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28 April 1964

**MEMORANDUM FOR:** Dr. Victor Heyman  
Office of the Assistant Secretary of  
Defense (Comptroller)

**SUBJECT:** Validity of Estimates on Soviet  
Tactical Aircraft Strengths

1. In a recent conversation with representatives of this office and of CIA/ORR, you requested our written comments on the reasons for revisions in National Intelligence Estimates of the strength of Soviet Tactical Aviation in recent years, as well as the reasons underlying current estimates of future trends in Tactical Aviation. As we were all aware at the time of our conversation, recent estimates have contained upward revisions in estimated Soviet tactical air strength at present and over the past several years.\* The most recent estimate for the future predicts a decline in total strength, but this decline is more gradual than that predicted or implied in earlier estimates. A modernization of the force through the introduction of current and advanced model aircraft and the retirement of older model aircraft is predicted.

2. The national estimates of 1960 and 1961 were heavily influenced [redacted] that the USSR had embarked on a major military reorganization and force reduction, which was to include sharp cuts in theater force manpower and obsolescent equipment. While it still seems clear that the Soviets intended to carry out substantial reductions, we have found in retrospect that the cuts in Tactical Aviation were

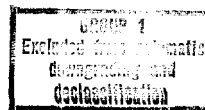
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See the detailed review of pertinent estimates since 1959, provided to you by CIA/ORR in March 1964.

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**SECRET**

not as precipitous or extensive as the contributors to national estimates believed to be the case when the estimates were prepared. Further, it later became evident that, for political and military reasons, the USSR suspended its planned force reductions rather than carrying them to completion.

3. The national estimate made in 1962 recognized that the total number of tactical aircraft had been generally stable since the suspension of force reductions. This estimate, however, predicted a considerable further decline in the following two years, in part because it was believed that older model fighters would have been in service so long that many would be retired, and in part because production evidence indicated that new models were unlikely to enter inventory in compensating numbers.

4. In the national estimate of early 1964, the estimated current strength of Tactical Aviation was considerably larger than we had predicted. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] the continued retention of older model aircraft in considerable numbers at tactical air bases. Although the status of such aircraft is not fully understood, we must assume for the present that they are active and not mothballed. In addition, the rate of production and delivery of newer model aircraft was evidently stepped up somewhat in 1963.

5. The estimate of early 1964 is the most recent national estimate dealing specifically with Soviet Tactical Aviation, and as you know, it supersedes the earlier estimates. This estimate predicts a gradual decline in the size of this component over the next five years or so. We continue to believe that older model aircraft will be phased out because of age, and present evidence does not suggest that the production of newer model aircraft will be stepped up to rates comparable to those of the 1950's. Newer model tactical aircraft are generally larger and more complicated than their predecessors, and thus their costs and manning requirements are greater. For ground support missions, the improved performance and armament of certain of the newer models make them individually more effective. Finally, in making a future projection, the national

- 3 -

**SECRET**

~~SECRET~~

estimate takes account of the availability of ground-launched missiles to support Soviet ground forces, including an expected increase in surface-to-air missile defenses assigned to these forces.

6. As you no doubt appreciate, there is much uncertainty in any estimate of the future size and composition of Tactical Aviation, especially in light of the changes in the Soviet program. Factors which might influence the USSR to maintain a larger force of tactical aircraft than we have estimated include: a Soviet decision to make serious preparations for the contingency of non-nuclear limited warfare with the West; significant improvements in NATO forces in Europe; greater Soviet concern over the hostility of Communist China; low Soviet confidence in the ability of their surface-to-air missile systems to provide adequate defense for their ground forces. On the other hand, the Soviets might again consider a very sharp cut in tactical air strength if economic factors and reduced international tensions cause them to return to major force reductions along the lines they instituted in 1960. In general, the most recent national intelligence estimates hold that none of these various factors is likely to be decisive. Thus they conclude that changes in Soviet military forces are likely to be gradual rather than drastic.

151

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