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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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SOVIETS ADOPT COHORT SYSTEM

Summary

Recent changes in conscription practices represent a major effort to overcome the most significant deficiency of Soviet ground forces-- poorly trained conscripts and small unit commanders. Like the US army, the Soviets are introducing a cohort manning system which, through increased training and strengthened unit cohesion, is intended to significantly improve their combat performance. These changes should help the Soviets to realize the combat potential offered by the buildup of their conventional combat forces over the past decade.

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The system requires combat units to be manned by soldiers who are conscripted and discharged together after serving in the same unit for 18

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months. After formation, units are isolated from the disruptive semi-annual induction of new recruits and progress from individual to complex combined arms tactical training. We estimate that the typical unit can receive about three extra months of field training than in the past.

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Soviet divisions in Eastern Europe all could adopt the cohort system within the next two years if they have not already done so. Although the cohort program offers some important advantages, it will entail higher training expenses. In addition, the Soviets face major obstacles implementing the system because of the increased demands it places on junior officers for initiative and responsibility. Moreover, their junior NCOs--who must lead small cohort squads and platoons--are often poorly trained for leadership positions.

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1. The authors gratefully acknowledge the cooperation and assistance of the office of the US Army Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel. The judgments expressed in the paper, however, are not necessarily those of the US Army.

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The New Program

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[redacted] 25X1
 [redacted] the Soviets began adopting a cohesive manning policy in 25X1
 the early 1980s. It requires small combat units to be manned
 entirely by specialists and conscripts with the same discharge
 date. The unit, whether a tank or rifle company or an artillery
 battalion, then remains intact for at least 18 months.¹ There is
 no evidence, however, that either combat support or service
 support units use the program. [redacted] 25X1

3. The cohesive unit program is now being extensively used
 by both Soviet and East German ground forces units. [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] 25X1
 [redacted] at least 6 of 19 Soviet divisions probably use the 25X1
 new system. [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] units had also adopted 25X1
 the program. [redacted] all six East 25X1

German divisions would implement the program by the fall of
 1983. Possibly East Germany--because of its small ground
 forces--was chosen as the Warsaw Pact's testing ground for the
 cohort concept. There is no indication yet that the system has

¹ Units which have significant numbers of conscript NCOs and
 specialists, who have had six months of training before
 reporting to their unit of assignment, probably would stay
 together 18 months. A few units composed almost entirely
 of two year conscripts without specialist training may be
 able to serve together for 24 months. [redacted] 25X1

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been adopted elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

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both the Soviets and East

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Germans conduct separate training schedules for companies within motorized rifle and tank battalions geared specifically to the experience level of unit members. For example, tank companies composed entirely of newly arrived soldiers in their first six months of service concentrate on individual and elementary company level tactics. Companies with more advanced soldiers--in their final year of service--concentrate on crew and platoon level training and advanced company level tactics. Their training reportedly is also intensive and demanding compared to tank companies with members in their first six months of service. Companies with soldiers in their last six months of service spend 60 percent more time in combined arms field training and almost no time on elementary individual skills.

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5. Forward Area Indicators: As Warsaw Pact units in East Germany have adopted the program, traditional indicators of routine force activity are becoming less valid.

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reported a fifty percent increase in tank and armored vehicle fire range training last year and a similar increase in company and battalion level training exercises.

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[REDACTED] GSFSG is currently acquiring the training materials and facilities to do even better. [REDACTED] additional training--emphasizing live fire training at lower levels--is supported by other evidence including:

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- Advanced regimental field training, including demonstrations for dignitaries and proficiency testing, are now occurring during and after the troop rotation.
- There has been a corresponding decrease in divisional level field exercises. In the past, units generally avoided complex training because of the turmoil associated with troop rotation. The new system, however, frees battalion sized units with experienced troops to conduct advanced training any time during the final service year of its members. [REDACTED]

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6. Changes in troop rotation practices--to include yearly fluctuations in the numbers of new recruits sent to each of the Groups of Forces, and an extension of the rotation period--may also be related to the new manning policies. The exact relationship of troop rotation changes to the new training practices are not yet clear, however. Some divisions may receive few new recruits for several cycles if most of their subunits are composed of second or third term soldiers. However, they would then receive large numbers of recruits when their sub units were reconstituted. [REDACTED]

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7. USSR [redacted] the cohort system, which emphasizes all arms company and battalion level training, is now used to some extent in at least 20 Soviet divisions--both high and low strength--in the USSR. Unusual company and battalion sized equipment sets [redacted] may be training equipment used by divisions adopting the program. There is no evidence that the Soviets have used the cohort system in Afghanistan--suggesting its scope is still limited. [redacted]

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8. The program apparently is confined to the combat arms of the ground forces. There is no indication that either the Soviet navy or air forces are experimenting with the cohort system, although our evidence on training in those services is not as current or complete as in the ground forces. Cohort training would probably not be as necessary in combat air units because most pilots are careerists and such units are highly stable. While naval units might benefit from such a training and manning program, the size of naval crews and the diversity of crew skills could present serious administrative problems in selecting and training cohort units. [redacted]

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Prospects

9. The cohort program will face major obstacles and will involve significant costs. A vigorous field training program

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entails large fuel and ammunition expenditures and heavy wear and tear on equipment. In the past, Soviet equipment usage norms have been austere--and designed to conserve rather than to expend unit equipment and fuel. For example, many tank crews fired only about six full calibre rounds each cycle. The Soviets will have to dramatically adjust their frugal peacetime equipment, ammunition, and fuel useage norms to derive any real benefits from added field training time. In turn, this will require added costs for supplies, skilled maintenance specialists, and additional repair installations to support the new training program. GSFG is scheduled to receive more training materials and will build additional training facilities suggests the Soviets are willing to spend more on their training establishment, at least in Eastern Europe.

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10. Like the US, the Soviets may still be experimenting with the proper way to manage their system. They have traditionally made the regiment their basic administrative unit but fragmentary evidence suggests that the cohort system is now administered at the battalion level. Each battalion apparently has at least two of its three companies in the same cohort cycle.

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11. Eventually regiments may become the focus of the cohort system perhaps with two of three battalions in each regiment on the same cycle. This would more closely correspond to Soviet

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emphasis on combined arms operations at battalion and regimental level. At the same time, the third battalion would provide the regiment with a residual combat capability when the two battalions on the same cycle were being reconstituted.

Furthermore, the Soviets could give some units six months of training in the Soviet Union prior to deployment to Eastern Europe. This would reduce the decline in readiness due to the loss of units about to be disbanded. We have no evidence, however, that the Soviets have considered this option.

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12. The Soviets face a far more complex problem in countering old habits and attitudes antithetical to any new manning or training policies. Despite talk of fostering command initiative at regiment and below, Soviet readiness testing favors stereotyped solutions to tactical problems. The Soviets have developed elaborate "objective" norms for evaluating all aspects of individual and unit proficiency.² Tactical innovation and initiative, however, assume creative deviation from the "school solution." It is difficult to see how the rigidly normative Soviet approach to evaluating military competence can create the psychological conditions or proper incentives to foster initiative at battalion and below. Nor is it clear that senior Soviet officers--by Western standards used to detailed top-down

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control of battle formations--would abdicate their command prerogatives or the strategic flexibility provided them by the standardization and interchangeability of small units. Thus the Soviets face a dilemma in striking a balance between providing lower ranking commanders with the skills to conduct all-arms, low-level tactics and freeing them to fully exploit those skills in tactical situations.

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13. The cohort system is also likely to expose weaknesses in the Soviet non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps. Already short of older professional NCOs, the Soviets rely heavily on junior NCOs who only are promising conscripts sent to specialty and leadership schools. They are approximately the same age as the conscripts they lead when they assume their duties and often have received only six months of intensive specialty training. Evidence from the US cohort experience indicates that the cohort peer group has high expectations of its immediate leaders in return for the loyalty it is prepared to offer. The junior Soviet NCO may not have either the stature or the expertise to be a role model and the Soviets may find that they will require NCOs with additional military experience and seasoning to lead cohort squads and platoons. In turn, this will increase pressure to recruit professional NCOs--already in short supply--or to change laws governing junior NCO terms of service and training. Alternatively, the Soviets could increase the already extensive use of junior officers and warrant officers for jobs done in western armies by NCOs.

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14. Given the size of the Soviet ground forces--and their heavy dependence on reservists--it will be years before the new training practices can work their desired effects. Not only do new training manuals, techniques, and instructions need to be widely promulgated in the active ground forces, but reservists--who will compose 10 percent to 100 percent of Soviet divisions after mobilization--need to acquire skills compatible with those of active personnel along side of whom they will fight. This can only be done, given the hundreds of thousands of reservists needing training and the poor quality of reserve³ training, by the gradual release to the reserves of conscripts who have gone through the new training programs. For critical skills, such as tank gunners, it will be more than a decade before enough reservists trained in the all-arms battalion level field tactics stressed in the new approach become available. A similar lag will occur until enough reserve officers--who would command companies and battalions--are available.

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15. We have no evidence on how the Soviets may plan to handle the effect on overall unit readiness when subunits are disbanded. Extension of the service terms of unit members in periods of crisis is an obvious option. Likewise, the Soviets will probably stagger the maturity levels of subunits--perhaps

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having the majority but not all companies in a battalion or the majority of battalions in a regiment on the same cycle. The minority of units on the "off cycles" would then provide high residual combat capabilities when other units were disbanded. Less demanding tactical missions could also be assigned to less experienced units in an effort to match mission to maturing capabilities.

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Why Change?

16. Problems. Since the late 1970s, Soviet authorities had become critical of the traditional training program because the repetitive six month training cycle was seen as inferior to a progressive, phased, multi-cycle schedule. They believed that traditional training programs encouraged overly rigid adherence to "school" solutions. Soviet authors emphasized that modern combat requires high levels of initiative and decisiveness, particularly by battalion commanders on the scene. These authorities argued that because the demands on such officers to make "spot" decisions has increased by a factor of two or three field training methods which realistically simulate battalion-level tactical situations for junior commanders were needed.

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17. Soviet writings also have faulted weapons operators for low skill levels due in part to overly simplistic field training which did not challenge them to respond quickly as needed in battle. Poor coordination between arms--particularly between

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artillery and supported infantry and armor troops--has been cited as a problem requiring additional all-arms field training.

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18. Broad organizational changes and the fielding of advanced weaponry in recent years brought with them renewed emphasis for "hands on" small unit tactical field training. Most Soviet ready divisions--including virtually all in Eastern Europe--have adopted changes combining armor, artillery, and infantry in balanced, all-arms maneuver regiments. Advanced weapons now widely fielded include self-propelled artillery, a new generation of battle tanks, and new mobile air defense systems which must be integrated into battalion and regimental level operations.

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19. Finally, past practices required the discharge of about one-quarter of a unit's personnel each six months, and their replacement by untrained recruits thereby drastically reducing unit readiness. Such turmoil merely amplified the affects of inadequate field training time needed to master new tactics and equipment. units did not recover from the effects of the semi-annual troop rotation for about three months and that most units did not conduct advanced field training during the four-to-six weeks required to train and absorb their new conscripts. Moreover, valuable field training time was lost, as whole units stood down to absorb conscripts received in the rotation.

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Solutions

20. Cohort manning reduces the turmoil associated with the semi-annual rotation because there is no longer a personnel turnover each six months. Since the cohort units receive no new recruits after their formation, the unit can follow an uninterrupted, progressive training schedule. We estimate that the typical small unit could spend three to four additional months in the field or in training with simulators simply by avoiding rotation standdowns. Furthermore, in Eastern Europe, better use can be made of large training areas, since some units will always be capable of conducting regimental exercises, even during the rotation period.

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21. The new program should allow units to master additional as well as more complex tactical maneuvers. More field training time is available, but more importantly unit skill levels are not depleted at every rotation by the discharge of experienced troops. Unit cohesion should also be improved by the prolonged service together of unit members. It is not clear, however, if it will provide sufficient time--up to four extra months--to meet vastly increased demands on lower level units

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22. If the Soviets take advantage of the training benefits provided by cohort manning, field commanders, particularly at battalion, should benefit by having more time to actually plan,

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control, and coordinate combined arms tactics in field settings. Furthermore, they will command more accomplished crews in the final cycle of a unit's training. Such field training--with the hands-on experience gained in the planning and direction of logistics operations, fire allocation, tactical movement, and terrain use--should be far more valuable to junior officers than the staff exercises now conducted during rotational standdowns.

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23. Despite problems with the implementation and administration of the cohort system and the inevitable resistance generated by new ways, the Soviet ground forces are adopting a training program which offers an opportunity to develop soldiers and commanders capable of better exploiting recent organizational, doctrinal, and weapon changes. Nonetheless, even assuming competent instruction, the 18 months most units will remain together--the function of the draft term--is probably inadequate to develop units with a large number of tactical options or junior officers experienced in all-arms command. However, the Soviets will probably provide their better units with a small number of standard tactical options and can expect that their best trained and led units will have competently mastered these and be capable of choosing the best solution for a given tactical situation.

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