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DIVISION DATE:
06-18-2012

22385



Directorate of
Intelligence

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HR70-14

The Soviet Operational Maneuver Group

An Intelligence Assessment

CIA HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM
RELEASE AS SANITIZED
1999

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The Soviet Operational Maneuver Group

An Intelligence Assessment

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The Soviet Operational Maneuver Group

Summary

*Information available
as of 1 February 1983
was used in this report.*

An operational maneuver group (OMG) is a specifically tailored Warsaw Pact maneuver formation intended for combined-arms operations. We believe the OMG concept to be a potentially significant step in the evolution of Soviet combined-arms doctrine. It should be viewed in the context of other recent improvements in Pact war-fighting capability—including rationalization of command authority, increases in the modernity, size, and flexibility of maneuver units, and measures to improve the responsiveness of artillery and aviation fire support.

We judge that there is a wide gap between Soviet theory of what an OMG is to do and present Pact capability. The appearance of the OMG concept has not been, nor do we expect it to be, the cause of any increase in major units in the Pact order of battle. The lengthy time the Soviets have taken to develop other important operational innovations (such as the use of helicopters, self-propelled artillery, and computers) leads us to judge that the OMG is still in the developmental stage. Although it is likely to become a component of Pact combined-arms doctrine, we doubt it will attain its permanent form for another three to five years.

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February 1983

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The Soviet Operational Maneuver Group

With historical antecedents in the World War II German panzergruppen and Soviet mobile groups, the operational maneuver group (OMG) concept has become, in recent years, a consistent feature in Warsaw Pact military writings and training. It has also become a contentious analytic issue in the West because of widely diverging claims about its relative importance and significance and []

A front OMG would probably be an armor-heavy formation varying in size from corps (two divisions) to army (three or four divisions). It is likely to be augmented by other units, most notably self-propelled artillery battalions and appropriately sized helicopter units, and to be composed of the best equipped and trained units available. Although writings on the OMG to date have focused on its offensive role, in theory it also has an important role in defensive operations.

This assessment is intended to acquaint the reader with the major issues associated with the OMG []

Although OMGs may be formed at a number of command levels, we focus on the front OMG (usually composed of a tank army) because it is both representative and strategically more significant than OMGs created at lower echelons.

Differences Between an OMG and a Tank Army

The Pact tank army is an essentially standard unit used for pursuit and exploitation. Its primary missions are to defeat the defending forces and prevent their reconstitution for subsequent combat. Its origin is usually in the second echelon of the front, and it is to be used only after the first echelon has ruptured the defender's line.

In contrast, the OMG is conceived as a formation of varying size, assigned a wider range of tasks, and designed to operate farther from friendly forces. An OMG would usually be composed of units from the second echelon but may be drawn from the first echelon as well and may assist in the initial penetration of the defender's line.

Theoretically, the OMG does not replace the second echelon or the combined-arms reserve but is a supplemental formation available to the front commander. Limits on the total forces available in specific instances might weaken or prevent the Pact from forming a second echelon or reserve in an area where an OMG was to be used. There are no indications that the Pact is increasing its number of major units to allow creation of OMGs without drawing upon forces that were previously available to constitute other echelons and the reserve. Past practices lead us to expect that once the Soviet General Staff has determined the OMG's final form and utility, it will begin some degree of reorganization to more fully implement the concept.

The novelty of the OMG concept has been questioned, especially by some of the NATO Allies, who have noted that it closely resembles the familiar Pact concept for employment of a tank army by a front second echelon to exploit a breakthrough. There is a strong resemblance. Indeed, the OMG may be the doctrinal heir of the second-echelon tank army's exploitation and pursuit roles. However, we believe that there are several important differences between a second-echelon tank army and an OMG.

Command. The second-echelon tank army in its exploitation and pursuit role is directed by its own regular commander and staff. In most situations, it would be augmented by a staff element (termed an "operations group") provided by a higher command.

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The operations group might or might not have command authority, depending on the situation, and it would be administratively supported by the tank army's headquarters.

We suspect that the operations group provided for an OMG would have command authority and would be given staff and communications support by the front headquarters. This could add another level of command over the existing command structure of whatever group of units is designated an OMG. It also would probably attract greater attention from higher headquarters than would a routine second-echelon tank army. By Western standards, this would have the somewhat contradictory effect of further centralizing control of what is intended to be a highly mobile exploitation force.

Timing of Commitment. According to a large volume of Pact writings, the front's second echelon and its components are physically separate from the first echelon and are scheduled for commitment within about six or seven days of the start of combat. Under certain conditions they could be committed as early as the third or fourth day.

An OMG is located closer to the main battle area than the second echelon and thus may be committed on the third or fourth day—or, if needed, as early as the second day of combat. Being closer, an OMG would be better able to help restore or increase a slackening tempo of combat pressure on a defender. A distinct drawback, on the other hand, is that the forward placement might expose the OMG to interdiction attack and would increase the overall density of Pact forces, making them more vulnerable to nuclear and chemical attack.

Mission. The second echelon and its components are intended for decisive exploitation of a penetration, while an OMG is intended for preliminary exploitation. That is, the second echelon is intended for use when its commitment would assure victory or stave off defeat. An OMG is committed to grasp an opportunity earlier in the battle than the second echelon and to ensure the maintenance of constant pressure or a satisfactory rate of advance by the attacking force.

Objective. The second echelon is intended for the pursuit and destruction of enemy forces. An OMG, according to Pact military theorists, seeks to avoid combat with enemy main force or frontline units and is oriented to military-geographic objectives such as nuclear delivery systems (aircraft, missiles, and so forth) and depots, airfields, river crossing sites, and command posts. It also may be used to interfere with mobilization and the movement of enemy reserves.

Pact military writers expect an OMG's employment to attract NATO's mobile reserves, thereby preventing their unanticipated intervention elsewhere on the battlefield. Another benefit cited for the successful employment of an OMG is complication of NATO's nuclear-release decision by insertion of a relatively large force deep into NATO territory and close to NATO military forces and civilian concentrations. These objectives were previously assigned to the second echelon's tank army in the exploitation phase.

Task Organization. The second echelon is bound to the usual logistics system, and when its component tank armies operate in advance of the bulk of friendly forces, they must keep a secure line of communications open to the rear to retain combat effectiveness. The inability of the World War II tank army to be logistically self-sufficient when it was acting as a mobile group is mentioned by Soviet historians as its most serious deficiency.

Pact military theorists have written that an OMG is intended to be logistically self-contained and thereby able to operate when separated from the main force by as much as 300 kilometers² and even, if necessary, when cut off from it entirely. To our knowledge, the Soviets have not yet determined how much more logistic capacity would be required for an OMG than for a second-echelon tank army.

²Enemy weapons of mass destruction are routinely cited as the priority target set for Pact forces.

³In Soviet doctrinal writings, the immediate objective of a front is approximately 300 km. The OMG would probably tend to operate toward the first-echelon army's subsequent objective, generally 150 to 200 km in depth.

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Combat Organization. Pact doctrinal writings normally divide second-echelon formations into two internal components: forward detachment and main body, while an OMG has three: forward detachment, first echelon, and second echelon.

Why an OMG?

We are uncertain why the Warsaw Pact would adopt a tactic which, while offering the prospect of more rapid victory, also offers the possibility of serious defeat. OMG employment would involve large numbers of vehicles densely packed into relatively narrow axes of advance. We believe that, given adequate NATO mobile reserves and supporting air, an OMG would be vulnerable to ambush and destruction—and that the Soviets would wish to avoid risking the psychological damage of such a defeat.

Further, the commitment of an OMG could offer NATO an exceptional opportunity for a counterattack at the point where the OMG had to transit Pact lines—and thus conceivably could lead to the defeat of the entire front. Similar reasoning has led many Western analysts to doubt that Pact military leaders seriously intend even to use a tank army in the exploitation mission to the degree discussed in Pact military writings.

Nevertheless, the fact that the Soviets are studying and testing the OMG concept suggests they are dissatisfied with some aspects of their present organization for combat. Why they have decided that a tank army is no longer suitable for some missions is unclear and subject to disagreement among Western analysts. We suspect a major reason has been the Soviets' evolving perception of the Central European battlefield, which has led them to seek a maneuver approach able to exploit NATO weaknesses while countering NATO strengths. Pact writings cite NATO's lack of geographic depth and its inadequate reserves as providing an ideal situation for employment of an OMG.

Three factors—the increasing urbanization of West Germany, the introduction of new battlefield technologies, and the continued and increasing threat of NATO airpower—together have contributed to reducing the expected rates of advance to a level below

that deemed critical by Pact commanders. Pact military writers describe the OMG as a means of restoring these rates of advance to a level sufficient to exert constant pressure on NATO combat units, thereby leading to an increased operational tempo.

There is some reason to suspect that the OMG owes its origin not to specific dissatisfaction with the tank army's capabilities but to continued problems with operations of forward detachments. Pact writings have long been concerned with various inadequacies (for example, in sustainability, combat power, fire support) of the forward detachment concept and have experimented with ways to correct them. It is possible, although there is no direct evidence, that the OMG is an outgrowth of attempts to resolve the forward detachment problem and that its connection, if any, with the World War II mobile group is indirect.

Some Western analysts hold that the OMG concept is a facet of a revolutionary change in Warsaw Pact strategy designed to overrun Europe quickly, before NATO's nuclear forces could intervene. The assumption behind this view is that the Pact sees no real chance of winning the air war in Central Europe and therefore must find some way to increase the tempo of the ground attack so as to overrun NATO airfields before NATO can gain decisive air superiority. All Pact forces have as their first priority the destruction of NATO nuclear delivery systems. An OMG operation not only would strike at the full spectrum of NATO's theater and tactical nuclear delivery capability but also would attack airbases, thereby reducing NATO's ability to achieve theater air superiority.

We do not believe there are revolutionary differences between a tank army and an OMG. Both are combat tools whose intrinsic effectiveness depends upon the talent of the user. In our view, the OMG concept is part of an evolution designed to improve combined-arms doctrine, notably by taking better advantage of the capabilities of helicopter and fixed-wing aviation to support the ground forces. All armies face the perpetual need to adjust to both the threats and the opportunities offered by advancing technology. Many

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factors--the advent of the combat helicopter, improvements in command and control technology, threats imposed by antitank guided missiles and rapid-emplacement countermobility mine weapons, and the routine effort to improve doctrine--have all contributed to the OMG concept. ()

We believe that an important cause underlying the OMG's introduction is a desire on the part of the Soviet General Staff to reinvigorate offensive thought and training. The OMG is not yet a predetermined unit within any front, but it is possible that individual officers have been designated for an operations group to command the front OMG in wartime. If this is the case, it increases the probability that additional attention will be given the general problem of the offensive by a group of relatively senior officers. In any case, the attention given to the OMG probably has the effect of promoting interest in and consideration of the problems associated with offensive operations. ()

There are signs that OMG terminology has spread to echelons below the "operational" level. This indicates the general purpose character of the concept and suggests an element of faddishness in the attention given it by the Pact. ()

The OMG concept may also be part of a long-term Soviet doctrinal solution to the increasing obsolescence of its East European allies' military materiel relative to Soviet and NATO materiel. We believe the Soviet leaders have noted the economic difficulties of Eastern Europe and the effect these have already had on military modernization in non-Soviet Warsaw Pact (NSWP) countries. Because the OMG obviously needs modern equipment (such as large numbers of helicopters, self-propelled artillery, and mobile SAMs), the concept may well apply in practice only to Soviet units. ()

This situation could have a profound effect on Warsaw Pact war plans. The technological demands implicit in the OMG concept could be used to justify changes in the Pact organization for combat. Although the Soviets could choose to place Soviet forces on major axes of attack and relegate the NSWP first-echelon forces to lesser axes or to the second echelon, we believe it more likely that NSWP forces would be more completely committed in the first echelon. The

Soviet General Staff probably would rather not have large bodies of NSWP troops to the rear of Soviet forces engaged in an expensive first-echelon battle. Despite their technological lag, NSWP forces should be capable of performing the mission of the first echelon--engaging NATO first-line formations. Some NSWP military officers have long suspected that the Soviets view their forces primarily as cannon fodder, to be used to inflict some damage on NATO forces while absorbing NATO firepower that would otherwise be used on Soviet forces. ()

Capabilities: Theory and Practice

Pact writings recognize there is a considerable gap between what an OMG is intended to do and what it would now be able to do. The emphasis on mobility suggests that, on commitment, a formation designated as an OMG would leave behind its less mobile elements--such as heavy missile units. In practice, the OMG commander would have to choose between his mobility and taking along his relatively hard to move units, such as area surface-to-air (SAM) and surface-to-surface (SSM) missile battalions. If he chose mobility, the absence of his long-range SAMs would leave the OMG with only its complement of short-range air defense, thereby increasing its vulnerability to NATO air attacks. To offset this vulnerability, the Pact would need to acquire new, more mobile, and more capable SAM systems or to establish local air superiority above an OMG with fixed-wing aircraft or helicopters. ()

As the OMG advanced, helicopters would play an important role in the early stages, but units operating in depth behind NATO lines would be increasingly dependent on fixed-wing aviation. Pact writers recognize that supporting an OMG would be difficult in an environment where communications may be frequently jammed or otherwise interrupted. ()

It is not clear where the helicopter units supporting an OMG would be based, once the OMG had penetrated NATO lines. Pact military writings have discussed the possibility of the units' operating from NATO airfields seized by the OMG. Alternatively, they

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might choose to operate from temporary arming and fueling points hastily prepared along the OMG's route of march, although there is no evidence that the Soviets are experimenting with this option.

Both helicopters and fixed-wing tactical aircraft operating from bases behind Pact lines in support of an OMG would require safe transit corridors through NATO airspace, which would have to be established and maintained by the defeat or suppression of NATO air and air defense forces. In addition, the Pact would have to provide air cover over the OMG operating area corridors, to protect supporting aircraft and to protect the OMG from NATO aircraft. The Soviets recognize that it is imperative to maintain communications and close coordination between the OMG and its supporting air units behind NATO lines. If those communications were interrupted, the effectiveness of direct air support to the OMG would be reduced considerably, threatening the security of the OMG force.

Pact military writers recognize that OMG operations will require a hitherto unknown flexibility in the employment of rotary- and fixed-wing aviation and artillery to provide the needed level of fire support. Steps are being taken to better integrate air and artillery fire support, and there are some indications that measures are being introduced that will improve flexibility. However, we have not observed any increases in the authority and number of artillery observers and forward air controllers, which we judge to be indispensable for providing adequate fire support for an OMG.

Another problem is inadequate reconnaissance and intelligence support capability. We judge that in the present Pact force structure, ground reconnaissance units are too few or too small to provide the perimeter surveillance required by a force advancing on a narrow axis in hostile territory. Soviet writings indicate, however, that the Soviets are experimenting with

the organization and composition of reconnaissance units. We are unsure of the significance of these experiments; whatever the fate of the OMG concept, however, we expect change and growth in Soviet reconnaissance capabilities. We believe that the Pact's present intelligence system cannot adequately support an OMG when it is operating beyond the main body.

We know that Pact military theorists are concerned about the difficulty of making the OMG logistically self-contained. To a large extent, this need is antithetical to the requirement for high mobility, because most support units are slow and road bound. Pact military writings indicate that resupply from the air is still experimental. It will probably take some years to solve the logistic problem.

OMG operations would seem to demand changes in the current approach to unit training. Pact unit training in OMG operations to date does not appear to differ substantially from training in the operations of the forward detachment (or advance guard). Presumably the commanders and staffs are receiving relevant training, however, and we expect that, in time, the Pact will begin training for OMG units that is qualitatively different.

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