

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE C-12WASHINGTON POST
21 November 1984

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GIs Might Face Soviets in Nicaragua

If U.S. forces invade Nicaragua, they might find themselves fighting Soviet combat troops. This disturbing possibility is raised in a recent "codeword" CIA report—classified higher than top secret. The report, which was reviewed by my associate Dale Van Atta, reveals that a Soviet combat brigade has been practicing near San Pedro in Cuba for an airborne assault of Nicaragua.

This is the same Soviet 3,000-man brigade that made headlines in 1979 when U.S. intelligence discovered it.

When asked about the report, an administration official said intelligence analysts believe that one explanation for the training exercise in recent weeks is that the Soviets plan to use the brigade against American invaders or U.S.-backed "contras." The Soviet brigade could be flown to Nicaragua in less than two hours.

The CIA is convinced that President Reagan's invasion of Grenada radically changed the KGB's assessment of U.S. intentions. The Soviets learned from Grenada that Reagan wasn't kidding when he threatened to stop the spread of Marxism in Central America and the Caribbean.

But far from backing down as they did in the 1962 missile crisis, the Soviets have been responding to every escalation in the Reagan administration's rhetoric and action with escalations of their own. They clearly don't intend to leave Nicaragua's defense to a handful of paramilitary construction workers as they did in Grenada.

In the wake of the Grenada invasion, the Soviets advised Cuban President Fidel Castro to withdraw from Nicaragua any Cuban "advisers" who were not combat-trained. Some 2,000 Cuban civilians, including teachers, left Nicaragua at the start of the Christmas school vacation. Only 1,000 returned—but they were younger, tougher and better trained militarily.

U.S. intelligence reports estimate that there are now 5,000 Cuban advisers in Nicaragua, 2,000 of them military or security personnel. The Nicaraguan army, which the Sandinistas say numbers only 30,000, actually has "a solid 100,000 troops" who can be called up within 12 hours, according to a recent top-secret CIA report. This is by far the largest military force in Central America.

The reason the administration was so concerned over intelligence reports that Soviet MiG21s were being delivered to Nicaragua is that these sophisticated planes would make the Nicaraguan air force overnight the most powerful in the region.

The MiG21s could dominate the air over Honduras and El Salvador, and pose a serious threat to the Panama Canal.

That's why the administration has been warning the Soviet Union and Nicaragua since 1981 not to introduce MiG21s into Central America—warnings the Soviets have respected so far.

Nicaragua already has pilots qualified to fly MiG21s. Eighty received training in Bulgaria four years ago, and 30 stopped off in Cuba on their way home to maintain their proficiency in Castro's Soviet-made planes.