

Document No. 81: Marshal Ogarkov Analysis of the “Zapad” Exercise, May 30–June 9, 1977

The 1977 “Zapad” (“West”) maneuvers, which took place in East Germany, were intended to assess the Warsaw Pact’s ability to counteract the marked progress in NATO’s combat readiness. The Western alliance had recently completed the comparable “Wintex” maneuvers, the largest ever, and according to an East German report, the results showed the Pact falling short of its objective.

Adding to the significance of “Zapad,” the scenario assumed that NATO would initiate hostilities under the guise of maneuvers (such as Wintex). This theme appears with greater frequency in the late 1970s. Warsaw Pact intelligence was well aware of NATO’s actual plans, but that did not entirely quell uneasiness over the presence of so many troops on maneuvers in the immediate vicinity. In his closing remarks following the exercise, Nikolai V. Ogarkov, chief of the Soviet General Staff, is fairly candid about the shortcomings revealed by “Zapad”, as is Marshal Dmitrii Ustinov, the minister of defense and the exercise’s commander. Ustinov notes that the Pact needs to acquire completely new (conventional) weapons systems to counter the West’s growing superiority in advanced technology. During the 1970s, Soviet bloc analysts realized that the gap in military technology continued to widen and might never be bridged.

As always, the “Zapad” exercise ended on an upbeat note with the East eventually launching an offensive deep into the FRG and winning the war, despite Ogarkov’s acknowledgement that not a single division had fulfilled its task.

REPORT

The exercise had three characteristics:

First, the exercise was distinct from previous ones in its large, spatial scope. The commanders and headquarters of the allied armies worked in locations with realistic space for administrative field stations and transfer points with great distances between them, and they worked through the questions under study during the entire exercise within a realistic timeframe using the “real time” method.

Second, it was carried out on the level of operational–strategic exercise, based on one of the possible variations of joint military action of the Warsaw Pact member-states for repelling aggression in the Western Theater. At the same time it also included significantly adjusted, realistic military staffing and initial positioning of the opposing sides. This was done deliberately in advance so that the commanders and headquarters could work from actions according to a realistic plan and so that they would show more creativity and initiative in their search for the best means to solve complex operational tasks.

Third, for the first time in the practice of our mutual undertakings, we studied in detail the use of armed forces in battle as a strategic operation in the continental war theater using a group of troops from the coalition staff and with the creation of a General Command Headquarters in the theater. The role of that headquarters was carried out by the directors. However, this does not exclude the fact that in the future the General Command Headquarters in the theater might also be under study.

[...]

The initial conditions were set up on May 31, that is, 3–4 days before the beginning of the war. The national boundaries used ran from Rostock to Leipzig to Pilsen, 100–150 km eastward from its actual location.

The “Western Forces” by that time had finished covert mobilization and, under the pretense of an exercise, implemented operational deployment in the Central European Theater (CET) and on the Atlantic. Altogether in the CET there were 85 divisions deployed as well as 3,700 fighter planes and more than 450 warships in concentrated groups.

A powerful grouping was concentrated in the first operational echelon on the territories of the Federal Republic of Germany and Denmark: 60 divisions, more than 15,000 tanks, and 9,500 units of artillery, which represented more than 70 percent of all its forces and materiel deployed in the CET.

The Western Forces had 25 divisions from various NATO countries on reserve in the CET. The Eastern Forces, having ascertained that the Western Forces were preparing to unleash the war, began covert mobilization and deployment of their troops and flotilla on May 28.

Having approximately the same number of troops and amount of materiel in its own forces in the western part of the theater as the Western Forces had, the Eastern Forces concentrated only 40 percent of their troops in the first echelon on May 31. The remaining troops were located 300 to 1200 km behind, while the 45th Army was 1,500 km from the areas of operation.

Thus, with an almost equal number of forces, generally speaking, the Western Forces created a 1–1/2 times advantage over the troops of the first operational echelon of the Eastern Forces (2nd and 3rd Fronts and the 28th Army), and a three- or even five-times advantage in its own shock troop formations.

[...]

Taking into account the overall situation, the two sides planned as follows [...]:

The Western Forces, under the guise of a large-scale strategic exercise, and while carrying out the deployment of troops of its operational groups, planned to attack the opposing troops of the 2nd and 3rd Fronts and the 28th Army with sudden, massive surprise attacks on a broad front until the approach of Eastern operational reserves. Then, developing an offensive approach, they planned to take control of the territory of East Germany as well as of the western regions of Czechoslovakia and Poland by the sixth or seventh day. Simultaneously, aerial attacks, paratroop attacks, and diversionary and reconnaissance groups would not allow movement into the areas of action along the Front of the second echelon of the Eastern Forces. Further, with the accumulation of forces making it favorable to introduce operational reserves into battle, using attacks by two basic groups from the area west of Gdańsk

and from the region west of Liwiec River in the general direction towards Brest, and with part of the forces headed toward Kaliningrad and to Lvov, they planned to completely defeat advancing Eastern operational reserves in head-on clashes, and to reach the western border of the Soviet Union.

By May 31, the Eastern Forces had completed mobilizing their land and naval forces and, with the goal of stopping the aggression, went ahead with their operational deployment by advancing the main groups of the 4th and 5th Fronts into the western regions of Poland and Czechoslovakia.

The plan of the Eastern Forces envisaged repulsing the attacks of the Western Forces, then introducing into battle the reserve fronts and armies to take the lead and defeat the groups of the first operational echelons of Western Forces which had invaded their territory, and move into counter-attack.

They further planned to inflict defeat on the advancing and newly formed operational enemy reserves and to completely defeat the aggressor on his own territory.

[...]

On the eighth day of operations, conditions became more complicated when the Eastern Forces repulsed enemy invaders and went on to attack in the direction of Hamburg, Hannover, Frankfurt, and Munich. Within 3–4 days they had advanced 100–150 km. At the same time, they successfully battled for control of the Baltic Straits. Only in the area toward Prague did the Eastern Forces still face a complicated situation. Troops from the 3rd Front fought hard for Prague in that area.

[...]

On the whole, the situation for the Eastern Forces turned out favorably: They became proficient in taking the strategic initiative, actually cut off groups of Western Forces, created favorable conditions for defeating them, and took control of West German soil.

The Western Forces fought difficult defensive battles, attempting not to have their main forces defeated. Near Hamburg the troops of the first Dutch Army Corps found themselves surrounded. In the Hannover region, as the result of the Eastern Forces making deep inroads toward that area, the Western Forces were threatened with being cut off in the theater of action and being defeated unit by unit.

Under these circumstances, on June 10 the Western Forces made the decision to use nuclear weapons. They began immediate preparation for a massive nuclear attack. In conjunction with this, at 9:30 on the 11th, General Headquarters sent a directive to all Fronts and to the Unified Baltic Fleet whereby the Supreme Command, based on confirmed data, warned the troops and fleets that the enemy was preparing for a nuclear attack.

Under these conditions, the commanders and headquarters staff of the Eastern Forces were supposed to quickly ascertain the deadlines for the beginning of an enemy nuclear attack and to carry out reconnaissance of important targets as well as prepare aerial forces, rocket troops and artillery to the highest level possible, all the while making arrangements for a first nuclear strike on the enemy.

Simultaneously, it became necessary to take steps to increase their own troop readiness, to assist them to recover from a nuclear attack, and after the assault to remove the aftermath and restore administrative systems and the combat-readiness

of troops with the goal of preventing the enemy from engaging in active operations following the nuclear attacks. Along with this, under such complex circumstances, there remained the task of leading the 5th Front into battle at the appropriate time.

These tasks were generally solved correctly at the Fronts and in the armies, although at the same time there were some shortcomings.

First: discovery of preparations for and the beginning of a nuclear attack.

At most of the Fronts and in the armies, the commanders understood that the Western Forces, having lost the initiative, were preparing to use nuclear weapons. [...] For the last 30–40 minutes before the Western nuclear attack began, all nuclear weapons at the Fronts were placed at Battle Alert #1 and aerial forces were dispatched at the front. The preparatory steps taken by the Eastern Fronts and fleets on the whole allowed them to refine their plans and to launch the first nuclear attack at the Western Forces at the appropriate time.

Second: maximum weakening of enemy nuclear forces and recovery of our own troops from nuclear attack.

We can all well imagine, theoretically, the difficult after-effects of a massive nuclear attack if measures are not taken to lessen the enemy's nuclear capacity as much as possible and to lead our troops to recover from nuclear attack.

However, these two related tasks were not given sufficient attention by field commanders at the front and in the armies. The necessary measures were not taken to lessen the strength of the enemy's nuclear attack, especially those needed to uncover hidden nuclear rockets.

While reconnoitering for enemy targets before launching the nuclear attack, they found administrative posts, rocket and artillery divisions and aircraft at airfields within reach of our firepower, capable of attacking these targets with conventional means. Unfortunately, neither aviation forces nor artillery nor even tactical rockets with warheads were used for this purpose. Although theoretically we all know that all important targets, if they can be attacked, must be destroyed immediately by conventional means at the commanders' request—and even that of the division commanders—we should not wait until there is the possibility of attacking them with nuclear weapons.

Another effective way of weakening the enemy's nuclear attack is through a concentrated blow to his administrative systems using nuclear weapons at the beginning of the nuclear strike. This measure was correctly planned and implemented by the 2nd Front headquarters.

[...]

At the same time, at many other headquarters there was no planning for the replacement of regional concentrations of troops, deployment areas of missile brigades and battalions, nuclear artillery, or for airfields serving as bases for transport planes and command posts, a fact which under real conditions is unacceptable and would lead to dire consequences.

Third—launching the nuclear attack in time.

When the threat of nuclear attack by the Western Forces was imminent, the commanders and headquarters at the Fronts and in the Armies concentrated their greatest attention on refining their plans for a first nuclear strike and on bringing their nuclear weapons up to the highest level of combat-readiness.

During this time, all the field administration of the unified forces worked with great intensity and focus. At the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Fronts, in the 9th Army of the National People's Army of the German Democratic Republic and in the 28th Army, this work was particularly well-coordinated and was handled directly by the commanding officers. The refinement of plans for the first nuclear strike and for the preparation for launching such a strike was carried out in time at all the Fronts. During this work, however, the groups for nuclear planning in the 19th and 30th aerial forces were not well coordinated. They did not work closely enough with the headquarters for artillery and rocket launchers at the Fronts.

We cannot avoid discussing the methods used during this period at the administrative posts at the Front, and their equipment. Take, for example, the 2nd Front. Here, during the first nuclear attack, they planned to use about 300 nuclear warheads. Many targets to be attacked were mobile, and their positions changed constantly. To refine the plan for a first nuclear strike and move those nuclear weapons from certain targets onto other targets would have meant carrying out a tremendous amount of work in a short period of time.

Without the use of computers and some decentralization of leadership, it would be difficult to resolve this problem, we were all convinced. Thus the question arises about the necessity of developing such automation at the front field administration.

Fourth Problem—the nature of troop activity at the start of nuclear strike launches by the opposing forces.

Having determined that the Western Forces were going ahead with preparations for launching a nuclear attack, the Eastern Forces began launching a first nuclear attack on the Western Forces at 11:29. Almost simultaneously, at 11:30, the first enemy nuclear strike occurred. In essence, putting the nuclear bombs into action took the form of a counter-attack.

By general calculation, the Western Forces launched 680 nuclear strikes at the troops on the Front and the Unified Baltic Fleet, and 400 strikes went deep into the country, to the western regions of the USSR.

The Eastern troops suffered significant losses. Only 36 percent of its formations maintained their fighting capability. In all, 31 percent of the divisions lost their fighting capacity.

The remaining formations ended up severely limited in their fighting capacity.

Twenty-four percent of rocket formations and units and 70 percent of aerial units suffered a total loss of fighting capacity. Along the front lines, huge areas of contamination, destruction, and fires developed.

The first nuclear strikes of the Eastern Forces were equally effective. Fifteen divisions of the Western Forces totally lost their fighting capacity. There was total destruction of 300 divisions of operational-tactical and tactical rockets (35 percent), 14 divisions of anti-aircraft rockets, 23 percent of tactical aircraft, and 25 percent of the joint command posts. The Western Forces lost a quarter of a million of their personnel.

In general, the two sides suffered equal losses; however, the Eastern Forces lost almost twice as many divisions. This situation could be explained by the fact that, with an approximately equal balance in nuclear forces, the Western Forces had a certain advantage in tactical nuclear capabilities. This is why, before the nuclear strikes

begin, it is very important to inflict the maximum amount of damage on the enemy's tactical nuclear capabilities during battle with conventional weapons.

Despite the complexities of the situation, the commanders and staff headquarters worked in an organized manner at this stage. The field administrations, particularly those of the 2nd and 3rd Fronts as well as in the 23rd Army, did all they could to make full use of the results of their nuclear strikes and to keep the enemy from going into active battle. It is true that not everyone was able to figure out the consequences of their work equally. This work was best organized at the 2nd and 4th Fronts. Over the course of two-three hours the headquarter staffs of these Fronts collected the basic facts of the situation and refined the tasks for the troops.

Based on the circumstances that developed, the troop commanders made the following decisions:

1st Front—on the morning of June 12, go into action, launch the main strike at Schwerin and Lübeck. On the morning of June 13 have the 17th Army attack toward Jutland and, together with the Unified Baltic Fleet, defeat the enemy in the Baltic Straits area.

2nd Front—continue attacking, launching the main strike into the Ruhr industrial area from the north. Putting the 11th tactical army into battle, launch an attack in coordination with the 1st and 4th Fronts to defeat the main groups of the central and northern NATO troops.

4th Front—renew the attack with army formations of the first echelon which have maintained their fighting capacity. From June 11–12 use the second echelon troops for a follow-up attack and continue carrying out their tasks along with the 109th airborne division, which pushed ahead into the area of Fulda on June 11.

3rd Front—on the morning of June 12, combat-ready formations should attack. Have the 32nd army corps increase its forces and help them succeed in the area toward Mainburg. Include the 4th Army, the 32nd army corps and the 7th Army in the first echelon, and in the second echelon, include the 5th Army.

[...]

We must note that the 5th Front during this time was in a very difficult situation. First, the Front came under serious aerial attack while it was in the final stages of deployment to its appointed regions. The circumstances were such that the aerial attacks, paratroop landings, and diversionary-reconnaissance groups destroyed the main bottlenecks on the routes where the Front troops were heading out, and they destroyed almost all the stores of fuel and heating supplies.

Under such complicated circumstances, the troop commanders, field command and Front headquarters staff took energetic measures to search for possible ways to replenish the necessary materiel by using current reserves from neighboring Fronts in the Polish People's Republic and the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, [and] by delivering fuel by air from the rear base. They also enabled the Front troops—albeit with some tardiness—to re-group and head out to their appointed positions.

At that time the commanders planned to send the troops into battle. Their decision envisaged that the 5th Front would go into battle alongside the 28th Army, which at that time was given over to its staff. The attack on the right wing was planned for two armies, the 18th and part of the 28th, and on the left wing, the 43rd. The 13th

tactical army was located in the second echelon of the Front. They considered sending the 13th into battle to increase their chances of success. Just when the Front Troop Commander had planned and organized sending the troops into battle, there was an enemy nuclear attack, and he had to change his decision in many ways, since, as a result of the nuclear rocket attack, the 18th Army lost nearly all its fighting capacity. Not one of its divisions could fulfill its appointed tasks. Within the 13th tactical army one division lost its fighting capacity entirely, while a second division ended up with limited fighting capacity and only a third was battle-ready. Under such circumstances the Front Troop Commander made an entirely correct decision to send the troops into battle and fulfill their appointed tasks by launching an attack with the 28th Army strengthened with formations and units which had retained their fighting capacity after the nuclear strike.

[...]

During the time when the enemy's threat to use nuclear weapons increased, the General headquarter staffs of the Polish Army, the Czechoslovak People's Army and the Main Headquarters of the National People's Army of the German Democratic Republic notified their territorial troops and put into effect local civil defense measures aimed at recovery from enemy nuclear attacks. They took measures to maintain constant communications with their troops and with government administrative organs.

With the launch of nuclear attacks, data collection about the attack on the troops and the countries was organized; local civil defense forces were put into action to clean up the remains of the enemy's nuclear attacks; and measures were taken to restore the fighting capacity of their troops as well as to render the necessary assistance to the Soviet Fronts.

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