
**Reviewed by** Wayne H. Bowen

**Published on** H-Russia (January, 1999)

In her introductory chapter, "The Context for Innovation in Stalin's Army," Sally Stoecker presents a counter-intuitive, but compelling, argument that the Soviet Army during the period of the First Five-Year Plan was not a prisoner to Stalin's totalitarian ideology, but instead a relatively "independent institution that was capable of successful innovation" (p. 8). Embracing and coaching their new strategies and tactics in Marxist-Leninist (and later Stalinist) language, "reform-minded military officers" such as Marshal Tukhachevsky promoted innovative military doctrines, doctrines which would survive Stalin's purges of the Red Army and prove their merit in the bitter struggle against Nazi Germany (p. 12).

In the midst of the titanic efforts of the First Five-Year Plan, the Soviet view that war against capitalism was inevitable, and Stalin's emphasis on breaking all links with the Tsarist past, military innovators had a significant amount of freedom to reshape the armed forces of the USSR, in the process modernizing and transforming the revolutionary army of the Bolsheviks into a conventional military power. Looking to the failure of Tsarist armies in World War I for powerful lessons on how not to prepare for war and conduct military operations, Marshals Tukhachevsky and Voroshilov also emphasized the need to give industrial priority to defense industries, and to link industrial production and priorities more explicitly to military preparations (p. 19).

In Chapter Two, "Politics and Military Priorities: Building a Case for More Resources," Stoecker explains the bureaucratic strategies employed by Soviet military leaders to focus more resources on rebuilding the military. Despite the image held today of an unbridled Communist military-industrial complex, which commanded more and more of the Soviet economy, the reality was that military leaders had to plead, cajole, and fight for every increase in their budgets.

The most significant challenge for military leaders was to persuade Stalin and other leading Communists that the Soviet Army could not wait for long-range industrial development to bleed over into defense preparedness: the armed forces needed a near-term infusion of resources to deal with potentially immediate threats to the exis-
tence of the Soviet Union (pp. 33-35). War Com-
missar Voroshilov, in particular, exhorted his fel-
low Communists at Party and Soviet Congresses to
devote more budget consideration to the military,
or face increased threats from Poland, Germany
and other capitalist countries (pp. 37-39). By 1934,
faced with rising instability in the Far East and
Central Europe, and the initial successes of the
First Five-Year Plan, Stalin finally began to devote
to the military sufficient resources to accommo-
date the recommendations of Voroshilov and
Tukhachevsky.

Chapter Three presents the confluence be-
tween foreign events, especially in the Far East,
and the efforts of Soviet military leaders to im-
prove and enlarge their institutions. With the
coming to power of an explicitly anticommunist
regime in Germany, and the swift Japanese con-
quest of Manchuria, Stalin was faced for the first
time with evidence of potential encirclement by
hostile and expansionist powers. The dramatic
seizure by Chinese Nationalists and Japanese of
the Chinese Eastern Railroad in 1929, previously
controlled by the Soviet Union, acted as a strong
stimulant to divert more resources into military
spending, particularly in the wake of the clearly
inadequate military personnel and equipment
available for Soviet counterattacks.

The Soviet military did learn valuable lessons
in the use of combined arms, the importance of
logistics, and tactics of encirclement from these
operations, however (pp. 67-69). More important,
however, was the Japanese conquest of Manchuria in 1931-32, which "rapidly spurred the
substantial rearming of the border with China"
(p. 69). Indeed, the Soviet military doubled its
forces in the region from 1929 to 1932, indicating
the rising necessity of military preparedness in a
world hostile to the Soviet Union and its interests
(p. 70).

Despite its great resources, the Soviet Union
was not capable of modernizing its forces without
some access to foreign technology and knowledge.
Fortunately for Soviet military leaders, another
pariah nation, Weimar Germany, was also in need
of a covert military partner, as detailed in Chapter
Four, "The Clandestine Collaboration between the
Reichswehr and the Red Army." Despite the mutu-
al "secrecy and suspicion" which clouded the rela-
tionship between German officers and their Sovi-
et counterparts, the Red Army gained significantly
from the unlikely partnership (p. 79). The Soviet
Union gained invaluable assistance in creating a
chemical weapons industry, and also in improv-
ing tank and air doctrine.

Chapter Five, "The Acquisition and Adapta-
tion of Foreign Models: The Case of Tank Develop-
ment," examines the development of an indige-
nous Soviet tank production infrastructure. Argu-
ing that the Red Army did far more than copy for-
eign models, Stoecker does admit that Soviet re-
searchers did copy from the West, particularly
from tanks purchased from Great Britain and the
United States. By the early 1930s, however, Soviet
R&D centers had gleaned what they could from
foreign sources, and were clearly focused on cre-
ating their own prototype tanks. Whatever imitation of components or designs they may have un-
dertaken, Soviet scientists and engineers did far
more than produce second-rate copies of foreign
tanks; they designed tanks to fit Soviet terrain,
tactics and industry. The best example of these de-
velopments was the famous T-34, the best exam-
ple of a military-industrial complex which, by the
years immediately preceding Soviet entry into
World War II, "was well on its way to designing
and producing a formidable arsenal of high-quali-
ty indigenous weapons" (p. 128).

Chapter Six, "Marshal Tukhachevsky: Enig-
matic Military Entrepreneur," focuses on the man
at the center of Soviet military innovation during
the late 1920s and early 1930s, convincingly argu-
ing that Mikhail Tukhachevsky was "the chief cat-
alyst" for the culture of reformism in the Red
Army, leading the movement for change within
his institution as a "public entrepreneur" (pp.
Comparing Tukhachevsky to Admiral Hyman Rickover, the father of the modern U.S. nuclear navy, Stoecker makes the case that Tukhachevsky, more than Voroshilov, Stalin, or the general institution of the Soviet military, promoted and encouraged reformism, contributing his own command of detail, brilliant strategic thinking, and mastery of political infighting to gain resources and approval for his improvements. Despite an aristocratic background and service in the Tsarist army, his ideas of the decisive offensive and deep battle became essential elements of Soviet battle doctrine, even after Tukhachevsky himself was purged and executed in 1937.

Chapter Seven, "Postscript: Yezhovshchina and the End of Innovation," details the fall of Tukhachevsky, a victim of the leading edge of Stalin's great purge of the military. Despite the success of his reforms, and his great service to the Soviet state, in May 1937 Tukhachevsky was arrested, charged with treason and conspiracy with fascist powers. His execution soon after, and those of thousands of other officers, left the Soviet military weakened on the eve of World War II. More important, according to Stoecker, was the destruction of "the culture conducive to innovation," which had been shepherded by Tukhachevsky, and the loss of this great strategist and doctrinal innovator (p. 182). Dismissing previous claims that Tukhachevsky was framed through an elaborate plot by Nazi leaders, Stoecker attributes Stalin's destruction of the Marshal to an old grudge of Stalin's from the Civil War, as well as, quoting Alec Nove, the General Secretary's well-known "pathological excesses" (pp. 185-86).

In her final chapter, Stoecker again asserts the indispensability of both Tukhachevsky and Voroshilov to the increased resources available to the Soviet armed forces after 1928, as well as the relative autonomy these leaders and like-minded fellow officers had to promote innovative strategies and doctrines during the period of the first Five-Year Plan. Leading us one more step away from the totalitarian model, Stoecker has constructed a persuasive view of an important institution in Soviet society, presenting a coherent analysis of the rebuilding of Soviet armed forces through the force of will of one man, and laying out a case that it was the reforms of Tukhachevsky which enabled the Soviet state to survive its greatest tests: the twin horrors of Stalin's rule and the Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany.

Stoecker's study, which relies on recently declassified documents of the former USSR, as well as a thorough and judicious use of the most recent historiography, is a pathbreaking foray into Soviet military history and should be recommended reading for historians, military analysts and other readers interested in the history of military innovation in the twentieth century, Stalinism, World War II, and the rise of the Soviet Union to world power. It would be a useful text for courses on modern military history or the Soviet Union, and is also recommended for upper-division undergraduates and graduate students. The only criticism which might be leveled at this text is its brevity, which does not allow the author an even more thorough examination of this important and interesting topic.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-russia


**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2709

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.