second time, and to a woman half his age. Irena Georgievna said that the woman was only three or four years older than she and was a graduate student, although she could not recall any other details about her, including her name. How he managed to pull off this feat is not known and may possibly be due to the severe shortage of men of marriageable age following the losses of the war. Irena Georgievna said that the two divorced a year later under unknown circumstances. She described the marriage as “insufficiently solid,” and speculated that the breakup came as the result of a clash of personalities, because Isserson’s second wife was not the kind of self-effacing spouse Yekaterina Ivanovna had been. Whatever the reason, the woman certainly knew her rights and

was able to win a judgment in court against Isserson that enabled her to divide their apartment into two separate rooms.⁷⁴ For a man of Isserson's irritable personality, living in such close proximity to his ex-wife must have been an intolerable situation. However, the realities of the protracted housing shortage in the Soviet Union left him with little recourse but to stick it out.

The strain of his unnatural living situation was not likely to improve Isserson's odious character, and before long he had managed to quarrel with just about everyone. In one incident, he had such a violent altercation with a cousin that he later called her husband to tell him that his wife should be committed to an insane asylum. As this and other incidents indicate, the rigors of the Soviet labor camp system had done anything to soften his personality. His daughter stated, "camp doesn't cure anyone's character. Quite the opposite, camp makes everyone harsher," because these are the qualities you need in order to survive.⁷⁵

Isserson's self-absorption and lack of concern for others even extended to his only grandson. At the time the Yerebins still lived in Leningrad, and Isserson would invite his daughter to come to Moscow with Aleksei. Irena Georgievna declined, citing the difficulties of an overnight train ride with a small boy. Instead, she would invite her father to Leningrad and offered to put him up in a local hotel with an elevator, so as not to aggravate his heart condition. Isserson, however, refused to make the trip and did not set eyes on his grandson until the latter was nine years old. Irena Georgievna still sputters with indignation when she recalls this. "He [Isserson] could travel to Sochi [a resort on the Black Sea] and to the Baltic," but he couldn't be bothered to travel to Leningrad to see her and her son.⁷⁶

Given these circumstances, it is nothing less than astounding that Isserson married again a few years later. His third wife was Lidiia Kuzminichna Chukreeva, who worked as a registrar at the clinic to which he had been assigned upon his return to Moscow. The two later became romantically involved, although they hesitated for some time to formalize their relations. At some point Irena Georgievna, then living in Leningrad with her family, became aware of her father's new infatuation and began to pressure him to remarry. One of her arguments was that it was "indecent" for a woman of Lidiia Kuzminichna's age to be in such a position, although it is hard to imagine this approach having much effect on someone as self-centered as Isserson. More practically, she put forth the idea of marriage as a way out of her father's housing woes, telling him that he would receive a new apartment as the result of this union. Probably as a result of this prodding, sometime in 1962 or 1963 the pair married. Irena Georgievna said that it was fortunate that at the time Marshal Bagramian, Isserson's former pupil and academy colleague, was a deputy defense minister and chief of the armed forces' rear services. He arranged for the newlyweds to receive a two-room apartment on the appropriately named Tkhachevskii Street in the northern part of Moscow.⁷⁷

Irena Georgievna described her new stepmother as a "tall, stately blonde," who was a "very good," and "very interesting woman," only four or five years older than herself. Unfortunately, she added, Lidiia Kuzminichna was as "weak-willed" as her mother had been, which evidently suited Isserson perfectly, and he could now resume his life of domestic tyranny without fear of contradiction. The force of her father's personality, she said, quickly wore his new wife down, and Lidiia Kuzminichna "did everything the way he wanted," just as it had been before his arrest.⁷⁸

To cite just one example, Lidiia Kuzminichna had to get her husband's permission in order to spend just three rubles to purchase a new pair of stockings. Isserson had always been "unbelievably cheap," according to his daughter. This tendency had been further exac-

erbated by the long years in camp and exile, which taught a man the virtues of frugality. Not that he lacked for money; he received a generous pension for the time — 360 rubles. Of this sum, he doled out to his wife approximately 90 for food, clothing, and rent. Other expenses supported Isserson's efforts to reconstitute his record collection, as well as trips to various resorts.⁷⁹ The two evidently did a fair amount of traveling together, and some photos taken from the 1960s show them with a number of friends at a rest home near Moscow.

Irena Georgievna and her son moved to Moscow in 1964, following her divorce. She said her mother persuaded her to return home, although at the time Moscow was a closed city to those Soviet citizens who weren't employed there. Her mother wrote Voroshilov to tell him that Isserson's daughter was returning to Moscow and asked for his assistance in getting her established in one of the city's many military clinics. And although Voroshilov had long been nothing more than a figurehead, he still retained some influence as a member of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet, and the request was granted. Irena Georgievna and her son were allowed to move in with her mother in the spacious apartment on Gorky (now Tverskaia) Street, where she lived until her recent death. She first worked in

the army's economic directorate and then sought to transfer to the clinic connected with the General Staff. This was not without its problems, however, and she said that the general in charge of personnel matters at first hesitated to approve her transfer, evidently disturbed by her father's arrest record. Irena Georgievna then told him not to make the decision on his own, but to ask M.V. Marshal Zakharov whether or not he should hire his former professor's daughter. Isserson's name still carried great weight among those who had studied under him, and the transfer was approved immediately.⁸⁰

However, in those days doctors were very poorly paid, and Irena Georgievna had to hold down two jobs in order to support herself, her son, and her mother, who not only received a miserly pension of 38 rubles per month, but who suffered from a serious case of bronchial asthma. When Isserson heard about this he said that his former wife should learn to live on her own pension, which indicates that he was completely out of touch with the way most people lived. This remark proved to be too much for his daughter, who exploded: "Do you understand what you're saying? My son and I will live



Isserson on vacation in Svetlogorsk, mid-1960s. This is a rare instance of Isserson smiling (courtesy Russian State Military Archives).

one way under the same roof as my aged mother, who'll live differently from us. Are you crazy, or what?"⁸¹

Her father's cavalier attitude toward money further exacerbated the pair's relations, particularly in light of Irena Georgivena's own difficult circumstances. She recalled with particular venom one of Isserson's periodic run-ins with various editorial boards, which were frequent during these years. According to this account, Isserson was paid 500 rubles for a journal article, but "became enraged" when the editors cut its length. Her father was so indignant, she said, that he sent back the money and wrote a nasty letter to the editorial



Isserson, center, with friends in Svetlogorsk, mid-1960s. Isserson's third wife, Lidiia Kuzminichna Chukreeva, is at the rear right (courtesy Russian State Military Archives).

board. The fact that her father returned such a large sum of money made a particularly strong impression on Irena Georgievna, who earned only about 250 rubles a month.⁸²

As can be seen from the above incidents, Irena Georgievna's newfound proximity to her father did nothing to improve their relations and the two often quarreled. Isserson may well have suspected that his daughter had been the driving force behind his wife's decision to divorce him. The daughter nevertheless dutifully tried to visit him at his home once a week. These visits, however, were a great trial for her. "I was always guilty of everything," she said of her father's nitpicking. To cite just one example, Isserson could not, or would not, understand why his daughter had not made a more successful career for herself and often criticized her "failure" to gain a master's or doctorate degree. This needling proved too much, and she once rounded on her father, saying, "You ruined my life. I should have been a doctor!"⁸³ Isserson's petty criticisms even extended to his daughter's personal life, of which she refused to divulge any details, reasoning that he, of all people, had no basis for reproaching her.⁸⁴

A Time of Transition

Stalin's death in March 1953 inaugurated a new chapter in the development of the Soviet armed forces. The struggle for power among the dictator's successors inevitably involved the military, and its support was critical in the removal and execution of secret police chief Beria in 1953. From this time on Khrushchev's star was in the ascendant, although his domestic policies continued to breed a good deal of resentment within the party. This burst out in the abortive revolt in 1957 of the so-called "anti-party group," which failed in large part to logistical support provided by defense minister Zhukov. Khrushchev shortly afterwards became head of the government as well and proceeded to put his erratic stamp on the country's military and domestic policies. Khrushchev was no Stalin, however, and his initiatives were a source of controversy that ultimately led to his downfall.

These years also witnessed a number of important changes in the armed forces' leadership and organization. Nikolai Aleksandrovich Bulganin, a political general in the Voroshilov mold, replaced Vasilevskii as defense minister in the post-Stalin shakeup. He was succeeded in February 1955 by Zhukov, was elevated to the party's ruling Presidium two years later. However, in October 1957 Zhukov was summarily dismissed from his party and government posts for alleged "Bonapartist" leanings and replaced by Marshal Malinovskii. Vasilevskii was eased out as deputy defense minister that same year, although many of Isserson's former pupils, such as M.V. Zakharov and Bagramian, continued to occupy high posts in the nation's military establishment.

The armed forces continued to increase in size during the first half of the decade, reaching a postwar high of 5,763,000 in 1955.⁸⁵ Thereafter they began to decrease in size and by the end of 1958 numbered 3,623,000 men.⁸⁶ In 1955 the Ground Forces were removed from the defense minister's direct control and reconstituted as a separate service. The latter received new models of tanks and artillery, as well as tactical and operational battlefield nuclear weapons. The Air Force and National Air Defense Forces were also outfitted with newer and more versatile aircraft, while surface-to-air missiles became increasingly important to the country's air defense. In 1955 the Navy tested its first submarine-launched ballistic missile, followed a few years later by the appearance of its first nuclear submarine.

Two other military-technological events during these years had a profound effect on the armed forces. In August 1953 the Soviets tested their first hydrogen bomb, the destructive yield of which far exceeded that of the atomic bomb. This was followed four years later by the USSR's successful test of an intercontinental ballistic missile. The marriage of these two systems meant that the Soviets could now hit targets in the United States within a matter of minutes. In December 1959 the Strategic Rocket Forces were formed and soon came to dominate the other services in the same way that the Ground Forces had previously done.

The reduction in the armed forces' strength was due in part to the gradual easing of tensions with the West following Stalin's death. This enabled the new leadership to bring the Korean War to an end in the summer of 1953. The withdrawal of Soviet troops from Austria two years later seemed to offer further promise of improvement. However, Soviet forces were quick to intervene in Hungary in 1956 to crush an anti-communist uprising. Periodic crises in the Middle East and Berlin threatened to spiral out of control, and real improvements in relations with the West were minimal. Moreover, by the end of the decade it became apparent that the Chinese were preparing to challenge the Soviets for primacy over the world communist movement.

Stalin's death and the subsequent relaxation of the repressive system he had created had an immediate and positive effect on the development of the army's military theory, which in many mirrored what was happening in society at large. The army's thinking on many questions was certainly in need of revision, as it had languished too long not only under the influence of the Great Patriotic War, but the peculiar Stalinist interpretation of the conflict as well. The road to recovery would inevitably involve debunking many of the misunderstandings and outright myths that had accumulated over the years.

Not least among these issues was the towering figure of Stalin himself, whose every pronouncement had been previously regarded as infallible. In the spring of 1953 an article, entitled "On Certain Factors Influencing the Development of Military Art," appeared, which for the first time, albeit in a veiled manner, questioned Stalin's heretofore dominant role in the formulation of the country's military policy. In a groundbreaking statement, the author boldly declared that although "Marxism-Leninism does not deny the role of outstanding

individuals in history,” the official ideology nevertheless “always considered and considers that the popular masses make history, and not outstanding individuals or heroes. The Communist Party,” he continued, “has always resolutely fought against the cult of personality, against ascribing to an individual any sort of special, supernatural qualities,” to the detriment of other, more important, factors.⁸⁷ To be sure, the article did not mention Stalin by name, as this would have represented a too-radical break with the previous quarter-century of official adulation. However, to a public accustomed to reading between the lines, there could be no doubt as to the target’s identity.

The same article also took on the reigning fixation with the experience of the recent war, or at least the Stalinist interpretation of the conflict. At one point the author declared that “the history of past wars shows that military art does not remain unchanged,” but rather develops unevenly over time as the result of the ceaseless struggle between old and new forms.⁸⁸ For this reason, he argued, Soviet military science should approach the experience of the Great Patriotic War critically, as “correctly understood ... historical experience is conducive to the development and improvement of military art.” On the other hand, the “clumsy and incorrect use of historical experience may lead to military art’s lagging behind practice.”⁸⁹ Once again, the point of the argument would have been obvious to the journal’s professional readership. To be sure, he concluded, the “forms and methods of waging war and military activities employed in the Second World War, to a great degree, still retain their significance for modern conditions.” However, this experience should be evaluated in the light of various technological changes, by which the author clearly meant the appearance of nuclear weapons.⁹⁰

Another author writing on the validity of the Soviet army’s wartime experience expressed a more conservative view. He attacked the belief, evidently expressed in some quarters, that the events of the recent war “are now losing their topicality and significance” under modern conditions and branded as “nihilists” and “ignoramuses” those who are “unable to use the experience of the past, nor distinguish new phenomena from old recurring ones.”⁹¹ Nevertheless, he admitted in his closing argument that “in military affairs nothing stands still,” and that “developing on the basis of the war’s generalized experience, Soviet military science must fully take into account and use everything new afforded by the modern development of science, technology, and weaponry.”⁹²

This new outlook was most visible in the shift in the official Soviet attitude toward nuclear weapons, the significance of which had been seriously underrated by Stalin. Upon the latter’s death, many of the previous restrictions against publicly discussing the subject were gradually lifted and a number of military authors joined in a lively discussion of the consequences of nuclear weapons for the country’s military art. The scope and intensity of this discussion doubtlessly reflected a good deal of pent-up frustration at previously being denied the opportunity to address such a vital topic. At the same time, the numerous articles and books dealing with nuclear weapons were evidence of the military leadership’s desire to orient the officer corps’s thinking in a highly fluid situation.

Isserson’s former academy colleague, Krasil’nikov, in this regard penned one of the more illuminating pieces. Writing in 1955, Krasil’nikov declared that “never before in human history has there ever appeared such a powerful and dangerous weapon, by means of which it would be possible to destroy not only men and materiel at the front, or ships at sea, but also cities and the civilian population in the rear.”⁹³ The presence of bacteriological and chemical weapons in the arsenals of the major powers only increases the potential for destruction and the large-scale loss of life. “All of these new weapons,” he concluded, “in conjunc-

tion with the increased capabilities of aviation and unmanned means of attack and the development of the ground troops' motorization and mechanization, are completely changing the face of war."⁹⁴

Previous critical developments in military technology (aircraft, tanks, etc.) had made themselves felt first of all in the sphere of tactics, and it was only as the result of their quantitative and qualitative growth that they eventually came to exert an effect on operational art and strategy. The appearance of atomic weapons, however, completely reversed this order, and from the very first the strategic implications of their use were obvious. Postwar developments in long-range delivery systems further strengthened the connection. As one writer noted in a 1956 article, the adoption of atomic weapons means, "strategy has acquired exceptionally powerful capabilities to affect the production of weaponry in the depth of the enemy's country, so as to reduce his strategic resources." He added that these capabilities will inevitably "influence the elaboration of new strategic tenets, relating to the construction of the armed forces and the waging of war."⁹⁵ Compared to some of the claims advanced by the next decade's theorists, this was fairly modest and reminds one of an extended strategic bombing campaign, albeit one carried out at a far higher level of destruction.

The appearance of nuclear weapons and their coupling to long-range delivery systems brought the problem of the beginning period of war into particularly sharp focus. For many of those writing in the 1950s this was an especially sensitive point, considering the near-fatal consequences of the German surprise attack in 1941. Krasil'nikov, for example, concluded that in the past a surprise attack had generally yielded the aggressor a number of temporary advantages, although these were not necessarily of a decisive character. Now, however, the presence of modern weapons makes "such a blow more dangerous," and "is pregnant with exceptionally serious strategic and military-political consequences for the countries subjected to a surprise attack."⁹⁶

Another author declared the following year that "the massive employment of modern powerful weapons is capable of inflicting immeasurably more powerful blows against an enemy than was the case in the previous war." He added that given the "skillful and timely employment" of these weapons, it is now possible "to achieve major military-political results and to quickly seize the strategic initiative."⁹⁷ Rotmistrov, for his part, was especially forthright in stressing the importance of the factor of surprise. Writing in 1955, he declared, "In a situation in which atomic and hydrogen weapons are employed, surprise is one of the decisive conditions for achieving success, not only in the battle and the operation, but in the war as a whole. In certain cases," he added, "the mass employment of the new weaponry may bring about the rapid collapse of a state," particularly if the state suffers from internal weaknesses and an unfavorable geographical position."⁹⁸ On a more ominous note, he declared that since the surprise attack is a favorite tool of the imperialist powers, the Soviet armed forces must not only be capable of repelling such a move, but also be ready as well "to inflict counterblows and even preemptive blows of terrible destructive force against the enemy."⁹⁹

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude from the flood of post-Stalin articles on the subject that the Soviets considered nuclear weapons to be the final word in warfare. To be sure, the atomic and hydrogen bombs had very quickly risen to the forefront in Soviet military calculations at all levels. Nevertheless, there existed within the military a number of serious objections to raising the status of these weapons any further. Most importantly, the more traditional services, particularly the Ground Forces, feared being displaced by the new weapon and would not give up their dominant position in the military hierarchy with-

out a fight. Another factor was the military's decades-long commitment to a combined-arms approach, in which no one combat arm or weapons system was considered supreme.

This approach was affirmed several times during these years. One of those who did was Rotmistrov, who was closely identified with the tank forces and who rarely missed an opportunity to push their agenda. Rotmistrov held that "by themselves atomic and hydrogen weapons cannot decide the fate of a war without the decisive actions of the ground troops and their modern equipment." Rather, the Ground Forces would strive to take advantage of nuclear strikes against the enemy in order to accomplish their mission.¹⁰⁰ He was seconded on this score a few months later by Krasil'nikov, who in similar terms declared that "no one single weapon can decide the fate of a war," specifically citing nuclear weapons. Instead, "all types of weapons are needed, including large armed forces" capable of waging war on the land, air, and sea.¹⁰¹

The appearance of nuclear weapons also had a profound effect on the army's views on conducting operations. Freed of many of their previous Stalinist shackles, Soviet operational theorists were now able to examine the problems of conducting operations in the nuclear age, some of them in a language Isserson would have found very familiar. One of these authors stated that "a future war's operations will be operations of the new forms of armed combat," which will include nuclear, missile, and military electronic equipment, among others.¹⁰² However, despite the revolutionary changes in the *means* of conducting the operation, its nature had changed surprisingly little since the 1930s. "The modern offensive operation," the author declared, "is the deep operation, the essence of which is determined by the capabilities of suppressing the defender's forces and waging military activities throughout the entire depth of the defending side's operational formation."¹⁰³

Indeed, the increased capabilities of nuclear weapons held out the promise of significantly easing the attacker's problem of breaking through the enemy's defensive position and pursuing the operation in depth. One author broached this subject in a 1955 article, in which he stated, "The appearance of the new means of combat of an enormous destructive power in the armies' arsenals, and their employment in modern operations, raises the possibility of conducting large-scale operations with even more decisive results."¹⁰⁴ Krasil'nikov elaborated on this idea a few months later, when he wrote that strategic operations under modern conditions might include as many as five or six *fronts* acting in concert in a theater of military activities. An offensive operation of such scope would likely involve supporting operations along maritime axes, requiring the support of one or more fleets, as well as air assets of corresponding size. Such an offensive, he calculated, might be launched along a front of 1,000 to 1,200 kilometers in breadth, by which he clearly had in mind an effort against Western forces in Europe.¹⁰⁵ He added that the depth of such operations would increase accordingly, and that the Red Army's epic 900-kilometer thrust into Manchuria would be exceeded in a future war, while air and submarine operations would be intercontinental in scope.¹⁰⁶ This was surely a scenario for conducting a full-scale ground offensive against Western Europe all the way to the Atlantic Ocean, while at the same time holding off any reinforcements from the United States.

Isserson's own views on this score were expressed at a meeting of the Military-Historical Society, held in Moscow in March 1959. This was one his earliest, if not the first, attempt to return to the public limelight following his return from exile. The society, which was riding the tide of the post-Stalin interest in the nation's military history, soon became one of his favorite venues for disseminating his views, and he was a featured speaker on many occasions over the next decade. On this occasion the topic of his address was "On

Soviet Military Science,” in which Isserson, like many others during this time, sought to clear away much of the Stalin-era obfuscation regarding the subject and restore some intellectual rigor to the discipline as a whole.

The thrust of Isserson’s remarks dealt with the question of whether the experience of World War II retained any relevance in an era of nuclear weapons. This formulation went to the heart of the ongoing debate within the Soviet armed forces and pitted those who increasingly believed that intercontinental ballistic missiles could decide the outcome of a war on their own, and those who argued for a “combined-arms” approach, which saw conventional forces playing a major role in even a full-scale nuclear conflict. Isserson’s remarks place him clearly in the latter camp and he lauded the recent war as having “opened the age of deep operations.” Such an assertion was not simply an act of nostalgia, he claimed, as “atomic and missile weaponry do not change the essential nature of the deep operation.” In fact, quite the opposite was true, as the reach and destructive power of nuclear-missile weaponry “bring to a close” the deep operation’s “historical development to its full realization,” by elevating it to global-strategic proportions.¹⁰⁷ Thus the fundamentals of the deep operation would retain their utility even in a full-scale nuclear conflict, although this certainly did not exclude adjustments that took into account the employment of nuclear weapons.

In reading these remarks, one is struck by the fact that Isserson did not take a more active role in helping to formulate Soviet military theory during this period. The answer is not exactly clear, but would seem to hinge upon two factors, the first being having to do with the nature of the Soviet state itself, and the second with Isserson’s own difficult personality.

An acquaintance stated that despite the fact that many of the country’s military leaders and others had studied under Isserson during the 1930s and had read his works, they had almost no contact with him upon his return from exile. The reason for this was twofold. Many of these former students, evidently still under the influence of the Stalinist psychology, “did not trust those who had been repressed.” Others, he remarked, assumed that those who had not taken part in the Great Patriotic War now “lagged behind in their own development” and were no longer in a position to offer an informed opinion on war in the nuclear age. “Isserson,” he concluded, “felt this and took it hard, but continued to seek contacts” among his former colleagues.¹⁰⁸

This account of events may well have been colored by Isserson’s own self-serving recollection of events. It also directly contradicts the version offered by his daughter. She stated that upon her father’s return from exile both M.V. Zakharov and Grechko offered him the opportunity to continue his military-theoretical work, although in what capacity is unknown. While Isserson was amenable to this proposal, he demanded a general’s rank in return for his services, another indication of just how sore a point his colonelcy was with him. This they were willing to do, contingent upon his acceptance of the position in question. Isserson, however, wanted the rank before he began the work and stubbornly refused to compromise on this point, and eventually turned down the offer.¹⁰⁹ This was particularly unfortunate, as it effectively sidelined him from the mainstream of Soviet military thinking during this revolutionary period in its development. Once again Isserson proved to be his own worst enemy.

Yet, for all of the revolutionary changes taking place in military affairs, Soviet strategy remained faithful to its heritage. One author commented on the “conspicuously offensive character” of Soviet military strategy, which manifested itself even in those cases where

conditions favor the defensive. He went on to say that while entire operations and even some campaigns may pursue defensive goals, it is only through the offensive that a decisive result can be achieved.¹¹⁰

The appearance of nuclear weapons was by no means an unalloyed blessing for the offensive; however, and by no means did they guarantee its success. In fact, the new means of combat contained a pronounced defensive component, the very presence of which threatened to overthrow everything the war had taught the Red Army. That conflict had demonstrated the necessity of massing overwhelming amounts of men and materiel along relatively narrow frontages, in order to break through the enemy's multi-echeloned defense and carry out the exploitation in depth. Nuclear weapons now rendered such large concentrations particularly vulnerable to the defender's attack, a circumstance that called into question many of the Red Army's most sacred postwar beliefs. One who did was Rotmistrov, who declared in 1958 that it was now necessary "to renounce certain principles of the past war's operational art." It is now necessary, he continued, "to elaborate principally new tenets for preparing for and conducting operations."¹¹¹ Another author seconded this judgment and declared that the previous war's methods of massing forces for the offensive were outdated and that attempts to duplicate these efforts in the nuclear age were "inadmissible."¹¹²

To Restore a Reputation

Despite numerous personal distractions and the problem of adjusting to life after the camps, Isserson was still able to maintain a prolific writing schedule during the 20 years following his return from exile. This achievement is all the more amazing in that it occurred at a time of life when most men are content to rest from their labors, particularly if they had suffered the hardships Isserson had. Even his unpublished work from this period runs to several hundred pages, some of them typewritten, with many more of them in Isserson's own nearly indecipherable handwriting.

It was certainly an auspicious time to begin such an undertaking, just as the Soviet Union was emerging from the long nightmare of Stalin's tyranny. Slowly but surely, some of the fear that the dictator inspired began to dissipate. A major step in the dismantling of the late dictator's legacy came in February 1956, during Khrushchev's famous "secret speech" to the Communist Party's twentieth congress in Moscow. Khrushchev, in a long and often rambling address, accused Stalin of committing enormous crimes and holding himself above the party, and of enhancing his status through the creation of a "cult of personality." This epochal speech signaled the beginning of a widespread "destalinization" campaign throughout the USSR and Eastern Europe, which continued with fits and starts until 1964. This period witnessed the mass rehabilitation of thousands, but not all, of Stalin's victims, many of them posthumously. In a nice bit of irony, the official propaganda apparatus, which once praised Stalin's every word and deed, was now turned against him, and the dictator was now held responsible for many of the country's past and present ills.

This brief period of relative freedom, while often uneven in its development and subject to the whims and needs of the ruling elite nevertheless had a number of positive results, particularly in the field of military history. For the first time in many years Soviet historians were somewhat free to address many of the burning questions from the country's recent past. One of the most important of these was the need to produce a less distorted history of the Great Patriotic War, in which over 25 million Soviet citizens died. Despite the obvi-

ous importance of this event, previous studies had been extremely superficial and had glossed over many sensitive questions, particularly the war's disastrous beginning. Moreover, the later victories were uniformly attributed to Stalin's "genius" and "far-sighted" conduct of the war, leaving nearly all the conflict's other participants in the darkness.

The most ambitious attempt to right the accumulated distortions of the Stalin era was the official six-volume *History of the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union, 1941–1945*, which appeared in the first half of the 1960s. This much-anticipated history was intended as the regime's final word on the political-military conduct of the war and thus reflected the dominant political currents of the time and the leadership's own transient needs. The latter inevitably led to a number of distortions, the most ludicrous of which is Khrushchev's name is mentioned 127 times, despite the fact that he spent the war as head of the Ukrainian communist party apparatus and as a political officer with various *front* commands. Stalin, on the other hand, although he headed the central party and government apparatus, while at the same time serving as defense commissar, chairman of the all-powerful State Defense Committee (GKO), and supreme commander-in-chief, is mentioned 121 times. His military deputy, Marshal Zhukov, whom Khrushchev had removed from his post as defense minister a few years earlier, is mentioned a mere 21 times, despite having a reputation within the USSR exceeding that of Eisenhower and MacArthur in the United States combined. However, in spite of these shortcomings, the history was certainly a step forward and in some ways proved superior to a later official history of World War II, which managed to be at the same time more informative and less truthful than its predecessor.

Isserson, who was always ready to take issue with the official view, found much to criticize in the new history's first volume, an advance copy of which he received sometime in 1960, several months before its publication. To be sure, his dissatisfaction did not extend to the volume's central political thesis, which was that the various political, military and economic measures undertaken by the Soviet leadership during the interwar period and the sacrifices they entailed, were necessary and justified by the threat from abroad. According to this "pre-Copernican" view of the world, the Soviet Union stood at the center of a vast plot by the capitalist powers of the West, whose every move was dictated by the desire to destroy the world's only socialist state. Having failed to destroy communism during the Russian Civil War, so the argument went, the capitalists then sought to accomplish this through their proxies — Germany and Japan. Thus German Nazism and Japanese "militarism" were merely the most extreme manifestations of the capitalist system, which sought to direct their aggressive tendencies against the USSR. There is no reason to believe that Isserson disagreed with this conspiratorial worldview, and given his orthodox political upbringing it would have been odd if he had.

Rather, he was much more concerned with those portions of the volume that dealt with the Red Army's lack of preparedness during the years immediately preceding the German invasion. Isserson was particularly irked by a passage that singled out Stalin's "serious miscalculation" in "evaluating the military-political situation," which not only did nothing to increase the country's readiness for war, but also actually "weakened the vigilance of the Soviet people and its armed forces."¹¹³

Even in light of what was selectively known at the time, the statement is hardly controversial, particularly as Stalin, who wielded absolute power must ultimately be held responsible for the USSR's lack of preparedness. Nevertheless, the passage prompted a lengthy retort by Isserson to the volume's editorial board in November 1960, which ran to 12 typewritten pages. In one of his strongest statements on this point, he wrote that "to level the

entire blame for the events of 1941 against Stalin alone is historically incorrect and, in essence, primitive. Such a point of view," he continued, "contradicts the materialistic understanding of history and the role of the individual in it."¹¹⁴ By this Isserson was referring to the Marxist view of history as the clash of competing class interests, which relegates the role of "great men" to a purely auxiliary function as the personification of larger forces. As a Marxist, he was certainly on firmer ground than those who only a few years before had slavishly ascribed the Soviet Union's victory in World War II to Stalin's "genius" and who now sought to blame the dictator for the disastrous beginning of the war. It is unfortunate, however, that he could not have found a more worthy topic in which to demonstrate his theoretical consistency.

Instead, good Marxist that he was, Isserson sought a deeper systemic answer to the problem of the Red Army's woeful performance in the summer of 1941. Regardless of the circumstances in which a war breaks out, he wrote, if the army is not ready it means that "there are serious shortcomings" in the country's military system. However, he charged, the authors of the first volume fail to mention the name of a "single military figure" who was responsible for the army's "mobilization and concentration" from 1938 to 1940. The authors, he added, "Diplomatically pass over this question," which was another way of saying that the omission was not accidental.¹¹⁵

Isserson's "defense" of Stalin's performance in 1941 boiled down to the contention that the dictator was badly served by his military advisers before and after the outbreak of war. "No head of government," he wrote, "no matter how brilliant he is," can do anything to affect events without the support of an "enterprising and intelligent General Staff, guided by a long-range view and a forward-looking military theory." Unfortunately, he continued, "Stalin had no such General Staff on the eve of the war," although he hastened to add "to a significant extent this was his own fault."¹¹⁶

To be sure, he continued, Stalin made a number of "miscalculations" before the war "as to the reality of and possible dates" for the German invasion, which ultimately proved decisive. However, he asked rhetorically, "does this really absolve the higher military command of all responsibility" for the disaster of 1941, and "could not these miscalculations, in certain conditions, have been corrected by an energetic General Staff, if that staff held the entire military system primed and in readiness?" He went on to claim that even if Stalin's prewar leadership had been beyond reproach, there is little he could have done to influence the events of the war's first weeks since the General Staff failed to adopt the necessary measures "so as to secure the army's mobilization and maintain it in operational readiness" to meet any eventuality. After all, he concluded, "that which occurs at the beginning of a war is prepared long before it breaks out."¹¹⁷

However, Isserson could offer no rational explanation for Stalin's perverse belief that he could avoid war with Germany in 1941. Soviet intelligence was aware of Hitler's plans almost from the beginning and dutifully reported the details of the ongoing German military buildup along the Soviet border to Stalin, who proceeded to put his own peculiar interpretation on these events. The dictator increasingly came to see these measures as a none too subtle means of pressuring the USSR into making political and economic concessions, rather than the preparations for an actual attack. Whether he actually believed Hitler's assurances that these movements were being undertaken in response to the British bomber threat or meant to disguise preparations for an invasion of the British Isles is doubtful. However, Stalin was only too quick to exchange this crude piece of disinformation for an equally improbable fantasy of his own making.

To give the devil his due, Stalin's thinking was based upon the entirely logical, if ultimately incorrect, assumption that Hitler would not dare attack the Soviet Union while the British remained undefeated, in order to avoid the sort of two-front war, which had proved Germany's undoing in 1914–18. However, at this point Stalin's own highly conspiratorial turn of mind led him astray, when he convinced himself that Hitler was not in complete control of his own army and that anti-Soviet generals might try to incite a war with the USSR by staging a border incident or some other "provocation." Thus the dictator's main concern in the final weeks preceding the German invasion was to avoid any measures that might give the latter offense and start a war for which the Red Army was manifestly not ready. These measures ranged from Stalin's veto of the General Staff's plan for a preemptive attack against the German forces in Poland to his refusal to allow the frontier military district commanders to put their forces on alert. Ultimately then, Stalin was too clever by half, and the master of political treachery found himself fooled not so much by Hitler as by himself.

The official history's version of events was in partial agreement with Isserson, although the motivation behind its conclusions was more than a little suspect. This was probably because Zhukov had served as chief of the General Staff during the six months preceding the outbreak of the war and it now behooved Khrushchev to highlight the marshal's less than stellar role in the war's first months. Thus the official history could charge, "Senior officers in the People's Commissariat of Defense and the General Staff, displaying tardiness, failed to take advantage of the objective opportunities for repulsing enemy aggression." Even this weak attempt to affix responsibility on someone other than Stalin was immediately watered down in the next sentence, which spoke of the "serious harm" caused by the "unjustified repressions" of 1937–38.¹¹⁸ Such flaccid declarations, however, failed to suit Isserson, who brusquely dismissed these conclusions by declaring that "tardiness and the failure to take advantage of objective opportunities is one thing — carelessness and shortsightedness are another."¹¹⁹

To Isserson, one of the most glaring of the high command's mistakes during the immediate prewar period was its failure to adjust to the new strategic situation which resulted from the partition of Poland and the incorporation of the Baltic States into the Soviet Union in 1939–40. The sudden removal of the Soviet frontier several hundred kilometers to the west immediately rendered obsolete the Red Army's previous strategic calculations and demanded "the immediate adoption of a series of practical measures in the sphere of mobilization, concentration, engineering support, and the adoption of a corresponding operational distribution of forces."¹²⁰ The General Staff utterly failed to do this, he charged, despite the evidence of Poland, France and the Balkans, which demonstrated that the Germans were capable of launching a surprise invasion with a fully mobilized army. To not prepare the army and the theater of military activities for this possibility, whatever the government may have thought, was for him evidence of the General Staff's "carelessness and lack of foresight, so inadmissible in the army's highest strategic post."¹²¹

There is a good deal of truth in these accusations and the General Staff was certainly remiss in carrying out its duties during the final years preceding the German invasion. Among the most serious of these lapses was the ill-considered decision to demolish the existing defensive positions along the pre-1939 border and move them to the new frontier, which meant that in June 1941 the old fortifications no longer existed and the new ones were not yet completed, leaving the Red Army worse off than before. Moreover, the new fortifications were often sited too close to the frontier to be effective, as Marshal Zhukov later admit-

ted.¹²² The same was true of a number of the “covering armies,” which occupied dangerously exposed salients close to the frontier and were thus quickly surrounded in the early days of the war. Another major error was the decision to station a disproportionately large percentage of the army’s forces, including the new mechanized corps, south of the Pripiat Marshes, thus weakening Soviet forces in Belorussia covering the traditional invasion route toward Moscow.

To be sure, Isserson was somewhat more forgiving a few years later and allowed that some of the higher-ranking officers within the General Staff apparatus (although, evidently, not the chief of staff) “understood that the situation in the beginning period of war might develop in a completely different manner.” Some of these officers, along with their colleagues from the General Staff Academy, he continued, even “spoke about this quite specifically,” while backing up their arguments with the appropriate calculations. “However,” he noted, “these conversations were carried out behind closed doors and went no further than their offices.” “As a result, the situation in which the Great Patriotic War began proved unexpected for the entire subjective strategic and military-theoretical orientation of our high command,” and was directly responsible for its inability to cope with an unexpected and rapidly changing situation. “This orientation,” he concluded, “in which our command had been raised for years, continued through inertia to influence military speculation,” long after it had ceased to reflect the emerging military realities.¹²³

Although Isserson’s criticisms never saw the light of day, they were shared by a number of high-ranking individuals. One of these was Marshal Sergei Semenovich Biriuzov, then chief of the General Staff. In a 1964 article Biriuzov wrote, “A great portion of the blame for the Soviet armed forces’ insufficient preparedness lies with the former leadership of the People’s Commissariat of Defense and especially the General Staff, which committed a series of mistakes on matters of operational and mobilization planning.” He went on to add that these individuals still expected a war to begin with an initial clash of the covering armies, while the main forces of both sides mobilized in the rear, a contention that has since been shown to be false.¹²⁴ Moreover, the obvious political goal of blackening the reputations of such men as Voroshilov and Zhukov is all too obvious here.

Isserson’s critique, whatever the merits of its particulars, is, in the end, too sweeping. Most egregiously, he ignores the extent to which the General Staff, like the rest of the military establishment, was completely under the thumb of one man — Stalin. Zhukov later recalled that at the time Stalin enjoyed tremendous authority within the country and there was no one, military or civilian, with the stature to challenge his judgment.¹²⁵ Moreover, Stalin, as head of the party and government apparatus, had access to intelligence denied even the highest military authorities, and he could always claim to be better informed. Finally, and most decisively, the commanders who made up Stalin’s military entourage had been acquainted with many of those who had been cut down during the purges and, whatever their feelings may have been regarding the guilt or innocence of their former comrades, they could have had no doubts as to who stood behind the killings. Under the circumstances, to expect that these men would dare undertake independent strategic decisions “independent of the considerations of government circles on this matter,” as Isserson suggested, is simply wishful thinking.¹²⁶

Nor is Isserson’s criticism of the General Staff very convincing for failing, once the war began, “to remove events from the chaos” and “to subordinate them to a specific strategic idea,” so as “to create an organized front and halt the enemy invasion on a selected strategic line.”¹²⁷ These are merely grand phrases with little grounding in the reality of the time,

and entirely unworthy of their author. What ultimately stopped the German advance was not the high command's adherence to some abstract formula, but the fortitude of the individual Soviet soldier, the country's increasing level of military production, and the factors of time and space, which worked ultimately to defeat the Germans.

At times Isserson's criticism of the General Staff leads one to suspect that there might be other, unstated reasons for his wrath. In support of this view, one need only note that the prewar General Staff was headed successively by Shaposhnikov (June 1937 to August 1940), Meretskov (August 1940 to January 1941), and Zhukov (January to July 1941), followed once more by Shaposhnikov, who served as chief of staff until ill health forced him to retire in mid-1942. As has been shown, Isserson's dislike of Shaposhnikov dates from the latter's tenure as chief of the Frunze Military Academy in the early 1930s and his failure to support the new ideas coming out of the operational department, headed by Isserson. Isserson's relations with Meretskov also seem to have been rocky, although solid proof is lacking, and he claimed to have been on good terms with Zhukov during their service together in Belorussia. However, the tenure of the latter two in charge of the General Staff was too brief to have had any significant impact on the Red Army's readiness for war in 1941. Thus by default Shaposhnikov becomes the chief culprit (after Stalin, of course) behind the army's disastrous performance at the beginning of the war.

None of the above is meant to imply by any means that Isserson was an apologist for Stalin. Rather, these statements indicate that Isserson's views of the dictator at this time were more nuanced than his later public writings would lead one to believe, and that he could at times stray from the official anti-Stalinism, at least when settling other scores. For all of his errors of emphasis, however, Isserson's comments were a healthy antidote to some of the more extreme anti-Stalinist statements then appearing in the Soviet press. This is by no means to imply that the overall thrust of the anti-Stalin campaign was incorrect. Stalin was a brutal murderer whose policies led to the deaths of millions of his fellow countrymen and whose count of victims exceeds even that of his fellow dictator, Hitler. Moreover, psychologically speaking, the anti-Stalin campaign was a necessary first step to cleanse Soviet society of the baleful excrescences of his rule. Here, too, Isserson played his part.

As a man nears the end of his appointed time on Earth he may well reflect upon the life he has led — what he has accomplished and what remains undone. Isserson had more reason than most to dwell upon the past. In his moments of self-examination he may well have reflected upon how his life had been neatly cleft in two by his arrest in 1941; this had not only caused him and his family untold hardship, but had also deprived him of the opportunity of serving his country during its greatest trial. This was all the more galling, as other men, many of them former students, were making brilliant careers for themselves while realizing his theories in countless offensive operations.

Thus it is likely that a good deal of Isserson's dissatisfaction with the first volume of the official war history was caused by the authors' inexplicable failure to mention him as having played any part in the development of the Red Army's prewar military thinking. This was done despite the fact that many lesser figures, such as Belitskii, Varfolomeev, Vol'pe, Kolenkovskii, Melikov, Krasil'nikov, Shilovskii, Mezheninov, and others, were praised as having played a "well-known role" in the formation of Soviet military theory during the interwar period.¹²⁸ In this case, the editors could not even claim that Isserson had been left out due to his arrest, as Varfolomeev, Vol'pe, Melikov, Mezheninov, and several others had all been repressed. Nor was his name mentioned in the volume's section devoted to the development of the army's prewar theory of operational art, which was an

even more egregious omission.¹²⁹ The latter slight must have been particularly galling to Isserson, as Marshal Bagramian, one of his former students, was a member of the history's editorial board.

Moreover, Isserson had other reason to believe that his contribution to the development of the Red Army's military theory and, by extension, its victory during the Great Patriotic War, was being publicly slighted. To a man with his suspicious turn of mind, there was no lack of examples of this among the large amount of memoir literature and other studies being released at this time.

One such work was certainly Maj. Gen. Semenov's *A Short Study of the Development of Soviet Operational Art*, which appeared in 1960 and which sought to trace the history of this phenomenon from as far back as the Napoleonic Wars through World War II. In the chapter devoted to the interwar development of the Red Army's operational art, there is no mention of Isserson, although the ritual obeisance is made to Triandafillov. This was done despite the fact that a good deal of the chapter lays out in great detail the formula for conducting the deep operation, which is lifted directly from Isserson's works.¹³⁰ A similar omission occurred a few years later in an article dealing with the development of Soviet military strategy between the wars.¹³¹

Isserson was further damned with faint praise in a 1962 article dealing with the pre-war development of operational art. The author, a retired colonel, dutifully listed several of those who played a part in elaborating the army's operational theory up until 1938. These included Golubev, Tukhachevskii, Melikov, Yegorov, Sediakin, Varfolomeev, and Triandafillov, among others.¹³² The article, however, mentions Isserson only once, in connection with the latter's 1932 book, *The Evolution of Operational Art*. He did praise the work, however, calling it "an original formulation of the problem of the new forms of combat on an operational scale," although the entire thrust of this statement was to illustrate its influence on the German army.¹³³

For a man as jealous of his reputation as Isserson, such omissions were intolerable, and he was determined to right this deeply felt wrong. In fact, the twenty remaining years of his life following his return to Moscow may be viewed as an unceasing campaign to set to rights his legacy. His efforts in this regard resemble that of a similar campaign waged by Liddell Hart in the West following the end of World War II, although with much less success than the latter. Isserson's campaign was conducted through any number of journal articles and public addresses, plus the occasional angry letter to the editors of any publication he felt had erred in its assessment of his role.

Since Isserson was effectively barred from making any significant contribution to Soviet military theory during these years, he sought to make his presence felt in the only way now open to him — military history. This circumstance that dovetailed nicely with the new feeling of openness in Soviet society and the general desire to lift the curtain on some aspects of the recent Stalinist past. One of the chief institutional beneficiaries of this campaign was the Soviet military, thousands of whose members had been falsely accused of treason and executed during the purges. Moreover, despite its victory in World War II, the armed forces continued to live with a stain on their honor. During this time many of these commanders, among whom the most prominent were Tukhachevskii, Uborevich, Yakir, and Yegorov, were not only rehabilitated, but also raised to the status of official martyrs. They and others quickly became the subject of countless articles in the official press, in which they were lavishly praised for their progressive military views, which were often favorably contrasted with those of the Stalinist military leadership under defense commissar Voroshilov. In gen-

eral, this was a positive development, as it allowed historians and the general public to explore, albeit within narrowly prescribed limits, the country's recent tragic past. There were excesses, however, and the fixation with Stalin's and Beria's crimes often obscured fundamental systemic problems.

Easily the most prominent of the repressed commanders was Tukhachevskii, who quickly became the official "poster boy" for Stalin's military victims. During this time he became the subject of two worshipful biographies and other works which praised both his military and personal qualities, while glossing over his obvious failings as a human being. In 1964 a two-volume collection of the marshal's works was also released. It would have been surprising if Isserson, given his long, albeit at times contentious, relationship with Tukhachevskii, had remained above the discussion of the marshal's legacy. Isserson's contribution to this campaign appeared in the *Military-Historical Journal* in April 1963, under the title "A Contemporary's Notes about Tukhachevskii." The article painted a very sympathetic portrait of the deceased marshal and credited him with the strategic foresight to predict the nature of a German attack on the Soviet Union, which was in keeping with the reigning orthodoxy that had it not been for the 1937–38 purges the Soviet Union would have been spared many of the horrors of 1941.¹³⁴

The article was actually a greatly reduced version of a book-length manuscript entitled *A Commander's Fate*, and thereby hangs a tale illustrating the difficulties of airing the truth about the country's recent military past. Isserson probably submitted his manuscript in the early weeks of 1963 to the Military Publishing House, the Ministry of Defense's publishing organ. He evidently hoped that the momentum of the ongoing destalinization campaign would be sufficient to ensure publication, despite the presence of a number of controversial (for the time) passages dealing with Stalin and the effects of his military purge on the armed forces' readiness for war in 1941. The publishers seem to have agreed and Isserson later wrote that the manuscript had already been typeset, when suddenly it was pulled from production.¹³⁵ This implies that the decision to publish had been rescinded at the last minute, no doubt due to a case of "cold feet" at the publisher's, or to orders from above, which amounted to much the same thing.

On June 4, 1963, a Maj.-Gen. Kopytin of the publishing house's directorate rather brusquely informed Isserson that his manuscript had been rejected. By way of justification, he cited the publishing house's ongoing plans to issue a "popular biography" of Tukhachevskii, a two-volume collection of the marshal's selected works, an "historical-biographical sketch," and a collection of reminiscences of those who had served with Tukhachevskii. On this point Kopytin proceeded to add insult to injury by suggesting that Isserson submit for inclusion in the latter publication a portion of his recent article on Tukhachevskii.¹³⁶ Needless to say, Isserson did not respond to this lame attempt to fob him off, and the article was never reprinted.

Kopytin's stated reasons for rejecting the manuscript were manifestly ridiculous and unconvincing for a number of reasons. For one, the Military Publishing House had never before had any qualms about publishing any number of worthless books on a particular subject in pursuit of the regime's agitation and propaganda goals. Secondly, both Aleksandr Ivanovich Todorskii's and Lev Veniaminovich Nikulin's "popular biographies" of Tukhachevskii, which appeared in 1963–64, can best be described as a "puff pieces," utterly devoid of any historical value. Even a cursory comparison of Isserson's manuscript with these works is to place the latter in an extremely unfavorable light, both in terms of the range of topics it covers, as well as in the depth of its analysis.

The true reason behind the publishing house's decision was Isserson's harsh critique of Stalin, which was too controversial for even those relatively "liberal" times. So sweeping was the author's indictment of Stalin that the publishers may well have feared that it might even call into question the legitimacy of the Soviet state as established by Stalin, although this was certainly not Isserson's intent. Thus rather than risk the wrath of the political authorities, the cautious military bureaucrats in charge of these matters chose the safe way out of their dilemma and, in effect, banned the book. Ironically, the *glasnost*-era and post-Soviet revelations of Stalin's crimes were far more damning and make Isserson's criticisms seem quite mild in comparison, and for this reason the manuscript will probably never be published, although the author's typewritten copy remains in the military archives.

The rejection was a great blow to Isserson and no doubt confirmed his jaundiced view of the country's military-historical establishment. He did not grieve for long, however, and soon was running his own campaign to overturn or bypass the publishing house's decision. This was accomplished through an acquaintance, Viktor Nikolaevich Il'in, who took it upon himself disseminate *A Commander's Fate* among those in the military and literary community who might be expected to render a favorable verdict. One of the recipients was Fleet Admiral Ivan Stepanovich Isakov, who wrote Il'in on March 30, 1964, that he was returning the manuscript with thanks and called it "a very interesting and useful work." And while Isakov was obviously not against publication, he cautioned Il'in that this would be impossible without the approval of Marshal Biriuzov.¹³⁷ That the admiral considered it necessary to go this high for approval indicates just how sensitive were the questions which Isserson had raised.

Il'in evidently forwarded a copy of the manuscript to Konstantin Mikhailovich Simonov for his comments. Simonov had been a noted correspondent at the front and enjoyed a good deal of success following the war as the Soviet Union's leading literary interpreter of the conflict. He had also served as the head of the Union of Soviet Writers and was still well connected with the country's political and literary elite. Simonov replied to Il'in on May 14, 1964, that he had read Isserson's work for the second time "with interest," and that as a literary man he "would consider it possible, in principle," to recommend it for publication in one of the literary monthlies. He cautioned, however, that certain of the manuscript's passages "will obviously cause controversy. But I think that such controversy is useful and will only lead to a clearer understanding of the truth, and one should not be afraid of controversy."¹³⁸

Simonov's endorsement was not unqualified, however, and he took issue with what he regarded as Isserson's "sweeping" judgment that by the start of the war the Red Army lacked a "tested" command echelon as the result of Stalin's military purge. "Despite the terrible devastation of the army, which Stalin committed in 1937–38," he wrote, the Red Army had nonetheless begun to cultivate a sizable contingent of commanders with experience in modern war, who went on to make their mark in the Great Patriotic War. To Simonov, Isserson's indictment was far too broad and "inaccurate," and he singled out for particular criticism the manuscript's final chapter that, he wrote, contained "elements of a lack of historical objectivity."¹³⁹

One is sorely tempted upon first reading the final passage of Simonov's letter to dismiss his objections outright as just so much Marxist boilerplate. All too often during the Soviet regime charging a political or academic opponent with a "lack of objectivity" was a ploy used to stifle debate, regardless of the merits of the argument, and Simonov here showed himself to be no better. Upon reflection, however, one cannot help but concede, to a degree,

the justice of Simonov's objections. Isserson was undoubtedly right in stating that the pre-war purge of the Red Army took a terrible toll of the experienced commanders and left the armed forces significantly weakened at an extremely critical time. At the same time, however, the indictment is too broad and does not account for a number of younger commanders (Vasilevskii, Ivan Danilovich Cherniakhovskii, and Biriuzov, etc.) who went on to distinguish themselves during the war. In many cases these and other commanders owed their rapid advancement in the years immediately preceding the war to the wholesale destruction of the purges, which killed off their immediate superiors and gave them an opportunity to assume positions they might otherwise have been promoted to in less perilous times. To be sure, these fortunate individuals had to learn their craft in the heat of war, often at the cost of their men's lives, although this does not mean that their predecessors would necessarily have performed any better.

It probably showed this letter to Isserson, although it is also possible that Simonov wrote Isserson directly during the following months. In any event, sometime in the spring of 1964 Isserson replied to thank Simonov for his previous comments and suggestions, which showed just how much he felt he needed the latter's assistance. He also complained that *A Commander's Fate* had brought him "only grief and unpleasantness" and that although it had been favorably reviewed the prospects for publication were remote. He readily admitted that the manuscript was not one of his "more or less successful works," and that it indeed contained "a lot of shortcomings and flabby passages," which he attributed to the fact that this was his first foray into historical literature after a lifetime of writing military-theoretical works.¹⁴⁰ Perhaps the work's saving grace, he continued, was its "sincerity" and the fact that it was written "from the heart," adding that he had written "that which I knew and that which I thought and considered necessary to write, neither acting against my conscience or taking into account the generally accepted and already-established views on these questions."¹⁴¹

Isserson correctly guessed the true reason behind the publisher's change of heart as being the standard Soviet fear of displaying initiative, "lest something go wrong."¹⁴² As the result of this fear, he continued, warning to the subject, "the slightest deviation from the fixed path and expression of one's differing point of view frightens the editorial boards, which shy away from each new thought like the plague."¹⁴³ The sum of these prohibitions and conventions had an obviously deleterious effect both on the veracity of Soviet military-historical literature, as well as its readability. Isserson focused on this dilemma, arguing that the work of many Soviet writers "appears lackluster and faded." This is because, he continued, the authors do not express "their point of view and hide behind the curtains of an already-established historical background, and thus events are depicted according to an already-established form," and that even different individuals are "drawn on one and the same ready-made historical canvas."¹⁴⁴ Those who have read the military-historical literature of this period will recall the pat phrases of the day, such as "his life was tragically cut short," or "he fell victim to a false denunciation," will readily agree.

Isserson closed his letter by declaring "I do not want to lose hope" that a publisher, "free from the fetters of the standard understanding of the events of 1937" might yet be found which would take upon itself the risk of publishing his work. "I myself am powerless to undertake anything," he declared, adding that he found it personally "difficult" to make the rounds of the publishing houses, and appealed to Simonov to employ his professional authority in the matter.¹⁴⁵

Whatever efforts Simonov may have made on Isserson's behalf came to nothing. In any

event, the time for such endeavors was rapidly running out and events taking place in the higher echelons of Soviet political life would soon make the publication of such works unthinkable. By mid-1965 the general direction of the new leadership's domestic policy under Leonid Il'ich Brezhnev and Aleksei Nikolaevich Kosygin was clear: stability and retrenchment. Not only was the anti-Stalin campaign called off, but also as time passed the dictator's deeds were increasingly put in a positive light. And while occasional references to Stalin's "cult of personality" could still be found in the official press, mention of the deaths of his military victims practically disappeared. Years later Isserson confided to an acquaintance that he had given up on the idea of seeing the work published in his lifetime. "Maybe it will come out in 20–30 years, like many of my manuscripts about the war, which I'm sending to the archives."¹⁴⁶ In fact, the manuscript remained in the author's possession until his death, after which it was turned over by his descendants to one of the state military archives in 1988, along with the rest of his voluminous writings.

CHAPTER 12

Final Years

Swimming Against the Tide

The early 1960s in the Soviet Union were dominated by Khrushchev's erratic attempts to reform the Stalinist system at home, although he was too much a product of the system itself to effect a complete break with the past. Abroad, despite repeated declarations regarding the need for "peaceful coexistence" with the capitalist world, Khrushchev's own precipitous actions threatened to involve the USSR in a major conflict with the United States and its allies. These included the Berlin Crisis in 1961, in which Soviet forces faced down NATO troops over the divided city. This was followed a year later by the much more serious Cuban Missile Crisis, which nearly brought about a full-scale nuclear war between the superpowers and which was only resolved when it became clear that the Soviets could not challenge local American military superiority.

During these years the Soviet armed forces continued to be dominated by Isserson's former pupils, although their reign was gradually coming to an end. For example, Malinovskii died in 1967 and was replaced as defense minister by Grechko, another former student. Another, M.V. Zakharov, headed the General Staff from 1960 to 1963, and then again from 1964 to 1971. In early 1960 the Soviets announced a further reduction in the size of their armed forces of 1,200,000 to 2,423,000, a move that had a disproportionate impact on the hitherto dominant Ground Forces.¹ In 1964 the latter were once again subordinated to the minister of defense, only to be reconstituted as a separate service in 1967.

The chief beneficiary of these changes was the newly created Strategic Rocket Forces. There were certainly sound strategic reasons for this shift, particularly in light of the growing American arsenal of ICBMs, submarine-launched nuclear missiles, and the threat posed by a large intercontinental bomber force. Other considerations included Khrushchev's desire to lighten the country's onerous defense burden by reducing the overall size of the armed forces and shifting the prime responsibility to the relatively fixed-cost strategic missile forces, both on land and sea. Another and not inconsiderable factor was Khrushchev's tendency to enthusiastically embrace new ideas and methods without fully thinking through the possible consequences of his actions, a psychological trait that would eventually contribute to his downfall.

The new leadership of Brezhnev and Kosygin set out to reverse many of their predecessor's policies, particularly in the domestic sphere, where the specter of a neo-Stalinist

restoration clouded the country's cultural life for the next twenty years. Abroad, the new regime adopted a more uncompromising line toward the United States. At the same time the Soviets felt themselves increasingly threatened by China, which exploded its first atomic bomb in the autumn of 1964. For these and other reasons, the new leadership embarked on a massive military buildup in all fields. It was particularly intent on increasing its arsenal of strategic nuclear weapons, and by the end of the decade the USSR had achieved overall parity with the United States in nuclear forces. Conventional forces were also improved and new weapons systems replaced each other with assembly line frequency. The navy was a particular beneficiary, as it clearly intended to challenge the American domination of the seas. The armed forces also began to steadily increase in size from the late 1960s onward.

The creation of the Strategic Rocket Forces marks a decisive shift in Soviet military thinking away from the previous continental focus, even employing nuclear weapons, to one involving global nuclear war and the possibilities therein. The bible for the new era was Marshal Sokolovskii's *Military Strategy*, which first appeared in 1962 and which was reissued twice more during the decade. *Military Strategy* was particularly significant in that it was the first public work on the subject since Svechin's effort more than thirty years earlier. As such, Sokolovskii's book contained the broad outlines of how Soviet military strategy would evolve throughout much of the decade.

For all of its revolutionary prescriptions for waging war in the atomic age, *Military Strategy* owed a great deal to the traditional Soviet political view of war, which had in fact changed very little over the years. For example, the authors were adamant in their opposition to theories then popular in the West that maintained that the highly destructive nature of modern weapons meant that war had ceased to be an instrument of policy. On the contrary, they declared, "the essence of war as the continuation of politics remains the same, independent of changes in equipment and weaponry."² As before, war was viewed as the natural outgrowth of the class struggle throughout history. Of the varieties of wars the most destructive was a conflict between the socialist and capitalist states, which will be a "*decisive armed collision of two opposing world social systems*," and which will play out as a world war (emphasis in the original).³ Nor was the outcome of such a war in doubt, despite the likelihood that both sides would employ their full arsenal of nuclear and other weapons. The Soviet political-military leadership was not ready to publicly question the sanctity of the hoary myth that the socialist system was fated by history to succeed capitalism throughout the world, a proposition that had its military element as well. Thus despite the unprecedented destructiveness of such a conflict, the war will inevitably "*end in the victory of the progressive communist socio-political formation*" over the capitalist system, which is in any event doomed (emphasis in the original).⁴

Indeed, such a high-stakes conflict presupposes the employment of the most decisive means available, now represented by nuclear weapons, delivered to their targets by intercontinental ballistic missiles. The authors of *Military Strategy* declared that "any armed conflict" between the nuclear powers "will inevitably grow into an all-out nuclear war," in which the chief weapons will be nuclear missiles.⁵ Under these circumstances, "*Military strategy ... is becoming the strategy of deep nuclear-missile blows in conjunction with the activities of all the armed services for the purpose of simultaneously hitting and destroying the enemy's economic potential and armed forces throughout the entire depth of his territory for achieving the war's aims in a short time*" (emphasis in the original).⁶

Given this scenario, the leading role of the Strategic Rocket Forces could not be dis-

puted, although it took opinion some time to coalesce around this question. In 1960, for example, Marshal Biriuzov still professed a fairly tentative view on this matter. "The chief expression of a state's military might and indicator of its ability to successfully wage under modern conditions," he wrote, "is not so much a large air park, its ground forces and navy, so much as its nuclear-missile potential."⁷ Five years later Sokolovskii was far more emphatic, when he wrote that the Strategic Rocket Forces "have become the armed forces' main and decisive service."⁸

However, it would be a mistake to conclude that the nation's political-military leadership had decided to place all of its eggs in one basket. The armed forces' combined-arms tradition was too strong for a completely one-sided approach. The authors of *Military Strategy* made this clear when they declared that even in an all-out nuclear war "final victory will be achieved only as a result of the mutual efforts of all the services of the armed forces."⁹ Another author stated that same year that with the appearance of nuclear weaponry "victory in a war may be achieved by its playing the leading role, but in conjunction with other means, including earlier ones."¹⁰ He then adduced a number of reasons for the continued utility of conventional weapons, even in a major nuclear war. Among these was the limited supply of nuclear weapons, which must inevitably be supplemented by conventional systems. Another was the presence of primary and secondary strategic and operational directions, in which nuclear weapons would most likely be employed along the former, with conventional in the latter. Finally, he argued, conventional weapons may be just as effective in destroying some of the enemy's nuclear targets as nuclear ones.¹¹

It was clear that under this new arrangement the Ground Forces would play a subordinate role, at least in a conflict between nuclear powers. According to this scenario, the Strategic Rocket Forces will attack immediately upon the outbreak of war targets deep in the enemy rear — his offensive nuclear weapons, economic infrastructure, political and military command and control centers, as well as other important military objectives "in the interests of quickly defeating the enemy states as a whole."¹² These strikes would create favorable conditions for an offensive by the Ground Forces, in conjunction with the other services, in order to destroy the enemy's remaining forces in a continental theater of military activities and occupy his territory. Under these circumstances, the authors concluded, it is not for the Rocket Forces to have their activities "coincide with those of the Ground Forces, but just the opposite, the Ground Forces must fully use the results of the Rocket Forces' blows to carry out their own tasks."¹³

The modern battlefield, it was now held, would differ substantially from that of the past, being distinguished primarily by a greater degree of destruction and dynamism. Operations on land are now determined by the results of nuclear missile strikes against the enemy's troop concentrations, air assets, and stockpiles of nuclear weapons. These strikes would inevitably create broad zones of destruction and radioactive contamination in which enemy forces would be few or nonexistent. Under these circumstances, the way will be open for "waging broad, maneuver offensive activities by the highly mobile mechanized forces." This will spell the end of the relatively stable fronts of recent wars, and "positional war will evidently be a thing of the past."¹⁴ Another writer anticipated these general conclusions in 1961, declaring that "the conduct of modern offensive operations is characterized by the activities of forces along separate axes and the presence of open flanks for both the attacker and the defender," as well as the likelihood of "large gaps between formations, which create the opportunity for maneuver along the flank and in the rear of the defender's dispersed grouping for their encirclement and destruction."¹⁵

The presence and likely employment of nuclear weapons would also significantly affect the methods of organizing the attacker's forces for the offensive. The authors of *Military Strategy* maintained that in the future "shock groups will be created in the depth at a significant distance from the front," due to their vulnerability to nuclear strikes. In a departure from previous practice, the attacker's "tank armies will operate in the first echelon along the main directions," in order to carry out "a headlong and uninterrupted advance to a great depth, all the way to the operation's final goal."¹⁶ The authors made no mention of a second echelon, and indeed its existence was in some doubt during these years. One group of authors asserted in a contemporaneous article that given the destructive power of atomic weapons, second echelons in an offensive operation "are losing their former meaning" and that under modern conditions second echelons are "coming more to resemble reserves."¹⁷ Another pair of writers was less ready to dismiss the concept and claimed that the expected heavy losses in men and equipment in a future war made the presence of second echelons even more critical, particularly while conducting mobile operations to a great depth.¹⁸ In fact, the presence of two such contradictory articles indicates that opinion on this score remained divided.

Finally, the destructive power of nuclear weapons, coupled with a rapid means of delivering them to targets thousands of kilometers away, held out the prospect of a quick resolution. And while the authors of *Military Strategy* warned that the Soviet Union "must seriously prepare for a prolonged war," they nevertheless held out the hope that nuclear missiles would make it possible "to achieve a war's goals relatively quickly."¹⁹ This conclusion was deeply at odds with everything that had gone before, which held that a final victory could only be achieved through the gradual accumulation of any number of intermediate, or partial victories. This was true of much of the Red Army's prewar theory, which postulated a long and bitter struggle against a capitalist coalition, from which the members would have to be removed one by one. Now, it was argued, "modern strategic means," by which the authors of *Military Strategy* meant nuclear missiles, enable the political-military leadership "to achieve victory in a war, often without the participation of the tactical and operational levels' forces and weapons," which means that "now partial successes may be conditioned by successes of an overall strategic character."²⁰

Much that was being written during these years flew in the face of what Isserson had been advocating for most of his adult life. Although he was no reactionary, he may well have resented some of the more extravagant claims on behalf of nuclear weapons and the resultant diminution of the role of conventional forces, particularly the ground forces. *Military Strategy's* snide condemnation of "people, burdened by past experience, in love with this experience, incapable of seeing what is new," certainly did nothing to ease any misgivings he may have had about the nation's military course.²¹

In fact, there is plenty of evidence that Isserson was deeply concerned with the development of Soviet military theory during these years. The evidence for this comes from Yurii Yakovlevich Kirshin, who during this time was a junior officer teaching at the Lenin Military-Political Academy. Kirshin would often meet with Isserson at the latter's apartment, where they would discuss the problems of war in the nuclear age. This was an issue which Isserson "thought continuously about," he recalled, particularly "the necessity of elaborating a theory of the beginning period of a nuclear-missile war."²² However, Isserson's efforts were hobbled by his lack of access to classified materials, which would certainly have lent more weight to his arguments. At one point he even asked Kirshin to intercede on his behalf. Despite the latter's best efforts, however, this request was turned down. This was particu-

larly unfortunate, he concluded, as Isserson, despite his advanced age, remained “an order above the many Soviet commanders and military theoreticians,” and could have made an “enormous contribution to the development of military science and the revolution in military affairs.”²³

Given these impediments, Isserson fought back as best as he could, although he had to tread lightly. Even in these relatively liberal times one could not stray too far from the official line. One could, however, make one’s point by delving into the Red Army’s rich experience in conducting operations during World War II and, by highlighting this, strike a blow at some of the more enthusiastic proponents of a nuclear-missile war. This may well have been the impetus for his speech on the occasion of twentieth anniversary of the Belorussian operation, delivered to the Military-Historical Society on May 15, 1964.

Isserson opened his remarks by admitting that he “had not had occasion” to take part in the operation, or in the war as a whole, the import of which was surely not lost on his audience. However, he continued, he had been one of those engaged “in elaborating the theory of the deep operation” before the war.²⁴ As such, he could view with pride the conduct of the Belorussian operation, which he called an “outstanding example of the deep operation,” in which “the deep forms of combat found their application on an unprecedented large scale and unfolded to a particularly great depth.” He added that the “study of this operation has particularly important significance for our operational art,” by which he clearly meant that its lessons had not lost their validity even in the nuclear age.²⁵

Isserson would not be Isserson, however, unless he could come up with a better way to conduct the operation. He criticized the operation’s planners for dispersing the various ERPs too far apart from each other to the point that their overall effectiveness was diminished. His solution was to consolidate the *fronts*’ mobile forces into two large ERPs. The first would consist of two tank corps, a KMG, and the 5th Guards Tank Army. Following its commitment along the boundary between the First Baltic and Third Belorussian fronts north of Vitebsk, the ERP would advance into the depth along the line Lepel’-Minsk. Another ERP would consist of the First Belorussian Front’s two tank corps and the cavalry-mechanized group, this time attacking along a single axis through Bobruisk north for a linkup with the other ERP at Minsk. He claimed that such an attack along converging axes would have enabled the Red Army to pinch off the “entire Belorussian bulge” and inflict on the Germans a loss similar to the one they dealt the Poles in 1939.²⁶

The organization of two major breakthroughs, instead of six separate ones, is certainly appealing and, if successful, might well have resulted in an even larger haul of prisoners around Minsk. Isserson, however, was probably underestimating the difficulty of supporting such an effort in the region’s swampy and forested terrain, which was hardly conducive to the employment of large mechanized formations.

Isserson was on firmer ground in criticizing the high command’s July 28 decision, which effectively pushed the Belorussian operation beyond its natural limits. Isserson criticized these directives and claimed that in setting such far-reaching goals the *Stavka* had inadvertently “crossed the limit of the operation’s development” and failed to distinguish “that boundary which divides one strategic operation from another consecutive operation.”²⁷ By the end of July, he charged, the operation’s initial impulse had exhausted itself and the enemy had succeeded in organizing a new defensive front. As a result, the Red Army spent the next month in “useless efforts” to break through along the Neman and Narew rivers, time which would have been far better spent in “organizing a new strategic operation and a new blow.”²⁸ In this regard, one can only agree with Isserson’s *post mortem* of the Beloruss-

ian operation and his assertion that the *Stavka* squandered the opportunity to achieve a decisive success along a single direction by chasing too many objectives at once.

As has been shown, the question of the beginning period of war was one that had engaged Soviet military theorists, to one degree or another since the end of the 1920s. Technological developments since 1945, however, had fundamentally changed the nature of a war's beginning period. Now, the hair-trigger state of readiness on both sides of the nuclear divide and the importance of a first strike had increased the stakes even further. The authors of *Military Strategy* recognized the increased importance of this period in the conduct of a future war, when they declared, "the beginning period of a modern nuclear-missile war ... will be the main and decisive period, which will predetermine the development and outcome of the entire war."²⁹

This was a subject close to Isserson's heart, and it no doubt took him back to his participation in the debates over the character of the beginning period of a war during the 1930s, and the Red Army's signal failure to deal with this problem likely rendered the question even more acute in his mind. With the consequences of a similar miscalculation infinitely greater in the nuclear age, Isserson likely felt the responsibility to join in the discussion. In fact, the topic of a war's beginning period was the occasion for a lengthy address delivered over the course of several days in April 1966 at a meeting of the Military-Historical Society. The speech, entitled "The Problem of the Beginning Period of a War," revealed that Isserson, even as he approached his seventieth birthday, was still very much engaged in wrestling with the problems of the day and that he had lost none of his analytical skills.

Isserson, as always, sought to place the problem in its historical context, showing its development to the present. As has been shown, the problem of a war's beginning period goes back at least to the outbreak of World War I, in which all the belligerents sought to mobilize more quickly than their opponents, although no side truly succeeded in doing this in a decisive way. In World War II it happened that the Germans were able to deploy a fully mobilized invasion force prior to their attack on Poland and the Soviet Union, which were caught unprepared. Thus Isserson could justifiably say, "Past wars have not left us an example of a war in which both sides simultaneously entered into a deadly struggle with ready forces at the beginning of a war."³⁰ With the introduction of long-range nuclear weapons, both sides are now capable of inflicting enormous damage to each other in a matter of hours, thus making the question of a war's beginning one of "new significance and content."³¹

As always, Isserson was rigorous in his analysis of the phenomenon at hand and sought to dissect its component parts in detail, illustrating not only their differences but also the way they interacted with each other. For example, he regarded it as a given that a war between the major powers would sooner or later witness the employment of nuclear weapons, although this formulation nevertheless allowed for a good deal of latitude in their use. According to circumstances, he declared, nuclear weapons may be employed from the very outset, sometime after the start of the war, or they may be gradually introduced into the mix as the war progresses. Also, the belligerent powers may choose to unleash the full might of their nuclear arsenals against each other, or they may limit themselves, for whatever reason, to a partial exchange while maintaining a reserve for any contingency. Finally, a nuclear war may involve an exchange of intercontinental ballistic missiles and bombers against the combatants' respective homelands, or the powers may limit their use of nuclear weapons to the tactical and/or operational levels.³²

Isserson further stated that a future war might begin as a local war in which nuclear

weapons are not employed. However, the possibility always exists that a local conflict, unless it is contained, may expand in scope and come to embrace a growing number of countries. In such a case, the conflict may become a world war, which would greatly increase the prospects of it becoming a nuclear one as well. A second scenario foresaw the outbreak of a limited nuclear war, entailing the employment of tactical and operational-level nuclear strikes against the enemy. For obvious reasons this scenario might easily lead to a full-scale exchange of nuclear weapons. Moreover, he added, a limited nuclear war in Central Europe “would likely be very difficult to distinguish from a general nuclear war.” Finally, there is a full-scale nuclear war, which may begin as such or may become an all-out conflict, “depending on the development of events.”³³

Where Isserson probably differed most from the reigning opinion, as elaborated in *Military Strategy*, was his thoughts on the utility of operations by the other services, particularly the Ground Forces. His approach posited three possible scenarios for their employment, including a conflict that would begin with nuclear strikes, coupled with the “simultaneous commitment of all the ground forces into the fighting,” which he labeled “*the most optimal of all possible variations*” (emphasis in the original). Another involved the initial employment of nuclear strikes against the enemy, followed by the commitment of the ground forces. In some cases, he added, this exchange may occur before the sides’ ground forces even come into contact, which might give rise to a “Phony War” situation reminiscent of 1939–40 in the West. Finally, a world war might begin with an initial clash of the ground forces alone, only after which strategic nuclear weapons would be employed.³⁴ In none of these cases, however, was the employment of tactical or operational nuclear weapons by the ground forces ruled out.

Isserson afterwards forwarded a copy of his remarks to his old pupil, Marshal Bagramian, along with a cover letter. The letter evidently included a request that the marshal use his influence to have the manuscript published as an article in one of the military journals. Bagramian replied on June 23 that he had read the manuscript “with great interest” and welcomed his former mentor’s “desire to take an active part in researching such an important problem as the beginning period of a war.”³⁵ The latter statement implies that Isserson may have asked for more than just assistance with the military publishers, and he may have regretted his previous rashness and was now angling for some sort of appointment with an official research body tasked with investigating these problems. If such was indeed the case, he was to be disappointed, as Bagramian’s reply contains nothing more than good wishes. As for the prospect of publishing the article, the marshal clearly indicated his unwillingness to get involved by telling his former mentor that the final say in such matters lay with the editorial board of whatever journal he submitted his work to.³⁶

Literary Triumphs and Tribulations

Isserson’s last and most ambitious attempt to rehabilitate himself in the eyes of history came in the form of a two-part article detailing the development of the Red Army’s theory of operational art. Entitled “The Development of the Theory of Soviet Operational Art During the ’30s,” the article appeared in the January and March 1965 issues of the official *Military-Historical Journal*. Written in Isserson’s usual concise style, it offered an inside view of the birth and development of the theory from the point of view of one of its prime movers. For the time, the articles were relatively free of the usual Soviet boilerplate and

sought to examine the various technological and institutional changes that had influenced the theory's development. Nor was it without its personal side and sought, in a small way, to do justice to the memory of many of those now-deceased commanders who had been instrumental in developing the theory of operational art.

As such, the article is inevitably hostage to some degree to the author's recollection of events and whatever prejudices he may have brought to the project. The latter is a particularly important consideration in light of Isserson's own strongly held views on many subjects, as well as his elevated opinion of his role in elaborating the Red Army's operational theory. For all of this, Isserson was surprisingly modest in detailing his own contribution to the development of the army's operational theory. This is all the more startling, especially if one recalls Bagramian's description of Isserson as being overly proud of his part in elaborating the theory of the deep operation, as well as his prickly defense of his views. To be sure, there is hardly an event or individual in the article with which Isserson was not in some way linked, but the connection is often muted. For example, he mentions in passing that he served a stint as chief of the Frunze Academy's operational department, although by far the greater part of the paragraph in question pays generous tribute to his former subordinates.³⁷ Elsewhere, he devoted a good deal of space to the drawing up and fate of a projected operational manual in 1936, without once mentioning that he was the author.³⁸

Isserson's account was a highly institutional one and focused almost exclusively on those academic centers that he regarded as having been in the forefront of the army's intellectual development. Not surprisingly, these were institutions with which he had been closely associated. One of the institutions he sought to highlight was the Frunze Military Academy's operational department, the founding of which he called "a new step in the elaboration of the theory of operational art," as the army began the transition from the tactical-level deep battle and sought to come to grips with the problem of organizing the breakthrough of the enemy's defense at the operational level.³⁹ As time passed, however, the department could no longer meet the army's growing needs, and in the autumn the General Staff Academy was established as a "higher operational school," which "had great significance for the future development of the theory of operational art."⁴⁰ Here, according to Isserson, Soviet operational art truly came into its own and the theory of the deep operation became more sophisticated and flexible in its ability to adapt to various types of enemy defenses.

Isserson was willing, to a certain degree, to recognize contributions from outside the academy, although he made it clear that these were secondary in nature. This was particularly the case, he wrote, in the first half of the 1930s, when a number of the deep battle's and deep operation's tenets were tested in the various military districts, and he singled out Uborevich and Yakir for special praise in this area.⁴¹ However, by the time of the founding of the General Staff Academy, he implied, the army's center of intellectual gravity was now very much in Moscow. Now, non-academic commanders such as Tukhachevskii, Uborevich, and Yakir traveled to the new academy in order to deliver lectures and conduct war games with the students and faculty.⁴²

Isserson was also uncharacteristically generous in acknowledging the contribution of a number of individuals to the development of operational art and mentioned any number of associates and others he deemed worthy. This was not done without an ulterior motive, however, and he was particularly interested in highlighting the services of those former comrades who had fallen victim to Stalin's purge, among whom were such former subordinates as Fedotov, Sergeev, and Peremytov. Other, more famous commanders, such as Tukhachevskii, Yegorov and Sediakin were also mentioned as being instrumental in devel-

oping the army's operational theory, although these individuals were so well known that Isserson evidently felt no particular need to single them out as having suffered.⁴³

The article was also the occasion for Isserson's sharpest attacks on the Stalinist dictatorship to date. Here he summoned up all the eloquence at his command to condemn the purge of 1937–38, which “shook the Red Army to its foundations. The arbitrariness and lawlessness engendered by Stalin's cult of personality spread to the greater part of the higher and senior command structure.” The victims of the purge, he continued, were the army's “honored and experienced cadres,” and their extinction meant that “the army was essentially decapitated.”⁴⁴

An observer of Soviet affairs once wrote, only half in jest, that in some cases the purge of a country's military apparatus might actually have a salutary effect. He cited the case of the French army in 1940 and speculated how different the outcome of the war might have been if the Gamelins and Weygands had been removed from their posts before the German attack.⁴⁵ While there may be some truth to this statement, there can be little doubt that the effects of the purge on the Red Army were catastrophic. In the course of some 18 months an entire generation of commanders was cut down, many of them with the experience of the civil war and the command of large forces behind them. This is not to say that all, or even many, of the victims were particularly talented, while the purge perversely spared others (Voroshilov, Budennyi, and Kulik) who were manifestly unfit for higher command responsibilities. Moreover, the savage manner in which the purge was conducted left the fortunate survivors cowed and afraid of displaying any initiative. As a result of this self-inflicted wound, the Soviet armed forces were in no position to meet the German onslaught of 1941.

Isserson certainly felt this way and he expressed his indignation in a surprisingly controlled fashion, particular considering that he and many of his acquaintances had fallen victim to Stalin's paranoia. He particularly bemoaned the fact that the “old, experienced commanders” were all but gone by the summer of 1941, and that the young commanders who had been promoted several grades to replace them as yet lacked the practical and theoretical skills necessary to repel the impending invasion. He laid the responsibility for this disastrous state of affairs squarely at Stalin's door, declaring that the “painful drama” of June 1941 was directly tied to “Stalin's cult of personality. The consequences of this,” he continued, “were immensely painful. They required enormous sacrifices and caused huge losses.”⁴⁶

All things considered, however, Isserson spent remarkably little time ruminating on the degree of Stalin's complicity in the disasters at the beginning of the war, despite what would seem to be an exceedingly rich field of endeavor. This may have been due to lingering political strictures against pushing this particular line of inquiry too far, or it may have been the result of Isserson's own conflicted views, due to the fact that he never actually fought in the war. As a military man he was also obliged to give the dictator his due as a wartime commander. Isserson's daughter recalled that even though her father “hated Stalin” he once declared that during the bitterest of the fighting for Stalingrad, the dictator had saved the day by keeping a tight rein on the Red Army's reserves and prevented them from being “squandered” in the city's defense, preferring to build up forces for a counteroffensive against the Germans. He added that had it not been for Stalin's “iron hand” the Soviets would have surrendered the city.⁴⁷

He showed no such qualms, however, in detailing the disastrous effect of the purges on his beloved theory of operational art. As a consequence of the 1937–38 witch hunt, the army's “creative initiative was hobbled for a time. The seed of doubt was planted in our

military thought, and instead of deepening and developing the theory of the deep operation, whose time had come, they started to quietly disavow it." The end result of the repressions, he concluded, was "the deviation from the correct line of development of our military theory, which brought about a certain stagnation and uncertainty in this field."⁴⁸

Nor was Isserson alone in his condemnation. Marshal M.V. Zakharov, Isserson's former student and now chief of the General Staff, also entered the fray. Zakharov had actually benefited greatly from the purges, having made the jump from regimental commander to chief of staff of a military district in just a year. However, despite a highly successful wartime and postwar career, the sorrow and shame for the events of 1937–38 evidently never left him. In his forward to a 1965 collection of Soviet theoretical writings from the interwar period, Zakharov wrote, "The repressions of 1937 and the succeeding years brought the army, as well as the rest of the country, enormous harm. They deprived the Red Army and navy of many of the most experienced and prepared ... cadres, talented researchers, and highly qualified commanders."⁴⁹ And although Zakharov did not directly hold Stalin responsible for the debacle of 1941, the implication of these remarks is clear.

Zakharov also supported the contention that the purges had been a disaster for the normal development of the army's military theory, which had been so recently on the cutting edge of developments. The marshal was no less indignant than his former instructor when he wrote that as a result of the massive bloodletting the relatively free study of military problems was now "replaced by their narrow and exclusively applied solution," which he condemned as "creeping empiricism." "Military theory," he continued, "was essentially reduced to the compilation of a mosaic of Stalin's pronouncements on military questions. The theory of the deep operation began to be subjected to doubt on the basis of the fact that there were no pronouncements by Stalin about it, and because its creators were 'enemies of the people.'"⁵⁰ Zakharov's language strongly implies that he had read Isserson's article and that he was still drawing inspiration from his old mentor's works.

However, the dead hand of the recent Stalinist past was still very much alive, even as these words were being penned. In October 1964 Khrushchev, the driving force behind the anti-Stalinist campaign, was deposed as party and state leader of the Soviet Union. His place was taken by Brezhnev, who soon called a halt to exposing the late dictator's crimes, and even went so far as his partial rehabilitation. After 1965 there was no real criticism of Stalin for the next 20 years, aside from occasional official pronouncements in which the dictator was mildly chided for his violations of "socialist legality." In fact, later writings on the same subject were more noteworthy for what they left out as for what they contained, and pale in comparison to Isserson's well-written and informative account.

In retrospect, 1965 proved to be the apex of Isserson's attempts to reclaim his place in the pantheon of Soviet military thinking. His seminal contribution to the development of the Red Army's military theory was recognized in a major publication, *Problems of Strategy and Operational Art in Soviet Military Works (1917–1940)*, which appeared later that same year. This collection contained many of the best-known works by the army and navy's most outstanding theorists during the interwar period and featured excerpts from two of Isserson's books — *The Evolution of Operational Art*, and *The New Forms of Combat*.

For all his well-deserved reputation as a maverick, however, Isserson was also very much a man of his time, and for whom the search for truth had definite limits. That is, Isserson was first and foremost a member of the Communist Party, the leadership of which had very definite and narrow notions as to the utility of the historical discipline, not as a vehicle for uncovering some abstract truth — which in any case had already been revealed

in the sacred writings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, as well as other official pronouncements — but rather as a tool for justifying many of the party's past and present policies. The deleterious consequences of this system for independent academic endeavor are obvious, particularly in a country where the publishing and other scholarly outlets were under the total control of the party apparatus, and any historian who failed to toe the line could quickly find himself ostracized and out of a job, or worse.

Isserson had no real disagreement with this policy of *partiinost'*, or "party-mindedness," which he once defined as "firmly standing on Marxist-Leninist positions" and approaching a particular historical problem "in the spirit of the party's policy" on a given question. If a historian does this, he continued, "he should be granted access to our press" to express his views, "even if he has erred in his interpretation of certain facts. The more varied and numerous such interpretations," he gushed, "the more quickly and more fully the entire historical truth will be revealed," by which he clearly had in mind his own frequent run-ins with the official line. He added, however, that such indulgence should only be granted to those "who don't fall away from party positions," by which he most clearly did not mean himself.⁵¹

Just what the limits of historical inquiry were, Isserson made clear a few years later in a draft article, entitled "Preserve Your Historical Past." Isserson wrote the article in the early months of 1967 and sent it to the editorial board of *Military-Historical Journal* for publication. The article was pure Isserson — long (51 typed pages) and full of righteous indignation.

The idea for the article had been germinating for some time, as Isserson had become increasingly distressed by what he regarded as disturbing trends in Soviet historical research. Thus he opened his article with a broadside against these "new historical discoveries and research," which, while lacking "any kind of scientific reasoning and objectivity," seek to overturn the "Marxist-Leninist understanding of the history of our Revolution and civil war," upon which several generations of Soviet youth had been raised. It has lately become "stylish," he fumed, to cloak oneself in the guise of "discoverers of new truths and to debunk the historical significance and heroism of past events. Unfortunately," he continued, warming to the subject, "these irresponsible works" and "sensational disclosures sometimes find a response" in those of "unstable views," thereby undermining the "military-patriotic upbringing of the younger generation." He concluded his outburst by declaring that such a state of affairs "cannot but cause alarm for the preservation of our revolutionary past," and that any such attempts "demand that most decisive condemnation."⁵²

Isserson, never one to be diplomatic, then proceeded to point out that *Military-Historical Journal* was not free of such "seditious" methodology. Two articles, in particular, both dealing with the civil war, aroused his ire. One of the issues in question dealt with the longstanding tradition of marking the Red Army's founding on February 23. According to popular legend, this was the day that units of the young Red Army halted the advance of German forces near Pskov, and a few days later at Narva. This day was later celebrated as a military holiday throughout most of the Soviet period and has maintained its popularity in the post-communist era as Defender of the Fatherland Day.

The trouble began when *Military-Historical Journal* ran a short article on the subject in its May 1964 issue. The article, entitled "Why is Soviet Army and Navy Day Celebrated on February 23?" by professor and former Major General S.F. Naida. The latter began by explaining that the holiday, as celebrated, has nothing to do with the official establishment of the two services by the Council of People's Commissars on January 28 and February 11,

1918. Rather, he noted the celebration's origins could be traced to the German high command's attempt to influence the peace negotiations with the new Bolshevik government by organizing an offensive toward Petrograd. In response, the Bolsheviks announced a number of emergency measures, which peaked on February 23 with the enlistment of large numbers of workers into the Red Army and the dispatch of several units to the front. As regards the situation at the front, Naida demonstrated on the basis of archival documents that "on February 23 1918 there was no fighting near Pskov, and all the more so around Narva."⁵³ Afterwards, he remarked the holiday was observed only sporadically until 1943, when Stalin proclaimed it as such by claiming that the Red Army had defeated the Germans at Pskov and Narva a quarter-century earlier.⁵⁴

Naida's article was certainly well within the scholarly mainstream of that timidly reformist time and contained nothing that should have been seen as offensive to the sensibilities of the journal's readers. None of this, however, did anything to soften Isserson's rage at seeing a favorite myth being called into question. His retort, written nearly three years later, took the journal's editorial board to task for what he regarded as serious distortions of the historical record.

Isserson promptly accused Naida of arguing that since there had been no combat between Soviet and German forces on February 23, then it follows that the Red Army could not have repulsed the German offensive, which was certainly logical. He then took this to mean that this was the same as maintaining, "that neither was there a German offensive nor that no threat to Petrograd existed on the part of German imperialism," which was something different altogether.⁵⁵

Two years later the journal once again had the temerity to challenge one of Isserson's favorite myths. This time it concerned the popular notion, much propagated in official publications, that the foreign intervention in Russia's civil war was the work of 14 different countries, headed by Great Britain, France and the United States, which left the pleasant impression that the young Soviet republic had defeated not only the major capitalist powers, but their numerous hirelings as well. With time, however, this version of events came under increasing scrutiny by a number of historians who sought to sweep away some of the more egregious legends from that time. To this end, the journal's editorial board organized a conference to discuss the validity of the concept.

The summary of the conference's conclusions was published in the journal's February 1966 issue. Surprisingly, the majority of participants rejected the notion of an organized campaign by the major capitalist powers and their underlings to overthrow the Soviet state. These conclusions were all the more remarkable, in that they were reached and published during the Brezhnev-Kosygin era, when many such hoary myths acquired a new lease on life. This was by no means an attempt to understate the Western Powers' determination to destroy the Soviet republic, but rather an examination of their failure to do so. That this attempt ultimately came to nothing, the conference participants argued, was due chiefly to opposition to this course by the working class of the major capitalist countries and the Soviets' own diplomatic success in driving a wedge between the Great Powers and their smaller allies.⁵⁶ Since the whole notion of an organized campaign by the 14 nations was thus rendered stillborn, the phrase has no basis in fact, the participants concluded, and attempts to assert the validity of this "winged phrase" by subordinating facts to a ready-made concept are groundless.⁵⁷

However, even this carefully worded and quite moderate conclusion failed to satisfy Isserson, who saw in the panel's conclusions yet another affirmation of his fears that cer-

tain elements of the Soviet historical community were hopelessly in the thrall of “revisionism.” This movement, he charged, had even dared to question some of society’s most deeply held beliefs concerning the events of the civil war, thus “shaking and distorting their historical significance.” Such attempts, he concluded, are not only without merit but politically destructive as well, as “they play into the hands of the imperialists.”⁵⁸

Another example of the “new history” which Isserson found so distasteful was an article entitled “Legends and Facts,” which appeared in the February 1966 issue of *Novyi Mir*, the official organ of the Writer’s Union of the USSR. In it, the author, V. Kardin, tried to set the record straight regarding a number of events from Soviet history, many of which had over the years become encrusted with the stuff of popular mythology. One of the many such legends he examined was the popular one surrounding the cruiser *Aurora* and its role in the Bolshevik coup of November 7, 1917. According to this myth, he wrote, a “salvo” from the cruiser was the signal for the Bolsheviks’ storming of the Winter Palace, the final outpost of the Provisional Government in Petrograd, one of the most enduring symbols of Soviet history. However, Kardin explained, not only was there no salvo, but the single round that was fired was a blank.⁵⁹

It should be emphasized that Kardin laid out his argument in a decidedly non-sensationalist manner, complete with supporting documentation. Here, as elsewhere, the article maintains a studiously respectful tone, no doubt mindful of the political and emotional sensitivity of many statements. There is certainly nothing of the “debunking” spirit here and none of the malicious glee one often encounters in works that seek to overthrow this or that golden calf. Kardin, at one point, even seeks to turn the idea of a blank round to the Bolsheviks’ advantage by arguing that the ship’s crew fired a blank shell in order to avoid civilian casualties and spare the artistic treasures housed in the Winter Palace.⁶⁰

Despite the author’s obvious precautions, Kardin’s article met with a savage response from Isserson, who summoned up all of his considerable polemical skill to refute it. According to Isserson, the crux of the matter lay not in whether the *Aurora* fired a salvo or a single round, or whether the shell was a live one or a training round, but in the event’s political significance. It was namely the “enormous political significance” of the October Revolution, he wrote, that justifies calling the *Aurora*’s discharge a salvo. Thus it happens that “an historical event draws its figurative representation and appellation not only from its factual content, but from the significance it has for history,” and even “insignificant facts” may “acquire enormous significance, because they mark a decisive boundary in historical development.”⁶¹

This was mere prelude, however. Kardin’s true intent in writing the article, he charged, was not to clear the historical record of its various cobwebs. Rather, in declaring the *Aurora*’s “salvo” to be a legend, the author “defamed, disparaged and denied the enormous significance of an historical fact,” and his “slandering attack acquires a definite political meaning,” whereby the mere raising of the question is a “screen, behind the scenes of which is hidden a far-reaching concept of the October Revolution.” After all, Isserson continued, it is only a step from denying that a salvo was fired to signal the storming of the Winter Palace “to the assertion that there was no storm itself,” thus making a legend out of the latter event as well. Furthermore, he wrote, having gone this far down the path of ruin, it is a small step to declare the October Revolution a “bloodless” cakewalk, during which the Bolsheviks seized power without a struggle.⁶²

Actually, the storming of the Winter Palace *was* a relatively bloodless event, mounted against an unpopular government with no effective means of resistance at its disposal. Isser-

son even admitted this in a roundabout way, although this inconvenient fact did nothing to deter him from pursuing his point. "It's completely unimportant for history," he wrote, "that in the military sense, this storm was not attended by fighting and large casualties. What's important is the significance it had for the Revolution."⁶³ Problems arise, he continued, when people "emasculate from a fact its historical significance and political meaning and view the fact" "outside of its connection with other facts and the course of history," leaving only its "bare factual side." However, "such a simplified view of things has nothing in common with the Marxist-Leninist method of historical materialism." In fact, he concluded, Kardin's article is "foreign to this method" and has not only "caused a great deal of harm," but "given rise to nihilism" and doubts as to the meaning of the "most important events of our historical past."⁶⁴

Isserson, who could have had no illusions that his article would actually be published, was nevertheless stung by the refusal of the *Military-Historical Journal's* editorial board to have anything to do with the piece and quickly fired off a vehement reply. He accused the editorial board of ignoring what he called his article's "chief political theme," which he described as "*the distortion of the historical events of our past and the denigration and debunking of their heroism*" (emphasis in the original).⁶⁵ As if this were not enough, he further raised the stakes by accusing the editorial board of being motivated by other than scholarly considerations. Thus not only did the board's reasons for rejecting his article lack "adherence to principle and objectivity," Isserson wrote, but the editors "are pursuing only a single goal — to defend the honor of your prestige and your bureaucratic interests. You prefer not to air your dirty linen," he continued, and therefore "you protect the false illumination of the events of the civil war on the journal's pages," although he did not specify what the board had to gain by doing this. He closed by expressing the hope that the "ideological refuse" that had accumulated in the journal's editorial offices "will be swept out of each corner, no matter where and with whom it lies."⁶⁶ The latter was certainly a snide reference to the removal of N.G. Pavlenko as chief editor a few weeks earlier, evidently for his insistence upon maintaining a more reformist line in the face of pressure from above. The particulars of this matter could hardly have remained a secret to Isserson, and he gave every indication of wishing the purge to continue.

Reading Isserson's last attempt at publication, one cannot help but feel a great sadness that he had fallen so far. To see a man who had written so many groundbreaking theoretical works, as well as a number of very creditable historical pieces later on, fall away from his earlier standards and come to rely on empty clichés and ideological bombast is indeed troubling. Whatever one thinks of his point of view, Isserson's frequent resort to *ad hominem* arguments, in which he questions his opponents' motives and honesty, must be held against him as unworthy of his earlier erudition. Moreover, his use of such boilerplate formulations as "playing into the hands of the imperialists" smacks of some of the academic bullying of the Stalin era, when such phrases were freely bandied about to silence dissent, or worse. That Isserson, who along with many other acquaintances had suffered so much under the dictator, should have employed such politically loaded arguments, is particularly egregious and is no doubt evidence of a decline in his own powers of expression.

The various elements behind Isserson's perverse devotion to so many of the hoary myths of the civil war era are not hard to determine. One of these was certainly his own deep emotional commitment to a positive historical evaluation of the conflict as a confirmation of his own personality. As Isserson approached the end of his life, he doubtless was moved to recall the excitement and idealism of the conflict. This was the same "romanti-

cism of the revolution” which compelled him as a young man to join the Red Army, and despite all that happened to him in subsequent years, these feelings remained strong within him. This is a perfectly human reaction, and one’s youth is almost always recalled in old age as the best years of one’s life, when passions and hopes flowed strongest. This is true, even if one’s youth is spent in an event as awful as war, and in fact the intensity of feeling engendered by such an event no doubt works to heighten the remembrance. Therefore, for Isserson to renounce the comforting myths of the time was tantamount to renouncing what he had fought and bled for as a young man. To be sure, his cause proved to be a bloody sham, which caused enormous suffering in its failed attempt to build a better world, and it would have been far better if his youthful dreams had come to naught. The latter consideration does nothing, however, to change the proposition, and it would be asking too much of Isserson, or any other man, to turn his back upon himself.

Isserson would doubtlessly have rejected this interpretation as too “personal” and have insisted on a more rigorous political examination of his motives, where he would certainly have felt himself on more solid ground. However, as has been shown, this approach consisted mainly of stringing together any number of political clichés and beating his opponents into submission by impugning their character, scholarship, and patriotism. This “no prisoners” style of argument in academic affairs was quite common during the Soviet era, and was doubtlessly engendered to a great degree by each author’s need to show himself as being more faithful than his opponent to the “true” interpretation of events. Just as reprehensible was Isserson’s practice of stringing together — as in the case with the *Aurora* — various historical events, all of which rely for their independent existence upon a factually empty interpretation of a single incident, and which will topple like dominoes if this event is called into question. This is obscurantism of the worst sort, more suitable to the methods of a party hack than the serious historian that Isserson once was. The fact that he had come to such a pass toward the end of his life is a circumstance more to be mourned than dwelled upon.

The Deep Operation Reborn

By the end of the 1960s the Soviet Union’s massive armament program was beginning to bear fruit and would continue to do so in the following decade. The most tangible result of this effort was the achievement of strategic nuclear parity with the United States. In fact, so confident were the Soviets of their strategic position that they entered into negotiations with the United States to limit the number of such weapons. The resulting treaty, however, left both sides a good deal of latitude to expand their nuclear arsenals in some areas, while making qualitative improvements to existing systems in others. Nor did the Soviets’ production of conventional weapons lag behind, and the country’s prolific design bureaus continued to produce a seemingly endless array of new weapons systems. These included not only new tank and aircraft models, but a large number of ships and other craft for the Soviet navy, which now bid fair to contest American control of the world’s sea lanes.

The cumulative effect of these and other developments was to impart a new and aggressive confidence in challenging the United States in areas far removed from the Soviet Union’s traditional spheres of interest. These years saw Soviet military power employed in many parts of the globe, most notably in 1968, when a Soviet-led invasion overthrew the reformist communist regime in Czechoslovakia. Even more ominous was the deteriorating relation-

ship with China, which by 1969 had flared up into a number of border clashes that threatened to escalate into a full-scale war between the two nuclear powers. War between Israel and its Arab neighbors in 1973 also threatened to entangle the Soviet Union with the United States in support of their respective allies. Elsewhere around the world the Soviets were able to take advantage of America's post-Vietnam malaise in order to prop up and establish friendly regimes in Ethiopia and Angola. Finally, at the end of 1979 the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in order to rescue an unpopular communist regime. However, hopes for a quick victory over anti-communist guerillas proved unfounded and the Soviets soon found themselves bogged down in a small but debilitating war that was to last nearly ten years.

At home the Isserson-inspired generation of senior officers was passing from the scene. The most prominent of these was Grechko, who died in 1976 and who was replaced by Dmitrii Fedorovich Ustinov, a civilian bureaucrat who had spent his entire life in the country's military-industrial complex. Gen. Shtemenko, another student of Isserson's, who later enjoyed an uneven career as a senior staff officer, also died in 1976, while serving as chief of staff of the armed forces of the Warsaw Pact.

Paradoxically, as the Soviet Union approached strategic nuclear parity with the United States the utility of these weapons' employment came increasingly to be called into question. To be sure, nuclear weapons continued to be viewed as the decisive arbiter in a war between the superpowers. However, the unpredictable consequences of their unrestricted use were such as to render their employment unimaginable, except as a desperate last resort, and as the 1960s drew to a close both countries found themselves facing a nuclear dead end. The United States and its allies sought to resolve the problem by adopting the strategy of "flexible response," which offered the option of engaging the USSR militarily below the nuclear threshold. A similar shift was also underway in the Soviet Union, where some of the more rigid dicta laid down in *Military Strategy* were being called into question. This was an especially welcome development for many senior officers who had long chafed at the domination of the Strategic Rocket Forces and who now sought to restore what they regarded as balance in the armed forces' view of war.

Evidence of this shift was subtle and sometimes open to varying interpretations. Perhaps the earliest public example of this was the appearance in 1965 of the previously mentioned *Problems of Strategy and Operational Art in Soviet Military Works (1917–1940)*. On the one hand, the book may be seen as a continuation of the Khrushchev-era campaign to do justice to the military theorists of the interwar period, many of who later became victims of Stalin's purge. On the other hand, the book may also be viewed as an attempt to move away from some of the more extreme tenets of the reigning military strategy by emphasizing the armed forces' pre-nuclear heritage. The book's appearance shortly after Khrushchev's ouster may thus be seen as the final cry of the anti-Stalinist campaign, or the opening salvo in a move to push Soviet military strategy in a new direction. As regards the latter interpretation, the inclusion of two of Isserson's most important works is hardly accidental.

One of the first to openly question the prevailing orthodoxy was, not surprisingly, Isserson, who was always ready to question authority, particularly if that authority impinged on his most deeply held beliefs. The occasion for this was another meetings of the Military-Historical Society, which had evidently come to be his favorite venue for publicly expressing his opinions. The conference was held in early February of 1968, as a prelude to the nationwide observance of the fiftieth anniversary of the Red Army on February 23. As a

veteran of the army's early years, as well as a noted military theorist, Isserson was a natural choice to deliver the sort of remarks common to such occasions — glorifying the past and predicting even greater things for the future. He certainly put his heart into the task, and his speech, entitled “Three Characteristic Features of Soviet Military Art,” ran to 48 typed pages. In fact, the strain of preparing these remarks may have been too much for his already-fragile health, and he was not able to deliver the address in person.

Much of Isserson's address consisted of the standard ideological boilerplate inevitable at such gatherings. The heart of his remarks, rather, lay in his spirited defense of the underlying premises of the theory of the deep operation, which was also, by extension, a very personal claim to his own relevance. To this end, he put forward the question of whether or not the fundamentals of the deep operation, as developed in the 1930s and perfected during World War II, retained any of their former utility in the nuclear age, in which the conditions for waging war “have changed radically,” or does the appearance of nuclear weapons signify that “a completely new avenue in the development of the forms of armed combat has now begun.” Or, is the new era in warfare merely a “continuation of the earlier line of development, albeit on a “higher material-technical base of nuclear-missile weaponry?”⁶⁷

Isserson's reply to his own question was the confident assertion that while nuclear weapons had indeed brought about a revolution in military affairs, their appearance only serves to increase the range of the deep operation “to its ultimate and maximum limits,” thus “imparting a crowning strategic-global nature to the deep forms of combat.” After all, he added, a future war may take any number of forms, and there is no guarantee that even a world war would start with a strategic nuclear exchange. Thus it is conceivable, he wrote, that ground operations in such a war would closely resemble the larger offensive operations of World War II. Of course, he concluded, the employment of nuclear weapons during operations would alter the situation significantly. Nevertheless, their use would represent only a “leap” along the lines already laid down.⁶⁸

There was a good deal of sense in Isserson's remarks, although he weakened the overall force of his argument by straining too hard to explain current developments through the template of his beloved “new forms of combat.” This was a needless distraction, and although forgivable in a man, was less so in a scholar. Nevertheless, Isserson's ideas were indicative of the larger discontent within the Soviet armed forces with what many regarded as an over reliance on nuclear weapons. This dissatisfaction would eventually take the form of an increased interest in the possibility of conducting large-scale offensive operations without nuclear weapons or, at most, their limited use. Under these circumstances, the deep operation was to be reborn during the next decade.

By 1968 even the authors of *Military Strategy* had begun, albeit in a tentative way, to question some of their earlier, more categorical, statements regarding the character of a future war. The book's third edition, for example, now contained a statement to the effect that the question was now whether a future war would be “a land war involving the employment of nuclear weapons as a means of supporting the activities of the ground forces, or a principally new war, where nuclear-missile weaponry will be the means of resolving strategic tasks.” The authors' failure to answer their own question, coupled with the admission that the matter had engendered “polemics,” indicates that there was no unity of thought within their own ranks.⁶⁹ Elsewhere, they proceeded to further muddy the previously clear waters by admitting the possibility of “a relatively prolonged war,” “in which nuclear weaponry will not be employed.”⁷⁰

Before long more evidence began to emerge that the Soviets were reexamining their views on waging ground operations. Confirmation of this came in the form of two articles, each written by a high-ranking officer, a circumstance that lent additional weight to their pronouncements. Marshal M.V. Zakharov, whose article on the development of the theory of the deep operation appeared in October 1970, penned the first of these. Zakharov, after outlining in some detail the operational developments of the interwar period, closed his article by declaring, "The theory of the deep operation has not lost its modern significance." He went on to add that the theory may still "serve as the basis for its creative employment by command cadres in resolving the multi-faceted and complex problems of contemporaneity," and closed with a quotation from Lenin to the effect that military problems must be examined in their historical context, by which he clearly meant the experience of the Great Patriotic War.⁷¹ This was followed a few years later by an article attributed to Gen. Ivan Grigor'evich Pavlovskii, then commander-in-chief of the Ground Forces. Pavlovskii stated that the Ground Forces' increased firepower and mobility have "created favorable conditions for the further improvement of the *theory and practice of the deep offensive operation*" (emphasis in the original). Now, he concluded, the Ground Forces, in conjunction with the other services, are able to "simultaneously inflict blows throughout the entire depth of the enemy's combat order and carry out a strategic offensive at higher speeds and to a significantly greater depth than was the case during the Great Patriotic War."⁷²

The possibility that a future war might involve only the limited use of battlefield nuclear weapons, or the employment of strictly conventional means, had a number of consequences for the further development of Soviet military thinking, particularly in the operational-strategic sphere. One of the most striking of these was the renewed emphasis on the Red Army's experience during the Great Patriotic War, which was viewed as the conflict most likely to resemble a future war in its scope and intensity. This was no mere exercise in nostalgia by an aging command echelon, but rather a systematic attempt by the armed forces' leadership to employ the country's recent military past as a tool for preparing for a future war. Typical of this approach was Marshal Bagramian's statement in 1973 that "lacking a correct understanding of the lessons of military history, particularly of the history of the Great Patriotic War and the Second World War as a whole, it is impossible to profoundly comprehend the essence of contemporary phenomena occurring in the development of military affairs and to determine tendencies in its further development."⁷³

Even before this the number of articles in the classified military press related to wartime operations had increased noticeably.⁷⁴ This was complemented by the appearance of a number of histories of the war and its military art, which continued well into the next decade.⁷⁵

Much of the analysis in these works tended to focus on the larger operations during the latter half of the war, at a time when the Red Army was honing its conduct of *multi-front* operations in depth. One of the favorite subjects for study was the massive Vistula-Oder strategic offensive operation of January-February 1945. Here two Soviet *fronts* (First Belorussian and First Ukrainian), which between them disposed of 2,203,686 men, 33,511 guns and mortars, 7,042 tanks and self-propelled guns, and 5,047 aircraft, broke through a series of German defensive belts and advanced in some places more than 500 kilometers in just three weeks, shattering the enemy front north of the Carpathians.⁷⁶ This operation was also notable for the employment of four tank armies in the two *fronts*' second echelon for the exploitation in depth.

Perhaps even more important to Soviet calculations was the previously examined Manchurian strategic offensive operation of August 1945, in which the Soviets defeated the

Japanese Kwangtung Army and occupied all of Manchuria and parts of northern China and Korea in less than a month. To the modern theorist the Red Army's conduct of the Manchurian operation had much to recommend itself, such as the deployment of large numbers of men and materiel from the European theater of military activities to the Far East. Of particular importance was the experience gained in launching a surprise attack against an enemy at the outset of a war with one's fully deployed forces. As one author put it: "The experience of concentrating and deploying troops showed that given the carefully thought-out organization of the regroupings, their secure supply and cover, the fronts' and armies' shock groupings can be secretly brought up to the state border, in this way achieve surprise in the conduct of the war's first operations."⁷⁷ For the Soviets, who maintained sizeable forces at a high state of readiness along the border with NATO and China, the meaning could not have been clearer.

As the preceding paragraph indicates, the question of a war's beginning period was undergoing a serious reevaluation. This notion had been deemed less immediate during much of the Khrushchev era, when it was assumed that nuclear-missile strikes during the first hours of a war would decide the issue, with the other services afterwards employed in "mopping up" the remaining areas of enemy resistance. With the shift in emphasis to the possibility of waging a non-nuclear war, the question of the beginning period of a war and its opening ground operations acquired a new prominence.

One of the most noted officials to address this problem was Gen. Semeon Pavlovich Ivanov, who served at the time as head of the General Staff Academy. He was certainly qualified to speak on the topic, having also served as chief of staff of the High Command of Soviet Forces in the Far East under Marshal Vasilevskii during the brief war with Japan. In a classified 1971 article, Ivanov declared, "a surprise attack, employing various kinds of weapons, must be considered the most likely and dangerous method under modern conditions."⁷⁸

The renewed emphasis on the war's beginning period, in turn, also sparked an interest in its component parts, among which one of the most important was the border engagement, a topic that had lain dormant since the latter half of the 1930s. Another commentator, writing a few years after Ivanov, stated that the border engagement now "exerts a decisive effect on the entire course of the operations of the war's beginning period." In the case of a successful outcome, he added, "a border engagement may grow into a pursuit of the retreating and disorganized enemy units," which may be followed by "a deep incursion into his territory and lead to the disruption of his mobilization deployment, the forward movement of his reserves, and to predetermine the outcome of the war as a whole."⁷⁹ This was language that might easily have been lifted from the writings of Tukhachevskii, Yegorov, or Isserson, and indicates just how much Soviet thinking on the subject had come full circle.

Another concept that was resurrected during these years was the breakthrough of the enemy's defensive position, the preparation and conduct of which comprised the heart of Isserson's thinking about the deep operation. One author opined that "the problem of breaking through the defense has not lost its significance in modern conditions," and that the Red Army's experience during the Great Patriotic War is of particular value on the non-nuclear battlefield. He went on to single out the following criteria for operational success: the careful selection of the breakthrough sector; the creation of shock groups appropriate to the task at hand; keeping one's preparations secret; achieving air superiority; the suppression of the enemy's defensive means; maintaining superiority over the defender throughout the operation, and; the rapid expansion of the breakthrough in depth and along the

flanks.⁸⁰ Another author recommended launching the breakthrough operation along converging axes, in order to carry out the encirclement of enemy forces in the operational depth. He went on to call the encirclement “the summit of military art” and averred that encirclement operations “will be widely employed in the future while conducting combat activities with conventional weapons,” while the employment of nuclear weapons will most likely lead to encirclements at the tactical level.⁸¹ This was language of a type that Isserson would have been very comfortable with and is indicative of a growing acceptance of the main tenets of his earlier theories, albeit at a higher technological level.

This is not to say that Soviet military writers were entirely focused on the past, as a number of contemporary conflicts provided more than enough food for thought. Foremost among these were the series of Arab-Israeli Wars, which offered the spectacle of two opponents waging a conventional struggle with fairly sophisticated equipment. Of particular interest was the October 1973 war, which saw several elements of the deep operation put to the test. One article pointed out both the Israelis’ and Egyptians’ use of masses of tanks to achieve a breakthrough, as well as for organizing counterattacks. Air power showed itself to great effect, providing ground support for one’s own forces, while at the same time launching strikes against the enemy’s troops.⁸² There were more than enough warning signs, however, for those who sought to recreate the sweeping operations of World War II. Perhaps the most disturbing of these was the extremely high losses in tanks by both sides, particularly to precision-guided anti-tank weapons, whether fired from the ground or air. Another was the heavy loss in aircraft caused by surface-to-air missiles, which led the author to conclude that only by first suppressing these weapons can one hope to gain air superiority under modern conditions.⁸³ This was more than enough to give Soviet planners pause, when contemplating an offensive war against well-supplied NATO troops.

From the foregoing it is evident that by the middle of the 1970s a broad consensus had emerged among Soviet military theoreticians that held that if the use of nuclear weapons could be avoided, or limited, then the main principles of the deep operation, as enunciated some 40 years earlier by Isserson and his colleagues, might yet find employment on the battlefield; to be sure, at a much higher level of technical sophistication. Although never explicitly stated as such, this development played out as a belated justification of Isserson’s views, which the previous decade had seemingly consigned to obscurity, and which may well have provided a measure of satisfaction in his old age.

The Bitter Dregs

Isserson’s years-long effort at self-justification seems, at first glance, to have paid off. In 1968 he turned 70, which was the occasion for an outpouring of congratulatory messages on the occasion. One of the most satisfying of these must have been from the Military-Historical Society and its chairman, Gen. Galitskii, with whom he had studied in the 1920s and whose family later befriended his. This message recounted at some length Isserson’s career as an academic and as a commander, although it tactfully omitted his unhappy service on the Finnish front and his subsequent arrest. The message closed by calling Isserson “one of the chief theoreticians in elaborating the problems of the deep battle and, especially of the deep operation,” for which he “had earned broad renown in our army.”⁸⁴

Other congratulations were also forthcoming. One arrived from Gen. Ivanov, who

noted Isserson's contributions to the theory of operational art.⁸⁵ Marshal M.V. Zakharov also thanked Isserson for his "fruitful work" over the years and informed him that he was being awarded a commemorative transistor radio.⁸⁶ The Frunze Academy's chief, Gen. Andrei Trofimovich Stuchenko, chimed in as well, calling Isserson one of the creators of the theories of the deep battle and the deep operation. In what must have been an especially pleasant passage, the academy leadership informed Isserson that his works were "still widely employed in the teaching process and in resolving complex problems of modern military art," adding that these works "continue to promote the strengthening of our beloved Motherland's combat effectiveness."⁸⁷

However, what could be expressed in an individual's private correspondence could not necessarily be stated in public. Marshal Zakharov's article on the deep operation contained a particularly striking example of this. The article sought to trace the development of this theory much as Isserson had attempted a few years earlier. He was certainly in an ideal position to do so, having studied under Isserson at both the Frunze Military Academy and General Staff Academy during the years when the theory was being elaborated.

However, despite the pair's close association, Zakharov mentions Isserson only briefly as being one of several individuals who had made a contribution in establishing the "fundamentals of the theory of the deep operation" during the 1930s, and they were further described as having carried out this work "under the leadership" of Yegorov and Shaposhnikov.⁸⁸ Given Isserson's harsh opinion of Shaposhnikov's baleful influence within the Frunze Academy, one can easily imagine his indignant reaction to what he probably regarded as "treason" by his former protégé. Moreover, while thus minimizing the degree of Isserson's influence on the theory's development, he freely employed such terms as the "breakthrough echelon" and the "success development echelon," which were borrowed directly from the latter's major works.⁸⁹

It is certainly difficult to fathom Zakharov's reasons for choosing to overlook Isserson's decisive role in developing the theory of the deep operation. His intent was probably not malicious, as the chief of staff obviously remembered his mentor with some affection and had assisted Isserson's daughter in finding employment in Moscow a few years before. It is more likely that political considerations played the major role in the decision to pass over Isserson's role in this and other areas. This most likely had to do with his arrest and imprisonment on charges of "anti-Soviet activities." Despite his subsequent rehabilitation and unquestionably orthodox political views, the stigma of having been branded an "enemy of the people" clung to Isserson all his life. Thus his situation differed from such officially sanctioned "martyrs" of Stalin's purge such as Tukhachevskii, Uborevich and Yakir, who were conveniently dead. Living second and third-tier victims, such as Isserson, faced a much more difficult task in securing official recognition for their work.

Another and less sinister explanation for Zakharov's oversight was the Soviet-era penchant for explaining developments in almost any field as the product of a grand collective effort, a prejudice which had its roots in the official ideology which stressed the role of the mass over the individual. The question of credit for the theory of the deep operation was no exception to this rule, although Zakharov went further than most. By spreading the credit for the authorship of the deep operation so promiscuously, he ignored the relative importance of each individual's contribution. No doubt this approach avoided many of the mistakes contained in Isserson's own highly subjective account, particularly given the latter's strongly held beliefs as to what constituted a "progressive" development and what did not. However, by erring on the side of excessive inclusion and a strained attempt to convey to

the readers the idea of a more broad-based movement, Zakharov's article suffers in comparison with Isserson's more tightly focused narrative. The latter, for all its obvious eccentricities and omissions, ultimately comes across as the superior work.

Others, for some reason, were also less than eager to acknowledge Isserson's undoubted contributions. Among these was General Kazakov, who had studied under Isserson at the General Staff Academy and who had gone on to a successful career as a high-ranking wartime staff officer and army commander. However, in his memoirs, Kazakov neglected to mention Isserson at all, despite repeated references to as the deep operation and the ERP.⁹⁰ As these concepts were so closely identified with Isserson, it is difficult to understand the author's reticence in mentioning his former professor's name. This is not to say that Isserson had been entirely forgotten, despite his existence as a semi-non-person. An official history of the Frunze Academy, published a few years later, for example, mentions Isserson twice, at one point calling him a "well-known military scholar and pedagogue," although it did not elaborate on his accomplishments.⁹¹

Isserson's contributions were once again widely featured in another publication, entitled *Problems of Tactics in Soviet Military Works (1917–1940)*. This book, which appeared in 1970, serves as a useful companion piece to the 1965 work on operational art and strategy. The editors chose to highlight Isserson's considerable role in the development of the theory of the deep battle by reprinting his tactical conclusions to the second edition of *The Evolution of Operational Art*. For their efforts, Isserson and the other surviving contributors were awarded an honorary certificate of appreciation and received the personal thanks of the defense minister, Marshal Grechko, in February 1973.⁹² How Isserson took this belated recognition is unknown, as he is reported to have had a low opinion of Grechko's abilities.⁹³

Grechko's gratitude extended only so far, however. Beginning in 1976 the military publishing house began to release its multi-volume *Soviet Military Encyclopedia*. As an official publication, these volumes were obliged to devote a good deal of space to such politically safe non-entities as Voroshilov and Budennyi, as well as more deserving commanders such as Tukhachevskii and Yegorov, although the circumstances of their deaths were passed over in silence. At some point, Isserson got wind of the fact that his name was being omitted from the draft version, although such contemporaries as Triandafillov and Shilovskii were mentioned. Isserson was sufficiently upset to complain of this slight in a letter to his former pupil, who as minister of defense had nominal control over the encyclopedia's content. One of the minister's deputies replied in a letter on July 16, 1975, that Grechko had read his letter and wanted to assure him that "Your name, like the names of many other Soviet military scholars," had been omitted "without any kind of malicious intent." The deputy went on to explain "only a small number" of academics had made it into the encyclopedia, "among which your name was simply omitted by accident." The deputy sought to make amends by quoting Grechko to the effect that "your contribution to the development of Soviet military science and military art is indisputable," and that Isserson's theoretical and historical works "played a significant role in training the Soviet armed forces' command cadres in the prewar period." In closing, he passed on the minister's best regards and promised that the oversight would "be corrected at the earliest possibility."⁹⁴

Grechko's protestations should be taken with a grain of salt, however. The omission of Isserson's name as an "accident" hardly rings true, particularly when comparing his achievements with those of Shilovskii, for example, whose name was included and whose productivity and depth of analysis was far inferior to Isserson's. One witness to these events

later stated that Grechko called Isserson a “Trotskyite” and personally made sure that he did not appear in the encyclopedia.⁹⁵ Another explanation is to be found in the unofficial anti-Semitism of the Brezhnev years, during which many Jews were systematically excluded from higher education establishments and the professions, and their contributions downplayed.

The oversight was repeated the following year, when an article on the deep operation in the *Encyclopedia's* second volume once again relegated Isserson almost to the status of a non-person. The article, by Gen. Nikolai Vasil'evich Ogarkov, then a deputy minister of defense and later chief of the General Staff, merely refers to one of Isserson's works in the bibliographical section, without separately acknowledging his contribution in the text, although those who contributed far less than he are mentioned.⁹⁶

A few years later a similar problem arose when the military publishing house prepared to issue its *Military Encyclopedic Dictionary*, a one-volume treatment that borrowed heavily from the previously issued encyclopedia. Kirshin, the editor, recalled that he approached Gen. Sergei Fedorovich Akhromeev, the chief editor, with a request to include Isserson's name, and had even drawn up the entry. Akhromeev rejected this suggestion, however, saying that he had read Isserson's arrest file and knew all about the latter's associations with “Trotskyites.”⁹⁷ To get an idea of Akhromeev's political coloration, one need only recall that in 1991 he supported the pro-communist coup, the failure of which caused him to commit suicide shortly afterwards.

In fact, it was not until 1995 and the appearance of the post-Soviet *Military Encyclopedia* that Isserson received the kind of broad recognition that had eluded him in life. However, the article proceeded to damn him with faint praise, and mentioned only in passing that he had “successfully engaged in scientific-research work” dealing with the “development of military art and tactics.”⁹⁸ As such, even this posthumous attempt at restoring Isserson's name was a half-hearted affair.

A far more serious matter than his battles with publishers, however, was the steady decline in Isserson's health. Aside from the usual complaints of old age, he also suffered from a variety of ailments dating from his period in camp, which increasingly threatened to incapacitate him. In December 1968, for example, he was forced to decline an invitation to attend a celebration in honor of the Frunze Military Academy's fiftieth anniversary for health reasons.⁹⁹

Perhaps sensing that the end was near, Isserson began to make preparations for his own death in the same rational and methodical manner in which he had approached his written work. To this end, he drew up his last will and testament on December 1, 1971, which he placed in an envelope with instructions to open immediately upon his death. He later amended the document in the early morning hours on September 10, 1973, during the onset of another illness.¹⁰⁰ Despite this setback, Isserson claimed to be in full possession of his faculties. He had evidently been near death on at least one occasion prior to drawing up the codicil and had found the experience so distasteful that he expressly forbade the doctors in the emergency room to undertake any extraordinary measures to revive him if he should once again be found in a state of clinical death. If death should ensue, he wrote, his body should be delivered to the Main Military Hospital.¹⁰¹

Isserson left detailed funeral arrangements that were nearly conspiratorial in their insistence on secrecy and solitude. He was particularly insistent that no one be told of his death and that no public announcement was to be made of the event. He further stated that he was to be buried in complete obscurity, so that “no one would know anything, no one would

hear anything, and no one would see anything.” To that end, he added, no organization or individuals should play a part in the burial and that all arrangements should be paid for out of his personal savings.¹⁰²

Ever the committed intellectual, Isserson insisted that his body be cremated, a practice which he called “one of the foundations of my philosophical conception.” In the same vein, he demanded that his coffin be painted red, as “I was and remain a convinced and committed communist.” Insofar as it was possible, he added, the cremation should take place on the day following his death, preferably after sundown. He also specified that no “outsiders” were to be present at the cremation and that there was to be no ceremony. Neither would there to be any music to accompany the ceremony, as everything was to be carried out “in complete and mysterious silence.” What music that Isserson would allow would be played as the coffin was removed from his apartment, or following the cremation ceremony.¹⁰³ He appended a list of recommended music from his personal collection, which he had previously catalogued by number. The list included music by Bach, Handel, Bizet, Chopin, Beethoven, Vivaldi, and, of course, Mozart’s “Requiem.”¹⁰⁴

Isserson expressed utter indifference as to where his ashes should be interred. He was equally non-committal as to the presence of mourners, although he was willing, in principle, to countenance the presence of those “who consider it their duty, according to their conscience” to pay their final respects. However, he expressly forbade the holding of a wake afterwards. He even allowed that the resting place for his ashes might remain a secret, if such were the wishes of his wife. His single request in this regard was that a headstone be placed next to the funeral urn, listing only his name and academic title.¹⁰⁵

As regards his personal possessions, Isserson stated that his printed works, particularly *The Evolution of Operational Art*, should be permanently stored at the General Staff Academy, where he had worked so fruitfully. His unpublished manuscripts, dating primarily from the 1960s and 1970s, should be sealed and opened “not less than 25 years” after his death (emphasis in the original). Until that time, he wrote, these materials were to be kept secret and not made available to anyone. Isserson specified that all other property be awarded to his wife, completely failing to mention his first wife, second wife, daughter, or grandson. This, he concluded, was only fair, as she was forced to bear the “heavy burden” of executing his will and also because “I have no one else.”¹⁰⁶

As the wording of the will indicates, by the end of his life Isserson had become a deeply embittered man, who may well have felt himself a failure. For years he had prepared himself and others for the great showdown with Nazi Germany, only to be arrested on the eve of the German invasion. Afterwards he had to watch the progress of the war from afar and note the rise of many of his former pupils on the battlefield. Like Esau, he clearly felt that he had been cheated of his birthright and the injustice poisoned his last years. As “punishment” for these wrongs, he sought to “deny” himself to his family and posterity by relegating himself to obscurity, even in death.

However, the fact that Isserson had “no one else” was almost entirely of his own doing, as has been shown repeatedly. For example, following his return from exile, Isserson does not seem to have had any direct contact with his former wife and he appears to have harbored a grudge against Yekaterina Ivanovna, feeling that she had “betrayed” him when his fortunes were at their nadir.¹⁰⁷ This was certainly a novel position for a man whose extramarital affairs had brought so much heartbreak, but then empathy had never been a distinguishing feature of his character.

Nor did he choose to maintain contact with his former sister-in-law, Galina Ivanovna

Vol'pe. In 1965 her health began to deteriorate and she was forced to approach Voroshilov, now a mere figurehead from the past, for assistance in procuring medical care. This was a strange move, considering the former defense commissar's role in the destruction of the Red Army's leadership cadre, including her husband, but the poor woman probably felt that she had no choice in the matter. However, Voroshilov's efforts were unsuccessful and her appeal was denied, the latest in a long list of injuries inflicted on her by the regime. Galina Ivanovna died in 1975, preceding her brother-in-law by only a year.¹⁰⁸

As usual, Isserson's own actions only served to exacerbate his isolation. His petty domination continued unabated and even extended to the way she wife dressed, and the poor woman had to adhere to his notion of what was proper. Irena Georgievna once encountered Lidiia Kuzminichna on the street one day in summer and was stunned that the latter was wearing hose in 95-degree weather. "G.S. doesn't allow me to go to work without stockings," was all she could say.¹⁰⁹ She added that her father also tried hard to make her conform to his idea of what he evidently regarded as socialist propriety. "Papa would become unbelievably angry with me when I would wear earrings," she recalled, "and when I wore some sort of light dress and not a severe suit."¹¹⁰

Some of his criticisms were truly outlandish. Irena Georgievna recalled how her father once took offense at something Brezhnev said and proceeded to criticize her for the current state of affairs in the country. She replied that, first of all, she had never been a party member and could thus not be held accountable for the country's leadership. "Secondly," she continued, "Papa, who made the revolution, you or me?" Taken aback by his daughter's reply, Isserson pretended not to hear her remarks, a common maneuver of his.¹¹¹ Isserson had a trepanation of the skull and was consequently hard of hearing, and would often use this infirmity to get out of a tricky situation.¹¹²

No doubt many of their disagreements had to do with money. Irena Georgievna's son Yurii, by now a high school student, had fallen in gym class and suffered from a serious case of muscular atrophy that caused him excruciating pain. Furthermore, if he were to avoid becoming an invalid, he would need a long course of physical therapy, which his mother's meager salary could hardly hope to cover. In desperation, Yekaterina Ivanovna sold her diamond ring, a gift from her second husband, in order to pay for her grandson's recuperation. Needless to say, Isserson did nothing to allay these expenses, despite his relatively comfortable situation. He even went so far as to raise a minor scandal over the fact that his grandson had been allowed the use of a military hospital, although he had every right to this by virtue of his father's military status.¹¹³

A few individuals did manage, however, to break through Isserson's self-imposed exile and came away the richer for the effort. One of these was Col. Sverdlov, a postwar graduate of the Frunze Military Academy and later a professor at the same institution. His first meeting with Isserson occurred by chance at the funeral of Gen. Galitskii, in March 1973. Both men had been close to the deceased: Isserson had known Galitskii and his family in Moscow during the early 1930s and had maintained contact after his return from exile, while Sverdlov had served as a staff officer under the general during World War II.¹¹⁴

Sverdlov wrote that he arrived early for the funeral service only to see standing by one of the hall's columns a "bent and quite elderly man of less than average height," dressed in a thick cloth coat. The man's "quite long arms" hung limply at his side, and "with his palm he wiped his eyes." Something about the man piqued Sverdlov's curiosity and he approached him and introduced himself. The stranger "immediately straightened up, and it seemed to me that in his blue eyes a small spark flashed," and he replied: "I'm Isserson," adding after

a brief pause, "Georgii Samoilovich." Sverdlov immediately recognized the name and recalled an old photograph of one of the Frunze Academy's earliest classes, in which Isserson posed with the rest of his classmates. "Of course," he continued, "it was now impossible to recognize him."¹¹⁵

Soon afterwards the hall began to fill up with Galitskii's wartime comrades, among who were marshals Vasilevskii and Bagramian. One by one the bemedaled septuagenarians approached Galitskii's widow to express their condolences, some kissing her hand. The last of these was Isserson. Without exchanging a word, the two old friends broke into tears. Watching from a distance, Sverdlov observed that the weight of many years' memories had evidently been too much for the pair.¹¹⁶

Sverdlov lost track of Isserson amidst the large crowd at the cemetery, and it was only after most of the mourners had departed that he noticed his new acquaintance standing by the gates. It had begun to sprinkle, which caused Isserson to hunch over even more to stay dry. Seeing Sverdlov, Isserson complained that Marshal Bagramian had asked that a car be provided to take him home, but that it had not yet arrived. Sverdlov offered to summon a taxi for him and got in beside him. When they arrived at Isserson's apartment in northern Moscow, he invited his new friend in "for a minute." As often happens in Russia, the minute lasted considerably longer and Sverdlov ended up staying for three hours.¹¹⁷

Isserson proudly showed Sverdlov his collection of his own works, dating from 1923. Sverdlov, a military historian in his own right, was already acquainted with such works as *The Evolution of Operational Art* and *The New Forms of Combat*. Isserson was particularly proud of the latter work, calling it "the best that I created after taking part in the elaboration of the theory of the deep operation." This recollection caused Isserson to sink into reverie, and Sverdlov recalled him "slowly and lovingly" paging through a copy of the book.¹¹⁸ As this incident reveals, Isserson remained quite proud of his work and jealous of his place in history.

The two men met again the next year, following Isserson's latest heart attack. Another visit took place in 1975. Perhaps feeling that the end was near, Isserson suddenly felt the need to unburden his mind. "They took," he said, "not only 15 years of life and productive work, but my health as well." He added that he suffered almost daily from bouts of cardiac arrest and that Lidiia Kuzminichna had to look after him like a "little baby. But the most terrible thing," he concluded, "is that I can't work more than two hours a day." Sverdlov wrote that he tried to cheer his acquaintance up, but Isserson saw through this easily. "I don't need any words of comfort," he said, raising his hand in feeble protest. "For me, the main thing now is to put my creative heritage in order."¹¹⁹ It was a prophetic statement and the two men never saw each other again.

Surely one of the great tragedies of old age is the gradual falling away of friends and loved ones, either through death or incapacitation. For Isserson, ailing and half-forgotten by his more successful peers, this feeling must have been particularly acute. Moreover, given his knack for alienating those who by right should have been closest to him, his isolation must have been all the more strongly felt. The only person who seems to have been close to him during his final years was his wife, who was as much a servant as a spouse.

Despite his many disappointments, if Isserson were capable of taking any comfort from the way his life had turned out, it would have been through the achievement of his students, a not uncommon fate among teachers. The list of students who studied under him at the Frunze Military Academy and the General Staff Academy reads like a who's who of those who occupied the Red Army's highest command and staff positions during the Great

Patriotic War and afterwards. Easily the most distinguished of this group was Vasilevskii, who entered the General Staff Academy with the first intake in 1936.

The two men do not seem to have associated much, if at all, in the 20 years following Isserson's return from exile. One may then imagine Isserson's pleasure at receiving two letters from Vasilevskii only a few months before his death. The pair's brief correspondence was prompted by Isserson's letter to Vasilevskii of October 28 1975, in which he congratulated the latter on the occasion of his eightieth birthday and on the occasion of the approaching anniversary of the October Revolution. Vasilevskii replied a few days later and enclosed with his letter a copy of his autobiography, *The Cause of a Lifetime*, in which he detailed his military career, with special emphasis on his service as chief of staff from 1942 to 1945. He warmly added that of all the messages he had received, "your so unexpected and so pleasant" letter "made the biggest impression on me," adding that "I remember you well and will never forget you." He continued in the same vein, writing that "I always remember with gratitude your work with us in the General Staff Academy," adding that his study in the academy, among other factors, had done a great deal to help him and others cope with their heavy responsibilities during the Great Patriotic War. "You, dear Georgii Samoilovich, played no small role in preparing us for this! My heartfelt thanks to you for this."¹²⁰

Isserson later answered this letter, although poor health prevented Vasilevskii from penning a reply until January 5, 1976. If anything, the former chief of staff's second missive was even more effusive than the first, and Vasilevskii stated that in his "struggle with the hated enemy there is no small amount of your labor." He wrote that while he was grateful to all of his mentors, such as Triandafillov, Tukhachevskii, Uborevich, and Shaposhnikov, the information "which you presented to us in your wonderful and unforgettable lectures on questions of military art and on questions of strategy, rendered me ... enormous and priceless assistance." He then thanked Isserson for again for his "priceless labor" and called him "one of the most well-known military thinkers of that time." On a more somber note, he added, "I am ashamed before you for those who so cruelly and unjustly forced you, along with many others, to endure such unrepeatable horror, especially at a time when you could have rendered our native land enormous help through your knowledge."¹²¹

The correspondence also throws an interesting light on Isserson's private feelings about Stalin. Vasilevskii, as chief of the General Staff for most of the war had worked closely with Stalin and he described his complex relationship with the dictator in detail in his autobiography. The portrait is a mixed one, showing Stalin to be a harsh and irascible taskmaster, but at the same time a hard-working and gifted politician who had the capacity to learn from his earlier mistakes. All in all, Vasilevskii's treatment of Stalin was a fairly positive one and in keeping with the dictator's cautious "rehabilitation" during the 1970s. How much of this reflected the marshal's true feelings will probably never be known.

Isserson's second letter evidently contained what must have been some choice comments regarding what he believed to be the marshal's lenient appraisal of Stalin. Unfortunately, Isserson's letter to Vasilevskii has not survived, so it is impossible to state what exactly his objections were. Their essence can be guessed at, however, on the basis of Vasilevskii's reply, which Isserson retained among his personal papers. In what could only have been a response to a pointed comment by Isserson, Vasilevskii stated that he was more than aware of Stalin's "evil deeds" and the harm which the dictator's "extremely harsh character and suspicious nature" had inflicted upon the party and state apparatus, and in no way did he seek to justify these acts. On the other hand, he continued, one had to give the devil his

due and recognize Stalin's "wisdom, exceptional energy, and unshakable strength of will" during the war years and challenged his correspondent to imagine how the war might have gone for the Soviets had Stalin not been at the helm.¹²²

There is certainly a good deal of truth in Vasilevskii's latter statement, although probably not the sort he had in mind. Stalin, by eliminating all possible rivals in his climb to power, had inadvertently transformed himself into the one indispensable figure in the Soviet war effort, whose unchallenged control over the country's political, military and economic policies far outweighed anything Churchill or Roosevelt could have dreamed of, and whose degree of control over the war effort exceeded even that of Hitler in Germany. With absolute power, however, comes absolute responsibility and the disasters that befell the Soviet Union at the start of the German invasion were the result of Stalin's miscalculations and his unswerving belief in the infallibility of his judgment. Paradoxically, however, having led his country to the brink of destruction through his mistakes, Stalin was the only one capable of salvaging the situation through his ability to inspire both patriotism and fear among his countrymen.

Isserson later showed this and other correspondence to Sverdlov, proclaiming proudly "they don't forget."¹²³ This is not entirely true, and many did forget, at least publicly. Perhaps most egregiously, Vasilevskii's memoirs do not mention Isserson at all, despite his effusive praise in private of his former instructor. This was probably not the marshal's fault and likely the result of the cloud of official disapproval that continued to hang over Isserson to the end of his days. Whether it was the result of his ethnicity or arrest, it is hard to say, and was probably a combination of both factors.

In any event, Isserson had little time to mull these or any other slights. After the New Year his health steadily worsened and he died in Moscow on April 27, 1976. The official



Lidiia Kuzminichna Chukreeva by Isserson's burial site, Novodevich'e Cemetery, 1977. Isserson's memorial plaque is in the second row, fifth from the left (courtesy Russian State Military Archives).

cause of death was listed as a “chronic ... disease of the heart,” which had become acute and carried him off in his seventy-eighth year.¹²⁴ As fate would have it, Marshal Grechko, the defense minister had died the previous day, while Gen. Shtemenko passed away on April 23. The death of such high-ranking personages completely overshadowed Isserson’s own passing and insured that his wish for anonymity was fulfilled. Interestingly, both men had been students of Isserson’s during his final years at the General Staff Academy. In fact, Isserson’s death was so overshadowed by these events that Sverdlov did not learn of his friend’s passing until later that summer.¹²⁵

Lidiia Kuzminichna, true to Isserson’s wishes, told no one of her husband’s death, and his daughter learned of the event only through a friend of the family. She then phoned the widow, who complained that she was having trouble getting authorization to bury Isserson’s ashes in Moscow’s prestigious Novodevich’e Cemetery, the final resting place for many of the country’s leading political, cultural, and military figures. Irena Georgievna promised to take care of this matter and immediately phoned Marshal Bagramian, who quickly made the necessary arrangements.¹²⁶

Unfortunately, Isserson’s burial was marred by a particularly ugly incident, which better than any other demonstrates just how deeply estranged he was from those who should have been closest to him. Despite Irena Georgievna’s help, Lidiia Kuzminichna did not invite the immediate family to the funeral. Irena Georgievna consulted with her son as to what she should do. His unforgiving verdict was, “We lived without him, and we’ll live without him.”¹²⁷ As a result, Isserson’s wife was the only one present at the funeral, which was carried out according to the traditions of the time, and Isserson’s ashes were interred in one of the cemetery’s walls. Whether Lidiia Kuzminichna felt she was carrying out her husband’s last wishes, or whether he had succeeded in poisoning her mind against his first family, is impossible to say. Whatever the actual cause, however, it is reasonable to assume that had Isserson been less of a misanthrope the entire matter would have been amicably resolved.

Following the burial ceremony, Lidiia Kuzminichna broke off all contact with her husband’s first family. Irena Georgievna explained her stepmother’s reticence, as the latter’s fear for Isserson’s possessions, which she evidently feared his former family would contest. She needn’t have worried, the daughter said, as the family had no intention of disputing the will, figuring that Lidiia Kuzminichna had more than earned the right to all her husband’s belongings through her years of caring for him and putting up with his caprices.¹²⁸

Epilogue

Lidiia Kuzminichna outlived her husband by a quarter-century and died in 2001. Yekaterina Ivanovna, who died on November 15, 1992, preceded her in death. Isserson's daughter retired from the medical profession at around the same time and died in the spring of 2009. Isserson's only known direct descendants include his grandson, Aleksei Yur'evich, who works for the Russian government, and his great-granddaughter, Dar'ia Alekseevna Yeremina, who attends school in Moscow.

As even a cursory reading of this biography reveals, Isserson was foremost a creature of the mind and not of the heart, and in this lies the great tragedy of his life, even eclipsing his long years of camp and exile. At almost every turn Isserson's absolute belief in the rightness of what he was pursuing and the lack of empathy sowed rancor among his associates and misery within his family. It was a productive life, though not a well-lived one. However, it would be a shame if Isserson's personal faults were allowed to obscure his achievements. Rather, he should be remembered as a scholar who, while working under extremely difficult circumstances, nevertheless managed to produce some of the most influential military-theoretical works of his time.

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Chapter Notes

Preface

1. A.A. Grechko, D.F. Ustinov, S.A. Tiushkevich, eds., *Istoriia Vtoroi Mirovoi Voyny, 1939–1945* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1973–81), 2:176.

2. See V. Semenov, "Operativnoe Iskusstvo v Trudakh Sovetskikh Avtorov," *Voennaia Mysl'*, no. 5 (1967): 83–91. This journal is hereafter referred to as *VM*.

3. See I. Korotkov, "K Voprosu o Periodizatsii Istorii Sovetskoi Voennoi Nauki," *VM*, no. 2 (1962): 62, 67; N. Shekhovtsov, "Zarozhdenie i Razvitie Operativnogo Iskusstva," *VM*, no. 5 (1966): 63, 65; S. Ivanov, "Nachal'nyi Period Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voyny Sovetskogo Soiuza," *VM*, no. 6 (1971): 21, and; I. Shavrov, "Sovetskoe Operativnoe Iskusstvo," *VM*, no. 10 (1973): 6.

4. See the entry by Ya. Gorelik in the "Khronika, Fakty, Nakhodki" section of *Voenno-Istoricheskii Zhurnal*, no. 6 (1978): 125. This journal is hereafter referred to as *V-IZh*.

5. J. Erickson, *The Road to Stalin-grad: Stalin's War with Germany* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 1, 3–4, 26.

6. D.M. Glantz, ed., *The Evolution of Soviet Operational Art, 1927–1991: The Documentary Basis* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 1:3–4, 48–90; 2:24–52.

7. See D.M. Glantz, "The Intellectual Dimension of Soviet (Russian) Operational Art." In B.J.C. McKercher, M.A. Hennessy, eds., *The Operational Art: Developments in the Theories of War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), 130.

8. J. Kipp, "Two Views of Warsaw: The Russian Civil War and Soviet Operational Art, 1920–1932." In McKercher, Hennessy, *The Operational*, 73, 79.

9. S. Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 172, 180, 232–33.

10. R. Simpkin, *Deep Battle: The Brainchild of Marshal Tukhachevskii* (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1987), 33.

Chapter 1

1. Lietuvos Valstybes Istorijos Archyvas, fondas 1226, aprasas 1, 1898, 40–41. This archive is hereafter abbreviated as LVIA. Interview with I.G. Yemina, March 22, 2004. See also F.D. Sverdlov, *Neizvestnoe o Sovetskikh Polkovodsakh* (Moscow, 1995), 248.

2. LVIA, fondas 1226, aprasas 1, 1895, 123–24.

3. LVIA, fondas 1226, aprasas 1, 1898, 40–41.

4. Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Voennyi Arkhiv, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 65, 3. This archive is hereafter abbreviated as RGVA.

5. Tsentral'nyi Arkhiv Federal'noi Sluzhby Bezopasnosti, delo R3212, 63. This archive is hereafter abbreviated as TsAFSB.

6. Yemina interview, March 22, 2004; Yemina interview, July 17, 2007.

7. Yemina interview, March 22, 2004.

8. *Ibid.*

9. LVIA, fondas 1226, aprasas 1, 1898, 40–41.

10. S.E. Isserson, *Sluchai Tiazheloi Rtutmoi Sypi, ili tak Nazyvaemoi Rtutnoi Skarlatin. Iz Kovenskoi Gorodskoi Bol'nitsy* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia M.M. Stasiulevicha, 1896).

11. Yemina interview, March 22, 2004.

12. TsAFSB, delo 3212, 15; Tsentral'nyi Arkhiv Ministerstva Oborony, Inv. no. 83831, 1 (back). This archive is hereafter referred to as TsAMO. See also Isserson's "Uchetno-Posluzhnaia Karta," housed in the RGVA.

13. LVIA, fondas 1226, aprasas 1, 1898, 41; LVIA, fondas 1226, aprasas 1, 1895, 124.

14. Yemina interview, July 17, 2007.

15. T. Dan, *The Origins of Bolshevism*. Edited and translated by J. Carmichael (New York: Schocken, 1970), 197.

16. Sverdlov, *Neizvestnoe*, 248.

17. Yemina interview, March 22, 2004; RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 65, 3.

18. Yemina interview, August 25, 2004.

19. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 31.

20. TsAMO, Inv. no. 83831, 1 (back); RGVA, "Uchetno-Posluzhnaia Karta."

21. TsAFSB, delo R3212, III.

22. TsAMO, Inv. no. 83831, 2.

23. *Ibid.*, 1 (back); RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 3, 5.

24. TsAMO, Inv. no. 83831, 1 (back); RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 3, 5.

25. Sverdlov, *Neizvestnoe*, 248.

26. RGVA, "Uchetno-Posluzhnaia Karta"; TsAMO, Inv. no. 83831, 1 (back).

27. TsAMO, Inv. no. 83831, 1 (back); RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 3, 5.

28. RGVA, "Uchetno-Posluzhnaia Karta."

29. RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 3, 5.

30. Dan, *Origins*, 197.

31. TsAMO, Inv. No. 83831, 47 (back).

32. A.M. Sovokin, "O Partii Sot-

- sial—Demokratov Internatsionalistov.” *Voprosy Istorii KPSS*, no. 1 (1967), 77–78.
34. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 52.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*; RGVA, fond 40871, opis’ 1, delo 3, 5.
37. TsAMO, Inv. no. 83831, 2.
38. RGVA, fond 40871, opis’ 1, delo 3, 6; TsAMO, Inv. no. 83831, 4 (back).
39. F. Sverdlov, “Uchitel’ Polkovodtsev,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, January 26, 1993, 2.
40. Yeremina interview, July 17, 2007.
41. N.N. Azovtsev, ed., *Grazhdanskaia Voina v SSSR* (Moscow, 1980–86), 2:406.
42. *Ibid.*, 2:240.
43. RGVA, fond 40871, opis’ 1, delo 3, 1; TsAMO, Inv. no. 84831, 4 (back); RGVA, “Uchetno-Posluzhnaia Karta.”
44. RGVA, fond 40871, opis’ 1, delo 3, 6; TsAMO, Inv. no. 84831, 4 (back); RGVA, “Uchetno-Posluzhnaia Karta.”
45. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 54.
46. RGVA, “Uchetno-Posluzhnaia Karta.”
47. G. Isserson, “Nachalo Boevogo Puti.” *V-IZh*, no. 2 (1963), 71. This journal is hereafter referred to as *V-IZh*.
48. *Ibid.*, 71–72.
49. *Ibid.*, 72.
50. *Ibid.*
51. RGVA, fond 40871, opis’ 1, delo 3, 6; TsAMO, Inv. no. 83831, 4 (back); RGVA, “Uchetno-Posluzhnaia Karta.”
52. RGVA, fond 40871, opis’ 1, delo 59, 1.
53. TsAFSB, delo R3212, III–12.
54. A. Soutar, *With Ironside in North Russia* (London: Hutchinson, 1940), 191, 193.
55. Isserson, “Nachalo,” 73.
56. *Ibid.* RGVA, “Uchetno-Posluzhnaia Karta.”
57. Isserson, “Nachalo,” 73.
58. *Ibid.*, 73.
59. *Ibid.*, 74.
60. *Ibid.*
61. *Ibid.*, 74–75.
62. L.I. Strakhovskiy, *Intervention at Archangel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944), 213.
63. Soutar, *With Ironside*, 201.
64. A.F. Gorlenko, N.R. Prokopenko, eds., *Severnii Front. Bor’ba Sovetskogo Naroda Proti Inostrannoi Voennoi Interventsii i Belogardeishchiny na Sovetskom Severe (1918–1920): Dokumenty* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel’stvo, 1961), 204.
65. RGVA, “Uchetno-Posluzhnaia Karta.”
66. RGVA, fond 40871, opis’ 1, delo 3, 6; TsAMO, Inv. no. 83831, 4 (back); RGVA, “Uchetno-Posluzhnaia Karta.”
67. RGVA, fond 40871, opis’ 1, delo 3, 6; TsAMO, Inv. no. 83831, 4 (back); RGVA, “Uchetno-Posluzhnaia Karta.”
68. RGVA, fond 40871, opis’ 1, delo 43, 1–2.
69. *Ibid.*, 1.
70. *Ibid.*, 1–2.
71. *Ibid.*, 2–3.
72. RGVA, fond 40871, opis’ 1, delo 3, 6; TsAMO, Inv. no. 83831, 4 (back). Other sources list February as the month of this appointment. See RGVA, fond 40871, opis’ 1, delo 43, 3; RGVA, “Uchetno-Posluzhnaia Karta.”
73. RGVA, fond 40871, opis’ 1, delo 43, 3.
74. RGVA, fond 40871, opis’ 1, delo 74, 2.
75. RGVA, fond 40871, opis’ 1, delo 16, 5–6.
76. *Ibid.*, 6.
77. G.A. Belov, A.V. Golubev, P.A. Zhilin, et al., eds. *Direktivny Glavnogo Komandovaniia Krasnoi Armii (1917–1920)* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel’stvo, 1969), 674–75.
78. Ye.N. Sergeev, *Ot Dviny k Visle* (Smolensk: Izdanie Voennogo Redaktsionnogo Soveta Zapadnogo Fronta, 1923), 7–8.
79. *Ibid.*, 8.
80. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
81. *Ibid.*, 7–8.
82. *Ibid.*, 24.
83. *Ibid.*, 27.
84. A.S. Bubnov, S.S. Kamenov, R.P. Eideman, et al., eds. *Grazhdanskaia Voina v SSSR, 1918–1921* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo “Voenny Vestnik,” 1928–30), 3:366–67.
85. Sergeev, *Ot Dviny*, 28.
86. *Ibid.*, 27.
87. RGVA, “Uchetno-Posluzhnaia”; TsAFSB, delo 3212, 55. Two other sources state that Isserson was appointed assistant to the commander of the 154th Regiment in June. However, they also state that he was also appointed deputy commander of the 160th Rifle Regiment, although the date of the second appointment is not given. There is no explanation for the discrepancy. See RGVA, fond 40871, opis’ 1, delo 3, 6; TsAMO, Inv. no. 83831, 4 (back).
88. RGVA, “Uchetno-Posluzhnaia Karta.” This appointment is not corroborated by the other two other sources. See TsAMO, Inv. no. 83831, 4 (back); RGVA, fond 40871, opis’ 1, delo 3, 6. However, as the first citation contains an actual date, it is assumed to be correct. Again, there is no explanation for the discrepancy.
89. Sergeev, *Ot Dviny*, 79–80.
90. M.N. Tukhachevskii, *Izbrannye Proizvedeniia* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel’stvo, 1964), 1:145.
91. Sergeev, *Ot Dviny*, 82–83.
92. Tukhachevskii, *Izbrannye*, 1:145–46.
93. G. Isserson, “Sud’ba Polkovodtsa.” *Druzhba Narodov*, no. 5 (1988), 182. This article, which appeared more than a decade after Isserson’s death, was excerpted from his unpublished biography of Tukhachevskii. For more on the manuscript’s fate, see chapter II.
94. N.N. Azovtsev, P.N. Dmitriev, V.V. Dushen’kin, et al., eds. *Direktivny Komandovaniia Frontov Krasnoi Armii (1917–1922 gg.)* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel’stvo, 1971–78), 3:78–79.
95. Isserson, “Sud’ba,” 181.
96. Belov, et al., *Direktivny*, 709.
97. Bubnov, et al., *Grazhdanskaia*, 3:436–37.
98. Sergeev, *Ot Dviny*, 95.
99. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 101.
100. *Ibid.*, 100, 107. Isserson’s memory was faulty in stating that Kupriianov served as political commissar for the 18th Rifle Division during this period. Kupriianov actually served as division commissar from November 1919 to June 1920. During the time the division was interned the political commissar for the division was the above-named A.A. Aleshin. See S.S. Khromov, ed., *Grazhdanskaia Voina i Voennaia Interventsiia v SSSR: Entsiklopediia* (Moscow: “Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia,” 1983), 115.
101. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 104–05.
102. *Ibid.*, 106–07.
103. *Ibid.*, 101–02.
104. *Ibid.*, 102, 113.
105. *Ibid.*, 42–45.
106. *Ibid.*, 107, 113.

Chapter 2

1. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 107.
2. F. Sverdlov, “On Videl Budushchuiu Voynu,” *Patriot*, no. 19 (1992): 11.
3. A.I. Radzievskii, ed., *Akademiia imeni M.V. Frunze* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel’stvo, 1973), 46–47.
4. A. Barmine, *One Who Survived* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1945), 81–82, 84–85. This work was published in Great Britain in 1938 as *Memoirs of a Soviet Diplomat*.
5. *Ibid.*, 82–84.
6. *Ibid.*, 83.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Radzievskii, *Akademiia*, 19, 22, 40, 52, 54–55.

9. Barmine, *One Who*, 83–84.
10. *Ibid.*, 84.
11. M.M. Kozlov, ed., *Akademiia General'nogo Shtaba*, 2nd revised and expanded ed. (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1987), 22.
12. Barmine, *One Who*, 126.
13. RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 3, 6; TsAMO, Inv. no. 83831, 4 (back). Another source places his transfer to Minsk in August of that year. See RGVA, "Uchetno-Posluzhnaia Karta."
14. RGVA, "Uchetno-Posluzhnaia Karta."
15. RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 3, 6; TsAMO, Inv. no. 83831, 4 (back); RGVA, "Uchetno-Posluzhnaia Karta."
16. Radzievskii, *Akademiia*, 53–54.
17. Ye. Shilovskii, "Evolutsiia Akademieskoi Podgotovki," *Voina i Revoliutsiia*, no. 11 (1928): 18–19. This journal is hereafter abbreviated as *V&R*.
18. Radzievskii, *Akademiia*, 55.
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65. TsAMO, Inv. no. 83831, 5.
66. RGVA, "Uchetno-Posluzhnaia Karta." Another source states this appointment took place in May. See TsAMO, Inv. no. 83831, 5.
67. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 84–85.
68. *Ibid.*, 85.
69. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.
70. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 107.
71. *Ibid.*, 107–08.
72. *Ibid.*, 109.
73. TsAMO, Inv. no. 83831, 2. Isserson elsewhere stated that his father died in 1926 and his mother in 1927. See TsAFSB, delo R3212, 16.
74. TsAFSB, delo R 3212, 16; Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
75. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.
76. RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 3, 7; RGVA, "Uchetno-Posluzhnaia Karta." The latter source states that Isserson entered upon his new duties in September.
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83. *Ibid.*, 3.
84. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.
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89. This information is taken from a typewritten declaration by G.I. Vol'pe, written in 1956, declaring her marriage to A.M. Vol'pe.
90. See his biographical entry in P.S. Grachev, ed. *Voennaia Entsiklopediia* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1994–2004), 2:265–66.
91. Yeremina interview, July 17, 2007.
92. Loichikova, Yeremina, "Zapiska," 4.
93. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 69.
94. Grachev, *Voennaia*, 2:265–66.
95. TsAFSB, fond 3212, 73.
96. *Ibid.*, 73, 86.
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 111. *Ibid.*; Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 112. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.
 113. G.S. Isserson, "Operativnaia Podgotovka Komsostava i Malye Voennye Igry," *Voennyi Vestnik*, no. 3 (1928): 13.
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 118. G.K. Zhukov, *Vospominaniia i Razmysleniia*, 11th ed. (Moscow, 1992), i:160, 169–70.
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 121. G.S. Isserson, "Shkola Takticheskoi Podgotovki Voisk v Letnii Period," *Voennyi Vestnik*, no. 29 (1929): 19.
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 135. *Ibid.*, 18.
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 4. *Ibid.*, 207.
 5. Kozlov, *Akademiia*, 25.
 6. Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 7. Isserson, "Sud'ba," 188.
 8. *Ibid.*, 187.
 9. *Ibid.*, 188.
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117. *Ibid.*, 26–27.
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36. *Ibid.*, 13.
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 48. *Ibid.*, 53.
 49. *Ibid.*, 49.
 50. N. Varfolomeev, *Udarnaia Armiia* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1933), 173–74.
 51. *IVI*, 65.
 52. *Ibid.*, 66.
 53. *Ibid.*, 67.
 54. *Ibid.*, 67–69.
 55. *Ibid.*, 68–69.
 56. *Ibid.*, 69–70.
 57. *Ibid.*, 70a–71.
 58. *Ibid.*, 71, 73.
 59. *Ibid.*, 73–74.
 60. *Ibid.*, 75–76.
 61. *Ibid.*, 76–77.
 62. *Ibid.*, 78–80.
 63. *Ibid.*, 80–81.
 64. *Ibid.*, 82.
65. *Ibid.*, 83–84.
 66. *Ibid.*, 86–87.
 67. *Ibid.*, 88.
 68. *Ibid.*, 89–90.
 69. *Ibid.*, 90, 92.
 70. *Ibid.*, 92.
 71. *Ibid.*, 92–93.
 72. *Ibid.*, 93–94.
 73. *Ibid.*, 94.
 74. *Ibid.*, 95.
 75. *Ibid.*, 97, 99–100.
 76. *Ibid.*, 97.
 77. *Ibid.*, 97–98.
 78. *Ibid.*, 98.
 79. *Ibid.*, 98–99.
 80. *Ibid.*, 101.
 81. *Ibid.*, 102.
 82. *Ibid.*
 83. *Ibid.*, 103, 105–06.
 84. *Ibid.*, 105.
 85. *Ibid.*, 109.
 86. *Ibid.*, 107.
 87. *Ibid.*, 109.
 88. *Ibid.*, 110–11.
 89. *Ibid.*, 111–12.
 90. *Ibid.*, 112.
 91. RGVA, fond 31983, opis' 2, delo 18, 135.
 92. *IVI*, 113–14.
 93. *Ibid.*, 114–15.
 94. *Ibid.*, 115–16.
 95. *Ibid.*, 116–17.
 96. *Ibid.*, 117–19.
 97. *Ibid.*, 120–21.
 98. *Ibid.*, 119.
 99. *Ibid.*, 121–22.
 100. *Ibid.*, 122.
 101. *Ibid.*, 123–24.
 102. *Ibid.*, 124–25.
 103. *Ibid.*, 124.
 104. *Ibid.*, 125–26.
 105. *Ibid.*, 126–27.
 106. *Ibid.*, 128.
 107. *Ibid.*, 130, 132.
 108. *Ibid.*, 129–30.
 109. *Ibid.*, 129–30, 132.
 110. *Ibid.*, 129.
 111. *Ibid.*, 130–31.
 112. *Ibid.*, 131.
 113. *Ibid.*, 134, 141, 143, 147.
 114. *Ibid.*, 134–35, 147.
 115. *Ibid.*, 141–43, 147.
 116. *Ibid.*, 144–45, 147.
 117. *Ibid.*, 135, 137–38, 147.
 118. *Ibid.*, 140–41, 147.
 119. *Ibid.*, 138, 143.
 120. *Ibid.*, 142–43.
 121. *Ibid.*, 138.
 122. *Ibid.*, 141, 145, 147.
 123. *Ibid.*, 148.
 124. *Ibid.*, 151.
 125. *Ibid.*, 154–55.
 126. *Ibid.*, 152.
 127. *Ibid.*, 153–54.
 128. *Ibid.*, 155–56.
 129. *Ibid.*, 156.
 130. *Ibid.*, 156–57.
 131. Triandafillov, *Kharakter*, 157, 170.

Chapter 5

1. Isserson, *Evolutsiia*, 3.
2. Institut Voennoi Istorii, *Inventar'* no. 8723, 10. This work is hereafter abbreviated as *IVI*.
3. *Ibid.*, 10.
4. *Ibid.*, 11.
5. *Ibid.*, 12.
6. *Ibid.*, 22.

132. IVI, 157–58.
 133. RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 25, 214–15. Elsewhere, Isserson mistakenly wrote that during Stalin's "cult of personality" all the copies of this document were destroyed. See Isserson, "Razvitie," 44.
 134. Isserson, "Razvitie," 44–45.
 135. RGVA, f.ond. 40871, opis' 1, delo 34, 166–67.
 136. Isserson, "Razvitie," 41–42.
 137. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 36.

Chapter 6

1. RGVA, fond 37837, opis' 4, delo 32, 240.
 2. Zhukov, *Vospominaniia*, 1: 192.
 3. *Ibid.*, 1:193–95.
 4. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.
 5. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 90.
 6. *Ibid.*, 91.
 7. *Ibid.*, 66–67.
 8. *Ibid.*, 67–68.
 9. *Ibid.*, 91–92.
 10. *Ibid.*, 92.
 11. *Ibid.*, 92–93.
 12. *Ibid.*, 93.
 13. *Ibid.*, 47.
 14. *Ibid.*, 47 (back)–48.
 15. *Ibid.*, 48 (back).
 16. *Ibid.*, 48 (back)–49.
 17. *Ibid.*, 94.
 18. *Ibid.*, 48.
 19. *Ibid.*, 49.
 20. P.G. Grigorenko, *Memoirs* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982), 93.
 21. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 66.
 22. Cited in O.P. Chaney, *Zhukov*, rev. ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 29.
 23. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.
 24. Zhukov, *Vospominaniia*, 1: 213.
 25. *Ibid.*, 1:213–14.
 26. *Ibid.*, 1:215–16.
 27. *Ibid.*, 1:216.
 28. *Ibid.*, 1:217.
 29. Isserson, "Nachalo," 75.
 30. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.
 31. RGVA, fond 37837, opis' 4, delo 62, 74.
 32. RGVA, fond 37837, opis' 4, delo 116, 170.
 33. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 78.
 34. Isserson, "Razvitie," 42.
 35. Isserson, "Zapiski," 72.
 36. *Ibid.*, 71.
 37. Tikhachevskii's most public statement of his views is contained in his article "Voennye Plany Nyneshnei Germanii," which appeared in 1935. See his *Izbrannye*, 2:233–39.
 38. See A. Lapchinskii, "Deistviia

- Aviatsii v Nachal'nom Periode Voiny," *V&R*, no. 6 (1929): 55–66; V. Novitskii, "Deistviia Aviatsii v Nachal'nom Periode Voiny," *V&R*, no. 9 (1929): 23–31; R. Eideman, "K Voprosu o Kharaktere Nachal'nogo Perioda Voiny," *V&R*, no. 8 (1931): 11–17; M. Tikhonov, "Nachal'nyi Period Sovremennoi Voiny," *V&R*, March–April (1933): 31–33; Ye. Shilovskii, "Nachal'nyi Period Voiny," *V&R*, September–October (1933): 3–11.
 39. Tikhachevskii, *Izbrannye*, 2: 212.
 40. *Ibid.*, 2:216–17.
 41. *Ibid.*, 2:217.
 42. *Ibid.*
 43. *Ibid.*, 2:217–219.
 44. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 78–79.
 45. Isserson, "Zapiski," 73.
 46. Zakharov, *General'nyi*, 105.
 47. Kozlov, *Akademiia*, 31.
 48. Isserson, "Zapiski," 73.
 49. *Ibid.*, 73.
 50. *Ibid.*
 51. *Ibid.*, 74.
 52. RGVA, fond 31983, opis' 2, delo 18, 145.
 53. *Ibid.*, 144.
 54. *Ibid.*
 55. *Ibid.*
 56. Isserson, "Razvitie Teorii Sovetskogo Operativnogo Iskusstva v 30-e Gody," *V-IZh*, no. 3 (1965): 52.
 57. Zakharov, *General'nyi*, 105.
 58. Isserson, "Zapiski," 73–74.
 59. *Ibid.*, 74.
 60. *Ibid.*
 61. Zakharov, *General'nyi*, 104.
 62. Isserson, "Zapiski," 74.
 63. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 75–76.
 64. See V.N. Levichev, ed., *Voina i Voennoe Delo* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1933).
 65. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 76.
 66. *Ibid.*, 136.
 67. *Ibid.*, 94, 136.
 68. Kozlov, *Akademiia*, 31; Kulikov, *Akademiia*, 43–44.
 69. Kozlov, *Akademiia*, 31–32; Kulikov, *Akademiia*, 44.
 70. RGVA, fond 37837, opis' 4, delo 73, 436.
 71. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 76–77.
 72. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.
 73. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 110.
 74. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.
 75. TsAMO, Inv. No. 83831, 1 (back).
 76. RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 25, 213.
 77. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.
 78. Isserson, "Razvitie," no. 3, 58.
 79. *Ibid.*, 58–59; RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 34, 215–16.
 80. Kozlov, *Akademiia*, 35.
 81. Isserson, "Razvitie," no. 3, 50.
 82. Kozlov, *Akademiia*, 31–32; Kulikov, *Akademiia*, 44, 48.
 83. Kulikov, *Akademiia*, 48.
 84. Kozlov, *Akademiia*, 33–34.
 85. *Ibid.*, 36–37, 39.
 86. *Ibid.*, 40–41.
 87. L.M. Sandalov, *Perezhitoe* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1966), 8.
 88. Grigorenko, *Memoirs*, 92.
 89. I.Kh. Bagramian, *Moi Vospominaniia* (Yerevan: "Aiastan," 1980), 158–59.
 90. *Ibid.*, 159.
 91. O.F. Suvenirov, *Tragediia RKKa, 1937–1938* (Moscow: "Terra," 1998), 469.
 92. TsAFSB, fond R3212, 26.
 93. *Ibid.*, 129.
 94. *Ibid.*, 26.
 95. *Ibid.*, 64.
 96. Kulikov, *Akademiia*, 47.
 97. RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 25, 221.
 98. *Ibid.*, 221a.
 99. *Ibid.*
 100. RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 34, 168, 188.
 101. *Ibid.*, 168.
 102. *Ibid.*, 188.
 103. *Ibid.*, 188–89.
 104. Isserson, "Razvitie," no. 3, 49–50.
 105. *Ibid.*, 50.
 106. *Ibid.*
 107. RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 34, 190.
 108. *Ibid.*, 191.
 109. Vasilevskii, *Delo*, 86.
 110. Kozlov, *Akademiia*, 33.
 111. Isserson, "Razvitie," no. 3, 51; Isserson, "Zapiski," 76.
 112. Isserson, "Zapiski," 76.
 113. *Ibid.*, 76.
 114. *Ibid.*, 76–77.
 115. *Ibid.*
 116. *Ibid.*, 77.
 117. *Ibid.*, 77–78.
 118. *Ibid.*, 78.
 119. *Ibid.*, 77; Isserson, "Razvitie," no. 3, 52–53.
 120. Isserson, "Razvitie," no. 3, 53.
 121. *Ibid.*, 53–54.
 122. *Ibid.*, 54.
 123. *Ibid.*
 124. Tsentral'noe Statisticheskoe Upravlenie pri Sovete Ministrov SSSR, *Narodnoe Khoziaistvo SSSR 1922–1972 gg. Yubileinyi Statisticheskii Yezhegodnik* (Moscow: "Statistika," 1972), 136, 138.
 125. Grechko, *Istoriia*, 1:270.
 126. Zakharov, *50 Let*, 202.
 127. *Ibid.*, 198.
 128. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.

129. *Ibid.*; Yeremina interview, July 17, 2007.

130. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.

131. Yeremina interview, July 17, 2007.

132. TsAFSB, R3212, 68.

133. Yeremina interview, September 19, 2007.

134. Yeremina interview, July 17, 2007; Yeremina interview, September 19, 2007.

135. Yeremina interview, July 17, 2007; Yeremina interview, September 19, 2007.

136. Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004; Yeremina interview, July 17, 2007.

137. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.

138. Yeremina interview, July 17, 2007.

139. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.

140. Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.

141. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.

142. Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.

143. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.

144. *Ibid.*

145. *Ibid.*

146. Suvenirov, *Tragediia*, 319, 401. Another source states that Melikov was arrested in 1944 and died in prison two years later. See I.D. Sergeev, ed., *Voennaia Entsiklopediia*, 5:87.

147. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.

148. *Ibid.*

Chapter 7

1. K.E. Voroshilov, "Prikaz Narodnogo Komissara Oborony SSSR," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, June 14, 1937, 1.

2. RGVA, fond 40874, opis' 21, delo 6, 39–40.

3. D.A. Volkogonov, *Triumf i Tragediia: Politicheskii Portret I.V. Stalina*, 2nd ed. (Moscow: "Novosti," 1990), 1:513. Another source claims that more than 35,000 men were dismissed from the ground forces during 1937–38, some 3,000 from the navy, and more than 5,000 from the air force. See V.V. Karpov, *Marshal Zhukov: Ego Soratniki i Protivniki v Dni Voiny i Mira* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1992), 74. Still another source, much closer in time to these events, mentions 35,000 victims of the armed forces purge. See W.G. Krivitsky, *In Stalin's Secret Service* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1939), 232.

4. J. Erickson, *The Soviet High Command: A Military-Political History, 1918–1941* (London: St. Martin's, 1962), 506.

5. Suvenirov, *Tragediia*, 315, 373.

6. Erickson, *Soviet*, 505.

7. Suvenirov, *Tragediia*, 313.

8. *Ibid.*, 314.

9. *Ibid.*, 315.

10. *Ibid.*, 317.

11. *Ibid.*, 378, 490.

12. *Ibid.*, 375, 379.

13. *Ibid.*, 375, 388.

14. *Ibid.*, 378, 394.

15. Zhukov, *Vospominaniia*, 1:241–44.

16. Yeremina interview, September 19, 2007.

17. "Zapiska," 4.

18. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 74. Fel'dman was arrested on May 15, although the announcement may have been delayed for several days. See Suvenirov, *Tragediia*, 380.

19. A recent study states that Vol'pe was arrested on May 30, or one day before Gamranik's suicide. See Suvenirov, *Tragediia*, 374, 386. One is thus tempted to dismiss Yeremina's account as the product of a faulty memory 70 years after the fact. On the other hand, it is doubtful she would have confused a major figure such as Gamarnik with anyone else.

20. RGVA, fond 40874, opis' 21, delo 6, 41.

21. *Ibid.*, 42.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Suvenirov, *Tragediia*, 386.

24. RGVA, fond 40874, opis' 21, delo 6, 42.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

27. Suvenirov, *Tragediia*, 384. This source does not list Oshlei's date of death, although the notation that he was rehabilitated on May 19, 1956, indicates that he did not survive his ordeal. At the time of his arrest he was serving as an assistant to the commander of the Moscow Military District.

28. RGVA, fond 40874, opis' 21, delo 6, 43.

29. Suvenirov, *Tragediia*, 373, 407.

30. *Ibid.*, 265, 374; RGVA, fond 40874, opis' 21, delo 6, 45.

31. RGVA, fond 40874, opis' 21, delo 6, 38, 44.

32. N.M. Yakupov, *Tragediia Polkovodtsev* (Moscow: "Mysl," 1992), 304; L.V. Nikulin, *Tukhachevskii* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1964), 191; A.I. Todorskii, *Marshal Tukhachevskii* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Politecheskoi Literatury, 1963), 8; V.M. Ivanov, *Marshal M.N. Tukhachevskii* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1990), 311.

33. RGVA, fond 40874, opis' 21, delo 6, 38, 44.

34. Yeremina interview, September 19, 2007.

35. *Ibid.*

36. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 74.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Loichikova, Yeremina, "Zapiska," 6.

39. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 62–63. Isserson here stated that he last heard from Petrusovich in March. His memory is obviously at fault here, as the latter was by that time already under arrest.

40. Suvenirov, *Tragediia*, 321, 410.

41. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.

42. These methods are described in greater detail in R. Conquest, *The Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Thirties* (London: Macmillan, 1968), 123–47.

43. Yeremina interview, July 17, 2007.

44. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 20.

45. Suvenirov, *Tragediia*, 442.

46. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 33.

47. Suvenirov, *Tragediia*, 428.

48. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 27.

49. *Ibid.*, 24.

50. *Ibid.*, 21.

51. Suvenirov, *Tragediia*, 429.

52. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 22.

53. *Ibid.*, 29.

54. Suvenirov, *Tragediia*, 403.

55. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 28.

56. *Ibid.*, 18.

57. *Ibid.*, 17.

58. *Ibid.*, 23.

59. Suvenirov, *Tragediia*, 319.

60. *Ibid.*, 318.

61. *Ibid.*, 386, 390–91, 440.

62. A.T. Stuchenko, *Zavidnaia Nasha Sud'ba* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1964), 63–64.

63. RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 34, 199–200.

64. Grigorenko, *Memoirs*, 91–92.

65. *Ibid.*, 92.

66. Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.

67. RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 34, 200.

68. Grigorenko, *Memoirs*, 92.

69. S.M. Shtemenko, *General'nyi Shtab v Gody Voiny* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1968), 1: 6–7.

70. RGVA, fond 37837, opis' 4, delo 132, 246.

71. RGVA, fond 37837, opis' 4, delo 155, 194.

72. G. Isserson, "Vstrechnoe Srazhenie Budushchego (V Poriadke Obshchdeniia)," *VM*, no. 7 (1938): 10–11.

73. *Ibid.*, 11–13.

74. *Ibid.*, 13–14.

75. *Ibid.*, 17, 20.

76. *Ibid.*, 20–21.

77. *Ibid.*, 18–20.
 78. *Ibid.*, 17–18, 21.
 79. *Ibid.*, 22–23.
 80. *Ibid.*, 23.
 81. *Ibid.*, 24–25.
 82. *Ibid.*, 25.
 83. *Ibid.*, 26.
 84. *Ibid.*, 10.
 85. RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 34, 200.
 86. *Ibid.*, 200–01.
 87. Isserson, "Razvitie," no. 3, 54.
 88. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 205–06.
 89. Isserson, "Razvitie," no. 3, 60.
 90. G. Isserson, "Operativnye Perspektivy Budushchego," *VM*, no. 8 (1938): 14–15.
 91. *Ibid.*, 15.
 92. *Ibid.*, 18–19.
 93. *Ibid.*, 21.
 94. *Ibid.*, 23.
 95. *Ibid.*, 22.
 96. *Ibid.*, 23.
 97. *Ibid.*, 25–26.
 98. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 124–25.
 99. *Ibid.*
 100. *Ibid.*, 126–27.
 101. *Ibid.*, 124–26.
 102. *Ibid.*, 126–27.
 103. Suvenirov, *Tragediia*, 469; TsAFSB, fond R3212, 26.
 104. TsAFSB, delo 3212, 127–28.
 105. *Ibid.*, 31.
 106. *Ibid.*, 128.
 107. RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 34, 207–09.
 108. *Ibid.*, 207.
 109. G.S. Isserson, *Osnovy Obo-ronitel'noi Operatsii (Konspekt)* (Moscow: Akademiia General'nogo Shtaba, 1938), 4–5.
 110. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
 111. *Ibid.*, 7–8.
 112. *Ibid.*, 8–9.
 113. *Ibid.*, 10.
 114. *Ibid.*, 10–11.
 115. *Ibid.*, 15–17.
 116. *Ibid.*, 17–20.
 117. *Ibid.*, 21–22.
 118. *Ibid.*, 23–24.
 119. *Ibid.*, 22, 24.
 120. *Ibid.*, 25.
 121. *Ibid.*
 122. *Ibid.*, 27–28.
 123. *Ibid.*, 28–29.
 124. *Ibid.*, 26–28.
 125. *Ibid.*, 25, 29–31.
 126. *Ibid.*, 42–43.
 127. *Ibid.*, 45, 47.
 128. *Ibid.*, 49.
 129. *Ibid.*, 50.
 130. *Ibid.*, 51.
 131. *Ibid.*, 58–59.
 132. *Ibid.*, 59–60.
 133. *Ibid.*, 59–61.

134. *Ibid.*, 59, 61.
 135. *Ibid.*, 61–62.
 136. *Ibid.*, 52–53.
 137. *Ibid.*, 54–55, 62.
 138. *Ibid.*, 62–63.
 139. TsAMO, inv. No. 83831, 1 (back).
 140. G. Isserson, *Osnovy Vedeniia Operatsii. Konspekt Vypusk II. Osnovy Operatsii* (Moscow: Akademiia General'nogo Shtaba, 1939), 3.
 141. *Ibid.*, 4.
 142. *Ibid.*
 143. *Ibid.*, 5–6.
 144. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
 145. *Ibid.*, 6.
 146. *Ibid.*
 147. *Ibid.*, 12.
 148. *Ibid.*, 13.
 149. *Ibid.*, 12–13.
 150. *Ibid.*, 12–14.
 151. *Ibid.*, 12, 15.
 152. *Ibid.*, 15, 19.
 153. *Ibid.*, 25.
 154. *Ibid.*, 26.
 155. *Ibid.*
 156. *Ibid.*, 27.
 157. *Ibid.*, 28.
 158. *Ibid.*, 28–29.
 159. *Ibid.*, 29.
 160. *Ibid.*, 29–30.
 161. *Ibid.*, 8, 30.
 162. *Ibid.*, 12.
 163. *Ibid.*, 6–7.

Chapter 8

1. K.A. Meretskov, *Na Sluzhbe Narodu* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Politicheskoi Literatury, 1970), 177–78.
 2. *Ibid.*, 179.
 3. Vasilevskii, *Delo*, 95–96;
 K.M. Simonov, *Glazami Cheloveka Moego Pokoleniia. Razmysleniia o I.V. Staline* (Moscow: "Novosti," 1988), 442–43.
 4. M.V. Zakharov, *Nakanune Velikikh Ispytanii* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1968), 56–58.
 5. G.F. Krivosheev, ed., *Grif Sekretnosti Sniat. Poteri Vooruzhennykh Sil SSSR v Voinakh, Boevykh Deistviakh i Voennykh Konfliktakh. Statisticheskoe Issledovanie* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1993), 6.
 6. Zakharov, *Nakanune*, 55.
 7. S.B. Ivanov, ed., *Voennaia Entsiklopediia* (Moscow, 2003), 7: 558–59.
 8. RGVA, fond 37837, opis' 4, delo 213, 499–500.
 9. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 151.
 10. Meretskov, *Na Sluzhbe*, 179, 182, 184, 186–89.
 11. Grigorenko, *Memoirs*, 93.
 12. TsAMO, inv. no. 83831, 1 (back).
 13. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 115.
 14. Meretskov, *Na Sluzhbe*, 176.
 15. C.G.E. Mannerheim, *The Memoirs of Marshal Mannerheim* (London: Cassell, 1954), 325, 371.
 16. Meretskov, *Na Sluzhbe*, 184.
 17. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 35–37.
 18. *Ibid.*, 37.
 19. *Ibid.*, 37–38.
 20. *Ibid.*, 119.
 21. *Ibid.*, 118–19.
 22. *Ibid.*, 119–20.
 23. *Ibid.*, 119.
 24. *Ibid.*, 38–39.
 25. *Ibid.*, 39–40.
 26. *Ibid.*, 40–41.
 27. *Ibid.*, 122–23.
 28. *Ibid.*, 123.
 29. *Ibid.*, 116–17.
 30. *Ibid.*
 31. *Ibid.*, 117.
 32. *Ibid.*, 117–18.
 33. Meretskov, *Na Sluzhbe*, 177.
 34. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 117–18.
 35. Meretskov, *Na Sluzhbe*, 185.
 36. Mannerheim, *Memoirs*, 343, 345.
 37. *Ibid.*, 350.
 38. RGVA, fond 37837, opis' 4, delo 213, 160.
 39. Meretskov, *Na Sluzhbe*, 186–87.
 40. Grigorenko, *Memoirs*, 93.
 41. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.
 42. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 115.
 43. N.L. Volkovskii, ed. and comp., *Tainy i Uroki Zimnei Voiny, 1939–1949* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo "Poligon," 2000), 282.
 44. M.I. Kazakov, *Nad Kartoi Bylykh Srazhenii* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1971), 26.
 45. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 115–16.
 46. RGVA, fond 37837, opis' 4, delo 344, 350.
 47. K.P. Chudinov, "Pamiati Nev-ernuvshikhsia Tovarishchei." In L.M. Gurvich, comp., ... *Imet' Silu Pomnit'. Rasskazy Tekh, Kto Proshel Ad Repressii* (Moscow: "Moskovskii Rabochii," 1991), 33.
 48. Yeremina interview, September 19, 2007.
 49. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 116.
 50. RGVA, fond 37837, opis' 4, delo 368, 554.
 51. RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 34, 203.
 52. S.S. Biriuzov, *Kogda Gremeli Pushki* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1961), 31–32.
 53. Zakharov, *Nakanune*, 211.
 54. G.S. Isserson, *Novye Formy Bor'by (Opyt Issledovaniia Sovremennykh Voin)* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1940), 6.
 55. *Ibid.*, 10.
 56. RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 34, 205.

57. Isserson, *Novye*, 6.
 58. *Ibid.*, 14, 16.
 59. *Ibid.*, 16.
 60. *Ibid.*, 19–20.
 61. *Ibid.*, 24.
 62. *Ibid.*, 24–25.
 63. *Ibid.*, 24.
 64. *Ibid.*, 26.
 65. *Ibid.*, 27–28.
 66. *Ibid.*, 28.
 67. *Ibid.*, 29.
 68. *Ibid.*
 69. *Ibid.*
 70. *Ibid.*, 30.
 71. *Ibid.*, 43.
 72. *Ibid.*
 73. *Ibid.*, 45.
 74. *Ibid.*, 46.
 75. *Ibid.*, 48–49.
 76. *Ibid.*, 50–51.
 77. *Ibid.*, 51.
 78. *Ibid.*, 52.
 79. *Ibid.*, 59.
 80. *Ibid.*, 60.
 81. *Ibid.*, 72.
 82. *Ibid.*, 66–67.
 83. *Ibid.*, 67.
 84. RGVA, fond 37837, opis' 4, delo 383, 201–02.
 85. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 57.
 86. Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 87. Isserson, "Razvitie," no. 3, 58.
 88. Bagramian, *Moi Vospomina-niia*, 162, 170–71.
 89. V.A. Zolotarev, ed., *Russkii Arkhiv. Velikaia Otechestvennaia Voina* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Terra," 1993–2000), 1:129–30.
 90. *Ibid.*, 132–33, 136.
 91. *Ibid.*, 135, 138.
 92. *Ibid.*, 138, 140–41.
 93. *Ibid.*, 137–38.
 94. *Ibid.*, 146, 148.
 95. *Ibid.*, 149–50.
 96. *Ibid.*, 154–55.
 97. *Ibid.*, 153.
 98. R.M. Portugal'skii in a letter to the author, September 2, 2004.
 99. S.K. Timoshenko, *Zakkluchitel'naia Rech' Narodnogo Komissar Oborony Soiuza SSR Geroia i Marshala Sovetskogo Soiuza S.K. Timoshenko na Voennom Soveschanii 31 Dekabria 1940 g.* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1941), 5.
 100. *Ibid.*, 5–6.
 101. *Ibid.*, 6.
 102. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
 103. *Ibid.*, 10–11, 13–14.
 104. *Ibid.*, 11.
 105. *Ibid.*, 16–22.
 106. *Ibid.*, 13.
 107. *Ibid.*, 25.
 108. *Ibid.*, 25–30.
 109. *Ibid.*, 30–31.
 110. *Ibid.*, 30–32.
 111. *Ibid.*, 23–24.
 112. *Ibid.*, 36.
 113. *Ibid.*, 37–39.
 114. *Ibid.*, 39–41.
 115. Bagramian, *Moi Vospomina-niia*, 180.
 116. Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 117. A.N. Yakovlev, ed., *1941 God* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi Fond "Demokratia," 1998) 1:735–36.
 118. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.
 119. Meretskov, *Na Sluzhbe*, III, 117–18, 166, 214.
 120. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.
 121. See B.V. Bychevskii, *Gorod-Front* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1963), 99; Grigorenko, *Memoirs*, 107–09. Elsewhere (p. 110), Grigorenko called Zhukov "a cruel, vengeful person, and throughout the war I was afraid I might have to serve under him again."
 122. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.
 123. This is taken from a series of questions regarding Isserson put to Maj. Gen. Yu. Ya. Kirshin in 2008. This document is hereafter referred to as "Questions."
 124. Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 125. TsAMO, Inv. no. 83831, 5.
 126. RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 25, 226.
 127. *Ibid.*, 227.
 128. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.
 129. *Ibid.*; Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 130. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 57–58.
 131. Yeremina interview, July 17, 2007.
 132. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.
 133. *Ibid.*
 134. Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 135. *Ibid.*
- pointment as an adviser to the *Stavka* of the high command. See his *Na Sluzhbe*, 214.
 6. Suvenirov, *Tragediia*, 376, 381.
 7. TsAFSB, fond R3212, 1.
 8. Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 9. Sverdlov, *Neizvestnoe*, 249. Unfortunately, this account is presented in the author's *The Russian Way of War: Operational Art, 1904–1940* (p. 203) as fact. The author apologizes for the error.
 10. Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 11. *Ibid.*; Suvenirov, *Tragediia*, 384.
 12. Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 13. *Ibid.*
 14. *Ibid.*
 15. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.
 16. *Ibid.*; Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 17. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 3–4, 14.
 18. Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 19. RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 25, 226–27.
 20. Sverdlov, *Neizvestnoe*, 248. Unfortunately, this author's search has proven equally unsuccessful.
 21. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 6, 10.
 22. *Ibid.*, 15–16.
 23. Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004. The details of this search are verified elsewhere. See Gorbato, *Gody*, 131–32.
 24. Sverdlov, *Neizvestnoe*, 249.
 25. Gorbato, *Gody*, 128; TsAFSB, delo 3212, 51–53.
 26. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 51–52.
 27. *Ibid.*, 52–53.
 28. Gorbato, *Gody*, 128.
 29. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 54–58.
 30. TsAMO, Inv. no. 83831, 5.
 31. RGVA, fond 4, opis' 15, delo 7, 390.
 32. TsAMO, Inv. no. 83831, 2.
 33. Gorbato, *Gody*, 128–29.
 34. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 59.
 35. *Ibid.*, 60–61.
 36. *Ibid.*, 63. This may actually have been Stepan Nikolaevich Bogomiagkov, who later served as chief of staff of the Special Red Banner Far Eastern Army, and who was later arrested. He seems, however, to have survived his ordeal. See Suvenirov, *Tragediia*, 380.
 37. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 64.
 38. Ivanov, *Voennaia*, 6:516.
 39. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 66–68.
 40. *Ibid.*, 66.
 41. *Ibid.*, 69–70.
 42. *Ibid.*, 70–71.
 43. *Ibid.*, 71.

Chapter 9

1. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004; Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 2. A.I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973–76), 1:3–4, 18.
 3. A.V. Gorbato, *Gody i Voiny* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1965), 126.
 4. TsAFSB, fond R3212, 1.
 5. Meretskov does not mention being arrested in his biography, although the date can be inferred. This occurred the day following his ap-

44. *Ibid.*, 71–72.
 45. *Ibid.*, 75–76, 78.
 46. *Ibid.*, 79–80.
 47. *Ibid.*, 22; Suvenirov, *Tragediia*, 389.
 48. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 77–78.
 49. *Ibid.*, 81.
 50. *Ibid.*, 81 (back).
 51. Narodnyi Komissariat Yustitsii, *Ugolovnyi Kodeks* (Moscow: Yuridicheskoe Izdatel'stvo NKYu SSSR, 1938), 26.
 52. *Ibid.*, 26–27.
 53. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 81 (back); Narodnyi Komissariat Yustitsii, *Ugolovnyi*, 27.
 54. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 81 (back); Narodnyi Komissariat Yustitsii, *Ugolovnyi*, 31.
 55. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 82.
 56. Gorbatov, *Gody*, 129–30.
 57. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.
 58. Yeremina interview, July 17, 2007.
 59. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 84.
 60. *Ibid.*, 84–85.
 61. *Ibid.*, 88–89.
 62. *Ibid.*, 86–88.
 63. *Ibid.*, 88.
 64. Gorbatov, *Gody*, 130.
 65. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 90–94.
 66. *Ibid.*, 94–95.
 67. *Ibid.*, 96–96 (back).
 68. *Ibid.*, 96 (back)–97.
 69. Gorbatov, *Gody*, 130.
 70. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 98–98 (back).
 71. *Ibid.*, 98 (back)–99.
 72. *Ibid.*, 98 (back).
 73. *Ibid.*, 100, 102–03.
 74. *Ibid.*, 104–06.
 75. *Ibid.*, 109–10.
 76. *Ibid.*, 111.
 77. *Ibid.*, 111–12.
 78. *Ibid.*, 112–13.
 79. *Ibid.*, 112–14.
 80. *Ibid.*, 120.
 81. *Ibid.*, 120–21.
 82. *Ibid.*, 122–23.
 83. *Ibid.*, 124–27.
 84. *Ibid.*, 127–29.
 85. *Ibid.*, 23.
 86. *Ibid.*, 130.
 87. *Ibid.*, 130–31.
 88. *Ibid.*, 131–32.
 89. Suvenirov, *Tragediia*, 391.
 90. TsAFSB, fond R3212, 132–33.
 91. *Ibid.*, 34.
 92. Suvenirov, *Tragediia*, 379.
 93. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 133.
 94. *Ibid.*, 133–34.
 95. *Ibid.*, 134.
 96. *Ibid.*, 135.
 97. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.
 98. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 135–36.
 99. *Ibid.*, 136.
 100. *Ibid.*, 137.
 101. *Ibid.*
 102. *Ibid.*, 138.
 103. *Ibid.*, 139.
 104. *Ibid.*, 139–43.
 105. *Ibid.*, 144.
 106. *Ibid.*, 146.
 107. *Ibid.*, 148–148 (back).
 108. Gorbatov, *Gody*, 133–35.
 109. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 149–50.
 110. *Ibid.*, 150–51.
 111. *Ibid.*, 152.
 112. *Ibid.*, 153.
 113. *Ibid.*, 153, 154–154(back).
 114. Gorbatov, *Gody*, 134.
 115. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 160.
 116. Yeremina interview, July 17, 2007.
 117. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 155–155 (back).
 118. *Ibid.*, 156.
 119. Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 120. Gorbatov, *Gody*, 140.
 121. Kirshin, “Questions.”
 122. Sverdlov, *Neizvestnoe*, 249–50.
 123. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004.
 124. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 157–157 (back).
 125. *Ibid.*, 163. The text of this decree is reprinted in Zolotarev, *Russkii*, 2 (2): 17–18.
 126. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 165.
 127. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004; Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 128. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004; Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 129. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004; Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 130. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004; Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 131. Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 132. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004; Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 133. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004; Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 134. Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 135. RGVA, fond 40874, opis' 21, delo 6, 38.
- ## Chapter 10
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 2. Isserson, *Novye*, 30.
 3. *Ibid.*, 30.
 4. Yakovlev, *1941 God*, 2:218.
 5. *Ibid.*, 2:218.
 6. V. Anflov, “... Razgovor Konchilsia Ugrozoi Stalina,” *V-IZh*, no. 3 (1995): 41.
 7. Yakovlev, *1941 God*, 2:219.
 8. Grechko, *Istoriia*, 3:440.
 9. Yakovlev, *1941 God*, 2:219.
 10. Grechko, *Istoriia*, 3:440.
 11. Zhukov, *Vospominaniia*, 1:340.
 12. *Ibid.*, 1:354.
 13. The most ambitious effort in this regard has been made by the pseudonymous V. Suvorov. See his *Ledokol and Den' “M.”* (Moscow: AST-LTD, 1998).
 14. Zolotarev, *Russkii*, 5(1): 353.
 15. M.N. Kozhevnikov, *Komandovanie i Shtab VVS Sovetskoi Armii v Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voine, 1941–1945 gg.* (Moscow: “Nauka,” 1977), 36–37.
 16. I.Ye. Krupchenko, ed., *Sovetskie Tankovye Voiska, 1941–1945* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1973), 22.
 17. N.P. Zolotov, ed., *Boevoi i Chislennyi Sostav Vooruzhennykh Sil SSSR v Period Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny (1941–1945 gg.)*. *Statisticheskii Sbornik No. 1 (22 Iunia 1941 g.)* (Moscow: Institut Voennoi Istorii, 1994), 16–17.
 18. V.A. Zolotarev, ed., *Velikaia Otechestvennaia Voina, 1941–1945* (Moscow: “Nauka,” 1998–99), 1:159.
 19. Zolotarev, *Russkii*, 5(1): 34–35.
 20. N.V. Yeronin, “Kampaniia Sovetskikh Vooruzhennykh Sil na Dal'nem Vostoke v 1945 g. (Fakty i Tsifry),” *V-IZh*, no. 8 (1965): 67.
 21. *Ibid.*, 68.
 22. G. Chernykh, “O Primenenii 6 Gv. TA v Pervom Eshelone Fronta,” *V-IZh*, no. 3 (1981): 69.
 23. I.M. Anan'ev, *Tankovye Armii v Nastuplenii. Po Opytu Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny, 1941–1945 gg.* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1988), 50–51.
 24. O.A. Losik, ed., *Stroitel'stvo i Boevoi Primenenie Sovetskikh Tankovykh Voisk v Gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1979), 69.
 25. Anan'ev, *Tankovye*, 55–57.
 26. *Ibid.*, 51–52.
 27. Losik, *Stroitel'stvo*, 70.
 28. Tiushkevich, *Sovetskie*, 288.
 29. Kozhevnikov, *Komandovanie*, 84.
 30. Tiushkevich, *Sovetskie*, 284, 318.
 31. V. Gurkin, “Kontrnastuplenie pod Stalingradom v Tsifrakh (Operatsiia “Uran”),” *V-IZh*, no. 3 (1968): 68.
 32. *Ibid.*, 67.

33. *Ibid.*, 69.
 34. *Ibid.*, 67.
 35. *Ibid.*, 71–72.
 36. *Ibid.*
 37. *Ibid.*
 38. A.I. Radzievskii, *Proryv* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1979), 40.
 39. *Ibid.*, 41.
 40. Vasilevskii, *Delo*, 254.
 41. F.W. von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 180.
 42. Anan'ev, *Tankovye*, 64.
 43. Losik, *Stroitel'stvo*, 75.
 44. Tiushkevich, *Sovietskie*, 318.
 45. G. Koltunov, "Kurskaia Bitva v Tsifrah (Period Kontrnastupleniia)," *V-IZh*, no. 7 (1968): 79.
 46. *Ibid.*, 80–81.
 47. *Ibid.*, 82–83.
 48. K.K. Rokossovskii, *Soldatskii Dolg* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1997), 276.
 49. Zhukov, *Vospominaniia*, 3:73.
 50. Koltunov, "Kurskaia," 88–89.
 51. F. Sverdllov, "Udar po Flangu Orlovskoi Gruppirovki Protivnika," *V-IZh*, no. 1 (1971): 24.
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 55. *Ibid.*, 81; O. Losik, "Primenenie Bronetankovykh i Mekhanizirovannykh Voisk v Belorusskoi Operatsii," *V-IZh*, no. 6 (1984): 20.
 56. Losik, "Primenenie," 21.
 57. B. Panov, "Okruzhenie i Unichtozhenie Krupnykh Gruppirovok Protivnika v Belorusskoi Operatsii," *V-IZh*, no. 6 (1974): 23.
 58. Zolotarev, *Russkii*, 5(4): 117–18.
 59. V.V. Gurkin, K.A. Malan'in, "Moskovskaia Bitva v Tsifrah (Period Oborony)," *V-IZh*, no. 3 (1967): 71.
 60. *Ibid.*, 72.
 61. *Ibid.*, 74.
 62. Krupchenko, *Sovetskie*, 36.
 63. Gurkin, Malan'in, "Moskovskaia," 74.
 64. *Ibid.*, 76.
 65. *Ibid.*
 66. *Ibid.*, 77–78.
 67. K.S. Kolganov, ed., *Razvitie Taktiki Sovetskoi Armii v Gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny (1941–1945 gg.)* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1958), 276–77.
 68. Gurkin, Malan'in, "Moskovskaia," 79.
 69. H. Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1952), 233.
 70. B.H. Liddell Hart, *The German Generals Talk* (New York: Quill, 1979), 184.
 71. Gurkin, Malan'in, "Moskovskaia," 79.
 72. G. Koltunov, "Kurskaia Bitva v Tsifrah (Period Oborony)," *V-IZh*, no. 6 (1968): 62.
 73. *Ibid.*, 61, 63.
 74. *Ibid.*, 64.
 75. *Ibid.*, 65.
 76. *Ibid.*, 62.
 77. *Ibid.*, 61, 63.
 78. *Ibid.*, 64.
 79. *Ibid.*, 65.
 80. *Ibid.*, 66.
 81. *Ibid.*
 82. *Ibid.*, 62–63.
 83. Sverdllov, *Neizvestnoe*, 56. The commander was Rotmistrov, Isserson's pupil from the Frunze Academy.
 84. Isserson, *Evoliutsiia*, 41.
 85. *IVI*, 46.
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 87. Zolotarev, *Russkii*, 1:140–41.
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 90. A. Pokrovskii, "Na 3-m Belorusskom Fronte," *V-IZh*, no. 6 (1964): 21.
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 92. *IVI*, 123–25.
 93. Radzievskii, *Proryv*, 23, 26.
 94. *Ibid.*, 26–29.
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 96. *Ibid.*, 126.
 97. *IVI*, 130–31.
 98. *Ibid.*, 131.
 99. *Ibid.*, 154–55.

Chapter 11

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- TsAFSB, delo R3212, 168–69.
- Ibid.*, 167.
- Ibid.*, 171.
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 34. Gurvich, *Imet' Silu*, 33.
 35. Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
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 37. *Ibid.*
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 44. *Ibid.*, 206.
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 46. TsAFSB, delo R3212, 200–200 (back).
 47. *Ibid.*, 200.
 48. *Ibid.*, 200 (back)–201.
 49. *Ibid.*, 201.
 50. *Ibid.*, 202.
 51. *Ibid.*, 203.
 52. *Ibid.*, 203–04.
 53. *Ibid.*, 204–05.
 54. *Ibid.*, 206.
 55. RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 2, 4.
 56. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004; Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 57. RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 5, 1–2.
 58. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004; Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
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 60. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004; Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
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 68. RGVA, fond 40871, opis' 1, delo 62, 1.
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 70. *Ibid.*, 2–2 (back).
 71. TsAMO, Inv. no. 83831, 2.
 72. Yeremina interview, July 17, 2007.
 73. Sverdlov, *Neizvestnoe*, 247–48.
 74. Yeremina interview, March 22; Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
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 76. *Ibid.*
 77. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004; Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 78. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004; Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
 79. Yeremina interview, March 22, 2004; Yeremina interview, August 25, 2004.
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 81. *Ibid.*
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 83. *Ibid.*
 84. *Ibid.*
 85. V. Sokolovskii, M. Cherednichenko, “Nekotorye Voprosy Sovetskogo Voennogo Stroitel'stva v Poslevoennyye Gody,” *V-IZh*, no. 3 (1965): 9.
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 87. M. Smirnov, “O Nekotorykh Faktorkh, Vliiaiuschchikh na Razvitie Voennogo Iskusstva,” *VM*, no. 6 (1953): 15.
 88. *Ibid.*, 4.
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