

THE STALIN AND MOLOTOV LINES

Soviet Western Defences 1928–41



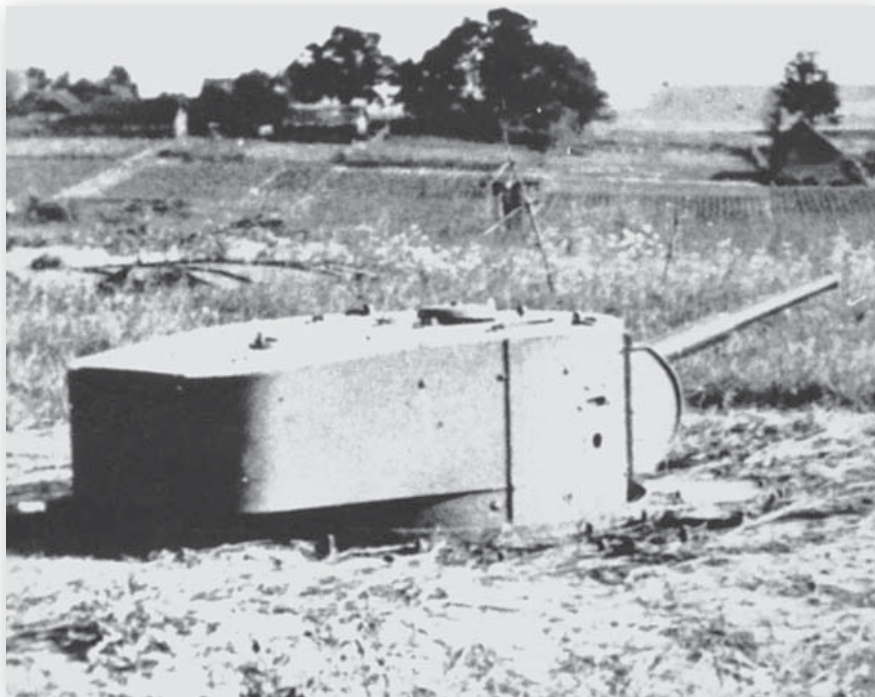
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Series editors Marcus Cowper and Nikolai Bogdanovic

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SOVIET WESTERN DEFENCES 1928–41

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history fortifications have played a pivotal role in protecting the strategic interests of the Soviet Union and its predecessor Tsarist Russia. In the 18th century work began on a series of defences on the Baltic, the best known of which was the great citadel of Kronstadt that protected St Petersburg. At the same time the coastline of the Crimea was fortified and the defences of Sevastopol played an important role in the fighting of the Crimean War, which raged from 1853 to 1856. Half a century later the defences around Port Arthur, the Russian naval base in Manchuria, proved to be a far tougher proposition than anticipated by the attacking Japanese and were to provide a taster of what was to come in World War I a decade later. However, the Russians (and the kingdoms that dominated the region before they were absorbed into the empire) had an even longer tradition of constructing castles and fortresses along the main invasion routes from the west. Towns and cities like Kingisepp, Ostrov, Pskov and Sebezh were fortified against attacks from, among others,

The fortress at Kamenets Podolski in the Ukraine. It successfully held out against attacks from Turks and Tartars. Defences have existed on the site since the Middle Ages. Later Soviet engineers established a fortified region to protect this strategically important position. (P. Netesov, courtesy of E Hitriak and I Volkov)



the Teutonic Knights, the Poles and the Swedes. This tradition continued into the 19th century when Warsaw was fortified, as was Brest, the largest fortress of the Russian Empire in that period.

In World War I the great fortresses of Warsaw and Brest were captured almost without a fight as the Central Powers advanced against the poorly equipped and ineptly led Russian Army. Later in the war the Russians did enjoy some limited success, but it proved to be too little too late. The Tsarist regime was overthrown and the new Bolshevik government sued for peace. This turn of events was greeted with consternation in the west and soon 'White Russians', backed by Russia's former allies (principally Britain and France), attempted to wrest power from Lenin and his cohorts. In the Civil War that followed, Trotsky's Red Army created a series of fortified regions, or *ukreplimnyje rajony*, to protect the new government's power base around Moscow and St Petersburg. These were often little more than field works, but these defences played an important part in securing victory for the Red Army.

The value of these defences in the Russian Civil War informed the debate on the shape of future defences much as the experiences of the main belligerents in World War I influenced their thinking on fortifications in the inter-war period. In the Soviet Union the outcome of these deliberations was a decision to create a series of fortified regions made up of pillboxes and bunkers to protect strategic interests. However, even such a relatively conservative undertaking was impossible in the period after the war because the Soviet economy was so weak.

In 1928 work on the western border defences finally began, but with funds limited the programme was restricted to four fortified regions. Later, as the economy grew more resources became available and it was decided to build a further nine fortified regions, which stretched the entire length of the frontier. Thereafter the building programme slowed, but with the rise of Nazism and the almost inexorable drift to war, the building programme was revitalized and in 1938 eight further fortified regions were commissioned to plug significant gaps in the line. However, the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non Aggression Pact in 1939 and the subsequent partition of Poland rendered the defences of the Stalin Line obsolete. Most of the building work was stopped and the defences were abandoned in favour of a plan to build new fortifications along the revised border, the so-called Molotov Line.

It is worth pausing at this point to consider further the names of these defences. Firstly, although both are referred to as 'lines' the defences were not continuous, and as Alan Clark notes in his classic study of the war on the Eastern Front, *Barbarossa*, 'the term line, although it may have denoted an ultimate goal, was, in 1941, no more than a geographical illusion founded on the presence of a sequence of fortified districts all in roughly the same longitude'. Secondly, the names of the lines, although widely accepted today and used throughout this text and indeed in the title, were a western invention in keeping with the grandiose titles afforded defences in the rest of continental Europe (Maginot Line, West Wall etc.).

The first line of defences were named after the Soviet leader, although it is not clear how Stalin viewed this 'honour', and certainly not after the defences had been breached in the summer of 1941. The new border defences constructed in 1940/41 were, following the war, named after the Soviet Foreign Minister, presumably in acknowledgement of the fact that the fortifications had been constructed along the new border agreed by Vyacheslav Molotov. However, in the Soviet Union the defences were always described as fortified regions (*ukreplimnyje rajony*).

CHRONOLOGY

1917	October	October Revolution.
	December	Civil War starts.
1918	March	Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.
1919	February	Russo-Polish War.
1921	March	Treaty of Riga (peace with Poland).
1922		Civil War ends (although most of the fighting was over by 1920).
	April	Treaty of Rapallo – restoration of diplomatic and economic links between Soviet Union and Germany.
1924	January	Death of Lenin.
1927		‘War alarm’.
1928		Work begins on the Stalin Line. First Five-Year Plan.
1933		Second Five-Year Plan.
1936		Spanish Civil War.
	August	Soviet Union begins supply of war <i>matériel</i> .
1938		Third Five-Year Plan. New URs created to fill gaps in line.
	March	German <i>Anschluss</i> with Austria.
	September	Munich peace agreement.
	October	Germany occupies Sudetenland.
1939	March	Bohemia and Moravia become German Protectorates. Memel Land returned to Germany.
	August	Nazi–Soviet Pact signed.
	1 September	Germany invades Poland.
	3 September	France and Great Britain declare war on Germany.
	November	Russo-Finnish (Winter) War.
1940	May	Peace of Moscow ending war with Finland. Germany launches offensive in west.
	22 June	France signs armistice with Germany.
	July	Baltic states annexed by Soviet Union and Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina annexed.
	Summer	Work begins in earnest on Molotov Line.
1941	January	Zhukov/Pavlov war game.
	May	NKO orders defences to be put on war footing.
	22 June	Germany invades USSR.
	29 June	Minsk captured.
	30 June	Brest fortress falls (although elements fight on into July).
	19 September	Kiev captured.

DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

It is impossible to talk about the defences of the Stalin and Molotov Lines without making reference to the physical geography of the western border area. Perhaps the most obvious feature is the enormous length of the frontier, which when work on the Stalin started in late 1927 stretched from the Gulf of Finland in the north to the Black Sea in the south. A little over a decade later, following the annexation of eastern Poland, the border was moved west and was extended so that it stretched some 4,500km.

The Stalin Line



The Stalin Line ran broadly from the Gulf of Finland in the north to the Black Sea in the south. Rather than a continuous line, the defences were built as series of fortified regions each of which covered a strategically important area of the border. It was built in three stages – four fortified regions in the first phase beginning in 1928, then a further nine were begun in the early 1930s and finally another batch of eight was started in 1938.

Neatly bisecting the frontier zone are the Pripiat Marshes, a vast tract of swamp and forest, more than 300km across. Throughout history this feature has been a major obstacle for any potential aggressor, but the marshes have also played an important part in the defensive thinking of the Russians and never more so than in the 20th century. Because they are all but impassable to a modern mechanized army, this portion of the front only needed to be lightly