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Readiness of Soviet Forces in Central Europe: Implications for a Rapid Transition to War

An Intelligence Assessment

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SOV 87-10053D
November 1987

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SOV 87-10053D
November 1987

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**Readiness of Soviet Forces in
Central Europe: Implications
for a Rapid Transition to War**

Scope Note

This paper focuses on the peacetime readiness posture of Soviet air and ground forces in East Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia—that is, those Warsaw Pact forces opposite NATO considered to be the most ready. East European forces and Soviet forces in the western USSR are also considered by the Soviets to be essential to the success of a large-scale offensive against NATO.

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Readiness of Soviet Forces in Central Europe: Implications for a Rapid Transition to War

Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 31 July 1987
was used in this report.*

Since the mid-1960s, and especially in the last decade, the Soviets have made significant improvements to their forces in Central Europe. These improvements are designed to raise the peacetime readiness posture and combat power of the forces and to make them more suitable for protracted nonnuclear war. Progress has been most pronounced in weapons modernization, logistics, and command and control:

- The Soviets have established and exercised the command structure necessary to direct the full preparation of all theater forces in the Western Theater of Military Operations. This theater-level headquarters—which would, in time of emergency, assume command of all forces, Soviet and non-Soviet, in the theater—would relieve the Soviet General Staff of much of the burden of managing the mobilization and deployment of these forces.
- The combat power of Soviet theater air and ground forces has improved markedly through the introduction of larger numbers of more modern weapons. In East Germany the typical Soviet maneuver division has roughly 25 percent more combat power than in 1975, and Soviet tactical air regiments there are currently being reequipped with the newest generation aircraft.
- Since the mid-1970s the Soviets have augmented their logistic stockpiles in East Germany to a level that, by Soviet standards, is sufficient to support combat operations of a force twice as large as that now in place for 60 to 90 days. These levels are such that the Soviets would probably not need to burden their lines of communications with large quantities of bulky supplies before hostilities began.

In part, these improvements in preparedness were made because the Soviets had come to believe that a war with NATO was likely to be fought initially with only nonnuclear weapons and that conventional conflict might be protracted. During the early 1960s, the Soviets had expected war to either begin with large-scale nuclear exchanges or to escalate quickly from conventional to nuclear conflict. Thus, the forces of that period were configured mainly to fight a nuclear war. But with the development of a NATO doctrine stressing "flexible response" and the advent of NATO conventional force modernization during the early and mid-1970s, the Soviets began to view a war with the West as increasingly likely to involve a protracted conventional conflict. Their military writings indicated that

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they saw the changes in NATO strategy and force improvements as threatening the USSR's security position in Central Europe, because their forces in the region were not sufficiently prepared to take part in sustained conventional operations—a condition they undertook to correct.

One consequence of the changes they have made to their forces in Central Europe, however, has been a sizable increase in the manpower that must be mobilized to bring these forces to full strength. We estimate that Soviet air and ground forces in Central Europe total slightly more than 500,000 men. This is about 25 percent less than intended wartime strength. While the number of personnel assigned to these forces has remained roughly constant during the last 10 years, the number of wartime personnel slots has grown substantially with the enlargement of the structure of divisions and the addition of more support units. As a result, the gap between the force's intended wartime strength and its peacetime assigned manpower has widened significantly over the past decade.

Although Soviet aircrews, tank battalions, and surface-to-air and surface-to-surface missile units are close to their wartime manning levels, and are fully equipped, most of the other units, which are also fully equipped, have sizable personnel shortages ranging from 15 to 85 percent of their intended wartime manpower. For example, motorized rifle and tank divisions today are manned at 80 to 85 percent of intended wartime levels, compared with about 90 percent in the 1970s. Peacetime manning levels in support units such as front-level hospital bases, ammunition depots, and heavy engineer construction brigades are considerably lower—typically ranging from about 15 to 30 percent of intended wartime strengths.

By distributing their peacetime manpower in Central Europe as they have, the Soviets are able to maintain the structure for a larger wartime force in a status that permits the force to be fleshed out with reservists in less time than would be needed to transport whole new military units from the USSR. The Soviets' decision to maintain theater forces in peacetime substantially below full wartime readiness levels is consistent with their appreciation of NATO's modest level of peacetime military preparedness and their expectation that an extended period of rising political tension would precede hostilities with NATO, providing the Pact with enough time to mobilize and integrate reservists and deploy forces in the region.

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To fully prepare Soviet forces in Central Europe for combat operations at full wartime strength, we estimate the Soviets would need to augment them with some 170,000 reservists, most of whom would be called up inside the USSR and transported to Central Europe. This process would take from one to two weeks, depending primarily on the extent to which it received priority for use of airlift. Furthermore, to achieve an acceptable degree of coherent military organization and effectiveness, the Soviets would need at least an additional week or so to integrate the reservists into the force and conduct some training. Given these considerations and assuming the relatively smooth functioning of the mobilization process, we estimate that the Soviets would need at least two to three weeks to prepare fully their forces in Central Europe for sustained offensive operations at planned wartime strength. []

The Soviets would attempt to conceal preparations for a general war in Europe in order to achieve some degree of surprise. We think, however, that, unless they feared an imminent attack or believed that further delay would permit NATO to achieve a potentially decisive strategic advantage in mobilization, they would be unwilling to accept the risks of committing to combat unprepared, understrength forces lacking sufficient size and logistic infrastructure to sustain large-scale offensive operations. Consequently, we judge that they would be unlikely to go to war without completing most, if not all of these steps required to flesh out and prepare their forces.

We cannot rule out the possibility that during a crisis the Soviets might choose to launch a preemptive attack on NATO without taking time to prepare fully their forces in Central Europe. They might, for example, mistakenly conclude that precautionary military steps taken by NATO during a period of political tension were precursors to a short-warning attack against the Warsaw Pact. We believe, however, that the Soviets do not have plans for preemptive conventional attacks with little or no time given to prepare their forces. Rather, we expect the Pact, when faced with such an extreme emergency, to take hasty defensive actions to halt a NATO attack, then go over to an offensive.

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Soviet theater forces now in place in the region give the Warsaw Pact the ability to meet a sudden attack with formidable military power. We judge that, without prior warning, the Soviets could alert these forces, arm and supply them with essential materials, and organize and deploy them for combat in a hastily constituted but effective defensive posture in about one or two days.

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