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**ON THE PERIODISATION  
OF THE BATTLE  
FOR EAST PRUSSIA  
IN 1944—1945**

*This article considers the problematic issue of the prehistory of the Kaliningrad region. The author analyses different approaches to the periodisation of the East Prussian offensive, delimits the periods of its stages and determines the date of the termination of the operation.*



**Key words:** history, Kaliningrad region, war, operation, phases of war, offensive, East Prussia, Pillau, spit, Frische Nehrung, strait.

The history of the Kaliningrad region goes back to April 7, 1946. On that day, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR issued the decree “On the establishment of the Königsberg region within the RSFSR”. On July 4, 1946, Königsberg was renamed Kaliningrad and the Königsberg region became the Kaliningrad region [1, p. 469].

The western-most region of the Russian Federation has a rich military pre-history. Despite the long time that has passed since the end of the Second World War, the history of the war is in the focus of attention in Kaliningrad. The discussion centres on political, sociocultural, demographic, and, of course, military issues.

One of such issues is the controversy over the beginning and end of the military operation in East Prussia and the phases of the 1945 East Prussian Offensive per se. Military science has the term “periodisation of war”, which means the division of a war into markedly different phases. Each phase has certain content; different phases are distinguished by the form of military actions; the time framework marks the turning points in the course of a war according to the objective and character of the latter [2, vol. 2, p. 295].

The periodisation can be historical and strategic. In its turn, the strategic periodisation is often accompanied by the operational determination, which can be considered as providing further details to the former one. The strategic (operational) periodisation is preformed at the stage of war planning and implemented in the course of its development. Depending on the development of the process and the peculiarities of the tasks set, the strategic periodisation can be divided into initial, interim, and final phases [3, p. 59].

The historical periodisation is performed according to the actual course of events and the results achieved. It is determined by the sequence of actions or phases.

In August 1944, at the final stage of the “Bagration” operation, the troops of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Belarussian front reached the border of Germany (within the province of East Prussia). Then, a strategic pause followed, during which the troops of the belligerents were preparing to continue military actions: the Soviet troops — to continue the offensive in Germany, the German troops — to defend East Prussia.

The troops of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Belorussian front launched the operation on October 16, 1944. Its objective was to destroy the Tilsit-Insterburg group and capture the city of Königsberg [4, p. 30]. However, the front's resources were not enough to fulfil this objective: a long, arranged in depth defence, desperate resistance of German troops, and great losses of the Soviet troops forced the command of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Belorussian front to take on the defensive. The operation was terminated on October 27, 1944. The Soviet troops managed to penetrate 30 km in depth and 140 km laterally into East Prussia [5, p. 258—260].

The new attack of the Soviet troops in East Prussia commenced on January 13, 1945. The East Prussian offensive of 1945, according to the official data, was carried out by the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Belorussian and a part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Baltic front supported by the Baltic Fleet. The operation terminated on April 25, 1945. However, the combat continued on the Frische Nehrung (today — the Vistula Spit). There, the remnants of German troops surrendered in the night of May 8—9, 1945<sup>1</sup>. This is the gist of the short review of the battles in East Prussia.

Colonel A. V. Vasilyev was the first to address the periodisation of the East Prussian Offensive. In 1945, he was head of the Department of the use of war experience of the Operational directorate at the headquarters of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Belorussian front. Immediately after the cessation of military actions, he was given the task of summarising the experience of the Soviet troops in the battles in East Prussia in 1944—1945. The troops were being reduced to a peace establishment; thus, an important issue was the training of the young generation that did not have real war field experience. Moreover, there was a need for the instruction of officers and the operational training of district commanders. The programme had to include skills necessary at war, which could be possible only after the experience of earlier combats and battles had been studied and summarised.

Over the four post-war months, the department staff prepared, under the supervision of A. V. Vasilyev, a 287 page report on the East Prussian Offensive of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Belorussian Front, whose subtitle introduces it as a “Conspectus for analysis” (hereinafter referred to as the *Conspectus — G. K.*). [7, p. 1—287].

For a long time, the title page of the *Conspectus* was classified as “secret”, although K. N. Galitsky, without disclosing the title and referring to the archive data only, used the document in his monograph «В боях за Восточную Пруссию» (“In the battles for East Prussia”). A. M. Vassilevsky also consulted the *Conspectus* when writing an article for the “*Voyenno-Istorichesky Zhurnal*” (*Military History Journal*) [8, p. 45, 437, 441, 450 etc.; 9, p. 45]. Today, the document is unclassified.

The structure of the *Conspectus* follows the then (and employed later) scheme for the commander to reach a decision regarding the forthcoming operation (combat). The commanders of fronts and armies understood the mission from the guidelines of higher headquarters (the commanders of units —

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the official version see [6, p. 290—313].

from the higher command), estimated the situation and the potential of their own and enemy forces and developed the tactical concept — the basis for the fulfillment of an operational mission. Thus, the *Conspectus* gives much background on the theatre of war, i. e. East Prussia. It offers data on the composition of the Russian and enemy forces, battle order, the battle missions of troops (breach of defensive lines, exploitation, routes of advance, repositioning), their interaction, etc. Moreover, almost every section of the *Conspectus* closes with an evaluation of the operation (or its stage) carried out and the data on casualties of the Russian and enemy troops. The *Conspectus* also offers the first periodisation of the East Prussian Offensive.

Colonel A. V. Vasilyev employed historical periodisation in the preparation of the *Conspectus*. He was acquainted with the whole course of the strategic operation, its results as well as the results of its main phases. He gave names to every phase taking into account its distinctive content.

According to A. V. Vasilyev, the East Prussian Offensive consisted of a number of independent (for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Belorussian Front) operations:

- the invasion of East Prussia;
- the Tilsit-Insterburg operation;
- the reduction of the enemy group to the South-West of Königsberg;
- the assault of Königsberg;
- the reduction of the enemy Samland group;
- the siege of the Frische Nehrung [7, p. 2]<sup>1</sup>.

According to some contemporary historiographers, the campaign of the Soviet forces in that province of Germany is limited to the East-Prussian Offensive of 1945. The Gumbinnen (Goldap-Gumbinnen) operation of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Belorussian Front in October 1944, which ended with the Soviet troops advance into the territory of Germany, was left off. That operation is not mentioned at all<sup>2</sup>, or included into the 1944 Baltic Offensive, perhaps, on the basis of the fact that the 39 army of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Belorussian Front participated in the operation [11, p. 2].

At the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the attack of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Belorussian Front on East Prussia, Colonel M. Alexeev, apparently, for the first time in Russian historiography, described the Gumbinnen operation. In the second half of October

<sup>1</sup> The preamble of the *Conspectus* says that the report is a *conspectus* for the analysis of both the *operation in whole and its phases and is also an introductory material for the further examination or research on the actions of the Front forces from October 1944 until May 1945* (italics mine — G.K.) [7, p. 2].

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: [10]. Perhaps, the reason was that Marshal Vasilevsky wrote about this operation disparagingly and rather unjustly: "...unsuccessful attempts to advance into East Prussia and the assumption of strict defence by the troops of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Belorussian Front". Possibly, he assumed certain responsibility for the not entirely successful actions of the front group he commanded as a representative of the Supreme Command (the 1<sup>st</sup> Baltic Front did not manage to seize Memel at once; neither did the Gumbinnen operation fulfil its objective. On November 8, 1944, Vasilevsky was released from commanding operations of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Belorussian and the 1<sup>st</sup> Baltic Fronts [9, p. 36].

1944, the front troops under the command of General I. D. Chernyakhovsky prepared and carried out an offensive in the Gumbinnen direction [12, p. 119—122].

M. Alexeev rightly states that, despite the initial success of the operation, the offensive went rather slowly; the second defensive line, supported by the fortified German border area, could not be broken at once [ibid, p. 120].

Colonel General A. P. Pokrovsky, who headed the headquarters of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Belorussian front at the final phase of the war, was more critical of this operation. According to him, the forces of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Belorussian Front in collaboration with the 1<sup>st</sup> Baltic Front were given a mission to destroy the Tilsit-Gumbinnen enemy group and capture Königsberg. “In effect, this operation resolved into an isolated attack of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Belorussian Front and an advance of 60 km in depth and 100 km laterally. This operation was carried out at a heavy cost” [4, p. 30]<sup>1</sup>.

Vasilyev clearly interprets this operation as the “operation designed to invade East Prussia”. This fact is undeniable, since, alongside the order of Commander-in-chief I. V. Stalin, it is also stated by German historiographers. In particular, Germans Dieckert and Großmann write in their memoirs, evaluating the results of the battle, that the Soviet troops penetrated 150 km laterally and 40 km in depth into East Prussia [13, S. 67]. Their data on the scale of advance into East Prussia are more precise than those provided by Pokrovsky.

As to the invasion operation, Vasilyev’s position on its inclusion into the East-Prussian offensive is highly debatable. The problem is that the Gumbinnen operation initially was clearly defined as a front operation to be carried out by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Belorussian front independently. And the operational pause (from October 1944 until mid-January 1945) was too long to speak of a certain succession or crucial links between the two operations. Thus, its inclusion into the East Prussian Offensive can hardly be justified.

The periodisation of the East Prussian Offensive of 1945 in the post-war literature underwent certain changes. For example, initially, three phases of the operation were distinguished (within the action zone of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Belorussian front): the first one covers the breach of the enemy’s tactical defence and the creation of conditions for the advance in depth (January 13—18, 1945); the second one — the further advance into the enemy operational depth of defence and the isolation of the East Prussian group from other forces of the Wehrmacht (January 19 — February 9, 1945), the third one — the reduction of the enemy groups in East Prussia (February 10 — up to the reduction of the Samland group of German forces). This periodisation is obviously strategic, and the division of the operation into three phases corresponded to the academic views on the strategic division (initial, interim, and final phases). The third phase of the East Prussian Offensive encompassed four stages: “the prevention of the enemy’s attempts to break the encirclement and the struggle with the southern group in February 1945; the reduc-

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<sup>1</sup> General Pokrovsky recalled the numbers from memory, thus, they, of course, differ from the data provided in the order of the Commander-in-chief. *G.K.*

tion of the southern enemy group in March; the siege of Königsberg; the reduction of the Samland enemy group [14, p. 11].

This order of the defeat of German forces was first given in a historical review by Lieutenant General Ye. A. Shilovsky. The review appeared in one of the first publications on the history of the East Prussian Offensive, which was out of print as early as 1946. Such interpretation had existed in historiography approximately until the early 1960s [ibid; 15, c. 59, 70, 76].

Later, the phases were extended, so that only two were distinguished: the first one — the isolation of the East Prussian enemy group (from January 13 to February 10, 1945); the second one — the splitting of the encircled enemy troops and its reduction in parts (February 10 — April 25, 1945). A. M. Vasilevsky brought up this division when speaking of the planning of the operation [9, p. 37]<sup>1</sup>.

Of course, Marshal Vasilevsky, mentioning the planning of the East Prussian Offensive, referred, strictly speaking, to its strategic component: until February 10, 1945, the troops of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Belorussian fronts (and the First Baltic Front as well) carried out one strategic operation, and from February 10, 1945, Marshal Rokossovsky's 2<sup>nd</sup> Belorussian front set to the conduct of another operation — the Pomeranian Offensive. From the 10<sup>th</sup> of February, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Belorussian front continued to accomplish the mission of the second phase of the East Prussian Offensive. Therefore, in terms of strategy, one can speak of two phases. General Shilovsky had to take into account both the operational-strategic and historical components of periodisation.

This rather vague periodisation, obviously, did not win the sympathy of A. V. Vasilyev. The same 1946 edition contains his article «Ход боевых действий» (“The course of the battle”) [16]. However, Colonel Vasilyev not only avoids a direct dispute with Lieutenant General Shilovsky, but almost gives up his 1945 variant of the periodisation. Vasilyev's article distinguishes the reduction of the Tilsit-Insterburg enemy group and the advance of the troops of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Belorussian front to Königsberg (January 13 — the end of January), the reduction of the Heilsberg German group (February–March), the assault of Königsberg (April 6–9), the reduction of the enemy group on the Samland Peninsula and the Frische Nehrung (April 13 — May 9, 1945).

In modern interpretation, the historical periodisation of the East Prussian Offensive (in the action zone of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Belorussian Front) includes the Insterburg-Königsberg Offensive (January 13 — February 10, 1945), the Königsberg Offensive (April 6–9) and the Samland Offensive (April 13–25) [2, vol. 1, p. 368; 10, p. 195].

Such periodisation has no room for the Soviet attack on East Prussia and front operations designed to reduce the enemy group to the South-West of Königsberg<sup>2</sup> and the siege of the Frische Nehrung.

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that this periodisation, though not formalised, was also mentioned by Ye. A. Shilovsky. He included such course of actions of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Belorussian Front into the operation concept: to isolate the German group in East Prussia from main forces and reduce it in parts [14, p. 9].

<sup>2</sup> A. M. Vasilevsky calls it the Heilsberg group [9, p. 41, etc.].

It is rather difficult to understand the motivation of contemporary scholars who exclude from Vasilzev's list the operation aimed to reduce the German group consisting of more than twenty divisions, which was driven to the South coast of the Frisches Haff lagoon. As to the siege of the Frische Nehrung, experts unanimously agree that the East Prussian Offensive ended on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April. Here, one should give credit to Colonel A. V. Vasilyev for his consistent referral of the Frische Nehrung battles to the East Prussian Offensive.

In 1945, when planning the *Conspectus*, he unambiguously pins the operation down. However, afterwards, the attitude of military scholars to the operation in East Prussia started to change. The offensive covered a longer time period (almost four months!) as though downplaying the efficiency of the Soviet troops, which, for a long time, could not defeat the demoralised enemy. The time of the operation should have been reduced; as a result, the order of the Command-in-chief for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Belorussian front to capture the last defensive pivot of the German forces on the Samland peninsula on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April started to be liberally interpreted [5, p. 468]. The claims that the 25<sup>th</sup> of April was not only the day of the fall of Pillau but also of the end of the East Prussian Offensive in whole appeared in the Soviet literature.

A. V. Vasilyev cautiously (due to his duty position) disagrees with this date of the termination of the Offensive. Firstly, he reports that, on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April, the Soviet troops captured the fortress and port of Pillau, thus *destroying the last German base in the South-West of the peninsula* (italics mine — G. K.). And later says that the troops of the front had the objective of “maintaining the offensive” and “for this purpose, on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April, fresh units were brought to the Frische Nehrung” (which means, that the Soviet troops had been already deployed on the spit and carried out combat actions if they needed fresh reserves). And only at 1 a.m. on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 1945, the enemy ceased fire along the whole front line, and its units surrendered [16, p. 47, 49].

This point of view was accidentally supported by an influential source. A secret historical military review of the Great Patriotic War came out in 1959. The second chapter of its fourth volume [15, p. 29—95] covered the East Prussian Offensive. The review was published for training purposes, predominantly, for the students of military academies studying the history of the art of war. Thus, it is characterised by greater objectivity of the situation analysis, the recognition of the flaws and failures of the own command; the review also mentions the strong points of the enemy actions, its resilience in defence and the expertise in the use of reserve [ibid, p. 61].

For an amateur, the text of the review might seem too difficult, since it is rich in specific terminology and does not provide explanations; it is implied that it speaks the same language with the students of military academies and officers and generals who were engaged in the system of command and operational training in the 1960—70s. Nevertheless, the review offers generalised statistical data, which can be of interest for civil historians.

The review per se requires a critical commentary in the framework of the modern knowledge of the East Prussian Offensive. I will comment on the only point that can be considered as a drawback of the research in the realm of the periodisation of the Offensive.

The point is that the review lacks a straightforward definition of the time framework of the East Prussian Offensive. Speaking of its termination the authors state the following: “On the 10<sup>th</sup> of February, the Offensive entered its third phase, in which our troops *completely destroyed the split and thrust to the sea forces of the East Prussian enemy group by the 25<sup>th</sup> of April* (italics mine — G. K.) [ibid, p. 59], thus supporting the official point of view on the date of the Offensive termination. This thesis is proven further in the text, which says that the “reduction of the enemy on the Samland peninsula (Pillau, the Southern end of the peninsula was seized on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April — G. K.) became the final episode of the whole East Prussian Offensive” [ibid, p. 88].

Nevertheless, the previous paragraph claims that “After the defeat of Wehrmacht on the Samland Peninsula, the enemy retained only the Frische Nehrung. The combat actions aimed to clear the spit of the enemy continued until the eighth of May [ibid]. Thus, the defeat of the Germans on the peninsula did not mark the end of the East Prussian Operation.

There was no chronological break between the operations. In the evening of the 25<sup>th</sup> of April, the assault of Pillau came to an end in the night of the 25<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup>; Soviet landing force was brought to the Frische Nehrung. The combats on the spit were a natural continuation of the operation on the Samland Peninsula. The units of the 11<sup>th</sup> Army and the 48<sup>th</sup> Army participated in the operation; at the initial stage, the eastern coast of the lagoon was secured by the 50<sup>th</sup> Army, which was later performed by the front units. Moreover, the Red Banner Baltic Fleet contributed to the operation.

The relative independence of the combat actions emerged due to a geographical feature — the strait separating the spit from the Pillau peninsula. It is the only reason to consider the actions on the spit an independent operation. Apparently, we should agree with V. A. Vasilyev that the combat on the Frische Nehrung was a part of the East Prussian Offensive, which ended on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 1945.

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