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The problem of the second front opening by Western Allies

Dear veterans, distinguished participants and guests, fellow commanders!

I am very glad to attend this wonderful conference. I would say a mid-term conference. And I welcome you also on behalf of the Russian military-historical society.

Russian military-historical society is young; it exists for only one year. The main goals and objectives that have been set to the society, including those of President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin, first of all, is education in the field of military history of the country and the protection of honest history of our country, our military in all wars, and especially in the Great Patriotic War.

I would like to express my gratitude to those people who sit on the panel today, especially to Oleg Rzheshevsky, who did very much for the topic that has been declared - “The Second Front, the Allies during the Great Patriotic War”.

Not only me, but many in the Academy of Sciences, in the Institute of Military History consider Rzheshevsky rightfully as their teacher. It was he who wrote a lot of books on the relations of Allied armies, the anti-Hitler coalition, Stalin and Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt.

He is the author of the wonderful works that, by the way, refer to the so-called operation “Unthinkable.” In 1945 Churchill ordered his chiefs of staff to develop the Operation. The war was not over, yet the Russian armies fought in Berlin, and Churchill was already giving orders of starting war against the Soviet Union. According to the plan, British and Americans, unbroken German army, and Poles were to unite and attack the Red Army.

This plan was developed in London in 1945. First time we have learned it from the British archives, also thanks to Oleg Rzheshevsky.

Now let’s switch directly to the subject.

From the beginning of the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet leadership forwarded a question to the United States and the United Kingdom about the

early opening of a second front in Western Europe. At some stages of the fighting in 1941 - 1943 the issue of a second front for the Soviet Union had a critical value. Despite the fact that the timely opening of hostilities in the West could significantly accelerate the defeat of the fascist bloc, the question of a second front for the Western leaders was more a matter of implementing their strategy. They viewed alliance commitments through the prism of their geopolitical interests.

At the Tehran Conference in November-December 1943, for the first time there was a meeting of Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill at the same table, and the issue of opening a second front was finally resolved. An oral statement of Stalin that after the war with Germany the Soviet Union would join the war against Japan was one of the main reasons for Roosevelt to agree on landing and, together with Churchill, mark its timing - May 1944.¹ That promise made it possible for the U.S to understand its prospects of ending the war in the Pacific more clearly. At the insistence of Stalin the appointment of the commander of combined forces of the Allies was also accelerated, General Dwight D. Eisenhower became the commander. Stalin made a statement that approximately at the same time he would start a powerful attack on the Soviet-German front.

The Red Army offensive in the summer of 1944 was supposed to pull on German forces, not to allow the Wehrmacht command to relocate any significant military units from east to west. Such coordination was fully justified. The success of the landing operation "Overlord", which began on June 6, 1944, became possible largely due to the actions of the Soviet fronts in Belarus.

Interesting is the fact that shortly before the start of "Operation Overlord" British representatives in the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington suddenly (!) announced that they "strongly opposed" the transmission of information on exact date of the beginning of the landing in Normandy to Russia. According to the British, any further delay of landing, which might occur due to weather conditions and other circumstances, could "be perceived by Russian, as evidence of hesitation and indecision" of Allied High Command. However, eventually, the opinion that the transfer of information about the exact date of landing would impact positively on the coordination of the fighting allies became prevailing. On May 29, 1944, American and British military officials in Moscow informed the General Staff of the Red Army that the operation would begin on the night of June 6. On June 7, Chief of the General Staff of the Red Army, Marshal Vasilevsky, informed the heads of the British and American military missions in Moscow - General Burrows and General Dean that a powerful Soviet offensive would start in mid-June. Soviet forces were preparing for "Operation Bagration."

¹ Tehran Conference of the leaders of the three Allied powers - the USSR, the USA and the UK (November 28 - December 1, 1943), Moscow, 1978, pp. 95, 173

On June 6, 1944, the second front was opened. The commander of the expeditionary forces General Eisenhower was appointed commander of the Allied military operations. Field Marshal B. Montgomery was at the head of the British military force. The opening of a second front was warmly welcomed in Moscow. But over two years of postponing landing of allies in Northern France - from May 1942 to June 1944, only the losses of the Soviet armed forces (killed, prisoners and missing persons) amounted to more than 5 million people. It should also be noted that a second front was opened when there were already great changes in the war and the forces of the Wehrmacht were finally undermined by the Soviet-German front.

After the Normandy landings the main German forces were still engaged in the Eastern Front. By early July 1944, there were 235 enemy divisions in the Soviet-German front, and 65 of them on the western front.

Together with the main operation in the north-west of France ("Overlord") the allies planned to land paratroopers in the south (associated "Operation Anvil"). After that they were supposed to carry out offensives in France, Belgium and Holland. In case of German collapse under the blows of the Red Army before the start of "Operation Overlord," the Allies continued to develop an emergency plan for the immediate top-secret invasion of the Continent ("Rankin").

In order to coordinate their actions with the Western Allies, Joseph Stalin informed Churchill on his plans for summer in a letter of June 6, 1944: "The summer offensive of the Soviet troops, organized according to the agreement reached at the Tehran Conference, will begin in mid-June in one of the important areas of the front. The general offensive will be deployed in stages by a consecutive advance of the armies in offensive operations. At the end of June and in July, the operations will turn into a general offensive of the Soviet troops." ²

Operation "Overlord" in Normandy became the largest amphibious operation of strategic importance during the Second World War. To do this, the Allies during its preparation had to solve a number of complex problems - to provide unexpected landing and clear communication of various kinds and types of troops. On June 6 alone, more than 156 thousand people, of which 23 thousand were airborne troops, landed in Normandy. Despite the strong resistance of the Germans, the Allies managed to gain a foothold on the shores of Normandy, and to ensure the arrival of new troops. By the end of June 25 divisions (about 1 million people), more than half a million tons of cargo and 171,532 vehicles were delivered to Normandy. It wasn't a coincidence that only a week after the operation Stalin gave it a high praise: "The history of war knows no other measures of similar breadth of idea, such a grand scale and craftsmanship." ³

² Correspondence of Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR with Presidents of the United States and Prime Ministers of Great Britain during the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945, Moscow, 1958, Vol.1. p. 261

³ Pravda, June 14, 2014

The losses of German fascist troops during the seven-week battles in Normandy totalled in 113 thousand killed, wounded and captured. In the period from June 6 to July 23, allies lost 122 thousand people (49 thousand British and Canadians, and about 73 thousand Americans).⁴

Meanwhile, the situation on the Soviet-German front did not allow the Germans to relocate troops to the area of Normandy. The reason was the beginning of a big offensive of the Red Army in Belarus in June. Summer of 1944 will go down in the history of World War II as a time of brilliant victories of the Soviet troops who carried a whole cascade of powerful offensive operations all the way from the White to the Black Sea. However, the first place among them was taken by Belorussian strategic offensive operation, code-named after the legendary Russian commander, hero of the Patriotic War of 1812, General Bagration. On April 22, 1944, the idea of an offensive in Belarus, advocated by Marshal Zhukov, was approved by the Supreme Command.

On June 10, 1944, the summer offensive on the Soviet-German front began with the Vyborg-Petrozavodsk strategic operation. After an attack in the north, Wehrmacht command waited for the Soviet offensive in the Baltic States or in the south, but a powerful storm, which involved force four fronts, suddenly hit the main, western direction on June 23, 1944. "Bagration" became one of the largest operations in the Second World War, which was destined to play a major role in the final defeat of the fascist German forces in Europe.

By June 23, 1944, Belarus Soviet troops were resisted by right-flank compounds of Army Group "North", Army Group "Centre" (commanded by Field Marshal E. Bush, and from June 28 by Field Marshal V. Model) - a total of 63 divisions and 3 brigades. They counted 1.2 million people, more than 9.5 thousand guns and mortars, 900 tanks and assault guns, about 1,350 aircraft. German troops occupied a pre-arranged, layered (to a depth of 250-270 km) defence. The task of Army Group "Centre" was to firmly hold the Belarussian bulge through which lay the shortest path to the borders of Germany.

Four Soviet fronts - 1st Baltic (General of the army I. Bagramyan), the 3rd Belorussian (Colonel General I. Chernyakhovsky), 2nd Belorussian (Colonel General G. Zakharov), the 1st Belorussian (General K. Rokossovsky) the joined 1st Army Polish Army (Lieutenant General S. Poplavsky) amounted to more than 1.4 million people, 31 thousand guns and mortars, 5.2 thousand tanks and self-propelled guns, more than 5 thousand aircraft. Coordination of front activities was carried out by representatives of Supreme Command - Marshals Zhukov and Vasilevsky.

Significant superiority of forces, as well as the sudden onset of "Operation Bagration" predetermined its successful and rapid development. The enemy Army Group "Centre", in less than two weeks, suffered a catastrophic defeat - its main strength was defeated. Already on July 3, the city of Minsk was liberated, to the east of which over 100 thousand German soldiers and officers

⁴ F. Pogue, Supreme Command

appeared in the encirclement. Army Group "Centre" lost 25 divisions and 300 thousand people. In the next few weeks another 100 thousand servicemen were added. A huge gap of up to 400 km was formed in the centre of the front, and the enemy was not able to close it in a short time. Soviet troops, in turn, had an opportunity to make a rapid move to the western borders of the USSR.

In total, during the period of the summer offensive of 1944, the Red Army crushed Army Groups "North", "Centre" and "Northern Ukraine", moved 400-600 km forward to the west, liberated eastern Poland and reached the approaches to East Prussia.

Meanwhile, after the successful landings in Normandy, further fighting of Western allies developed with mixed results. Many subordinates Eisenhower, and he himself, admired the Soviet successes. Comparing them with their own, they talked about their long slow progress, despite the overwhelming superiority in tanks and aircraft. Nevertheless, the Allies advanced, and were able to break through the German front in late July. Eisenhower ordered the United States Ambassador to the USSR Averell Harriman to convey his thanks to Russian Command for an excellent on-going offensive. After the liberation of the French capital in August 1944, the main fighting took place on the territory of Belgium and Germany. Eisenhower directed the operations from the headquarters located in Versailles.

But all this time, the Soviet-German front still remained the main theatre of war in 1944-1945. For the second half of 1944, the German command brought there 59 divisions and 13 brigades, and took 12 divisions and 5 brigades from it for the Western Front. In January 1945, 195 enemy divisions confronted Soviet forces, and 74 controlled the Allied forces in Western Europe.

Summer and autumn of 1944 was a time of the final collapse of the bloc of fascist states. After the broad offensive of the Red Army, which began in August at the southern flank of the Soviet-German front in the direction of the Balkans, one after another, German allies - Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary - began to break away from Germany and declare war. After signing the armistice agreement with Finland in Moscow on September 19, 1944, the latter also launched military operations against those German troops that were in the north of the country and were then retreating to Norway. Soviet troops entered the central regions of Europe. In some areas they reached East Prussia.

By the end of 1944, the defence of Wehrmacht, both on the Eastern and on the Western Front was not only weakened, but broken to smash. From now on almost no one doubted that the next 1945 will be the last in the fight against Hitler's Wehrmacht. Nazi Germany was inexorably approaching its death.

It is necessary to stop and look at some examples of coordinated actions of the Red Army and the Allies after the Normandy landings.

Although the Germans continued to fight it on the Eastern Front with particular ferocity, the Western allies also faced considerable problems. The most difficult situation was in December 1944 as a result of the powerful German breakthrough in the Ardennes, in which the Allied command and

Eisenhower himself were taken aback. However, he quickly figured out the strategic nature of the Wehrmacht attack and redeployed more breakout forces to the area. However, the Allies managed to stop Germans only at the cost of heavy losses.

On December 24, at the request of Eisenhower, Churchill, on behalf of himself and Roosevelt suggested Stalin to immediately send a competent officer to Moscow to verify Soviet plans for further offensive operations, stressing that “Eisenhower cannot solve their problems, not knowing what their plans were.”⁵ Stalin agreed and on December 29 Eisenhower offered to send his deputy, Chief Marshal of Aviation A. Tedder.⁶

On January 6, 1945, Churchill wrote to Stalin that there was a “worrying” situation in the West, with “very heavy fighting, and at any time major solutions can be required from the Higher Command.” Churchill asked to report whether the Anglo-Americans could rely on the Soviet offensive in January. The next day, the Soviet government responded: “Given the state of our Allies on the Western Front, the Supreme Command decided to promptly finalize preparations and, regardless of the weather, launch major offensive operations throughout the Central Front not later than in the second half of January.” Terms of the Soviet offensive, originally scheduled for January 20, were moved to January 12.

Soviet Supreme Command made adjustments to the pace of preparation for new offensives and ordered front commanders to begin eight days earlier than planned. “On January 9 - Marshal Konev evidenced in his memoirs - I received a call from the acting chief of the General Staff, A. Antonov. He said that due to the difficult situation which our allies faced in the Ardennes, they asked us to precipitate the beginning of our attack; after that, the Supreme Command rescheduled the beginning of the offensive. The 1st Ukrainian Front should start the offensive on January 12 rather than on 20. Antonov spoke on behalf of Stalin. “

Before the beginning of the Vistula-Oder operation, the Soviet command had to speed up the training of newcomer units and to urgently address many other issues. However, loyalty to ally duty, a desire to help the Anglo-American troops in a difficult situation, came to the first place and stood above the purely operational reasons.

On January 12, 1944, the Soviet offensive forced the Germans to redeploy the 6th SS Panzer Army and 16 divisions from the western to the eastern front. Eisenhower responded with such a grateful letter to the Soviet command that the Chief of Staff of the American Army, General Marshall, even advised him to adhere to a “more mundane and gruff tone” in contacts with Moscow.⁷

At the end of March 1945 the Allied troops successfully crossed the Rhine, and the Red Army reached the line of the Oder - Neisse. In total, at that time

⁵ Correspondence of Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR ... Vol.1., p. 292

⁶ Russian State Archive of Social and Political History

⁷ The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower. Vol.V. P. 2428

there were about 4 million people under the command of Eisenhower on the Western Front - more than any other commander of the Second World War had.

So, a second front has played a major role in the armed struggle against the aggressor bloc. Eventually, it brought the victory over Germany closer, which objectively meant a reduction in losses and in the war of the Soviet Union. In operations on the Western Front an active part was taken by the Canadian, French, Polish and other troops of anti-Hitler coalition.

Today we remember them, we know about their contribution, we study their contribution and should do everything possible that the war -a big, a small war, any war –never repeated again, and that the power in various states, including those adjacent to Russia, was never taken by ultranationalists, or, better say, blatant Nazis, which we anyway had to fight together in 1941-1945.