

Soviet Application of Operational Art in the Khalkhin Gol Campaign, May-August 1939

A Monograph

by

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Abstract

Soviet Application of Operational Art in the Khalkhin Gol Campaign, May-August 1939, by LTC Michael C. Manner, US Army, 31 pages.

This monograph analyzes the Khalkhin Gol Campaign, also referred to as the Battle of Nomonhan, from the Soviet perspective to look at the elements of operational art in a historical campaign. The Khalkhin Gol Campaign resulted from the poorly defined border between Outer Mongolia and Manchukuo. The Khalkhin Gol Campaign began when Mongolian cavalry occupied disputed territory between the Khalkhin Gol River and the town of Nomonhan. This undeclared border war between the USSR and Japan lasted from May to August, 1939 and resulted in more than fifty thousand casualties combined. This analysis provides current military planners with a historical vignette to enhance their appreciation for the application of the elements of operational art for future high intensity conflicts.

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Acronyms

ADRP	Army Doctrine Reference Publication
IGHQ	Imperial General Headquarters (Japan)
IJA	Imperial Japanese Army
IJN	Imperial Japanese Navy
JP	Joint Publication
MPR	Mongolian People's Republic
NKVD	People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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Introduction

The significance of the Holhin-Gol (Khalkhin Gol) River battles must not be underestimated. The whole world followed their outcome, the matter involved the international prestige of the USSR, and, primarily, it was a rare opportunity to test new materiel and tactics under actual battle conditions. For Stalin, the losses were of no importance whatsoever. Zhukov himself knew that this appointment was to test his competence and one which he had to pass without fail.

—P. Ruslanov, *Russian Review*

Following Stalin's Great Purges in the Soviet Army in 1936-1938, the Soviet military was reeling from the internal gutting of the senior leaders of the Soviet military's officer corps. Because of the purge, it was assumed by the Japanese and American observers in Moscow to be an army operating at reduced capacity. The loss of senior leadership was to enter its first true test of the leadership that remained in position.¹ This test would come during the Khalkhin Gol Campaign in Outer Mongolia. The Soviet Army and the Mongolian Army forces together would enter into an undeclared border war against the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) and the Manchukuo Army in a disputed area along the Mongolian People's Republic (Outer Mongolia) and Manchukuo (Japanese-controlled Manchuria) border from May through September, 1939 (see figure 1). Manchukuo and Outer Mongolia at the time shared about 600 kilometers of border and small armed clashes between the two countries were not uncommon, but rarely attracted attention above the local level of leadership.² The Khalkhin Gol Campaign would prove not only to be a turning point in the Soviet Army but would also provide valuable lessons for both of these empires' armies. But, the defeat the Japanese sustained at the hands of the Soviet Army helped to ensure that the USSR would not have to worry about a two-front war in the near future as the

¹ Viktor Suvorov, *The Chief Culprit: Stalin's Grand Design to Start World War II* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 92-97.

² Robert Edgerton, *Warriors of the Rising Sun: A History of the Japanese Military* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997), 239.

situation in Europe deteriorated and diplomatic relations between the USSR and Germany were becoming more strained. At the time, it would seem that neither of these local powers truly understood how the outcome of the border dispute would change not only their political relationship but the future war plans of both countries for the next five years. The uneasy agreement between Japan and the USSR would last until 8 August 1945, when the USSR declared war on Japan and invaded Manchukuo.

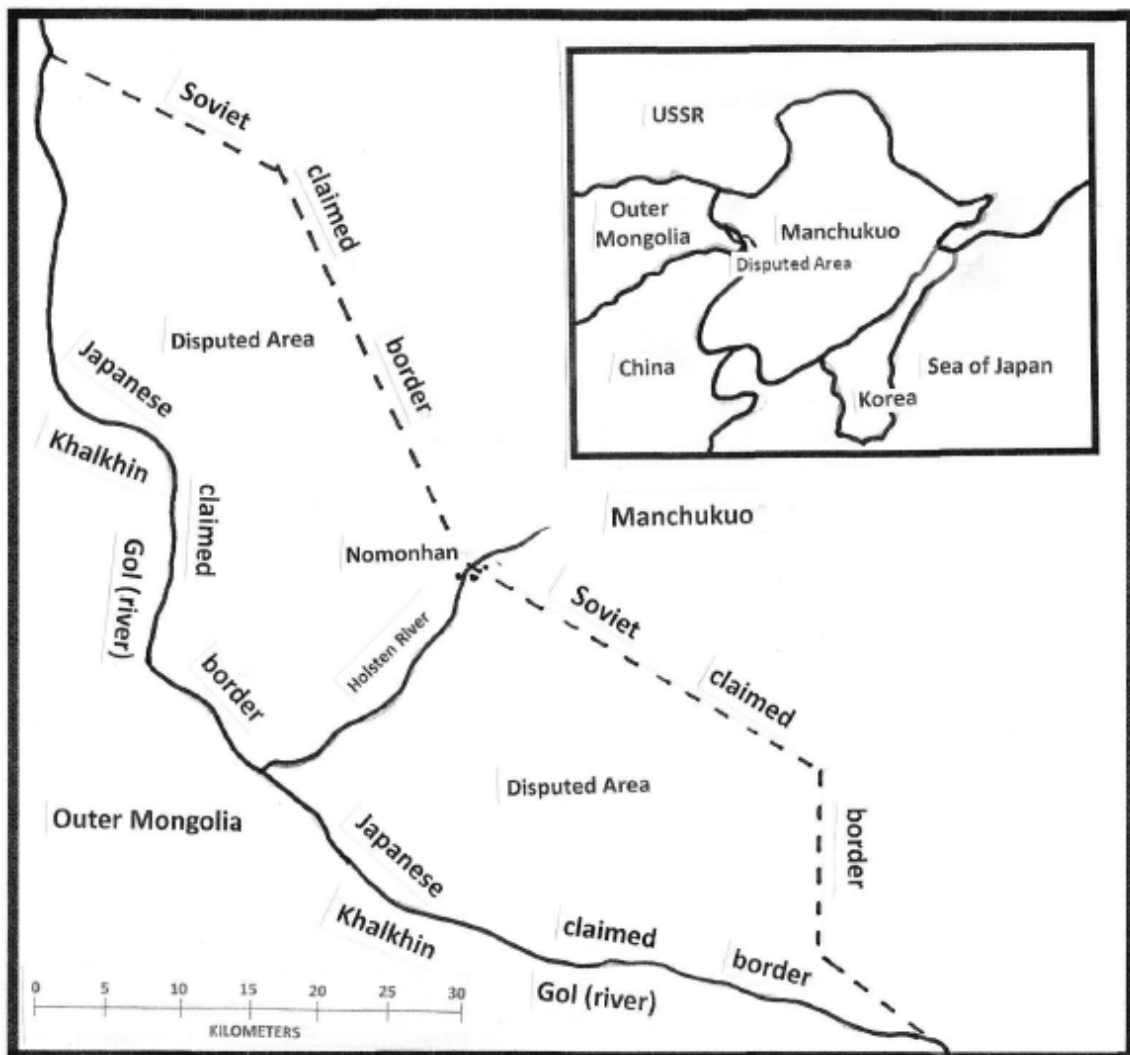


Figure 1. Map of the Disputed Area of the Khalkhin Gol Campaign: May to September 1939.

Source: Author created.

The Soviet Army's actions during the Khalkhin Gol Campaign gives current military planners the chance to better understand the application and utility of US Army doctrine. The utilization of the elements of operational art to look at an historical campaign to help shape and understand future planning efforts is instrumental in a military planners' educational experience. By looking at the Khalkhin Gol Campaign from the Soviets' point of view using current US Army doctrinal concepts of operational art, a military planner can gain a better understanding of what is required to combine tactical and operational objectives and actions in both time and space with a purpose. This allows the military planner to achieve an end state in a dynamic and changing environment. In the current operational environment that current military planners are faced with the issues and challenges are similar to the military planners in the Soviet Army of 1939. The current and past operational environments both pose similar characteristics: they are political constraints on operations, limited applications of military forces, similarly equipped conventional operational forces and the need for quick conflict resolution. Understanding the Khalkhin Gol Campaign by the application of an analysis of the elements of operational art is beneficial to current military planners because of the similar operational environments that they have to plan in today.

The literature on the Khalkhin Gol Campaign is extensive but much of the writing has focused on the Japanese accounts and perspective of the campaign. To fully understand the Soviet side of the actions that occurred between May and August 1939, one must look to the more recent material like Stuart Goldman's book *Nomonhan, 1939, The Red Army's Victory that Shaped World War II*, published in 2012 and Andrew McDonald's *Where the War Was Won: Nomonhan 1939* published in 2017.³ These two books are a strong basis for understanding the Soviet actions

³ Stuart D. Goldman, *Analysis: Nomonhan, 1939, The Red Army's Victory That Shaped World War II* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2012); Andrew McDonald, *Where the War was Won: Nomonhan 1939* (London, England: Austin Macauley Publishers LTD., 2017).

during the Khalkhin Gol Campaign. Almost all other books on the subject focus on Japanese actions during the campaign. For a detailed understanding and account of Japanese actions, Alvin Coox's two volume set entitled *Nomonhan: Japan Against Russia, 1939* published in 1985 is heavily cited by both of the previous authors and is a necessary reference for details and additional context.⁴

Japanese actions and analysis have been more readily available because after the war, the Japanese documents outlining lessons learned and the application of tactics were translated by the United States Army and made public. Also available to the English language reader was the fruit of the US Army's requirement of the Japanese Army to provide complete battle histories and after-action reviews. The Nomonhan or Khalkhin Gol Campaign has always been a very popular campaign to study in the Japanese Army because of the multiple lessons learned. So much so that the case study is used by the Japanese Ground Self Defense Forces today to help educate its officer corps on the importance of both logistical lines of effort and the unity of command.⁵ The Nomonhan or Khalkhin Gol Campaign continues to be a subject of great interest, and sadly, a comprehensive understanding of the Soviet Army's operational campaign plan remains misunderstood outside of small groups of scholars. It is virtually unknown to current western military planners because, only recently, have complete Soviet accounts been written in English from limited Russian language and translated source documents. To help military planners understand the Soviet Army's actions leading up to and during the Khalkhin Gol Campaign, the use of operational art as a frame work or intellectual tool to understand the operational environment and Soviet operations is beneficial. A detailed analysis of the elements of operational art that contributed to the Soviet Army's victory during the Khalkhin Gol Campaign

⁴ Alvin D. Coox, *Nomonhan: Japan Against Russia, 1939* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985).

⁵ Edward J. Drea, *Leavenworth Papers No.2, Nomonhan: Japanese-Soviet Tactical Combat, 1939* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1981), ix.

aids the military planner in the understanding of the campaign's importance to the Soviets and provides an excellent example of the application of selected US Army doctrinal elements of operational art. US Army doctrine lists ten elements of operational art they are, end state and conditions, center of gravity, decisive points, lines of operation and lines of effort, tempo, phasing and transitions, culmination, operational reach, basing and lastly risk.⁶ The following five of these elements were clearly employed by the Soviets during the Khalkhin Gol Campaign: end state and conditions, lines of operation, tempo, phasing and transitions, and operational reach. The purpose of this monograph is not to provide a complete battle analysis but to analyze how the selected elements of operational art were applied by Soviet planners and how they helped to shape the Soviet Army's victory during the Khalkhin Gol Campaign in Outer Mongolia in 1939.

The Khalkhin Gol campaign remains relevant because it provides current military planners a unique chance to study and research a historic operation that allows planners to achieve a better understanding of how the US Army's elements of operational art can be applied to better permit a commander and staff to "visualize and eventually describe their approach for conducting an operation."⁷ The use of current Army doctrine as a framework to study the Khalkhin Gol Campaign provides the necessary context to allow military planners to see the linkages between the operational campaign plan and the outcome on the ground at the tactical level. The ability for current military planners to look at the lessons learned by the Soviet planners using the application of current US Army doctrine puts the operational problems faced by the Soviet Army planners into a framework that can be understood by current planners to aid them in a better understanding of their current operational environment. How the Soviet Army planners overcame the challenges of their day are still valid today to current military planners.

⁶ US Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0, Operations, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2017), Table 2-2, 2-4.

⁷ Ibid., 2-4.

Strategic Overview

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and Imperial Japan had a contentious relationship along the 600 kilometers border between the Mongolian People's Republic (Outer Mongolia) and the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo, founded in 1931.⁸ The Mongolian People's Republic was Russia's first satellite country in 1924, and in 1936 the two countries signed a mutual assistance treaty that gave the Soviets permission to keep Soviet forces based in the MPR⁹ the Mongolians were becoming more concerned with the Japanese actions in both China and Manchukuo so having Soviet forces based within their borders provided security against a possible Japanese invasion. The border dispute that had been ongoing for more than two hundred years between Mongolian and Manchurian herdsman was going to cause the USSR and Japan to fight bitterly over what the MPR and Manchukuo both considered their territory.¹⁰ This was not the first border dispute that brewed into open conflict for the USSR or the Japanese. A year earlier, in July of 1938, at Lake Khasan near the borders between the USSR, Manchukuo, and Korea, bloody fighting ensued between the Soviet Army and the Japanese and Manchukuo Army at great cost to all involved. Out of that conflict came the stated Soviet political policy that any conflict along the Soviet frontier would be first answered by force.¹¹ The border between the Mongolian People's Republic (MPR) and Manchukuo (Manchuria) had always been porous and the local nomadic tribes moved freely back and forth with no tangible concept of a boundary. The border dispute and subsequent battles in Manchukuo between the Japanese and Manchukuo

⁸ Edgerton, *Warriors of the Rising Sun*, 239.

⁹ Richard W. Harrison, *The Russian Way of War: Operational Art, 1904-1945* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 237.

¹⁰ Christopher D. Bellamy and Joseph S. Lahnstein, *The New Soviet Defensive Policy: Khalkhin Gol 1939 as a case study, Parameters* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army War College, 1990), 21.

¹¹ Drea, *Leavenworth Papers No.2, Nomonhan*, 3.

Army against the Soviet and MPR Army that occurred between May and September 1939 has two common names depending on which of the opposing forces is being researched or the country of origin for a reference document. *Nomonhan* named after the small town in the disputed area is the common name for the Japanese campaign that ensued and for most western references because of the large amount of translated Japanese documents, and *Khalkhin Gol* named after the nearby river for the Soviet Army and Slavic scholars.

In the summer of 1939, the Soviet Army, along with Mongolian Army forces under one command, the 57th Special Corps, later renamed after being reinforced was re-designated 1st Army Group. The 1st Army Group would fight against the Kwantung Army consisting of the Japanese Imperial Army units and Japanese-led Manchurian soldiers. The two Armies would fight over the disputed border between Outer Mongolia and Manchukuo. The dispute stemmed from all the governments involved and the knowledge of the military commanders on the ground that their forces were operating inside their own respective borders. The disputed area located in remote Outer Mongolia and Manchukuo was roughly 700 kilometers of very sparsely wooded rolling open dry grass land between the east side of the Khalkhin Gol river and west of the small village of Nomonhan.¹²

This minor border skirmish around a small town called Nomonhan and along the Khalkhin Gol River and its tributary would quickly escalate. As the Japanese forces attempted to crush the small MPR cavalry force that had in the Japanese commander's estimation and by his maps had again violated the Manchukuo border in his area. The perceived border incursions by the MPR army become more frequent so the local Japanese commander acted in accordance with a standing imperial order that addressed border violations. His choice was to make an example of the border incursion by attacking and driving the MPR cavalry back across the border that he

¹² Coox, *Nomonhan*, 143.

recognized. The attacking of the MPR cavalry in turn led to an equally quick and heavily armed Soviet and MPR counter response from the 57th Special Corps.¹³ This rapid escalation of force for both sides would build to a boiling point the tensions between the two. Propelling this seemingly unimportant border dispute into armed conflict on the Outer Mongolian frontier that was destined to over the next few weeks become larger conflict between the 57th Special Corps and the Kwantung Army. The dispute would culminate later that summer, with the Soviet Army defeating the Japanese, leaving over 10,000 Soviet soldiers dead or wounded, and between 52,000 to 55,000 Japanese dead or wounded.¹⁴ Some Japanese units suffered unit casualties above 70 percent during the Khalkhin Gol Campaign.¹⁵

In the end, Moscow and Tokyo agreed to one thing: neither side had a desire to start a war with the other during the summer of 1939, so the 1st Army Group stopped its advancement within what they had always claimed was the MPR's side of the border and the Kwantung Army withdrew and sent no more reinforcements forward conceding the disputed area to the MPR, and an uneasy peace followed.¹⁶

Soviet Preparations

To help military planners understand the scale and scope of the Khalkhin Gol Campaign it is useful to use current US Army doctrine so that current military planners can understand and take into account the physical distance of the Lines of Operations (LOO) that the 1st Army Group

¹³ Michael A. Barnhart, *Japan and the World Since 1868* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 121.

¹⁴ Amnon Sella, *Khalkin-Gol: The Forgotten War*, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 18, no. 4, (London: SAGE, 1983), 651; Otto Preston Chaney, JR., *Zhukov* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 57.

¹⁵ Edward J. Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor: Essays on the Imperial Japanese Army* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 89.

¹⁶ Edgerton, *Warriors of the Rising Sun*, 241; Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War*, 143, 241.

forces were required to use to ensure that the essential forces and supplies were available for the Khalkhin Gol Campaign. Army Doctrine Reference Publication 3-0 (ADRP 3-0) defines Lines of Operations as “a line that defines the directional orientation of a force in time and space in relation to the enemy and links the force with its base of operations and objectives.”¹⁷ The movement of men and supplies from European Russia required that the Trans-Siberian railroad would have to be used to move the up to three thousand kilometers required to the closest point in Borzya, and then downloaded and moved by trucks the final 700 kilometers.¹⁸ This not unlike any LOO that the current military planer could face if conventual forces in large numbers need to be moved to support operations in a force on force conflict.

General Secretary Joseph Stalin was growing concerned by the current 57th Special Corps commanders’ actions and sent Marshal Georgi Zhukov, a student of mechanized warfare and combined arms employment, to evaluate the current situation and take command if required of the 57th Special Corps. Marshal Zhukov did assume command of the 57th Special Corps, this was the force that would become the 1st Army Group once it was reinforced with additional Soviet units and combined with augmented Mongolian Army units. The Soviet Army was able to employ over 1000 tanks throughout the Khalkhin Gol Campaign.¹⁹ This was an impressive number considering the extended lines of operations that limited the logistical lines through put of both repair parts and fuel at the front lines.

Also, under Marshal Zhukov’s control was the latest advancements of the Soviet Army’s artillery, armor, and aircraft to support his mechanized infantry and light infantry forces. This was in stark contrast to the arms and equipment being field by the Kwantung Army both in quality and capability. The most noticeable equipment advantages that the Soviets had was in both range

¹⁷ Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0, Operations, Glossary-5.

¹⁸ Harrison, *The Russian Way of War*, 237-238.

¹⁹ Drea, *Leavenworth Papers No.2, Nomonhan*, xi.

of artillery pieces and armor and weapon systems on their tanks. As the fight continued the Soviets started to equip 1st Army Group with more modern aircraft and in greater numbers than the Japanese could keep up with.

After Marshal Zhukov took command of the 1st Army Group, he immediately started to prepare and implement a deception plan that would prove over time to be successful. Multiple operations were conducted to deceive the Kwantung Army forces at Khalkhin Gol but the most successful three are addressed below. First, is the use of night movement of troops and equipment from the railhead in Borzya, USSR, was a dangerous 700-kilometer trek across Outer Mongolia.²⁰ The drive on dirt roads of varying degrees of quality and trafficability combined with the use of blacked out vehicles to move these forces forward during the hours of limited visibility was a dangerous undertaking but was necessary to conceal the amount of incoming forces from Japanese observation. But the return trips during daylight hours successfully gave the appearance to the Japanese scouts and observation aircraft that forces were leaving the area not coming into the area. It was a mistake that would cost the Kwantung Army in the coming weeks as 1st Army Group continued to build up both combat power and supply stocks for the upcoming attacks. The second use of deception operations was the employment of special loud speakers mounted on trucks that was used in two ways: the first was to play prerecorded sounds over loud speakers of the movement of tanks and other vehicles continuously moving along the length of the Soviet lines to give the impression that forces were moving more than they were. The second was to help create the illusion that the Soviet forces planned only to defend. Sounds of soldiers building defensive works were also played over loud speakers in multiple areas was combined with the printing and distribution of booklets to 1st Army Group Soldiers on the construction and conduct of defensive operations helped to reinforce the Kwantung Army's theory that the Soviets did not

²⁰ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 579.

plan on attacking anytime soon. The third was the continuous use of disinformation by using false troop movement reports on 1st Army Group internal radio and communication networks that the Soviets knew were being monitored by the Kwantung Army. Marshal Zhukov's use of deception during the Khalkhin Gol Campaign was instrumental in helping him gain time to build the combat power that he required to defeat the Kwantung Army and to reinforce what the Kwantung Army staff wanted to believe was happening on the ground. All through June and well into August, 1st Army Group continued to build combat power, reaching an end combat strength for the upcoming attack of approximately 57,000 soldiers, 882 tanks and armored cars, over 500 aircraft and 548 artillery and mortar systems. Out-numbering the Kwantung Army up to two to one in almost every category (see table 1).²¹

Table 1. Forces and Equipment on 20 August 1939

Forces and Equipment in the disputed area 20 August 1939					
	Soldiers	Armored Cars	Tanks	Combat Aircraft	Artillery
1 st Army Group	57,000	382	500	512	548
Kwantung Army	38,000	12	135	225	310

Source: Richard W. Harrison, *The Russian Way of War: Operation Art, 1904-1940* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2001); Joseph Miranda, *Analysis: The Battle of Nomonhan, 1939, World at War 32, OCT-NOV 2013* (Bakersfield, CA: Decision Games, 2013), 11; Dimitar Nedialkov, *In the Skies of Nomonhan: Japan versus Russia May-September 1939* (Malta: Gutenberg Press, 2011).

²¹ Harrison, *The Russian Way of War*, 239.

Japanese Preparations

The Japanese had been preparing for a land battle with the Soviets since the end of the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. The closing events of the Russo-Japanese War had led the Japanese to the conclusion that a land war with the Soviet Union was destined to occur in the near future, as Japan expanded its empire and more of its expanded borders touched the borders of the USSR. General Kenkichi Ueda was in command of the Kwantung Army. His headquarters was in charge of all civil and military operations in Manchukuo. The country had been under their control for almost a decade²² and during that time they had slowly been equipping and training the Manchukuo Army. The Kwantung Army at Khalkhin Gol was predominantly a light infantry and horse mounted cavalry force supported by light tanks, short range artillery, and fighter aircraft. The Kwantung Army was made up of second line Japanese and Manchukuo forces equipped with older and sometimes antiquated equipment, the Japanese first line forces were in China conducting combat operations against the Chinese Nationalists, which was Tokyo's priority at the time. The commander and staff of Kwantung's Army were reluctant to request more men or updated equipment because they feared it would be interpreted that they could not handle the situation they had created in Manchukuo. Asking for more could also cause a loss of face and/or confidence from Tokyo in the commander and his staff. These two facts combined led to a mismatch in both men and materials that the Kwantung Army would not be able to overcome as operations continued against the Soviets 1st Army Group.²³

A short explanation of the relationship between the Kwantung Army Headquarters located in Hailar, Manchukuo, and Imperial Japanese Army Headquarters in Tokyo, Japan, is necessary to understand the inner workings of the Kwantung Army Headquarters. This

²² Joseph Miranda, *Analysis: The Battle of Nomonhan*, 1939, *World at War* 32, Oct-Nov 2013, (Bakersfield, CA: Decision Games, 2013), 6.

²³ *Ibid*, 8.

relationship was at best dysfunctional and at times the Kwantung Army Headquarters was insubordinate. A practice call *gekokujo* was often employed by the staff officers on the Kwantung Army staff to justify their actions. *Gekokujo* translates into English as the “rule from below.” The officers on the Kwantung Army staff had previously proven that they were not above this practice by their dubious actions that started the Manchuria incident in September, 1931.²⁴ The practice of *gekokujo* had become synonymous with the Kwantung Army staff and their disregard of orders from the Army General Staff was commonly known throughout the Imperial Japanese Army.

To say that the relationship between the Kwantung Army Staff and the Army General staff was in most ways dysfunctional would be an understatement. By all accounts, the Kwantung Army staff made it a common practice to following orders from the Army General Staff selectively or not at all. If that was not problematic enough, the Kwantung Army staff also had taken to reporting in half-truths or not at all. This practice, coupled with deliberately not gaining Army General staff approval for operations as required, put a strain on relationships both inside the Imperial Japanese Army Headquarters and with the political planners in Tokyo that were trying to contain the fighting in the contested area and avoid a war with the USSR that would put Japan’s plans in China at risk.²⁵

The Kwantung Army staff believed that to use a railroad as a means of logical support the railhead needed to be within 200 kilometers of the supported unit. Because all Soviet supplies and forces used during the Khalkhin Gol Campaign had to be transported three thousand kilometers by train and then 700 kilometers by truck to arrive at the disputed border area. The Kwantung Army staff assumed that any sustained fighting they would engage in with the Soviet or MPR forces needed to be within the planed 200 kilometers of a railhead, so the Kwantung Army staff

²⁴ Goldman, *Analysis: Nomonhan*, 14-16.

²⁵ Dimitar Nedialkov, *In the Skies of Nomonhan: Japan versus Russia May-September 1939* (Malta: Gutenberg Press, 2011), 15.

assumed that the Soviet forces could not continue to sustain operations because they were 700 kilometers from their railhead.²⁶ The 200 kilometers planning factor would allow the Japanese logistical planners to ensure that commanders received the supplies and reinforcement that would be required to maintain combat operations for extended periods.²⁷ The mindset of the Japanese commander and the Kwantung Army staff can be easily understood by the following order issued to the subordinate commanders:

If the enemy crosses the frontiers annihilate him without delay. To accomplish our mission, it is permissible to enter Soviet territory. Where the boundary lines are not clearly defined, area commanders will, upon their own initiative, establish boundaries. In the event of an armed clash, fight until victory is won, regardless of relative strengths or of the location of the boundaries. If the enemy violates the borders, friendly units must challenge him courageously and endeavor to triumph in their zone of action without concerning themselves about the consequences, which will be the responsibility of higher headquarters.²⁸

This Kwantung Army Operations order 1488, was issued on 25 April 1939 and was implemented immediately by all Kwantung Army commanders. The issuing of order 1488 left little room for interruption of what was expected under any border infraction situation. On 11 May 1939, when a section of Mongolian Cavalry crossed the Khalkhin Gol River, the Japanese commander felt that this was an incursion into Manchukuo and must be met with force.

Soviet Victory

From May to mid-August 1939, 1st Army Group and the Kwantung Army would continue to fight back and forth on the ground within the disputed area and in the air inside and outside the disputed area. On 20 August, Marshal Zhukov began the attack that he had been preparing 1st Army Group for over the last few months. The attack using all elements of combined arms warfare began with both preplanned bomber attacks and artillery fire. The ground attacks were

²⁶ Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor*, 3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁸ Goldman, *Analysis: Nomonhan*, 85.

then spearheaded by mechanized forces split into three separate forces South, North and Center to fix and trap the Kwantung Army in a double envelopment, this final ten day battle of the Khalkhin Gol Campaign would serve as a foreshadow of Soviet strategy that Marshal Zhukov was going to employ on the western front against the Germans in the coming years.

Past studies of Soviet Defensive strategy use the Khalkhin Gol Campaign as a baseline example of “a counteroffensive that does not enter enemy-held territory.”²⁹ Although the main reason that the 1st Army Group did not cross land forces out of the claimed MPR’s borders was because of Stalin’s desire to keep the battle area within what he felt were the historical borders of Outer Mongolia. By not crossing the border Stalin hoped not to provoke the Japanese into any further hostilities.³⁰ His gamble would pay off the Japanese did not increase their military commitment and Marshal Zhukov would quickly secure the victory at Khalkhin Gol Moscow required. But the victory came at a great cost of men and materials, the Kwantung Army had 79 percent of its soldiers killed or wounded during the campaign while the Soviets reported as high as 20 percent killed or wounded (see table 2).

²⁹ Bellamy and Lahnstein, “The New Soviet Defensive Policy,” 19.

³⁰ Miranda, “Analysis: The Battle of Nomonhan,” 15.

Table 2. Timeline

USSR	Japan
11 July – 10 August, 1938: Lake Khasan, severe fighting in border dispute over a poorly defined border area at the junction of Manchukuo, Korea, and USSR.	
11 May 1939: Mongolian cavalry crossed the Khalkhin Gol River and occupied the disputed territory between the Khalkhin Gol River and town of Nomonhan	15 May 1939: Japanese pushed the Mongolians back over the river
	28 May 1939: Japanese conduct night attack and receive heavy losses
2 June 1939: Zhukov was ordered to proceed to Mongolia	
5 June 1939: Zhukov takes command and formulates a plan to trap and encircle the Japanese	1 July 1939: Japanese crossed over the Khalkhin Gol River into communist territory
2 July 1939: Soviets counter-attacked with tanks	5 July 1939: Japanese ordered a withdrawal to east side of the Khalkhin Gol River
5 July -19 August 1939: Soviets conduct defensive operations to continue to prepare for offensive operations	7 August 1939: Tokyo authorized a Japanese air offensive against Soviet air bases in Outer Mongolia
20 Aug 1939: Zhukov begins attack to envelop the Kwantung Army units in the disputed area	31 August 1939: Japanese divisional commander and 400 survivors managed to escape the envelopment
1-16 September 1939: 1 st Army Group defends disputed border	
16 September 1939: USSR and Japan work out a ceasefire agreement, USSR/MPR maintains control of disputed area	

Source: Christopher D. Bellamy and Joseph S. Lahnstein, “The New Soviet Defensive Policy: Khalkhin Gol 1939 as a case study,” *Parameters* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army War College, 1990); Stuart D. Goldman, *Nomonhan, 1939, The Red Army’s Victory That Shaped World War II* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2012); Dimitar Nedialkov, *In the Skies of Nomonhan: Japan versus Russia May-September 1939* (Malta: Gutenberg Press, 2011).

Effects of the Elements of Operational Art

US Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0 defines Operational Art as “the cognitive approach by commanders and staffs—supported by their skill, knowledge, experience, creativity, and judgment—to develop strategies, campaigns, and operations to organize and employ military forces by integrating ends, ways, and means.”³¹ This definition is important to current military planners because it gives the context for the application of the elements of operational art as an intellectual tool to aid commanders and their staffs in the planning and visualization of operations. The application of operational art helps commanders and staff gain a mutual understanding of not only the purpose of an operation but also its challenges, conditions, risks, and operational environment.

It is important to understand that not all ten elements of operational art apply to every problem or to all three levels of warfare. This is a critical factor to understanding the correct application of the elements of operational art. Because the Khalkhin Gol Campaign was planned and conducted by the Soviet Marshal Zhukov and the 1st Army Group Staff against the Japanese General Ueda and the Kwantung Army Staff, the elements of operational art lend themselves to helping future planners gain a better understanding of what the Soviet commander and staff considered in their planning and execution of the Khalkhin Gol Campaign. Reviewed below are five relevant Elements of Operational Art with examples of how Marshal Zhukov and the 1st Army Group Staff applied them during the Khalkhin Gol Campaign in Outer Mongolia in 1939.

Lines of Operations

The first element of operational art that the Soviet Army applied is lines of operations. “A line of operations is a line that defines the directional orientation of a force in time and space in relation to the enemy and links the force with its base of operations and objectives.”³² Two

³¹ Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0, Operations, Glossary-6.

³² Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0, Operations, 2-6.

examples of the 1st Army Group's application of lines of operations during the Khalkhin Gol Campaign are the massive movement of men and supplies forward from the USSR to the battle area in Outer Mongolia. Second is the 1st Army Group counter offensive on 20-30 August 1939, against the Kwantung Army.

The use of the Trans-Siberian Railroad to move all men and supplies to the railhead at Borzuya, USSR, was key but the use of over 4,000 trucks to transit the last 700 kilometers to the disputed area in Outer Mongolia was nothing sort of a logistical miracle.³³ All the trucks had to be moved to this remote railhead and then modified for blackout drive for night use. Then the trucks were loaded with all sources of supply and soldiers moving forward. Over 4,000 trucks were allocated to 1st Army Group and all of them would make the four-day round trip staggered by a day between each group to keep the flow of men and material from the railhead to the front moving. This line of operation was fully vested in support of operations during the Khalkhin Gol Campaign.

The second application of Lines of Operations was Marshal Zhukov's counter offensive that started on 20 August and ended on 30 August 1939. This massive offensive operation that was conducted after two months of continuous preparation was key to the Khalkhin Gol Campaign. This operation was the only way that Zhukov could achieve Stalin's end state which was ending the border conflict with Moscow's version of the international border restored between Outer Mongolia and Manchukuo. For 1st Army Group to conduct this operation it needed to ensure the control of five major decisive points. First was control and the buildup of the supply depots that would support the counter offensive. Second was control of necessary primary and alternate river crossing sites. Third was selection and securing of the staging areas required for the attacking forces. Fourth was the movement to and the preparation of artillery units and their

³³ Harrison, *The Russian Way of War*, 237-238.

firing positions. And last was the repositioning of supporting aircraft and supplies at the required airfields.³⁴ These five actions, occurring roughly in sequence, would lead up to the launching of the counter offensive that would allow 1st Army Group to accomplish the three major objectives that Marshal Zhukov required, first was all land forces must stay within the disputed area. This restriction was important because any forces that crossed into Manchukuo, would provoke the Japanese government and ran the risk of extending the scale and scope of the conflict thus risking the increasing of Soviet forces required and the time to end the conflict. Second was to expel all Kwantung Army forces from the disputed area. And third was the restoration of the international border between Mongolia and Manchukuo. Successful completion of these three geographic and force-oriented objectives Marshal Zhukov felt would ensure a Soviet victory at Khalkhin Gol. The interior lines that prepared the 1st Army Group for offensive operations were critical for the force being able to transition to exterior lines as they converged on the enemy and the internal border. Marshal Zhukov divided his attacking forces into three efforts - a Northern Force, Southern Force, and Center Force. The Center force was heavily supported by artillery and air support. Its mission was to fix the Kwantung Army forces between the east side of the Khalkhin Gol River and south of the village of Nomonhan. This fixing effort in the center purpose was to allow the Northern and Southern Forces to fight to the international border and envelop the Kwantung Army Forces by cutting them off in the disputed area. Once surrounded and cut off from reinforcement, Zhukov planned to destroy them using all three efforts. This mass concentration of forces now surrounding the Kwantung Army meant that it was now unable to maneuver, be reinforced, or resupplied. This also meant they were unable to mount a counter offensive. After ten days of brutal fighting 1st Army Group was successful and the remaining Kwantung Army forces were forced to withdraw broken and demoralized back into Manchukuo.

³⁴ Nedialkov, *In the Skies of Nomonhan*, 78-79.

As the conditions changed in the area of operations, Marshal Zhukov was not required to shift from lines of operations to lines of effort or employed a mixture of both because the actions of the Kwantung Army did not require him to make any adjustment to his overall plans of fixing and enveloping the Kwantung Army in the disputed area. Marshal Zhukov's ability to synchronize and sequence the 1st Army Groups actions was instrumental to his winning of the Khalkhin Gol Campaign.

End State and Conditions

The political climate in Moscow was starting to become strained as Stalin and his political advisers became concerned with the events transpiring in Europe and in a remote corner of Mongolia on the Manchukuo border.³⁵ The border dispute, in Stalin's eyes, was becoming more of a confrontation with Japan than he desired at this time and in many ways, it seemed similar to the border dispute a year earlier at Lake Khasan. This time, however, the Kwantung Army's response was more intense and stronger than the Chosen Army response had been at Lake Khasan. This was because of the Kwantung Army's belief that they were better than the Chosen Army, going back to the Lake Khasan Campaign the Khalkhin Army staff had agreed with Tokyo that the Chosen Army staff had waited too long to attack and that they had misread the tactical situation until it was too late. This led the Kwantung Army staff to react quickly and disregard of the General Staffs orders not to escalate the conflict, but Stalin had no way of knowing this. As Stalin's concerns grew, this was when he summoned Zhukov to Moscow to personally tell Zhukov that he was to go and assess the situation in Outer Mongolia and report back to him. Stalin also informed him that he was to take command if he deemed it was necessary to quickly end the border conflict in victory.

ADRP 3-0 says that:

³⁵ Suvorov, *The Chief Culprit*, 109.

The end state is a set of desired future conditions the commander wants to exist when an operation ends. Commanders include the end state in their planning guidance. A clearly defined end state promotes unity of effort; facilitates integration, synchronization, and disciplined initiative; and helps mitigate risk.³⁶

Marshal Zhukov and the 1st Army Group Staff had no doubt what the end state was at Khalkhin Gol after Zhukov gave his first report back to Stalin he took command. Stalin personally told Zhukov what he expected from him. First, he was to not attack using land forces outside of the disputed area with Japan this was for fear of escalating the border conflict into a war that Stalin did not want. Second, he was to end the conflict in victory as quickly as possible.

Marshal Zhukov and his staff had to avoid getting involved in a prolonged escalation of force that could cause a larger Soviet involvement in what could, in the near future, become a two-front war. Marshal Zhukov envisioned a Soviet controlled escalation of force and clear guidance on the termination of the conflict to achieve the desired end state was necessary to meet the end state Stalin had given him when they met in Moscow.

Tempo

ADRP 3-0 states “Tempo is the relative speed and rhythm of military operations over time with respect to the enemy. It reflects the rate of military action. Controlling tempo helps commanders keep the initiative during combat operations.”³⁷ Tempo and Operational reach are tied together and the Khalkhin Gol Campaign conducted by 1st Army Group was no exception. Marshal Zhukov’s ability to quickly assess 1st Army Group’s current and past performance. The available forces and supplies on hand led him to the conclusion that he needed to slow the operational tempo of 1st Army Group. He did this to allow more of his requested forces to arrive, integrate into 1st Army Group, and to build up the supplies necessary to sustain his ever-growing forces. Marshal Zhukov understood that if he forced 1st Army Group to operate at a tempo it

³⁶ Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0, Operations, 2-5.

³⁷ Ibid., 2-7.

could not maintain, he ran the very real risk of running out of forces and the supplies required to sustain them. His ability to slow down and speed up the tempo of operations was necessary to keeping the Kwantung Army off balance and would give 1st Army Group the time and resources required to build up his forces, and more importantly, increase its operational reach.

When writing the plan for the Khalkhin Gol Campaign, Marshal Zhukov and the 1st Army Group Staff had to consider two major factors. First was Stalin's desire to gain a victory in the border dispute with Japan as quickly as possible, and the second, was to ensure that they did not escalate the border dispute into a full war with the Japanese.³⁸ This hesitation was because of the ever-increasing chance of war in Europe, and a two-front war was to be avoided at all costs. The first of these is relevant to the application of tempo. Understanding that tempo is more than just speed, Marshal Zhukov set out to ensure that the Khalkhin Gol Campaign plan was flexible enough that he could control the tempo while at the same time allowing his commanders to exploit current gains and prepare for subsequent operations. The Khalkhin Gol Campaign plan that Marshal Zhukov drafted with his staff relied on two things. The first was that his new command would have all the operational forces and logistical support that Stalin had promised so he in turn could deliver the timely victory that political conditions required. The second was the ability to move the operational forces and logistical support as quickly as possible so he could build his combat power at a sustainable rate that allowed him to exploit the initiative and achieve the end state directed by Stalin. Marshal Zhukov understood the need to create a headquarters that could handle the speed at which operations needed to be planned and executed. He needed to quickly reorganize the 57th and its attached units into a structure that could handle the large amounts of men and materials that his staff was requesting so he created the 1st Army Group to handle the overall command of all forces and all logistical operations.³⁹ This reorganization was

³⁸ Miranda, *Analysis: The Battle of Nomonhan*, 15.

³⁹ Goldman, *Nomonhan*, 102.

critical in his ability to keep the tempo of operations and to control the combined arms formations with basic command and control equipment consisting of rudimentary radios and existing telephone and telegraph lines. The tempo of logistical operations was a limiting factor during the Khalkhin Gol Campaign. The amount of supplies that could be moved forward was critical to being able to keeping the operations going at the tempo required while building stock for future operations. To accomplish this massive task, extensive truck and train schedules had to be completed and adhered to because of the limited logistical movement assets available and the over taxed road and rail networks being utilized for sustainment operations. The 1st Army Group's roughly 100,000 soldiers, vehicles, and planes were consuming 500 tons of fuel and 1,450 tons of other supplies a day to maintain what had become steady state operations. Management of these commodities and their distribution was critical to achieving a timely victory over the Kwantung Army. By comparison, the Kwantung Army only had to move their supplies 200 kilometers at its farthest point from the railhead versus the 700 kilometers required for 1st Army Group logistical movements from the railhead.⁴⁰

Phasing and Transitions

Current Army doctrine in ADRP 3-0 states “A phase is a planning and execution tool used to divide an operation in duration or activity...Transitions mark a change of focus between phases or between the ongoing operation and execution of a branch or sequel.”⁴¹ The Khalkhin Gol Campaign after Marshal Zhukov assumed command of 1st Army Group was transformed into a four-phase operation. The first phase was the buildup of combat forces and the movement of supplies. The second phase was the deception and defensive operations in preparation for offensive operations. The third phase was the offensive operations to fix and envelop the Kwantung Army inside the disputed area and restore the international border. And the fourth and

⁴⁰ Sella, “Khalkhin-Gol: The Forgotten War,” 662.

⁴¹ Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0, Operations, 2-7.

final phase was the redeployment of forces from Outer Mongolia. These four phases and their transitions shaped the 1st Army Group Khalkhin Gol Campaign.

Phase one required the movement of men and equipment from the European side of Russia thousands of kilometers from Outer Mongolia where they were needed. This was a huge logistical undertaking that needed to be completed as quickly as the Siberian Railroad could move them to Borzuya, USSR, where the men and supplies were cross loaded on to trucks for the 700 kilometers drive to the disputed area in Outer Mongolia. The transition to phase two was 1st Army group reaching the required combat power that Marshal Zhukov need to start the attack against the Japanese. The flow of supplies was required throughout the campaign to keep the 1st Army group resupplied.

Phase two was on going throughout phase one, the deception plans that Marshal Zhukov and his staff made was elaborate and required additional resources that were critical to its execution. Load speakers and recording equipment and defensive operations printed material and the supplies for construction of defensive works also had to all be brought forward in the same manner as all other supplies. This took time and close management to ensure that the necessary equipment arrive in accordance with the plan.

The transition to Phase three from phase two was the three force commanders reporting to Marshal Zhukov that they had all the required supplies and forces need to conduct the attack. The offensive operations conducted by the three division size forces to fix the Japanese in the center and then envelop the Kwantung Army in the south and north while staying inside the disputed area was a ten-day operation that would result in the restoration of the international border.

Phase four the redeployment of forces back to European Russia was to be executed on Stalin's order once he received reassurance from both Marshal Zhukov and the Japanese that hostilities had ended. This phase is as complex and demanding as the first phase because of the

limited movement assets 1st Army Group and the Trans-Siberian Railroad could provide to move the units and their equipment back west.

The campaign lasted less than four months but during that time the Soviet Army moved thousands of men and tons of supplies thousands of kilometers to face the Japanese in Manchukuo. To do this the 1st Army Group had to create a plan that was both detailed and flexible enough to ensure that Marshal Zhukov's subordinate commanders could execute the plan as he envisioned it.

Operational Reach

Marshal Zhukov and the 1st Army Group staff's ability to set a sustainable tempo for the subordinate units of the command ensured that commanders could retain the initiative required to provide logistical sustainment for the force which in turn could continuously continue to execute high tempo operations that maintained pressure on the Kwantung Army and its staff. This pressure prevented the Kwantung Army from regaining any initiative after July 1939 and allowed 1st Army Group to gain and keep the initiative that allowed it to continue to extend its operational reach. "Operational reach reflects the ability to achieve success through a well-conceived operational approach"⁴² The two examples of operational reach are first the utilization of aircraft for close air support, transportation and bombing and the effects of each of these with regard to the support of operations during the Khalkhin Gol Campaign. The second example of Operational Reach is the employment of artillery to support operations. Marshal Zhukov and the 1st Army Group staff's immediate request for heavy artillery units was to fill the long-standing gap in long range fires that the former units in Mongolia had been missing. It should be noted that not all offensive operations conducted by 1st Army Group were supported by artillery but Marshal Zhukov made every attempt to do so unless unable to do so.

⁴² Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0, Operations, 2-8.

Basing is an additional element of operational art that is central to the effective application of operational reach. An example of basing is 1st Army Group use of multiple expeditionary airfields. These small austere airfields quickly set up to support air operations during the Khalkhin Gol Campaign is an example of extending operational reach through basing. These air fields were key to ensuring air support was located as close to the frontlines as possible to ensure timely support for ground forces, it also increased the maximum time that aerial reconnaissance elements could collect intelligence on the Kwantung Army. Both the Japanese and the Soviets used aerial reconnaissance to gather intelligence on each other and both were limited by range and weather, but at the beginning of August the 1st Army group had a two-to-one advantage in dedicated reconnaissance aircraft and a four-to-one Soviet advantage of fighter aircraft which limited the effectiveness of Kwantung Army reconnaissance aircraft.⁴³ This gave the Soviets a clear advantage in the ability to collect information on troop movements and defensive posture of the Kwantung Army, which would prove beneficial in the upcoming attack.

As Soviet field artillery units struggled to meet the operational demands placed on them by Marshal Zhukov and his staff, they started to change the way they had been conducting fire support operations and resupply. Three major improvements were made and implemented from the lessons learned over the past few months of operations. By the beginning of August, 1939, these changes extended the operational reach of the field artillery units in 1st Army Group. First, was the use of separate supply depots for artillery rounds and artillery unit supplies. This simple change was instrumental in ensuring that units received required and correct ammunition in a timely manner without having to wait for their supplies to be separated from other units. Second, was the allocation and assignment of dedicated trucks to the artillery units. Previously units had been required to wait for trucks to complete current missions and then be reassigned back to them

⁴³ Nedialkov, *In the Skies of Nomonhan*, 104.

for a subsequent mission that upon completion they went to the next unit. And, last, was the stringent accountability of rounds on hand at all locations and the staff practice of calculating projected rates of fire and resupply to ensure that the required ammunition was being prepared and moved forward as quickly as possible.⁴⁴ After correcting these deficiencies at the completion of operations in September 1939, the percentage of overall loss to Kwantung Army forces during the Khalkhin Gol Campaign, to Soviet artillery fire was estimated to account for 53 percent of all Kwantung Army losses. This was a substantial increase in the effectiveness of artillery fire compared to the Lake Khasan Campaign. In the preceding year during the border incident at Lake Khasan between the Soviet and the Japanese forces at the intersection of the border of the USSR, Korea, and Manchukuo, the overall Japanese loss rate attributed to artillery was only 37 percent.⁴⁵ This improvement contributed to 1st Army Group's ability to retain the initiative and continue to execute a high pace of operations during the final battles of the Khalkhin Gol Campaign at the end of August and the campaign's completion in September.

The application of the selected elements of operation art to the Khalkhin Gol Campaign in this section helps to show how the elements can be used as a framework to help commanders and staffs understand not only their operational environment but also how to visualize and describe the commander's approach for the conduct of an operation. This understanding and the commanders' ability to describe his approach to the staff is imperative to enable the staff to be able to ensure the integration and synchronization of all the available elements of combat power. Marshal Zhukov helped his staff gain a shared understanding of his plans by providing clear commander's intent and guidance. He also ensured that his subordinate commanders guidance and end state by conducting frequent visits to their locations during the campaign. The use of

⁴⁴ Vladimir S. Mil'Bakh, "The Battle of Khalkhin-Gol, July-August 1939: Red Army Artillery in the Armed Conflict on the Khalkhin-Gol River," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 15, no. 4 (London, England: Frank Cass, Publishing, 2002), 65.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

battlefield circulation to gain situational awareness and back briefs from his commanders' and staff to ensure shared understanding become a practice that would serve him well in the future.

Conclusion

After consideration of all collected material researched, it becomes evident that the Khalkhin Gol Campaign had three major outcomes for the Soviet Union. First and foremost, it prevented the Soviet Union from having to fight a two-front war with both Germany and Japan. Second, it allowed Marshal Zhukov to gain experience and for him to put into practice his ideas and techniques that he would continue to refine and employ against Germany. And, third, the Khalkhin Gol Campaign allowed the refinement and improvement of Soviet Army logistic doctrine and support unit training and employment.

Marshal Georgi Zhukov, future three-time recipient of the Hero of the Soviet Union award, commanded the Soviets' 1st Army Group and used every bit of the operational experience gained at Khalkhin Gol to build support for the development and use of mechanized formations employing combined arms warfare.⁴⁶ The experience gained by the Soviet Army would pay huge dividends later in the west against a well-trained and well-equipped Germany Army. Because of this victory, resources and time were spent to train the Soviet Army in the employment of Marshal Zhukov's mechanized techniques that combined the use of artillery and air support as used during the Khalkhin Gol Campaign. Equally important was the logistical efforts that were employed and refined during the campaign. The monumental efforts required to supply a force the size of 1st Army Group is nothing short of amazing considering the overall size of the force and the extreme distance of supply lines. The Soviet victory during the Khalkhin Gol Campaign was the second major victory for the Soviet Army against the Japanese who had not previously

⁴⁶ Otto Preston Chaney, Jr., *Zhukov* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 59.

faced an enemy that was equipped with modern arms and equipment. The Japanese were on both occasions, Lake Khasan and Khalkhin Gol, overwhelmed by a more advanced Soviet force that had better leadership, equipment and the support of a robust logistics system⁴⁷. Both losses occurred in a little over a year and left Tokyo with the feeling that any further confrontation with the Soviets would cause the commitment of more resources and men than could be diverted from current operations in China, and other future plans.

The examples of the practical application of operational art employed by Marshal Zhukov and the 1st Army Group Staff helps to demonstrate for the current military planner the linkages of guidance at the strategic level, planning at the operational level and the execution at the tactical level. These examples also reinforce the relevance of current US Army doctrine as it applies to current planning efforts or the application of doctrine to past campaigns.

⁴⁷ John H. Boyle, *China and Japan at War 1937-1945: The Politics of Collaboration* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1972), 47, 257.

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