

Comments on Polish documentary material regarding SOYUZ 75 and SHCHIT 88

15.02.2010

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Preliminary remarks

It can well be expected that within the near future further documentation on Warsaw Pact military planning will become available from Central and Eastern European archives. Judging from the material that has become available recently, the vast majority of these papers will not contain authentic operational planning, but will rather deal with Warsaw Pact exercises. This needs to be considered. Still, this kind of material allows us a glimpse into operational-strategic thinking within the Eastern bloc, and into basic military rationales and their effects on the operational planning of Eastern military elites.

This is certainly true for the Polish material regarding the exercises SOYUZ 75 and SHCHIT 88. Furthermore, the comparison of both documents heralds the significant change in Warsaw Pact operational thinking which took place in the mid-1980s: The command staff exercise SOYUZ 75 focuses on positional aspects both within the framework of a defensive and an offensive strategy (the so-called “two-phases concept”), including the move(s) towards nuclear warfare. Within this exercise military planners still presume that nuclear war can be both waged and won – while SHCHIT 88 aims at preventing or limiting war. This indeed represented a significant watershed in the operational-strategic thinking amongst the military leadership of the Warsaw Pact, triggered and influenced by numerous political, economic and military factors.

1. Polish material on SOYUZ 75

This document deals with exercise material related to the command staff exercise SOYUZ 75 of the united forces of the Warsaw Pact countries in March 1975. Every WP exercise preparation consisted of two parts: one containing written material, the other one related graphics. The material presented here falls into the first category: the tasks for the command staff of the united forces of the 4th army, directives from the “front” (the superior level) to the “army”, details concerning the enemy and one’s own troops, the directive of the commander of the 4th army and battle orders for all participating troops. This is added by a contribution of the “analysis group” of the exercise. Unfortunately, because the graphical part is missing, no evaluation of the validity and accomplishment of the “exercise tasks” is possible.

The exercise situation describes a scenario quite representative of operational-strategic thinking within the Warsaw Pact until the early 1980s. The Pact’s military leaders kept to an official doctrine, which held that war in Europe could both be waged and won – even if one or both inimical parties resorted to the use of nuclear weaponry. Characteristics of this contemporary WP image of war in Europe were (a) its beginning with a defensive action that would swiftly throw back the (NATO) enemy onto his own territory (counter strikes), (b) the ability of WP troops to develop this successful defense action into one comprehensive offensive operation with the aim of annihilating the enemy on his own ground.

In this case – SOYUZ 75 – the head of the exercise (the commander in chief of the united forces) and the commander of the 4th army obviously intended (i) to prepare the participants for a specific war scenario, (ii) to estimate the military situation and preparedness, (iii) to develop a best-case scenario for defensive, offensive and nuclear operations and a set of corresponding orders, (iv) and to improve the ability of commanders and staffs to deal with this.

The paper of the analysis group is of particular interest in this respect. It states that all tasks, decisions, reports, orders, instructions, plans etc. had been worked out competently and above all in time – despite the reduced number of personnel involved. It concludes that all of these measures taken within SOYUZ 75 contributed to much more efficient operational (i.e. real) planning of the specific phases envisaged.

The contents of the command staff exercise focuses on selected elements of the work of an army staff during a specific phase of the operation. As such, it provides a valid impression on the planning, organization and command of troops within an army of the Warsaw Pact as well as on the cooperation with other troops relevant to the overall operation.

2. Polish material on SHCHIT 88

The framing and meaning of this “operational summary” are impossible to conclude from the documents available.

We suspect that this is actually a “operational collective report” (Operativer Sammelbericht – a specific term in the Warsaw Pact armies, whose meaning is explained in due course). Because the English translation of the original documents is not always conclusive (for example concerning abbreviations), the transfer and comparison of the English expressions with the contemporary East German army language has to be based on guess-work, but still allows for some general conclusions.

It is likely that these documents actually represent attachments to the “plan for the realisation” of the exercise SHCHIT 88. But because there are no details on the actual phases of the exercise – necessary (and characteristic) for exercise material for the troops – this is most likely information material for VIPs: the conceptual ideas behind the actual exercise or a description of the assumed situation at its start (“Ausgangslage” in East German army – NVA – terminology).

There exist numerous similarities and parallelisms between this Polish material on SHCHIT 88 and the reconstruction of the East German operational – that is real – planning after 1983. This has recently been reconstructed and described for the Military History Research Office of the Bundeswehr in Potsdam by this author, the GDR’s former operational planner (see 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: Rüdiger Wenzke (ed.), Die Streitkräfte der DDR und Polens in der Operationsplanung des Warschauer Paktes, Potsdam 2010; the same, Veränderung des Kriegsbildes im militärischen Denken der WVO in den 80er Jahren, MGFA, Potsdam, 2010, unpubl. MS, publication forthcoming).

The “operational summary” (perhaps “operational collective report”) of the general staff of the Polish armed forces from June 2, 1988, comprises nine days from May 25, 8.00, to June 2, 8.00. It lists all major measures, which command and troops had to enact during the envisaged period of tensions.

Within this habitual scenario, the command and the troops of the 3rd Front enact battle readiness and mobilisation, increase their strength to full battle readiness and prepare for their relocation towards the areas of their tactical or operational destination.

According to “intelligence summary no. 1” of the general staff of the Polish armed forces of June 2, 1988, “Red” (the Warsaw Pact countries) calls for “full combat readiness” on June 6, 19.00. This triggers the general mobilisation (“allgemeine Mobilmachung”) and moves the situation into a state of war (“Kriegszustand”). At the same hour, “Blue” (obviously NATO) declares “a full combat alert...in all the armed forces”.

The “information summary no.1” of June 2 describes the attempts by “Red” on behalf of the exercise participants to avoid a war.

Quite remarkable is the description of the situation in the author’s own country--Poland. This represents a lucid description of the influence exercised by the fast changing international situation on people’s opinions, the economic problems, a lack of work discipline, food shortages (Wrocław), protests and increasing speculations throughout the country. “Subversive” influences are discrediting the armed forces; doubts arise over the capability of the army and its equipment, and it is depreciated as a “hopeless army”. The passivity of the administration even in peace-time is well captured, leading to the conclusion that the country’s civil administration is not capable of maintaining the country’s economic viability and public life in war-time. Pessimism in all societal layers is steadily increasing, and international problems ought to be solved peacefully. A notion characterising the public mood holds that a victory in a war by “Red” is highly unlikely. On the other hand, the summary itself contains positive evaluations of the general state of the army, the political convictions of the troopers, their morale and discipline. Concerning the (Polish) army, no negative aspects are listed (observed).

Despite a noticeable nervousness, the army command lives up to its responsibility and fulfils its tasks both comprehensively and in time. The increasingly demanding education of soldiers – particularly reservists – is performed by cadre personnel.

To prepare for every kind of eventuality, is the obligation of the Ministry of Defense and the general staff. To enact these preparation presupposes high morale amongst troops and officials. On the other hand, the document material does not provide information on the actual ability of the army to fight a war. The planners of the exercise seriously consider the general atmosphere amongst Poles, they define political and economic disproportions, and they are obviously under no military illusions.

War is relatively easy to start, but no one knows in advance what dimension it will take – which is why it has to be prevented and every step towards it has to be stopped in its beginning. It would very interesting to know how this exercise then actually went. Judging from the assumed preconditions and framing, it seems that the exercise aimed at the prevention or at least limitation of armed confrontations.

The material on the exercise SHCHIT 88 has to be taken as unequivocal indication for the change in strategic thinking amongst the military leadership of the Warsaw Treaty Organization. The reasons for this change did lay in a multitude of interconnected political, economic and military developments within the Eastern bloc. Some of these are mentioned in these documents.

At this point in time – June 1988 – the military establishment of the Warsaw Pact, including the Polish general staff, clearly denied the possibility of waging and winning any kind of war in Europe. This judgement was based, among other aspects, on the critical state of the morale of the soldiers, particularly their increasingly critical opinion on the dogma of ideological superiority of socialism over capitalism – a problem that became particularly apparent in the political education of reservists through the political cadres of the army.

Apart from its specific Polish framing, SHCHIT 88 reflects the East Berlin declaration of May 1987 of the member states of the Warsaw Treaty Organization. In this declaration, the Warsaw Pact had proclaimed its will to reduce the armed forces and conventional armament in Europe to a level that - while guaranteeing each side's ability to defend itself – would strip both blocs of the equipment to wage a surprise attack and any kind of offensive operation.

Summarising these impressions, the material on SHCHIT 88 indicates a surprisingly sincere and honest effort by the Polish general staff to reflect these changes in their own exercise. Similarly, it contains a convincing analysis of the political and economic reasons for the reversal of operational planning for the armed forces of the Warsaw Pact, officially adopted and proclaimed in the late 1980s.

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