Comments on and Contextualisation of Polish Documents related to SOYUZ 75 and SHCHIT 88

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Contextualisation

From the early 1950s to the mid-1980s the military doctrine of the Soviet Union and her allies was guided by an axiomatic belief in the virtues of strong offensive capabilities: capitalism, by definition, was held to be aggressive and the West Germans to be revanchist. Therefore, in order to successfully defend socialism, Warsaw Pact troops had not only to obtain and maintain the capability to stop an attack from the West, but also to do this quickly and to move the war onto NATO territory. In the perception of the Soviet leadership this war in Europe was to be the decisive battle between the two antagonistic societal systems on a global scale and it was expected to become a nuclear war at some stage. Waging this war on and deep in the enemy's territory was therefore of crucial importance: it would not only aim at destroying the bases of the enemy's military strength, it would also divert a significant share of the destruction away from one's own territory, it would lead to a sustained weakening of the industrial-military capabilities of the adversary, and result in the disorganization of Western states and their societal systems.

Within this war scenario, the People's Republic of Poland held a key geo-strategic position: All traffic routes—on rail, road or water—necessary to redeploy and concentrate the WP's massive strategic reserves to the battlefield in Central Europe, ran through Poland. It is therefore not surprising that already in the early 1950s the Soviets helped communist rulers in Warsaw build up a well trained, well equipped and disciplined army. For this reason, even before the formal establishment of the Warsaw Treaty Organization, Polish troops played an important and integral part in Soviet operational planning and the Polish army was to form its own "Front" (consisting of several armies).[1] From the very beginning, the soldiers of the Polish Peoples Army were meant to attack Northern Germany and then move on to Jutland (the continental part of Denmark) and from 1955 onwards the Polish "Coastal Front" was also meant to move through Northern Germany towards the Dutch border. Its main line of attack was planned to run just north and in parallel to the 2nd Guards Tank Army of the Soviets (later

[1] Andrzej Paczkowski, Die Polnische Volksarmee im Warschauer Pakt, in: Torsten Diedrich, Winfried Heinemann, Christian Ostermann (eds), Der Warschauer Pakt – Von der Gründung bis zum Zusammenbruch 1955 bis 1991, Berlin, pp. 119-132 (p. 123f).

the 5th Army made up from East German troops), thereby constituting a kind of double spearheaded scheme of attack at perhaps the most important scene of a future war between the blocs.[2] At least one high-ranking East German general, Hans-Werner Deim, later claimed that Soviet planners took care to pose Polish soldiers against West German and not against British or American units, while East German troops were not meant to confront Bundeswehr units.[3] This general idea of how a prospective third world war would unfold on the North German plains and along the Baltic shore line was regularly adopted to latest developments both on the NATO and the Warsaw Pact side throughout the 1960s, 1970s and the early 1980s. This necessity to adopt the grand-scheme to new realities – be it new military technologies, troop deployments, infrastructure etc. – was mirrored in training and operational planning. Command staff exercises offered regular opportunities to both examine the effectiveness of current plans and troops and to introduce and test innovations within this larger framing. There existed three kinds of regular command staff exercises of the United Forces: SOYUZ was an "operational-strategic exercise", DRUZBA a tactical exercise, and VAL a navy exercise. Therefore adaptation and refinement rather than the drawing up of completely new plans continued to characterise Warsaw Pact thinking until the mid 1980s.

It is at this point that the Polish documents on SHCHIT 88 come into play. This material describes a rather different scenario for the summer of 1988: The communist societies of the Warsaw Pact member states are experiencing internal unrest, pressure for reform and economic chaos. "Blue" troops intend to take advantage of this – and while their politicians and military leaders are desperately trying to prevent war, the armed forces of the Warsaw Pact have to prepare for a drawn-out defensive battle under increasingly difficult domestic circumstances. This constitutes not only a rather different scenario – but a decisive break away from the established doctrine as described above. Applying the classical historiographical instrument of a terminus post-terminus ante analysis, we have to ask what happened in between 1975 and 1988 that made this change come about – and when did it take place.

[2] For a historiographical reconstruction of the development of this opertional planning and the role of the Polish army within it, see Zbigniew Moszumanski, Die Polnische Kuestenfront auf dem Westlichen Kriegsschauplatz, in: Rüdiger Wenzke (ed.), Die Streitkräfte der DDR und Polens in der Operationsplanung des Warschauer Paktes, Potsdam 2010 (forthcoming).

[3] Hans-Werner Deim, Die NVA in der Ersten Strategischen Staffel der Vereinten Streitkräfte des Warschauer Vertrages, in: Manfred Backerra (ed.), NVA – Ein Rückblick in die Zukunft, Cologne 1992, pp. 311-331 (p. 328), cited in Rüdiger Wenzke, Die NVA und die Polnische Armee als Koalitionsstreitkräfte auf dem europäischen Kriegsschauplatz in den 1980er Jahren – Operative Planungen, Konzepte und Entwicklungen, in: the same, Die Streitkräfte, (forthcoming).

SOYUZ 75

It seems apt to judge the Polish documents presented here on SOYUZ 75 as convincing and interesting precisely because they fit nicely into the chronology of Warsaw Pact exercises and our (still somewhat patchy) knowledge of its operational ideas and planning. What makes me believe this? The Military History Research Institute of the German Army, for which I work, is currently putting together an edited volume on East German and Polish operational planning within the Warsaw Pact – and within this forthcoming publication our Polish colleague Zbigniew Moszumanski discusses two Polish plans from 1965 and 1969 and a directive of the Polish general staff from the summer of 1986 concerning the offensive operations of their "Coastal Front" in Northern Germany and Jutland.[4] Moszumanski provides a highly interesting, coloured map of the offensive operations and lines of attack of the Polish "Coastal Front" through Northern Germany towards the Netherlands, also showing the role and direction of neighboring Soviet and East German forces. I used this map – or rather the main thrust of attack of the Polish forces in it – to reconstruct the course of the advancing Polish troops as mentioned in the Polish material on SOYUZ 75. I did this because a great number of the town and village and other geographical names in the English translation provided seemed either incorrect or so incomprehensible that I found myself unable to come up with the correct – or likely correct – term. Using "Google map," magnifying the scale, and then moving the curser along the line of advance as pointed out in the 1969 map brought me to all the places in question. The plan – of either 1965, 1969 or 1975 – immediately sprang to life and the reasons why the Polish planners concentrated on specific avenues westward (like numerous rivers, normally running in a northerly direction in this region, swamps, large city centres et al.) were more than apparent. "Mönsen" became Möhnsen, "Wentschau" Ventschow[5], "Fasdorf" is Vastorf. The names otherwise impossible or at least much harder to decipher are predominantly in the vicinity of Oldenburg: "Ewer" is actually Jever, "Witmunt" Wittmund, "Barnstors" Barnstorf, "Haslingen" Häuslingen, "Kirhatten" Kirchhatten. Another area whose town names are rather warped is located around Lüneburg: "Wesenlech" is Wesseloh, "Südergelersen" Südergellersen, "Felgen" Velgen. Other town names involve "Redensburg"= Rendsburg, "Hintel"= Fintel, "Wintermor"= Wintermoor, "Suderberg"= Suderburg, "Unterflüs"= Unterlüss, "Gorlesen"= Gorlosen, "Dannenburg"= Dannenberg, "Berenburgl"= Bernburg, "Lichof"= Lüchow, "Harmotorf"= Haarmstorf and many more. If

[4] see fn 2. All three plans were found in the same archives as the material on SOYUZ 75 and SHCHIT 88 – the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) in Warsaw, which now holds the archival documents on Polish military security services of the communist era.

[5] See also the „Standort-Datenbank NVA" (a comprehensive list of all deployment locations of the East German Army) on the webpage of the Military History Research Institute (www.mgfa.de).

this garbling came out of translating the original into English, or if it is already to be found in the original (which I suspect) is a matter for the CWIHP editors. [Dr. Bange's diligence in this regard is most appreciated. The errors, which were transliterated correctly in the original, and many of which were identified in advance by the translator, have since been repaired. –The editors.]

My little (though somewhat time consuming) Google-exercise has shown at least that this Polish material on the SOYUZ 75 exercise contained – in contemporary perspective - neither new nor unique operational ideas. It rather continued and further developed, adopted and refined the Polish part in the Warsaw Pact's larger scheme of crushing through NATO's defenses in Northern Germany onto the Netherlands and perhaps across the Rhine.

Compared to the "plan" of 1969, described by Moszumanski, a number of new details or changes in the course of events appear in this summary of SOYUZ 75: it seems that for the first time in the sequence of SOYUZ exercises great attention is paid to radio-electronic warfare and that for the first time a SOYUZ exercise is conducted with the help of computers (highly praised in the document). What is particularly shocking about it is the extensive use of nuclear weaponry envisaged on both sides. Because NATO detonates its "nuclear land mines" (ADMs, Atomic Demolition Munition in NATO terminology), the second echelon of Warsaw Pact divisions is held up on its way to the battlefield – and Western forces are even able to conduct a counter-attack after five days in the midst of the Eastern offensive. The further advance of the Polish Front is prepared through a massive nuclear attack – paving its way through the 1st Army Corps of the West German army (as, indeed, Deim did insinuate). The date of this true horror-scenario might come as a surprise. After all, March 1975 preceded only by a few months the grand Helsinki summit of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, often described as the climax of East-West détente. In 1973, Brezhnev had declared the ideology of the Cold War to be obsolete, and Kissinger stressed in 1975 that the East-West conflict was then pursued by "modern methods," which stood – he claimed – in marked contrast to those of the Cold War.[6] This, however, did not mean that the ideological and societal antagonism had ceased to exist, but rather that the political leadership on both sides had realized that nuclear war in Europe would destroy what one was fighting for – and that therefore the security situation had to be stabilised and controlled in order to pursue the systemic antagonism in different fields. SOYUZ 75 with its impressive nuclear scenario

[6] Cited in the introduction in Oliver Bange and Gottfried Niedhart (eds), Helsinki 1975 and the Transformation of Europe, New York/Oxford 2008, p. 7.

proved both: the preparedness of Warsaw Pact armies and military leadership to conduct war even if it turned nuclear – and the disaster that would follow.

SOYUZ 81 and SOYUZ 83

The following analysis of the SOYUZ-sequels is based on material collected in the East German archives. SOYUZ 81 took place from March 17 until April 7, 1981, on Polish, East German, Soviet and Czechoslovak territory – and it served a dual purpose. The detailed report on SOYUZ 81 delivered by Generaloberst Streletz to the National Defense Council in East Berlin (the GDR's decision-making body in security matters) once again gave the impression of adaptation and refinement. Streletz aptly stressed the innovative elements. For the first time, he claimed, the SOYUZ exercise would deal with questions related to the selective and increasing use of nuclear weapons by each side, broken down by targets and delivery means. Interestingly enough, Streletz' otherwise concise language contained no hint about which side would use (which) nuclear weapon first.[7] Also, it was a conscious decision to let SOYUZ 81 take place at the same time as DRUZBA 81 and NATO's WINTEX 81 exercise – so that information from these exercises could immediately be fed into SOYUZ or at least written into its final conclusions. Furthermore, SOYUZ 81 seems to have seen a first test of the operational usage and validity of Orgakov's concept for "operational maneuver groups". Their "most important task" was, as the Warsaw Pact's commander-in-chief Marshal Kulikov explained to the East German Minister of Defense Heinz Hoffmann in a post-exercise analysis, "the destruction of rockets, command posts, reserves and taking air ports". All of these elements hint at the increasing offensive abilities of Warsaw Pact troops and the growing belief of their leadership that a war in the European theater could be won even in a state of nuclear destruction and radiation – and that, perhaps, nuclear exchanges could even be geared in a way which would favour the advancing of one's own troops.

The second purpose of SOYUZ 81 can not be concluded from these military documents. At least from January 1981 onwards, the SOYUZ exercise of that year was meant as an instrument in the Polish crisis: the gathering of Warsaw Pact troops in or around Poland would serve as an imminent threat and the exercise itself would provide important insights regarding the trustworthiness of Polish troops and their commanders. Both the Polish political and military leadership hesitated to lend their support to this kind of SOYUZ scenario. The lower ranking officers, as Kulikov told the East Germans, disagreed with an involvement of

[7] The protocols of the National Security Council of the GDR can be accessed online under www.nationaler-verteidigungsrat.de.

the army in domestic affairs, and their superiors argued for a "theoretical exercise" bare of any practical procedures involving "trench-digging and troops" and argued for months against any kind of unlimited prolongation of SOYUZ (like in Czechoslovakia in 1968). In as much, Kulikov claimed, the exercise was also a Soviet test on Poland's generals and admirals.

SOYUZ 83 took place from May 30 until June 6 in East Germany, the CSSR and Poland – and its extensive documentation in the East German archives shows that the momentum (inherent in the SOYUZ sequel) not only towards more and more offensive capabilities but also towards an increasingly offensive thinking and rationale had reached a dangerous level. SOYUZ 83 focused on "operational-strategic command systems" for bringing troops and societies to combat-readiness and for coordinating offensive operations. The East German army provided two complete divisions for this stage-play, the Czechoslovak army two regiments and the Polish army merely two divisional command staffs. The background scenario foresaw fast growing tensions between the two blocs – only a few months before Ronald Reagan's rhetoric and NATO's Able Archer exercise seemed to turn this into reality. In order to undercut NATO's aggressive plans, the Warsaw Pact engaged "from the beginning in offensive action," not on a small but a fully "comprehensive" scale. The result of the exercise (inserted in a prepared form at the end) was that Warsaw Pact troops had moved via Hannover to Enschede (this involved the Polish "Coastal Front") and from Eisenach to Koblenz on the Rhine (thereby splitting West Germany in half). Theoretically, they had accomplished this 240 km drive in only nine days – more and considerably quicker than in any other exercise before. Still, the analysis of SOYUZ 83 showed room for improvement: Because it was assumed that NATO too was then capable of launching an attack earlier than in previous years, all troops even in their normal barracks had to be kept on constant combat readiness. Because Warsaw Pact troops were now meant to attack earlier, a massive improvement and extension of supply lines, particularly of military railway lines, was deemed necessary. And, finally, the troops in the exercise had been so successful that this would force the West to resort to nuclear attacks earlier on – and that therefore extensive preparations against nuclear attacks particularly with regard to the civil defense in the GDR were asked for. However, the lines of attack remained very much as described in the Polish "plan" of 1969 and in SOYUZ 75.

The defensive turn and SHCHIT 88

Siegfried Lautsch argues in his comments on this new material that this was VIP material – prepared for key personnel like the ministers of defense, heads of staff, possibly even party leaders, paying an official visit to the exercise. Lautsch, who experienced situations like this more than once in his life, provides convincing circumstantial evidence to this effect (the way the information was put together, the absence of maps, the non-standard title etc.). Therefore, we have to ask: How valid is this material and the information provided by it? As mentioned before, SOYUZ 75 and SHCHIT 88 are separated not only by a time-gap of thirteen years but also by their military-strategic contents which are light-years apart. While we established that SOYUZ 75 stood in the middle—and is therefore representative—of the long term development of strategic-operational thought in Poland and more generally the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact – the historical place and relevance of SHCHIT 88 still needs to be defined.

By looking at SOYUZ 81 and SOYUZ 83 this analysis has narrowed the time-gap to the years between 1983 and 1988. The analysis has depicted SOYUZ 83 as a kind of climax to the SOYUZ sequels. It has shown a worrisome structural and institutional aggressiveness of the Warsaw Pact's operational-strategic posture – in itself necessitated as it seems by a specific perception of NATO's growing ability to intercept the Pact's second wave of tank armies, of NATO's increasing technological lead and assumed ability to launch operations earlier than hitherto thought. With regard to Polish planning, Moszumanski has recently argued that their basic operational and strategic rational remained "in principle unchanged" until the summer of 1986.[8]

It seems however that this did not hold true for Soviet – and therefore the Warsaw Pact's – military leaders. Soviet commanders and planners dropped several remarks to this effect (albeit without references to specific dates) during an eye-witness conference in Stockholm in 2006[9] and Siegfried Lautsch, the planning officer of the 5th (East German) army in the 1st Front, remembers how he had to reverse his utterly offensive plans from 1983 into a defensive scenario in 1984/85 "apparently as a result of the considerations of the political leadership and the general staff of the USSR for the relaxation of tensions and for reducing the risk of a

[8] Moszumanski, Polnische Küstenfront, op. cit. (no page reference possible, as edited volume is forthcoming).
[9] See Jan Hoffenaar and Christopher Findlay (eds), Military Planning for European Theatre Conflict during the Cold War, Zurich 2007.

possible war."[10] Already in December 1984 the head of the Soviet general staff Marshal Sergej Akhromeev advised the leadership in East Berlin to refocus their military planning on defensive operations[11] - which the East Germans duly did within the shortest time-span (October 1985). As Lautsch in his comments on SHCHIT 88 rightly points out, with this the top-level military leadership was well ahead of the official announcement of this defensive turn by CPSU chairman Mikhail Gorbachev. It is noteworthy that Gorbachev's rise to power came almost half a year after the Soviet military leaders had redirected their East German colleagues towards defensive planning – leading to the assumption that the military top brass in Moscow had gone over this idea several months before, at least since the summer of 1984. Gorbachev first announced his support for a defensive strategy only in early 1986 and it took more than another year before this new strategy – explicitly leaving the operational initiative to the invading forces – was finally adopted by the member states of the Warsaw Pact in May 1987.

In this respect it is important to notice that Moszumanski describes the "Operational Directive of the head of the Polish Army" of August 1986[12] as further detailing the attack of the Polish "Coastal Front" in Northern Germany. This, of course, leaves us with an incomplete puzzle, in which SHCHIT 88 is one important piece. SHCHIT 88 was conducted in June 1988 – and clearly adhered to the new operational-strategic doctrine. So why – if key Soviet and East German commanders had started to devise a defensive doctrine as early as 1984 and Gorbachev had public announced his intention in early 1986 – did the Polish "Operational Directive" of August 1986 still contain the out-dated and risky offensive planning? Several answers appear, at least theoretically, possible: (i) the Polish military and/or political leadership were not informed (or trusted) as early as others; (ii) the Polish military and/or political leadership did not adhere fully to the new ideas – even after Gorbachev had made them public; (iii) there existed – like in the GDR – serious differences between how operational-strategic planning was brought to the attention of large groups of soldiers and staffers and the real "sharp" operational plans, to which only a very restricted number of key personal had access.

[10] Siegfried Lautsch, Zur operativen Einsatzplanung der 5. Armee der NVA im Rahmen einer Front der Vereinten Streitkräfte der Warschauer Vertragsorganisation in den 1980er Jahren, in: Wenzke, Die Streitkräfte der DDR und Polens (forthcoming).
[11] Report by Heinz Hoffmann to Erich Honecker about a conversation with Achromeev on December 3, 1984. Cited in: Rüdiger Wenzke, Die NVA und die Polnische Armee (forthcoming).
[12] op.cit.

Another (iv) possibility would be that the Polish military leadership was acutely aware of the lack of trust with which Poland and its army were treated by other Warsaw Pact members and particularly by the military and political establishment in Moscow – and that the Polish military leaders therefore tried to present themselves and their army as the most reliable allies possible under the given circumstances. While in 1986 this intention might still have been served (at least in some quarters in Moscow or East Berlin) by adhering to the traditional doctrine and "brotherhood in arms," by 1988 the international and intra-bloc situation had changed dramatically and a seemingly serious and honest connection between Poland's domestic unrest and the committed participation of its forces in the envisaged defensive operations seemed an adequate way to show one's allegiance. SHCHIT 88 indeed went beyond the new defensive doctrine of the Warsaw Pact in drawing Poland's domestic difficulties into the East-West strategic and operational scenario. The impression obviously intended by the Polish material on SHCHIT 88 was that on the one hand the Polish Army was trustworthy, reliable and skilled and willing to take its share in the battles that had to be fought on behalf of the Warsaw Treaty Organization – and that the Polish political and military leadership were prepared to do everything at their disposal to hinder or at least to limit an armed confrontation between East and West. Considering Soviet doubts over the motivation of Polish troops and their commanders already in 1981, this picture certainly has to be put into question. But in its own way, this – by the summer of 1988 increasingly unlikely - fictional scenario was also symptomatic for a military and an army desperately in search of a purpose and a future. And as such, SHCHIT 88 could also be read as a writing on the wall for the complete dissolution of the Warsaw Pact's military and security structures only one year later.