

Document No. 16: Speech by Marshal Malinovskii Describing the Need for Warsaw Pact Offensive Operations, May 1961

Soviet Defense Minister Rodion Ia. Malinovskii delivered this speech on the occasion of the evaluation of a joint Soviet-East German command post exercise. Presented at a time of growing crisis several weeks before construction of the Berlin Wall, the speech shows the developing transition from a defensive to an offensive Warsaw Pact military strategy. Malinovskii tells the participants in the exercise that it is now important to deploy ground forces capable of destroying, by rapid action, and by employing nuclear arms "very sparingly," any enemy nuclear weapons before they can be used. But at the same time, Warsaw Pact forces should be prepared for "a rapid shift of focus deep behind enemy lines" that would result in the destruction of enemy capabilities in a short period of time. Previous exercises had ended with the repulsion of the enemy without making clear where that would take place; this one specifies defeating him on his own territory largely with the use of tanks. Malinovskii implies an advance at least into West Germany, if not farther, but this is still a step removed from the concept of a deep thrust into Western Europe, which became the standard strategy by 1961 and remained so through 1987, when Mikhail Gorbachev explicitly adopted a defensive approach.

As a result of the existence of long-range missiles with nuclear warheads, the options have increased for launching strikes deep behind enemy lines. [...]

Under modern conditions the main task of destroying the enemy is realized through nuclear strikes. And the army's ground forces will be in charge of aiming for the complete destruction of enemy forces.

During the first operations in the initial phase of war, the army ground forces mainly have to exploit in their area of attack the results of strategic nuclear strikes. Only very sparingly should they use their own nuclear weapons, instead keeping the bulk of them for battle behind the enemy lines. The transition to attack must be contingent on the level of radiation resulting from nuclear missile strikes with strategic weapons.

Calculations have shown that the time needed to lower the level of radiation can be measured in hours and days. Thus there is little likelihood that our own troops will enter the contaminated zone before five or six hours.

There is only one way of avoiding this, namely to cross the contaminated area speedily with tank units and heavy armored personnel carriers protecting the crews from radiation, with helicopters, and, if possible, to bypass the areas with the highest levels of radiation by using ordinary motor vehicles and other means of transportation.

Attack must be pursued without interruption by using primarily conventional weapons, tanks and the air force. The troops have to proceed purposefully.

Our modern tank divisions are the most important assault force of the Fronts¹⁰. They have enormous striking power, high mobility and are least vulnerable to the enemies' weapons of mass destruction. Their actions right at the beginning of the war should guarantee a rapid shift of focus deep behind enemy lines, the destruction of the enemy's operational and strategic reserves, the destruction of its nuclear weapons and the prevention of mobilization efforts, and the disruption of the command structure and efforts in the hinterland.

Like pointed arrows, tank detachments must deeply penetrate the enemy's operational lineup, tear up its strategic front line, split its efforts, and deprive it of further options for organized resistance.

The armored as well as general army units are thus both able to break the resistance of a large enemy group, to launch a determined attack, rapidly shift the main focus of operations from one direction to the other, and independently solve larger operational tasks.

Recently we commissioned the army to solve tasks within a range of 150 to 200 kilometers behind enemy lines and with a speed of attack between 40 and 50 kilometers per day. Now we have the capability to plan an by general army units up to a range of 400 kilometers, and [to plan an attack] by tanks deep behind enemy lines with an average speed of 100 kilometers per day.

[Source: BAMA, DVW-1/5203, Bl. 7. Translated by Karen Riechert.]

¹⁰ "Front" is a term of Soviet origin describing the organization of forces within a theater of operations.