

Soviet Airborne Forces 1930–91



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SOVIET AIRBORNE FORCES 1930–91

INTRODUCTION

A paratrooper, wearing jump overalls, a cloth jump helmet and armed with what appears to be a well-worn AKS-47 assault rifle, stands in line after a route march, 1971. By this time the men of the VDV were a recognized elite; General-polkovnik Vasily F. Margelov had been relentless in his drive to turn the VDV into a strategic asset, and had used the invasion of Czechoslovakia as a demonstration of their capabilities and élan. (Sputnik/TopFoto)

During the 1930s the Soviet Union was the unquestioned world leader in the development of airborne forces and doctrine. With its first tactical parachute jump on 2 August 1930, the RKKA (*Raboche-krestyanskaya Krasnaya armiya*, ‘Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army’) opened a new chapter in warfare that would have far-reaching consequences in the Great Patriotic War of 1941–45 – though not, ironically, for the Soviet Union.

The airborne forces of the Soviet Union were known as the VDV or *Vozdushno-desantnye voyska*, literally ‘air-landing forces’; ‘air-landing’ (hereafter translated as ‘airborne’) was a term that referred to parachute units, specifically air-landed units, and the type of operations that employed them both. Innovative and forward-thinking, the VDV strove to explore the possibilities inherent in the delivery of large numbers of highly trained troops well behind the enemy’s lines. However, the Great Purge of 1937–38 (and its grim echoes down to 1941) ensured that such ambitions were smothered.

That damage to strategic leadership combined with chronic shortages of transport aircraft to ensure that the VDV’s performance in the Great Patriotic War was overshadowed by the ground forces of the Red Army (*Krasnaya Armiya*). Despite a number of small-scale successes, there were only two major operational uses of Soviet airborne troops in their designated role, at Vyazma in January–February 1942 and the Dnepr River in September 1943, both operations ending in failure.

In 1946, control of the VDV passed from the VVS (*Voyenno-Vozdushnyye Sily*, ‘Military Air Forces’) to the direct control of the *Ministr Vooruzhonnykh Sil SSSR* (‘Minister of the Armed Forces of the USSR’), where it became a strategic asset. Under the leadership of General-polkovnik Vasily F. Margelov from 1954, the VDV was organized and trained to conduct large-scale deep insertions behind enemy lines, attacking command-and-control facilities, lines of communication and key infrastructure targets such as nuclear power plants. To overcome the traditional weaknesses of airborne forces – a lack of mobility and low firepower – the VDV rebuilt itself into a highly flexible striking force, well-equipped with integral air assets as well as large numbers of air-delivered armoured vehicles and self-propelled guns.

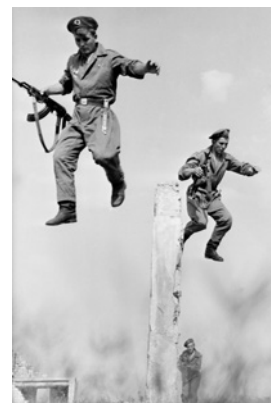


The VDV played a major role during the Hungarian Uprising of June–November 1956, and in Czechoslovakia during the ‘Prague Spring’ protests of January–August 1968. During the Soviet–Afghan War (December 1979–February 1989), the VDV became the key assault force of the Soviet Army (*Sovetskaya Armiya*), proving to be among the most formidable of the Mujahideen’s opponents. During the conflict the VDV implemented organizational evolutions and tactics that had started in the 1960s with the development of the air-assault concept – the transport, insertion and support of air-landed troops by helicopter rather than parachute.

Throughout its existence the VDV would reflect key aspects of the Soviet Union’s broader history: its intellectually ambitious beginnings thwarted by self-sabotage; the bloody exigencies demanded of it by war; its adaptation to the realities of a nuclear ‘stalemate’; and its inability to solve what appeared to be a simple problem in a client state on its southern border.

CHRONOLOGY

2 August 1930	Kombrig Leonid G. Minov leads a practice air assault that informs the establishment of the VDV.
11 December 1932	The first special-purpose airborne brigade is formed in the Leningrad Military District. By 1936 the force expands to three brigades and three regiments.
December 1938	By this time six airborne brigades have been formed, plus three airborne regiments.
22 June 1941	Operation <i>Barbarossa</i> , Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union.
July–December 1941	The six airborne brigades are expanded into ten airborne corps, later converted into rifle divisions.
18 January 1942	The Vyazma airborne operation commences. It is a failure, concluding on 28 February 1942.
April–June 1943	Twenty new Guards airborne brigades are raised.
24 September 1943	The Dnepr airborne operation is launched.
3 June 1946	Control of the VDV passes to the Ministry of Defence.
May 1954	General-polkovnik Vasily F. Margelov takes command of the VDV, continuing in that role (with a hiatus in 1959–61) until 1979.
3 November 1956	Operation <i>Vikhr</i> (‘Whirlwind’), the Soviet invasion of Hungary.
20–21 August 1968	Operation <i>Dunay</i> (‘Danube’), the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia.
24 December 1979	Soviet paratroopers and special forces overthrow the Afghan government.
29 February 1980	The Kunar Valley operation.
April 1980–June 1985	Operations <i>Panjshir I–Panjshir IX</i> .
19 November 1987	Operation <i>Magistral</i> (‘Highway’) begins, concluding on 10 January 1988.
15 February 1989	The last Soviet troops leave Afghanistan.
9 November 1989	The Berlin Wall falls.
26 December 1991	Dissolution of the Soviet Union.



Airborne troops in training in the Sverdlovsk region, 1975. The overalls they wear are more or less unchanged from those issued to their forebears in the 1930s, and would continue to serve the VDV right through the war in Afghanistan and beyond. (TASS via Getty Images)

EARLY YEARS OF THE VDV

ORIGINS

In the 1920s and 1930s the Soviet Union was not the only country interested in the concept of landing troops by air, but none of its contemporaries had the initial vision or the scope of ambition that animated the RKKA's military theorists. At the beginning of 1930 there were no parachute factories in the Soviet Union, no dedicated transport aircraft and no airborne forces, but there were ideas about the sort of war the RKKA wanted to wage. Before the year was out, a number of air-landing and parachute-landing exercises had been conducted, and the first homegrown parachute factory had been established; from 1931, airborne operations became a standard element of military exercises; by the end of 1932, the first special-purpose air-assault brigade was established; by 1936, airborne doctrine was a major element in the RKKA's field regulations; and by 1939, the VDV had expanded to six 3,000-man brigades and three separate regiments, the most substantial airborne force in the world.

The driving ambition of the Soviet State to modernize, industrialize and spread its creed beyond its borders informed the conduct of the RKKA, and by 1929, this led to the concept of *Glubokyi boi* or 'deep battle' – in essence an operational-level attack upon the entire depth of an enemy's defensive line by a combined-arms force of armour, infantry, artillery and air power all acting in concert and with a clear objective. While the tank would break the positional stalemate of the previous war, the aeroplane would strike far beyond the range of artillery, but it also offered the prospect of vertical envelopments, an entirely new way to destabilize an enemy's rear area. Though such ideas were more theory than practice, they drove technological development and encouraged experimentation (Glantz 1984: 3–4).

As early as 1928, the distinguished military thinker General-mayor Mikhail N. Tukhachevsky was calling for the RKKA to develop the capability of delivering troops by air. Though Tukhachevsky's exact level of involvement in developing the concept of deep operations remains unclear, it is still one of the ideas with which he is most closely associated. A key aspect of this approach involved the development of air power, not just in the projection of force, but also in the areas of transport and supply. From there it was not a great leap to see the possibilities inherent in the air-delivery of infantry or special sabotage units.

A report from the RKKA's Revolutionary Military Council, summing up the results of the military and political preparation for the 1929–30 academic year, commented that airborne operations should be thoroughly studied from both the technical and tactical sides by the headquarters of the Red Army, with the aim of developing and then sending out appropriate instructions to the field units (Shaykin 2013: 77–78). Tukhachevsky, in his role as commander of the Leningrad Military District, conducted a number of exercises in 1929 and 1930, including one such experiment on 13 March 1930: six Tupolev TB-1 heavy bombers from the 55th and 57th squadrons of the 3rd Aviation Brigade were to ferry a 70-man force on a practice mission, inserting them near Novgorod and enabling them to 'blow up' a bridge. In the event, bad weather meant that only four of the aircraft found the landing site and had to come in one after another, eventually getting 45 men, four



machine guns and 600kg of supplies offloaded, but the overall mission was deemed a success. Tukhachevsky wrote up his findings of that and other exercises in the study 'Actions of Airborne Units in Offensive Operations', in which he called for the establishment of a table of organization and equipment (TOE) for an aviation motorized division.

Initially, there was no thought of delivering troops by parachute; rather, the expectation was for aircraft to land on designated patches of ground or airfields, allowing troops to alight with their weapons and equipment. This was in part due to the non-existent nature of the Soviet parachute industry, but contacts in the late 1920s with the Irving Air Chute Company of Buffalo, New York had led to the purchase of a number of parachutes to equip test pilots, as well as for general training purposes. Soon afterwards, a licence was negotiated that allowed the establishment of a domestic Soviet parachute factory in April 1930, making Irving-pattern parachutes for pilots (PL-1), pilot-observers (PN-1) and for training (PT-1), with production expected to reach 2,000 a month by the end of 1932, and doubling the following year. Parachutes for the airborne infantry were developed separately, as they were required to be more robust and bear greater weight than those used by aircrew baling out of a stricken aircraft; by 1931 the PD-1 (a development of the Irving design, but worn on the back instead of the chest) was in production, replaced in by 1933 the PD-2, with the PD-6 entering service in 1936. The PD-10 (designed to handle heavier loads) came out in 1940, with the square-canopied PD-41 arriving the following year.

At the same time, the VVS chief-of-staff, Polkovnik Aleksandr N. Lapchinsky, was writing a paper with Polkovnik N.P. Ivanov that examined the logistics and practical issues that would need to be understood to allow for the successful insertion of battalion- or regiment-sized units (Glantz 1984: 4). Kombrig Leonid G. Minov, a VVS officer, was tasked with developing a test unit of parachutists from the men of the 11th Air Brigade. Minov had been the officer despatched to purchase parachutes for the VVS from the Irving Air Chute Company; his current role was parachute-training instructor for the VVS, in which capacity he was instructing members of the

ABOVE LEFT

A group of paratroopers undergo a military inspection prior to take-off, c.1930–34. The overalls appear to be dark-blue VVS issue (worn before the issue of khaki versions became more common after 1935); the jump helmets are leather, but would be replaced with a simpler cotton model for summer activities. Leather jump helmets (usually lined with wool) were retained for cold-weather operations, though in the Great Patriotic War it seems to have been commonplace for paratroopers to wear the *ushanka* fur hat when jumping in winter conditions. (Scheufler Collection/Corbis/VCG via Getty Images)

ABOVE RIGHT

A Soviet paratrooper leaps from an aircraft during a training exercise, c.1934. Despite widespread interest in the possibilities of parachute-landed infantry, no other nation was conducting operations on anything like this scale at this time, though that would gradually change. (KEYSTONE-FRANCE/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)