

D-DAY IN THE EAST: AMERICAN AID AND SOVIET VICTORY, 1944

Hubert P. van Tuyll
Augusta College

The operation known as *Overlord* enjoys a popular awareness granted few historical events. All the details may be familiar only to historians and military history buffs, its myths may outshine the realities, but it is nevertheless one of those rare events firmly planted in the American national memory. Far fewer realize, however, that in the same summer of 1944, only 16 days after the 'D-Day' landings began, the Soviet Union launched an offensive operation even greater in scope and size, yielding victories at least as strategically significant as those won in France.

This Soviet operation, code named *Bagration*,¹ has received less attention in the West than it deserved (even though Western leaders had requested it). Western attention, then and later, was naturally focused on the Western armies' victories in France, and for political reasons worthy of some explication. The second reason was more political in nature. The Soviet offensive became embroiled in a controversy, never completely resolved, about the Red Army's decision to halt before reaching Warsaw in the summer of 1944, a decision which the permitted the Germans to crush the anti-Nazi revolt of the Warsaw citizenry. Ironically, these factors have contributed to the lack of attention by scholars to the massive assistance that the West, particularly the United States, gave to this gigantic operation in the form of Lend-Lease

aid.

Operation *Bagration* has few equals in scope during the Second World War. Including forces deployed for flank protection, *Bagration* threw 1,670,000 soldiers, 4,070 armored vehicles, 32,000 pieces of artillery and rocket trucks, and more than 6,000 aircraft into the attack on 22 June 1944. A hundred trains were needed every day to replenish the 125,000 tons of supplies consumed in the previous 24 hours by the attacking armies.² Nor was this an operation with the limited aim of achieving mere frontal victories and the recapture of some territory; rather, total destruction of the enemy was sought. The cumulative depth of operations ranged from 400 miles to 750 miles by fall. The results were impressive. An entire German army group was destroyed, and Germany's defeat in the East became virtually inevitable. Did Western aid appreciably assist this enormous offensive?

Study of this question encounters the well-known problem that it was not only the Western view of the Eastern Front that was skewed by politics. References to Western aid in Soviet historiography are very general with little information about actual use in specific operations. The Western role in *Bagration*, if any, was especially sensitive because the operation was indeed such a great military achievement, and also because it led to the Soviet conquest of Eastern Europe.

This does not mean that there is too little data to arrive at meaningful conclusions. A lack of specific information about use of Western equipment primarily denies us knowledge about events at the actual battlefield. This is less problematical than it might seem since relatively little of Western aid was composed of ground combat equipment. Where the United States [and, to a lesser extent, Britain] made the greatest contributions were in improving the transportation and communications of the

Red Army. This not only enabled the Soviet Union to ship more supplies to the troops, but it also significantly increased maneuverability (and, hence, offensive capability).

Bagration took place on the third anniversary of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. That the USSR was in a position to expel Hitler's armies from its soils is almost beyond explanation, given the travails that the 1941 invasion had wrought. The war cost the Soviet Union more than 20 million lives. Three years of continuous heavy fighting (something not endured by any of its major allies) had led to the destruction of 32,000 industrial enterprises, including more than 900 factories. Warfare had destroyed a hundred thousand farms, 40,000 miles of railway, 70,000 villages, 1700 towns, and 6 million buildings, and made refugees of 25 million people.³

The vastness of the Soviet people's suffering, and the prodigiousness of their labor in expelling the invader, makes the incremental importance of aid even greater. That aid could make a difference was clear from the speed with which President Franklin D. Roosevelt moved to authorize aid to the Soviet Union; the legal basis for the aid program was laid on June 23, 1941, the day after the invasion. The first true Lend-Lease agreement was signed on October 1, 1941, and would be followed by supplementary agreements in each year of the war. By the end of the war, combined US and British assistance to the Soviet Union amounted to more than \$10 billion (1945), about \$80 billion in today's currency.

Bagration coincided almost exactly with the arrival of the largest quantity of Western supplies of any quarter of the war. This materiel arrived in the final quarter of 1943; the total shipped that quarter was worth almost \$1 billion (about \$8 billion in 1994). The Lend-Lease program remained steady from the fourth quarter of 1943 through

the fourth quarter of 1944.⁴ When shipments are evaluated by weight, rather than dollar value, the picture remains the same. Shipments in December, 1943 were the second largest of any month of the war in terms of tonnage and the largest in terms of dollar value.⁵

Few aspects of aid to the Soviet Union have attracted more attention than motor vehicles. Certainly this emphasis is justified by the statistics. More than 360,000 '6x6' 2 1/2 ton trucks and 91,000 other vehicles were sent to the U.S.S.R. during the war.⁶ Because of constant Soviet requests for more transport, trucks absorbed more than one sixth of all Soviet aid tonnage, and shipments remained constant throughout most of the war.⁷ By 1944 the trucks were arriving in sufficient numbers to make a difference. This can be deduced from the fact that, although transport was a major headache in 1942 and early 1943, it no longer seemed to be a critical issue in from late 1943 onwards, by which time the United States had delivered almost 200,000 vehicles.⁸ Nor can this improvement in transport be attributed to domestic production. Soviet vehicle production was described as "notoriously inadequate" by U.S. military authorities and even declined by more than half as foreign trucks arrived. Monthly imports (12,500), in fact, exceeded monthly domestic production (8,000),⁹ a fact rarely discussed in Soviet sources. Probably half to two-thirds of all trucks in service came via Lend-Lease.¹⁰

That the trucks were considered desirable by the Soviet military should surprise no one. But, specifically, what made them so useful? And, more to the point, was their role in *Bagration* really significant? As to the first question, a large vehicle park obviously gave the army a much better supply base. More important, and often overlooked, is that it enabled the army to move its forces more quickly, and to change axes of advance if this became necessary. An initial offensive success might quickly come

to grief as the Germans shifted reserves to meet the threat. This would lead to a slow advance and higher casualties. Contrary to popular opinion, the Soviet Union suffered from a labor shortage during the war, and it could not have afforded even higher losses than it actually suffered during the war. Germany was not the only country scraping the bottom of the manpower barrel by 1945.

What of the linkage between vehicle shipments and the success of *Bagration*? As this operation was the largest attempted by the Soviet Union up to this point, the supply and troop movement requirements exceeded anything attempted before. The Western trucks certainly were not responsible for *Bagration's* success - obviously that credit belongs to Soviet soldiers and officers - but the operation simply could not have been executed without an adequate supply of motor vehicles. Even in 1943, when Lend-Lease trucks were arriving in quantity, there were never enough.¹¹

The U.S. Military Mission concluded that "one-half of the highway-borne supplies for the advancing Soviet armies [in *Bagration*] were carried in American trucks," a "vital factor in maintaining supply services for the 2,000 mile Russian front."¹² British officers echoed the American assessment.¹³ (It should be noted that Lend-Lease monthly truck imports (11,500) almost equalled the number of trucks needed by the operational units themselves (12,000).¹⁴) Undoubtedly, *Bagration* was also assisted by improvements in road transport generally, which improved 23% from 1943 to 1944 - an improvement attributable to imports of trucks and other transport equipment.¹⁵ Truck shipments did drop briefly in August, 1944, to the distress of the Soviet government, but by this time the operation was two months underway, and a brief drop in shipments could hardly have made much difference.¹⁶

Motor vehicles were but one way in which Western aid helped the Red Army solve one of its most notorious

early problems - the lack of proper coordination, or, more technically, 'C³ [command / control / communications] capability.' The woeful lack of coordination, partly attributable to the Soviet Union's minimal and war-damaged communication system, contributed to the destruction of entire armies early in the war. An operation like *Bagration* could not succeed without excellent communications and coordination, regardless of its numerical or firepower advantages. A large concentration of troops and guns might lead to a breakthrough, but many earlier breakthroughs had been contained by the Germans as the Soviet attacks degenerated into confused and unimaginative frontal attacks.

Communications at the outbreak of the war were a nightmare. Soviet commanders in 1941 had to use the civilian telephone network to contact adjacent formations - and to do so required the assistance of operators as far back as Moscow! Many of these telephone lines, which ran along roads and rail lines subject to German attack, were destroyed by bombing.¹⁷ Retreating units could not warn their neighbors of their exposed flanks. The situation deteriorated to the point that, by the end of 1941, officers in staff cars had to drive westward from Moscow to locate the battered Soviet armies.¹⁸

By 1944 many of these problems had been solved, but, as the outcomes of the late-1943 battles had shown, communications were still far from what they should be. Poor communications in battle meant badly coordinated attacks and higher casualties which the Soviet Union, again contrary to popular opinion, could ill afford. Certainly no operation could be conducted in any serious depth if the conditions of 1941 were not improved.

The Western contribution to communications in *Bagration* was significant both in terms of quantity and quality. By the end of 1944, the United States had furnished

about 30,000 radios, a million miles of wire, and more than 300,000 field telephones.¹⁹ The latter were quite important because Soviet officers distrusted radios, fearing German interception. In addition, the invasion cost the Soviet Union 40% of its telephones, and telephone line shortages were chronic through much of the war.²⁰ A large quantity of more specialized equipment was also shipped, including over a thousand radio location devices, more than 40,000 radios, and more than \$25 million (1945 dollars) of miscellaneous equipment.²¹ The jeeps and motorcycles also supplied were similarly useful for communications, because Soviet commanders frequently used these vehicles to transmit messages and maintain contact with adjacent units, thereby avoiding use of the radio.²²

Lend-Lease also contributed substantially to the total strength of the Red Army at the time of *Bagration*. The 1944 offensive required the equivalent of about 200 divisions, about two fifths of the army's strength. A full-strength division plus necessary rear-service personnel (known as a division 'slice') required a maximum of about 25,000 soldiers. The U.S. military mission in Moscow reported that the 'average' Soviet soldier required .381 long tons of supplies per month, or .552 long tons if aviation supplies are included [the comparable figures for American soldiers were .764 and 1.0063 long tons]. According to the military mission, Soviet soldiers required fewer supplies in every category except, interestingly enough, fuel.²³ Presumably the higher fuel need stemmed from the vast distances that the increasingly mechanized Soviet army had to cover.

The source of the military mission's figures is not known. It is not even clear whether they were estimates or based on actual data from an unnamed source. Some of the data is quite specific (for example, .056 long tons of engineering construction materials per month). The figures

do not appear to be ratios of numbers for American soldiers. The absence of a source for this data is peculiar, because, if it had been legally supplied by the Red Army, the military mission would have said so. The military mission (and before its establishment, the military and naval attaches) had long been frustrated by the inability to get information from the Soviet military and hence would have made the most of a rare coup (or leak). Given all this, can the figures be trusted? Fortunately, there is some corroboration. The United States agreed to supply the Soviet Far Eastern forces in their war against Japan. To supply 1.5 million troops in a 2-month campaign, the U.S.A. would send about 1 million tons of supplies, or about a third of a ton per month per soldier - not too far from the .381 ton figure calculated by the military mission.²⁴

Based on the above figures, Lend-Lease tonnage was sufficient to support between 85 and 110 divisions in the summer of 1944, or about 50% to 60% of the force allocated to the offensive. A closer calculation is inadvisable, as there are arguments in favor of both the high- and low-end estimates. If the division slice was below 25,000, the number supported by Lend-Lease equipment and supplies would rise correspondingly. The commander of the Persian Gulf Command, which was organized to ship Western aid across Iran to the Soviet Union, estimated that his supply corridor alone could support 60 divisions.²⁵ If correct, the 85-110 division estimate looks reasonable. On the other hand, a large share of Lend-Lease tonnage was not directly military: raw materials, industrial machinery, specialized chemicals, and high-octane fuels, to name but a few. Lend-Lease food could (and, in fact, did) go directly to the army, but other items obviously had a more indirect impact. This does not mean, however, that they did not ultimately contribute to the strength of the army, but assigning a specific weight to their contribution is very

difficult. Lend-lease did not supply much ammunition, for example, but it did supply materials and resources for the production of ammunition.

The Lend-Lease contribution to one aspect of total Soviet military strength - firepower - can be assessed more easily. Air power was the one area in which foreign aid remained significant. Demand for American tanks was low, and for artillery pieces, non-existent. Airplanes were a different story. Even in 1944, Soviet demand for planes was still very high. While Soviet tank production far outstripped that of Germany, airplane production was roughly equal at the time of *Bagration* - 32,900 German and 26,000-33,200 Soviet planes being produced.²⁶ Significantly, the Germans also viewed the role of Western aircraft as qualitatively important (something they certainly did not in regard to tanks).²⁷

It was estimated by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in October 1945, that approximately 12% of the Soviet air force was composed of Lend-Lease aircraft.²⁸ This did not take into account the large number of British planes shipped in 1941-44, which in the aggregate added up to about 1/3 of total American shipments. Simple arithmetic would suggest that 15% of the Soviet air force in 1945 was composed of Western aircraft. The figure in 1944 must have been higher. Aircraft production in early-mid 1944 was about 50% lower than was true a year later, if wartime Western estimates are accepted.²⁹ In addition, the highest monthly rate of Lend-Lease shipments was achieved in 1943, and British aircraft were still being shipped. A reasonable estimate is that about 1 out of every 5 Soviet aircraft in service at the time of *Bagration* was imported.

The importance of Western planes exceeded numbers alone. The Soviet air force, like its Nazi counterpart, concentrated on ground attack. The US supplied 4700 Aircobras and 2400 Kingcobras, planes that

were quite useful for ground attack. The 3000 Hurricanes from Britain also were good for ground attack. In other words, the type of airplane sent by the Soviet Union's allies fitted well with the Soviet Union's tactical needs. Admittedly, this was more good fortune than brilliant planning. None of these 3 planes were competitive as fighters after the war's early stages, and the western air forces parted with them willingly (especially the P-63 Kingcobra, which was prone to lose its tail in high speed dives).³⁰

Did Lend-Lease defeat Nazi Germany in 1944? No. But it did provide a vital increment in the supply and materiel situation. For the first time in World War II, Lend-Lease shipments met the targets jointly set by the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. during the year from 1 July 1943 - 30 June 1944. In other words, during the months of preparation and buildup for *Bagration*, the Red Army was actually getting what it asked for - and, presumably, what it needed. In fact, on 1 March 1944 the delivery program was a million tons ahead of schedule.³¹ George Marshall may have been exaggerating when, on that same date, he told Franklin D. Roosevelt that "if Russia suddenly lost Lend-Lease, the Nazis could probably still defeat her."³² But it seems equally doubtful that, without Lend-Lease, the Soviet Union could have inflicted one of the most devastating defeats in military history, operation *Bagration*.