Tactics of Combat for Inhabited Places

[Translated at the Command and General Staff School, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, from a Russian article by Major P. Slesarev, Soviet Army, in *Krasnaya Zvezda* 10 December 1942.]

Fighting in the regions of Velikiye Luki and Rzhev is characterized by stubbornness and violence. In the final analysis, it reduces to a struggle for control of separate inhabited places or of groups of them. Many of these settlements had previously been transformed into powerful centers of resistance by the Fascists.

The Germans hold onto inhabited places especially tenaciously for a variety of reasons. First of all, in a village it is easier to organize defense, to dispose the fire elements and personnel, and to store munitions, fuel, and provisions. Moreover, as also in the preceding year, the German troops prove to be unprepared for action in woods and fields during the cold season. Captured Germans, still clothed in summer uniform, unanimously declare that in their forces there are as yet no units equipped for winter. Thus not only tactical considerations, but also climatic conditions force the Germans to confine themselves to villages and farmsteads.

Upon advancing, our units quickly learn how to drive the Germans out of the inhabited places. In the course of the fighting, definite methods have been worked out which have the greatest effect in the struggle for the villages. Let us study the basic conditions for success, considering such stages of the battle as the preparation for attack, the attack, and the consolidation of its results.

Before the start of combat for the inhabited point, careful reconnaissance of the forward edge and depth of defense of the enemy must be carried out. There is usually a fairly dense network of permanent log and earth fortifications located on the outer edge of the German defense. They cover the intervals between neighboring settlements which are adapted to all-around defense. The number of dugouts on the forward edge is large. As many as 25 to 28 of them have been counted near a small outer defense village. In order to neutralize all machine-gun nests and engineering constructions of the enemy in the direction of the proposed attack, our reconnaissance at times penetrated thirty to thirty-five kilometers (fifteen to eighteen miles) in the rear of the Germans. They marked all permanent control points on a map, and likewise the roads which could be used for infantry and vehicular transport.

In the course of painstaking study of the enemy's fire system, the reconnaissance parties uncovered one important tactical detail. Building their defense in the fall, the Germans as a rule did not erect permanent fortifications in swampy areas and on the necks of land between lakes. Our attack units therefore made some use of this fact for concealed approach to the rear of the fortified inhabited places. Prolonged and systematic reconnaissance of the hostile defense made possible the surprise encirclement and speedy destruction of a series of control points. But what is to be done in cases where the conditions of the region do not make it possible to break through to the enemy's rear unobserved?

Generally speaking, there are two types of attacks on inhabited places: frontal attack, and outflanking movement on one or both sides. Frontal attack, proceeding along the shortest route, is very inviting. But combat experience demonstrates just once more that the shortest way does not always lead to success. The opposite is usually true. Those units which attacked the settlements frontally suffered losses and retreated. Thus, for four days a certain unit undertook a series of frontal attacks, and all were repulsed. But no sooner did they take advantage of hollows and woods to outflank the enemy than the village was taken.

In by far the greater number of cases it is more expedient to take the inhabited places from the flanks, although it sometimes requires prolonged preparation. Let us relate the experience of a certain unit of all arms. In the first stage of the attack our artillery crushed the registered log and earth fortifications covering one or other of the settlements. In this network of dugouts the artillery cut veritable corridors. At once a stream of our tanks and ski troopers rushed in that direction. The artillery shifted fire to the hostile batteries and observation posts. At the same time the antitank guns passed through the corridors behind the attacking echelons. With their fire they protected the attacking tanks and infantry from the rear, taking care of the revived machine-gun nests of the enemy.

As soon as the units attacking through the corridors turned to meet each other, the Germans usually hastened to withdraw to the next village. This moment is particularly advantageous for the destruction of enemy personnel and the capture of matériel. The reason is that the Germans, retreating under the threat of encirclement, often do not succeed in securing their flanks, and do not carry out reconnaissance. They ordinarily retreat massed in close column, and at this moment they are most vulnerable to attack.

One of our tank companies, attacking a battalion of Germans by surprise at the time of its hurried retreat, almost completely wiped it out by fire and tank treads. By attentively following the course of battle, it is always possible to detect the start of the enemy's retreat, and if even only a small group of tanks and automatic riflemen on skis is available, it can deal the retreating Germans a crushing blow.

How opportune the enveloping of one or both flanks of the enemy may be is evidenced by the following incident. Operating in a similar way, units of a certain force of combined arms captured thirteen inhabited places and advanced twelve kilometers (seven miles) in two days of ordinary combat. At the same time they killed more than 1,200 Hitlerites and seized 28 guns, six tanks, and large numbers of regular and automatic rifles.

However, the region sometimes abounds in lakes and unfrozen swamps, which hinder flanking maneuvers. Then the situation necessitates recourse to frontal attack. Here it is important that the attack be preceded by an adequate artillery bombardment of all registered objectives. It is most advantageous to time the attack by tank and infantry for the approach of darkness or snowfalls and storms. Such a bold night attack in the region of the Velikiye Luki-Novosokolniki railway made possible the capture of several fortified villages which up to then had been considered impregnable.

Organizing active day and night movements and boldly leaving individual log and earth fortifications of the enemy blockaded in our rear, it is possible to fight the Germans out of one village after another. But here the commander must know not only how to strike down an inhabited place, but also how to consolidate it quickly behind him. The matter is occasionally quite different in practice: some villages have changed hands many times.

What is usually the cause of such a phenomenon? Basically this, that the units, after reaching the inhabited place, halt their activity and begin to re-form. For those units which cleared the village of the foe, such a pause is valid. But at this very time the commander of the unit should immediately advance his reserves. If he deliberately withholds his reserves in needless apprehension as to the flanks, he thereby gives the initiative to the enemy.

Consequently, upon taking a village the commander must organize here an all around defense with the personnel of the units having sustained the burden of combat. At this time the reserves must pursue the retreating enemy continuously. With such alternation of activity by the units the enemy will be thrown back so far from the inhabited place that surprise counterattacks can not be made.