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KONEV VERSUS ZHUKOV

Marshal Ivan Konev's denunciation (Pravda, November 3, 1957) of his former superior and comrade-in-arms, Marshal Zhukov, is an unparalleled example of the type of "guidance" provided by the Communist Party for the Soviet Army. Instead of confining himself to the entirely credible and easily substantiated charge that Zhukov has sinned by opposing the expansion of Party political controls over the armed forces, Konev attempts the impossible by trying to demonstrate that the ex-Defense Minister of the USSR, who until his removal commanded the world's most powerful army, was a military blunderer.

Specifically Konev alleges that Zhukov has "recently" been responsible for "administrative measures" taken against the officer corps and against young officers in particular. In communist jargon, "administrative measures" are usually connected with the operations of the police authorities, so this is presumably an attempt to tar Zhukov with the Stalin-Beria brush. From what is known of Zhukov's character and standing with his subordinates it seems unlikely to succeed. Most observers agree with the view of R.L. Garthoff (Soviet Military Doctrine, Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois, 1953, p. 252) who credits both Zhukov and Konev with a benevolent attitude to their men: -

"In the Soviet armed forces...paternal authority which although strict and demanding is firm and 'personal' is respected. This attitude of the Soviet soldier towards his commanders...is given further credence by the apparent popularity of such men as Marshals Zhukov, Rokossovsky, and Konev, and the unpopularity of Timoshehko, who is considered a stiff martinet."

Konev also accuses the savior of Moscow and captor of Berlin of "introducing a through muddle" by stating that our military regulations play a negative role in the training of commanders and fail to contribute to a development of their creative initiative." Konev continues:

"Such a statement is radically wrong; the regulations, by making available the accumulated experience of the armed forces, not only give the opportunity but demand outright that commanders should make creative and sound decisions, taking into consideration concrete circumstances. "

Examination of Zhukov's alleged statement on the regulations suggests that his true opinion is similar to the views of any enterprising commander anywhere: i.e., that the book should be used as a guide to action, not as dogma, since any two battles are seldom alike. The stress on military regulations by Konev is merely a revival of dogmatism.

As regards Konev's attack on Zhukov's generalship in the last

war, it is an almost universal experience that even the greatest military leaders in the course of a long career inevitably make some mistakes. But to decry most of Zhukov's major victories as clumsy errors, as Konev does, is to suggest to the reader the most primitive type of propaganda campaign. Khrushchev himself said in the secret speech to the 20th Party Congress, "I have known Zhukov a long time. He is a good general and a good leader."

Konev now accuses Zhukov of negligence as Chief of the General Staff (February-October 1941) on the grounds that he inadequately prepared the Soviet Army for the German onslaught, in spite of his possession of "indisputable data on the real threat of attack by fascist Germany." But in fact it was the Red Army's own intelligence service (GRU) which warned Stalin from two separate networks (Rote Kapelle in Switzerland and Richard Sorge in Japan) of the plans and even the date for the German invasion of the USSR (B.H. Liddell Hart, The Soviet Army, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1956, p. 268). Stalin, however, received the same information from Winston Churchill, and R.L. Garthoff suggests the reason for his inaction was that "he apparently concluded it was all a British trick to embroil the Soviet Union with Germany." If this was the attitude of Stalin, and it is the only logical explanation, a Soviet Chief of Staff (whose task it is, according to Konev, to prepare plans and appreciations for the CC, not to implement them) could scarcely have acted differently.

Konev's account of Zhukov's wartime service completely omits mention of the fact that Zhukov was the field commander who saved Moscow at a time when German detachments had reached the suburbs in the winter of 1941 (Garthoff, op. cit., p. 189). This battle was the turning point of the war in the east, which gained the USSR a breathing space and prepared the ground for all the later Soviet victories.

Konev now claims that Zhukov "undeservedly" ascribes to himself the strategic offensive plans for the battle of Stalingrad, yet it is a matter of record that Zhukov "directed all preparatory work for the Stalingrad operation" (Zhukov's own words, Pravda, 13 February 1955) which was carried out by Marshal Vasilevsky. Since Zhukov has given credit for the execution of the operation to Vasilevsky there is no reason to doubt Marshal Zhukov's word in this respect. The point at issue now raised by Konev is that of authorship of the successful plan; Konev claims that "the most detailed outline of this plan was submitted to HQ Supreme Command at the beginning of October (1942) by the Military Council of the Stalingrad Front...To a certain extent Comrade Zhukov, as deputy to the Supreme Commander, and executive personnel of the General Staff led by Comrade Vasilevsky took part in drawing up this plan."

This Konev formulation is designed to make the reader ask himself who was mainly responsible for the plan, if the two leading soldiers concerned played such a limited role. And every reader knows that N.S. Khrushchev was a member of the Military Council. The implications are obvious.



Similar efforts to build up Khrushchev as a strategist have occurred in the past. Oktyabr in 1954 described a general's reply to a hard-pressed regimental officer in these terms (see Background Information, June 15, 1954):

"You would like to know whether Stalin knows what is going on? you come to me and I - I too am no stick of wood - go to a member of the Military Council of the front, Comrade Khrushchev, to Malenkov. And where do they go? Yes, certainly to Stalin. And Stalin? He is not alone. With him is our Party."

Another attempt at the glorification of political leaders was made by Pravda on February 2, 1955 in an article by Lt. Gen. A. Rodimtsev on the 12th anniversary of the Stalingrad battle. In his account Rodimtsev mentioned only two individuals by name - Stalin and Khrushchev.

Konev's denunciation of Zhukov for allowing German forces to escape towards Lvov (March-April 1944) has at least some basis in fact. According to Liddel Hart (op. cit., 118-119) Zhukov, who had taken over General N. Vatutin's armies while the latter was ill, launched an attack early in March towards Tarnopol, outflanking the German defenses along the Upper Bug. This was the northern most prong of a two-pronged drive completed by Malinovsky's advance in the south across the mouths of the Dnieper and Bug. Konev, in the center, crossed the central part of the Bug, reached the Dniester, 70 miles away, and crossed this river by capturing the pontoon bridges intact. By the end of March Konev had reached the Pruth, near Jassy in Rumania, and Zhukov had advanced to the upper reaches of the Pruth. On April 1, Zhukov reached the Tartar pass, but his spearhead failed to take it, and "there was not sufficient weight behind it to renew the impetus. His forces were feeling the effects of their prolonged advance, while the Germans benefited by falling back on their supply lines. In the following week they succeeded in mounting a flank counterstroke... which broke off the tip of Zhukov's spearhead and enabled them to extricate a part of their forces which had been trapped by the Russians' rapid advance." In fact the very same factors which saved Moscow (over-extension of an attacking army and the shortening supply lines of the defense) are those which led to the successful withdrawal of the German forces to the Lvov line, for which Konev belatedly blames Zhukov.

Konev's final criticism is of Zhukov's part in the battle of Berlin:

"Comrade Zhukov claims an especially outstanding part in the Berlin operation as well, and immodestly considers that the decisive role in this operation was played by the First Byelorussian Front, which he commanded. The role played by the other fronts...amounted in his opinion only to the infliction of auxiliary blows, which is not in accord with history.

"It is known that the task of destroying the enemy's grouping in the direction of Berlin was implemented by the resolute and active operations of three fronts: the 1st and 2nd Byelorussian and the 1st Ukrainian...As regards the task of taking the capital of fascist Germany, it was implemented by the troops of the 1st Byelorussian and 1st Ukrainian Fronts.

"It must be noted that...the main efforts of the 1st Ukrainian Front were, by a decision of H.Q., aimed at striking against Berlin from the Southeast. This was dictated by the fact that the speed of advance of the 1st Byelorussian Front from the Küstrin line was slow and did not ensure the speedy capture of Berlin. Yet Comrade Zhukov strove to keep silent about some miscalculations he had made in the operation."

Konev goes on to accuse Zhukov of underestimating the German defensive strength despite "existing data" and of a frontal assault on a fortified position after inadequate preparation. Thus Konev's account divides the honors for the capture of the city between the 1st Byelorussian Front (Zhukov) and the 1st Ukrainian Front (Konev; Khrushchev was a member of the Military Council of this Front) but criticizes the slowness of Zhukov's advance, leaving the reader to assume that Konev's (and Khrushchev's) own Front deserves the main credit. But to put this operation in its true perspective, the relative strengths of the Soviet and German armies should be remembered. The Ukrainian Front, 1st Byelorussian Front, Second Byelorussian Front, Second Byelorussian Front and 3rd Byelorussian Front combined possessed a superiority of numbers as follows:

Infantry 7.7 to 1; artillery 6.9 to 1; mortars 10.2 to 1; tanks 4.7 to 1. The Red Air force employed about 8,000 aircraft in the campaign. (Liddell Hart, op. cit. p. 149 and 150).

Western accounts of the Berlin battle provide the objective explanation for the slow progress of Zhukov's front criticized by Konev. Naturally Hitler made every attempt to reinforce the Oder in an attempt to save his capital, even at the risk of weakening the less important sections of the line (Liddell Hart, op. cit, p. 125). It was for this reason that Zhukov failed to break out from his bridge head across the Oder in March 1945, at which time Konev was held up on the Neisse. On April 16th, both Zhukov and Konev resumed the offensive, and eleven days later Konev's men met the American Army on the Elbe. In Berlin, according to Liddell Hart, "desperate street by street resistance was put up by the Germans and was not completely overcome until the war ended after Hitler's suicide, with Germany's unconditional surrender." Such is the true explanation for the slower advance of Zhukov's Front as compared with Konev's. To omit all mention of it in a political article designed to discredit a former colleague is to perpetrate yet another gross distortion of the facts.

R.R.G.