

If the Cold War Had Turned Hot by John Curry

A perspective on the potential NATO and Warsaw Pact confrontation in the early 1970's

Having played a number of wargames used by the West during the cold war for training the military, I started to consider the larger picture. Rules such as Contact! (Canadian Army Wargame Rules- 1980) or Dunn Kempf (American Army Wargame Rules 1977-1997) give a feel for the land war on a tactical level, but they do not say much about the wider perspective.

The British Army Tactical Wargame rules (1956) offer a little more insight. They demonstrated that at that time, senior British Army Officers (and presumably American, if not other nations) trained on the wargames table top to stop the Russian hordes advancing the liberal use of tactical nuclear weapons. The rules indicated that a recon screen would have been used to identify the enemy axis of advance and then communication nodes being used by the advance would have been the nuclear targets.

From the perspective of 2008, it is possible to start looking back on the cold war and to evaluate the military possibilities with some certainty. This article breaks down the complex strategic picture into 'surprise', 'the air war', 'the naval war' and finally 'the land war'.

Surprise One of NATO's public fears (and that of the Russians) was a surprise attack. Both were frightened by the other side launching a deadly surprise assault that would overwhelm the other within days. It would have been possible for the Russians to launch an assault on NATO with just 48 hours warning for the West. With hindsight I would challenge the publically held view as hardly plausible.

(a) Logistics build up - impossible to hide

A Russian Rifle Division would have consumed 1223 tons per day[1]. Therefore for the approximately 46 divisions that could have been used in the first wave, 56,000 ton would have been needed per day. If the Russians stockpiled say 10 days worth, this would have required over ½ a million tons of supplies to be stockpiled in East Germany/ Czechoslovakia [2]. The Russian divisions and the Warsaw Pact divisions were not kept with large war stocks in peacetime. It was not inconceivable that some countries in Warsaw Pact could rebel [3] and the Russians were concerned that if these countries armed forces had access to a few hundred thousand tons of war stocks, the rebellion would be hard to suppress [4].

Stationed in Germany were the British BRIXMIS team of 100 staff, only 31 of whom were given passes to move around the East German countryside monitoring the daily activities of the Warsaw Pact's armed forces. They were the British military liaison team permitted to operate in return for the Soviet team operating in West Germany. Geraghty's (1997) book BRIXMAS [5] clearly states they the British liaison team believed they would not fail to notice and report the necessary build up of munitions/ fuel etc. necessary for the Russians to launch a surprise attack. If the team disappeared, (i.e. all murdered), then this would have been the clearest signal for a general alert to be issued and NATO would have marched to war.

Even without reports from the BRIXMIS team, the scale of the necessary build up of supplies would have been obvious to satellite observation, long range aerial photography (aircraft flying parallel to the border and pointing their cameras deep across the border) and the East German economy would have ground to a halt as nothing would be moving on road or rail except military convoys.

b) Submarines

The Russians kept 85-90% of their submarines in port. If they put their 'wolf packs' to sea it would have been obvious to NATO that war was about to commence. The submarines deployment for war would have been detected by satellites (in clear weather), by NATO submarines deployed to listen for such movement, SOSUS (a sonar network deployed on the sea bed) and Nimrod aircraft on continual patrol from Scotland. To deploy the submarines would have taken two to three weeks, alternatively leaving them in port until war commenced would have left them trying to negotiate hostile coast of Norway and the British/ Iceland/ Greenland gap (BIG gap) against fully deployed NATO anti-submarine forces. It would also allow the first wave of convoys to reach Europe with a minimal of interference.

Conclusions on surprise My own view, for what it is worth, is that it would have been possible for the Warsaw Pact to move direct from their annual exercises areas to the border ready to attack. This would have only given NATO 48 hours notice. However, the initial assault would then have been with Russian divisions with only 48 hours of combat supplies. The rest would be on trains and trucks stretching a 1,000 miles to rear. Whatever the initial success of the advance, the Warsaw Pact forces would have ground to a halt within two days until more supplies arrived.

A more realistic scenario, would have been a surprise attack with only a seven day build up. This would allow the initial divisions to have 5-10 days of supplies ready for their first echelons use.

The Air War All major NATO exercises declared that 'air equality' would exist at the start of a general war with Russia, but what would have happened next? From WWII experience, it is well established that technology, training and pilot quality are critical in air combat. Initially, there would have been a massive air battle, with substantial losses on each side [6]. However, rapidly the superiority of Western aircraft, missiles and pilots would have told. My own guess would be that NATO would have gained air superiority within two weeks and kept it. The Warsaw Pact would still have been able to regain air equality for short periods, such as to cover specific operations, by use of its strategic reserves, it could not hope to keep this state.

The impact of the losing the war in the air would be felt most in the ability of NATO to start hitting lines of communication (i.e. railways) and the inability of the Russians to interfere with NATO Reforger reinforcements arriving by air and sea over the Atlantic.

The Naval War would have been largely over in a matter of weeks. The 100 or so Russian submarines deployed to fight in the Atlantic would have been outnumbered and technologically outclassed. Against a 1000+ anti-submarine warfare aircraft and hundreds of western surface ships/ submarines, they would have been hunted down and destroyed. The West had a clear superiority in surface forces, control of the air and by using naval mines. The Russian navy

would have been able to assist in the invasion of Denmark, Norway and help keep the western submarines away from their nuclear submarines in their firing positions close to the shores of Northern Russia.

Given several weeks, American and Canadian reinforcements would be have been coming in convoys to the central front and there would have been little the Russians could do to stop them.

The Land War In contrast to the air and naval war, the Warsaw Pact did enjoy a conventional superiority. The Warsaw Pact had approximately 102 divisions in Europe (19 in East Germany) against NATO's 59 divisions. Assuming the Russians achieved some degree of surprise, they would expect to achieve a combat superiority of 2.6 to 1. This approximate ratio is repeated in many models e.g. Dunnigan's *How to Make War* (1982) edition and various commercial NATO board games. This ratio would make a quick victory possible, but not a certainty.

There are two further points to note. On the first day of the day, the Warsaw Pact advance would have got nowhere. The first obstacle would be crossing the border obstacles, (the wall, wire, mines, trench of the 'Iron Curtain'). Secondly, the majority of NATO had light forces tasked with defending this border by blocking every road with fallen trees, craters, booby traps and hasty scattered nuisance minefields. The games I have seen indicated that it would take the Russians a day to get through the myriad of obstacles and they would have seen a significant reduction in their reconnaissance forces (i.e. they would have been ambushed and blown up by mines).

In 1940 France fell with almost no resistance once its armies were defeated. The German advance helped itself at petrol stations and various shops along the way. NATO had made plans to ensure that there would have been an organised, active, well equipped resistance that would have started the day after the Front had advanced past their village or town. There were stay behind units of upto company strength that were tasked with ambushing every supply vehicle they could see.

We know from the 2nd Gulf War, the effectiveness of stay behind units hitting the huge soft skinned lorry trails behind the fighting units. Indeed, a more organised effort could have seriously jeopardised the American led advance. The Warsaw Pact would have found that their supply convoys would have been hit, including within the supposedly safe areas of Eastern Europe.

Interestingly enough, the Russians were always concerned with a NATO surprise attack on them. Only 1 civilian board game, (*Revolt in the East* by SPI) ever modelled that scenario, close examination shows that if there was an uprising in Eastern Europe and a significant part of their combat power was tied down in maintaining order, that it would have possible for a NATO attack to have beaten the Russians.

Conclusions These are my own conclusions for what they are worth.

At some point in the early 1970's the military balance tipped against the Russians. Although they could have advanced well into West Germany, they would only advance at a rate of 10 k per day for perhaps 10 days before they would have shot their 'logistic bolt'.

Their advance would have hampered by pre-war organised behind the line operations, and the impact of NATO airpower on their supply lines. Getting the supplies from East Germany to the front in West Germany would have been challenging. From my perspective, they did not have enough trucks to move these supplies in peacetime, let alone in the face of the 'friction of war'.

While it would have possible in 'best case scenario' for the Russians to have seized a rapid victory after the early 1970's, it would have more likely become a war of attrition in West Germany. In a war of attrition, there would have been no question about who would win when the western economies mobilised for war.

References

- [1] James F. Dunnigan (1982) How to Make War, page 318. This book has been reprinted many times. A Russian tank division needed 1073 tons per day.
- [2] Not including the supplies necessary for the air operations etc.
- [3] Such as Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968
- [4] Of course the Soviet's took precautions against rebellion such as ensuring they had Russian officers in key posts in Warsaw Pact divisions e.g. holding armoury keys.
- [5] Tony Geraghty (1997) BRIXMAS, the untold exploits of Britain's most daring Cold War spy mission.
- [6] Alfred Price (1986) Air Battle Central Europe