



Ukrainian armed forces conduct military exercises using Russian-made T-64 tanks and aircraft in 2017. (Photo courtesy of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine)

# Through a Glass Clearly

## An Improved Definition of LSCO

Maj. John Dzwonczyk, U.S. Army

Maj. Clayton Merkley, U.S. Army



*Read over and over again the campaigns of Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar, Gustavus, Turenne, Eugene, and Frederic. Make them your models. This is the only way to become a great general, and to master the secrets of the art*

*of war. Your genius, when enlightened by this study, will induce you to reject such maxims as conflict with the principles of those great commanders.*

—Napoleon

When Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, U.S. military analysts began reconsidering the possibility of large-scale conflict between organized military forces, a concern that has only grown since February 2022. To describe this type of warfare, the U.S. Army uses new jargon: large-scale combat operations (LSCO). LSCO is conducted to achieve national strategic objectives or protect national interests, typically within the framework of a major operation or campaign.<sup>1</sup> LSCO is the focus of tactical and strategic thought from the smallest units to the most influential publishing houses in the Army.<sup>2</sup>

LSCO is well-described in the literature, which variously discusses its significance, how to train for it, how to fight it, and how to sustain it. LSCO is “intense, lethal, and brutal”; “war at its conventional zenith”; “war with “weapons ... exponentially more lethal”; and combat “involving multiple corps and divisions.”<sup>3</sup> All of these are well-meaning *descriptions* of LSCO, but they are all in the end merely descriptions and do little to enable understanding and study.

The Battle of Wanat involved less than a company of U.S. soldiers, but it was intense, lethal, and brutal.<sup>4</sup> It is emotionally appealing, but uselessly vague, to define LSCO as war at its conventional zenith. To say that LSCO uses weapons that are exponentially more lethal implies that LSCO uses different weapons than other types of combat operations. As American experience in Iraq with tanks in urban terrain shows (especially after 2003), this is not the case. The tactics and mass of weapons may be greater, but the weapons themselves are often similar. LSCO may be fought by corps and divisions, but that is at best an incomplete picture.

Defining, rather than describing, LSCO matters because LSCO is a subset of war that most currently serving soldiers have not experienced. LSCO is distinct from, for instance, counterinsurgency, but existing definitions do not usefully articulate how it is distinct. Despite this and subsequent critiques, the term has merit because it forces the professional reader to consider a broader range of historical experience rather than be limited by the biases of their lived experiences. Many service members have had multiple deployments, but those experiences may not be relevant to the type of warfighting LSCO implies. Discussing and defining “LSCO” should spur a paradigm shift among professionals, identifying and isolating a subset of war to permit its study.

The Army needs a useful definition of LSCO because without one, we risk learning the wrong lessons from history and being unprepared for the next war. Without a definition, LSCO cannot be professionally analyzed. Without analysis, LSCO cannot be understood. Without understanding, LSCO cannot be won. Therefore, defining LSCO is the first step in winning it.

This article will critique the Army’s definition of LSCO, offer an improved definition that applies to combat in all physical domains, and demonstrate how a proper definition can allow aspiring operational planners and leaders to educate themselves in the spirit of Napoleon’s maxim.

## Doctrinal Definition

In October 2022, the Army published Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*. This update reiterates the need to focus on, study, and prepare for LSCO. The 2022 version of FM 3-0 uses the term “LSCO” over one hundred times, but it relies on an earlier, flawed, definition. The first official mention of LSCO in Army doctrine was in 2017, but it was not defined until 2019 in Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Operations*. ADP 3-0 defines LSCO as “extensive joint combat operations in terms of scope and size of forces committed, conducted as a campaign aimed at achieving operational and strategic objectives.”<sup>5</sup> This definition is subjective, U.S.-centric, historically uninformed, and does not define the entire term it is meant to define.

**Maj. John Dzwonczyk, U.S. Army**, is a PhD student in geography at the University of Colorado-Boulder with a focus on geopolitics. He serves the Army as a strategist and has infantry, Stryker, and joint experience. He holds a BS in economics from the United States Military Academy and an MS in geography from Pennsylvania State University.

**Maj. Clayton Merkley** is an Army strategist currently serving as chief of plans at Joint Task Force-North. He has deployed multiple times to both Iraq and Afghanistan and recently served in the Resolute Support mission Afghanistan CJ35 as a planner while deployed with Fourth Infantry Division headquarters. He holds a BS from the United States Military Academy and an MA from Columbia University.

The first word of the ADP 3-0 definition makes it subjective. Defining LSCO as “extensive ... in terms of scope and size of forces” is superficially useful, notwithstanding the circularity of defining “large” as “extensive.”<sup>6</sup> Something can have an “extensive” scope in many ways though, and which way (or ways) matters. An operation that is extensive could be spatially extensive (Operation Detachment, the invasion of Iwo Jima, required maneuvering some forces from Hawaii, a distance of about four thousand miles). It could be temporally extensive (Operation Enduring Freedom lasted two decades). The objective could be extensive (the overthrow of Saddam Hussein or the unconditional surrender of the Axis powers). The Army’s definition is right to insist that the “size of forces committed” be extensive but is vague about how extensive such forces must be, and how that would be measured: for instance, the United States used 60 percent of its existing divisions for Operation Iraqi Freedom but only 7 percent for Operation Overlord. These are just a few of the possible ways to define “extensive,” so ADP 3-0’s definition is too subjective to be a useful starting point for professional development.

For LSCO to be “joint,” it must be conducted by the forces of one or more military departments.<sup>7</sup> The use of the word “joint” makes the definition U.S.-centric and ahistorical, and its use assumes a governmental structure that does not exist everywhere in the world and has not existed by any name for the majority of history. By excluding much of the modern world and nearly all of world history, the definition implies that there is little useful to learn about large-scale combat from those places and times. No serious student of war would concede either point.

Aside from the sophistry of pointing out differences in bureaucracies, the requirement for LSCO to be “joint” excludes single-service operations, some of which have been quite extensive and are worthy of study. American naval raids on Japanese outposts during World War II sometimes involved as many as six aircraft carriers, and the British Royal Air Force launched three “thousand bomber raids” against German cities.<sup>8</sup> Any operation involving six carriers or a thousand planes simultaneously is certainly “extensive,” but the ADP 3-0 definition excludes these because they are single-service operations.

To its credit, though the definition of LSCO does not define “operations,” it does specify that LSCO must

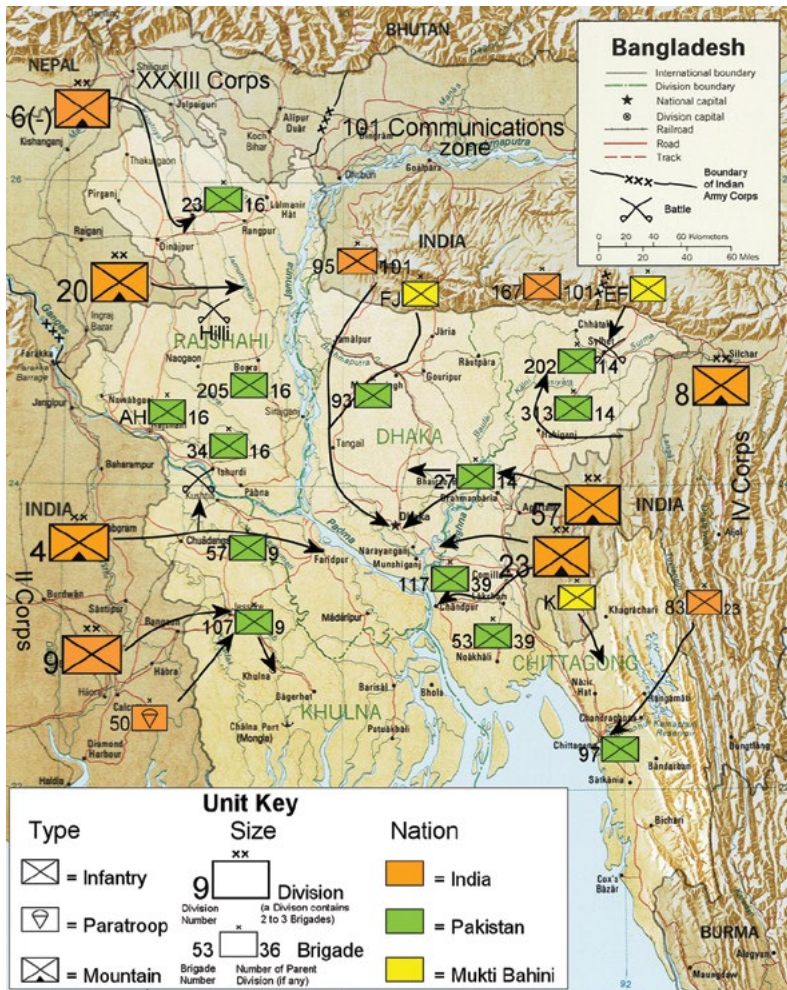
be “combat operations.” What is and is not an operation is beyond the scope of this article, but the addition of the adjective “combat” provides a refreshing clarity in a world in which virtually every focused effort is an “operation.”<sup>9</sup> Further, it implies that LSCO describes the operational level of war, between tactics and strategy. The tactical responsibilities of brigade and below units will be the same in LSCO as they would be in other operations, and strategy will continue to encompass both tactics and operations, large and small. Thus, “World War II” cannot be LSCO: war is far larger than operations, and any war will consist of both small-scale and large-scale combat operations, plus many non-combat ones.

The Army’s definition, correctly in our opinion, requires LSCO be “conducted as a campaign aimed at achieving operational and strategic objectives.”<sup>10</sup> Here, it is useful to return to the maxim at the start of this article. Napoleon lists seven individuals. Three of them are kings (Alexander, Gustavus, and Frederic), who unified politics and military art in their persons, but Napoleon, despite also being a monarch, valued them as “great commanders,” to the exclusion of any other role (monarch, leader, etc.) they held. He reinforced the comparison by pairing them with four generals: Hannibal, Caesar (who was not a monarch at the time of his greatest victories), Turenne, and Eugene of Savoy.

Napoleon did not recommend we study the *tactics or wars* of these commanders. He recommended studying their *campaigns*.<sup>11</sup> That is, their ability to link battles into operations, operations into campaigns, and campaigns into wars. This integration is necessary for operational art—the way commanders and their staffs develop strategies, campaigns, and operations and employ military forces by integrating ends, ways, and means. The great commanders Napoleon references were great because they were great at this progression. Certainly, Napoleon would belong in an updated version of his list, and others would as well. Our definition will offer ways of identifying additional names to include in this list.

## Redefining LSCO

To overcome these shortcomings, we propose an exclusive, historically applicable, and universal definition. For the definition to be exclusive, it must be useful for identifying which operations are LSCO and which are not. The excluded events may still be worthy of study in the right context (for tactical leadership lessons for



An illustration showing military units and troop movements during operations in the eastern sector of the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War in Bangladesh. Non-Western wars and non-Western theaters are a rich source of LSCO lessons. (Illustration by Mike Young via Wikimedia Commons)

instance), but they will not provide any special insight into LSCO. For the definition to be historically applicable, it must fit within the historical experience of warfare and guide operational planners and leaders to case studies that are relevant for professional military education. Finally, for the definition to be universal, it must apply to warfare worldwide, not simply the parts well-known in the West. The West holds no monopoly on operational art or LSCO, and students can gain valuable lessons and insights from “the other.”

With these criteria in mind, we propose the following definition for LSCO: *combat operations involving two or more general or flag officer-level echelons of command on at least one side maneuvering their commands in support of a campaign against an enemy with comparable tactics and force structure.*

This definition is complex but so is operational art. The definition is exclusive because it discounts combat, no matter how intense, that does not involve flag officers maneuvering their forces: the Battle of the Ia Drang Valley is not LSCO but the Battle of the Bulge is. It is historically applicable because it holds for all campaigns no matter the era. The 1631 Breitenfeld campaign and the 1942–43 North African campaign both contain valuable lessons on movement and maneuver, sustainment, and command and control, among others. Finally, it is universal because it allows for the fact that any military can practice LSCO and LSCO need not involve multiple services. The 1971 Indian offensive into East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) is as worthy of study as Operation Chromite, MacArthur’s amphibious assault on Incheon.

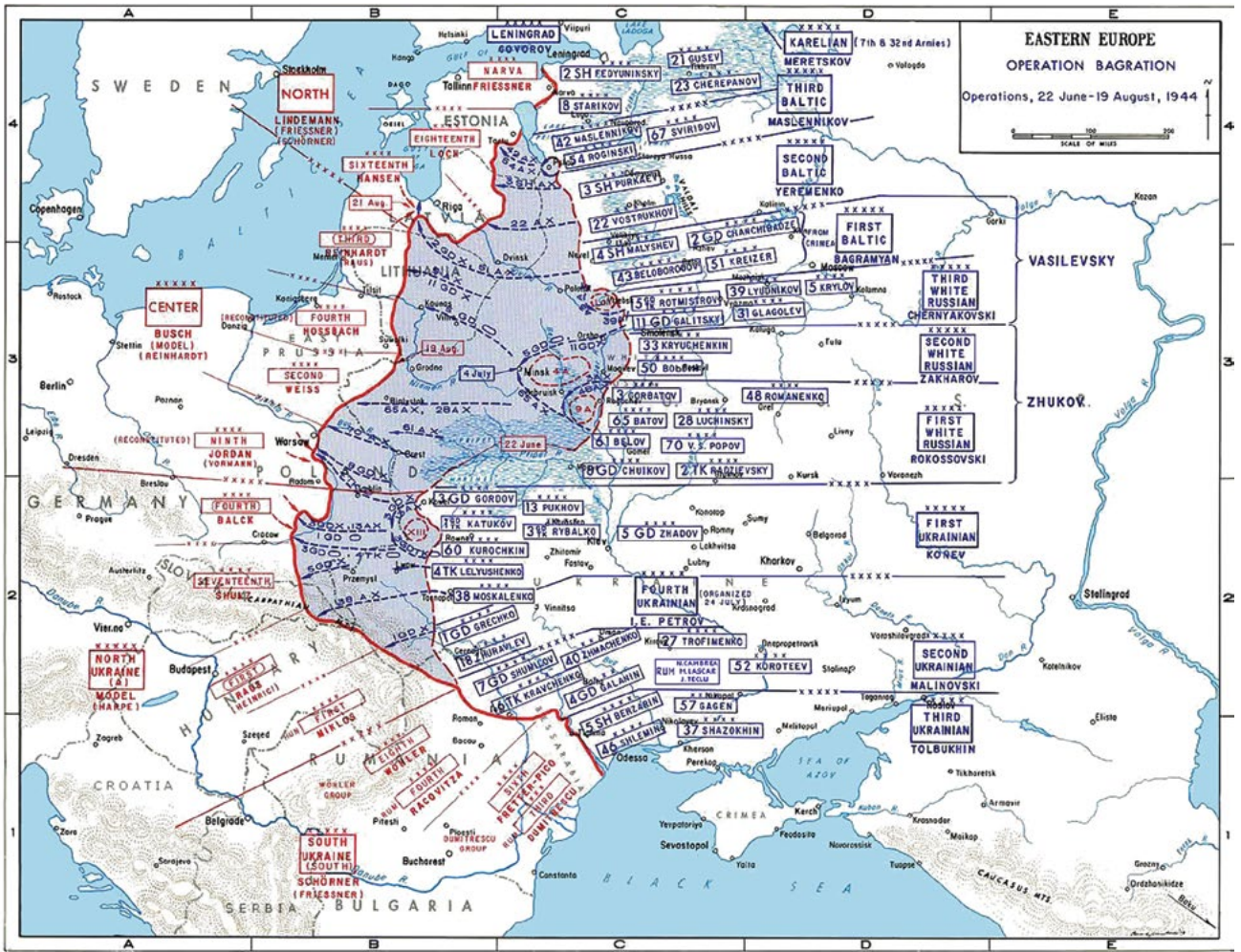
This definition excludes, for instance, the U.S. engagements in Iraq following the completion of the 2003 invasion, in part because of the requirement for flag officers to maneuver their commands. For nearly a decade after the initial invasion, the United States fielded several corps and division-

al-equivalent units in Iraq, but those echelons were hybrid political-military units, not warfighting headquarters. Instead, the war was fought by squads and platoons while units at company and higher levels were nearly always static.

This definition supports part of the Army’s current definition, which holds that LSCO must be in support of a larger design. It also is intentionally indifferent to technology, such as air and space power, as it must be to remain historically applicable.

Finally, the proposed definition requires “general or flag officers” and that the enemy has “comparable tactics and force structure.” These are necessary because when combined, they imply comparable *operational systems*. An operational system describes how a military or individual service maneuvers and fights,





A map of Operation Bagration, June-August 1944, showing the major German and Soviet units. The scope of this two-month battle epitomizes LSCO. (Map courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

took less than a day, and happened on a relatively small battlefield. In terms of personnel, however, more people died in one day at Königgrätz than participated, on both sides, in the 1965 Battle of Ia Drang. In contrast, our definition clearly marks it as LSCO. It involved dozens of general officer commanders who maneuvered their commands and was fought by units of comparable tactics and force structure. That the battle lasted one day is irrelevant. For the officer learning about operational art, the Battle of Königgrätz and the campaign preceding it contain many lessons that can be applied today and in the future.

Too great a focus on size and scale can cause one to miss relevant LSCO lessons. Operation Bagration was a two-month assault by the Soviet Union against the Germans during World War II.<sup>15</sup> Upward of two

million Soviet soldiers and pilots faced just under one million Germans over an area larger than the size of California. Whatever critiques exist of the ADP 3-0 definition, it is difficult to argue that Operation Bagration is not LSCO. Israel's June 1967 preemptive assault on its Arab neighbors, Operation Focus, was small by comparison, but no less worthy of study.<sup>16</sup> In only six days a quarter of a million Israelis—the entire Israel Defense Force—took part in a lightning operation that defeated Arab armies several times its size. Operations took place over an area about the size of West Virginia (to include the entire Sinai Peninsula). Despite the order of magnitude difference between Bagration and Focus in geographic size, forces involved, and time scale, our proposed definition firmly places the Six-Day War in the LSCO category. Relative to

Bagration, the Operation Focus was tiny, but there is much to learn about LSCO from such a fight.

The Tet Offensive provides lessons on LSCO, though primarily from a Vietnamese perspective. In 1968, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong launched a coordinated offensive involving over eighty thousand troops at its start (and eventually involving over three hundred thousand) against dozens of objectives across the length and depth of South Vietnam as part of a campaign to both defeat enemy forces and inspire revolution in South Vietnam.<sup>17</sup> The attacking and defending forces (South Vietnamese, American, and allied) employed comparable tactics and fielded forces of battalion, regiment, and brigade organization, as did the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. Tet was conducted as part of a campaign, albeit one that failed in the short term, and that campaign was in support of strategic objectives. Tet was LSCO, if viewed through a Vietnamese lens. It is worth study despite, or perhaps because, the North Vietnamese/Viet Cong did not achieve their objectives. The training, informational, logistical, and leadership considerations involved in infiltrating tens of thousands of unconventional operatives, unnoticed, into enemy territory and synchronizing their operations with a huge conventional force is arguably one of the most remarkable, if least-considered, feats in the history of operational art.

## LSCO and Training

An improved definition of LSCO will help the U.S. Army and its allies tailor the proper type of training to the proper echelon of command. Current U.S. Army large-scale training exercises divide tactical and operational war fighting, but they do not need to. For tactical training, the U.S. Army maintains the world's premiere combat training centers (CTCs) and programs to include the National Training Center, the Joint Readiness Training Center, and the Joint Multinational Readiness Center. These locations allow units of up to brigade size to train and operate against a live opposing force. This training is invaluable for commanders, staffs, and soldiers, but the training is tactical, not operational, and is underpinned by the unstated assumption that many skilled tactical echelons can scale up to create effective combat operations. The "combat" at CTCs may be high intensity, involving copious amounts of supply and high numbers of simulated casualties, but it is essentially a one-versus-one brigade-level

engagement—that is, not LSCO. The scale and complexity of multibrigade combat is not tested, let alone the multidivision or multicorps sort.

Those echelons—divisions and corps—are generally trained using the Warfighter exercise series. The training audiences for Warfighter exercises are units commanded by general officers/flag officers, usually involving at least one division as the primary training audience and a corps headquarters and other divisions as supporting elements. Some exercises involve the corps and multiple divisions as the training audience. Warfighters are specifically tailored for LSCO and focus on the difficulties of synchronizing all warfighting functions across several general officer-level commands.

In the future, these exercises should not be separated. One way to achieve that goal would be to make CTC rotations divisional or even larger. Conducting such large-scale training rotations, or even a modern, multi-state "Louisiana Maneuvers" would be a useful re-thinking of training rotations at CTCs.<sup>18</sup> There is enormous friction in maneuvering real forces that is not present when maneuvering in a simulation, no matter the sophistication of that simulation. For example, commanders would have to travel significant distances to see their subordinate units. They would be out of communication for hours at a time, forcing their staffs to execute using the principles of mission command. Logistics units would have to protect themselves and/or be protected, reducing available combat power. Despite that attrition, they would have to supply distant and dispersed units, testing the resiliency of logistics force structure. This enhanced understanding of how to train for LSCO could shape the future of division and above training.

## Conclusion

A clear definition of LSCO enables commanders, planners, and staffs to apply rigor to the study of military history to find the lessons that will assist them with the problems of today. The proposed definition in this essay for LSCO is that definition. Adopting this definition is a necessary step to creating a common, useful vocabulary that allows for professional development. Commanders and planners need this to improve their ability to conduct LSCO. It also provides insight and guidance on applying Napoleon's maxim on mastering the secrets of the art of war, and enables new ways of thinking about training for LSCO. ■

## Notes

**Epigraph.** J. Akerly, trans., "Maxim LXXVIII," in *Military Maxims of Napoleon* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1845), 67–70.

1. Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 22 October 2018), V-5.

2. Harrison "Brandon" Morgan, "How Small Units Can Prepare for Large-Scale Combat Operations," *Army Times* (website), 13 February 2020, <https://www.armytimes.com/2020/02/13/how-small-units-can-prepare-for-large-scale-combat-operations/>.

3. Field Manual 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, October 2017), para. 1-4; Kaman Lykins, "LSCO Is a Lost Art ... and It's About Time," *Small Wars Journal*, 13 December 2020, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/lSCO-lost-art-and-its-about-time>; Dennis S. Burket, *Large-Scale Combat Operations: The Division Fight*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Army University Press, 2019), 31.; Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2019). Dennis S. Burket, *Large-Scale Combat Operations: The Division Fight*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Army University Press, 2019), 31.

4. Staff of the U.S. Army Combat Studies Institute, *Wanat: Combat Action in Afghanistan, 2008* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2010).

5. ADP 3-0, *Operations*, 1-5.

6. *Ibid.*

7. JP 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 12 July 2017), GL-8.

8. "WW2 People's War—Timeline," BBC, 2 September 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/timeline/factfiles/nonflash/a1057367.shtml>.

9. Brandy Cruz, "Operation People First: Fort Hood, III Corps Command Team Remains Focused on Future," *Army.mil*, 10 December 2020, [https://www.army.mil/article/241632/operation\\_people\\_first\\_fort\\_hood\\_iii\\_corps\\_command\\_team\\_remains\\_focused\\_on\\_future](https://www.army.mil/article/241632/operation_people_first_fort_hood_iii_corps_command_team_remains_focused_on_future).

10. FM 3-0, *Operations*, para. 1-46.

11. JP 3-0, *Joint Operations*, I-13, sec. 6.c.

12. Todd South, "Army's Maneuver Force Is Retooling for Large-Scale Combat Operations from Top to Bottom," *Defense News*, 19 August 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/news/your-army/2019/10/17/armys-maneuver-force-is-retooling-for-large-scale-combat-operations-from-top-to-bottom/>.

13. James King, "Large-Scale Combat Operations: How the Army Can Get Its Groove Back," *Modern War Institute at West Point*, 19 June 2018, <https://mwi.usma.edu/large-scale-combat-operations-army-can-get-groove-back/>.

14. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Battle of Königgrätz," accessed 28 September 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Koniggratz>.

15. David M. Glantz and Jonathan House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995).

16. "Six Day War," *Israel Defense Forces*, 18 October 2017, <https://www.idf.il/en/mini-sites/wars-and-operations/six-day-war/>.

17. Gregory Daddis, "The Importance of the Vietnam War's Tet Offensive," *War on the Rocks*, 19 January 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/importance-vietnam-wars-tet-offensive>.

18. Jennifer Mcardle, "Simulating War: Three Enduring Lessons from the Louisiana Maneuvers," *War on the Rocks*, 17 March 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/03/simulating-war-three-enduring-lessons-from-the-louisiana-maneuvers/>.