

A SHORT HISTORY OF TANK DEVELOPMENT PART II

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This was the American M3, known as the 'Lee' (American turret) or 'Grant' (British turret). Comparison with the Soviet T34/85 shows it as an inferior machine in that its silhouette is higher; the main armament is not in the turret; construction is by riveting, not cast or welded.

The struggle for survival

LAST MONTH I DESCRIBED the tremendous variety of mechanised armour that passed under the name 'tanks' in the 20 year period between the World Wars. In 7 main varieties this Heinz-like assemblage of war-cars entered the great struggle for survival in 1939 . . . but they did not all emerge at the other end in 1945. In this instalment, I shall describe how first one type, then another, failed the test of war—and which ones in the end proved to be the dominators.

Now we must point out that tanks were used in several wars before 1939, and that the chief lesson to be drawn from them, was that they could not be relied on to show a quick profit. The Japanese used tanks against the Chinese in the 'thirties, but found only that small numbers of tanks used without an overall plan in a vast country, had very little effect on the profit-and-loss of a campaign that looked like lasting for ever.

In the late 'thirties a Civil War broke out in Spain. Both sides—the Fascists and the Communists—we might call them—used small numbers of tanks, usually to support infantry in frontal attacks and were rather disappointed, because the tanks were mostly small, thin-skinned 'commercials' which were not always able to cross the enemy's defence positions, and were never available in really large numbers.

Then, co-inciding with the outbreak of World War Two came a savage Russian attack upon Finland, and as was the case when the Russians smashed down Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the Red Army didn't waste time handling penny-packets of tanks—they were sent in in hordes. Stalin had only recently re-directed the Red Army's use of tanks. They were to lead and support infantry, but in a new way. Only a small area was to be attacked at one time, and it was to be simply overwhelmed by vast numbers of tanks and men. Actually, the British first demonstrated this