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The Hungarian People's Army during the Cold War

ABSTRACT

This article is a short summary of the History of the *Magyar Néphadsereg* (Hungarian People's Army), with emphasis placed on its operational tasks, structure and planned wartime application during the Cold War period. The People's Republic of Hungary was a member of the Warsaw Pact, so the above mentioned tasks were signed in Moscow, and the planned deployment of the country's military was covered by the Soviet South-Western Theater of Military Operations' so-called Northern-Italian and Danube Valley Operational Directions.

Introduction

The article covers the history of the Cold War period Hungarian military. It is a brief summary of the main events, with a clear focus on the planned operational employment of the forces. The research of the period even in Hungary is far from complete: there are natural points of interest from the early and middle part of the era (like the Revolution of 1956 and the Intervention of 1968, etc.), but the later part of the Cold War (especially the war planning) is not (yet) well covered. The assumption was that if there are gaps even in Hungary covering the country's Cold War military contribution, there could be more of them at the international level, but an article with an operational focus can help the military historian community to fill in some of those.

The sources for the research are a wide variety of documents, including secondary sources like published books, articles and Central Intelligence Agency (hereafter: CIA) declassified documents that fit the role of

this publication as a summary. The other important group of sources were the never before published formerly classified PhD thesis of the officers of the Hungarian military. At that time, completing a PhD in the military was totally different from how we do it today, when civilian control is in effect. The topics were officially assigned to researchers (candidates) by their units/commands/superiors, and they had access to the classified Soviet documents, the intel reports and plans of their organizations and the General Staff (hereafter: GS) to complete their tasks. Interestingly some of those daily reports and analysis never made it to the Hungarian Military Archives or simply became lost during the many organizational changes of the early 1990's.

Since the assignment of the tasks and the position of some of the candidates the key findings were incorporated into the wartime operational plans, and into the training of the troops. Essentially the research topics covered the main interests of the Hungarian military at that time and the candidates task was to answer the specific questions (with a scientific underpinning if possible) raised by their superiors.

Hungary during the Cold War

The Kingdom of Hungary was „liberated" by the conquering Soviet armies in 1944–1945, and most of the country, especially its capital, Budapest, was in ruins. After the disastrous Second World War, Hungary became part of the Soviet sphere of influence as most of Eastern and Central Europe, and until 1989–1991 (when the last Soviet troops left the country) its freedom in decision making covering foreign and defense policy (and on other topics) was heavily limited by Moscow.

In 1948, a communist takeover happened in the whole region, and Hungary was not an exception.[1] The first secretary of the Hungarian Workers' Party (Mátyás Rákosi) was a true stalinist hardliner, and the country suffered a lot under his rule. The Hungarian Defence Forces (hereafter: HDF; hung. *Magyar Honvédség*) were renamed to Hungarian People's Army (hereafter: HPA, hung. *Magyar Nephadsereg*) in the summer of 1951, and the name was official until 15 March 1990.

The HPA's history was unique even in the Eastern Bloc (the politico-military alliance was officially called Warsaw Pact from 1955), since the Revolution in 1956 broke the process of the expansion-focused organic military evolution. I, therefore, recommend using a different splitting of the military history of the period as in the case of the other countries:

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[1] Ferenc Fischer, *A kétpólusú világ – 1945–1989* (Pécs: Dialóg Campus, 2014), 106–107.

1945–1948: From World War 2 to the communist takeover,
1948–1956: Sovietization and the extensive expansion of the military,
1956–1960s: Revolution and punishment, the HPA as a scapegoat,
1960–1980s: Catching up with the Military-Technical Revolution[2] and other members of the Warsaw Pact (Including the „Prague Spring"),[3]
1985–1987: The time of the Structural Changes,
1989–1991: The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact.

From this list all the periods have very different characteristics, structural changes, new equipment, or unique politico-military relationship not just between but inside the blocs. Considering the limitations of an article like this, I decided to keep an operational planning and tasking focus, so all the changes are analyzed from this point of view. Therefore I identified the following topics:

– The early Cold War period, and the war plans against Yugoslavia (until 1956),
– The plans against the West, Italy and Austria (1960–1989).

The Early Cold War period

After WW2, the Hungarian Defense Forces were in need of a total rebuild, but a clear strategic framework and guidance based on it were missing. It was a time of confusion and hope, but also the communist slowly took over the power, of course with the help of the occupying Soviet troops. Until 1955, Hungary was a second echelon country, since Austria was the main frontline country against the West between 1945–1955.

From the late 1940s the relationship between Soviet leader Joseph Stalin and marshall Josip Broz Tito (the former partizan leader and incumbent dictator of Yugoslavia) deteriorated,[4] so it became the task of the Hungarian Defence Forces (HPA from 1 June 1951) to prepare for war against its

[2] The belief that modern (futuristic, even nowadays) technology will totally change the face of war. It came in times, when computers appeared in the military, mankind went to the Moon, etc. In the 1970s it was a leading concept in Soviet military thinking, that later reappeared in the west as part of the Revolution of Military Affairs.

[3] The Hungarian participation in the operations in Czechoslovakia was with a reinforced motorised infantry division („ZALA 68" the HPA mobilization and „DUNA 68" the intervention „exercises"), but they took part only in the disarmament of the Czechoslovak People's Army, and in a few months long occupation but not in kinetic military operations. From the military's point of view the real experiences were about the mobilization, the readiness and the deployment of forces. Miklós M. Szabó, *A Magyar Néphadsereg és a Varsói Szerződés csapatainak részvétele Csehszlovákia megszállásában* (Budapest: Dialóg Campus, 2019), 111–112.

[4] László Ritter, „Titkos háború a szovjet blokk és Jugoszlávia között, 1948–1953," *Történelmi Szemle* no. 1 (2012): 133.

southern neighbor, as the first echelon.[5] From 1950, an independent Border Guard force was established. It was supervised by the State Security Authority (hung. *Államvédelmi Hatóság*, ÁVH), the secret service (terror) organization of the early Hungarian stalinist state was in charge for the border security. It was tasked to stop all the immigrants in and out of the country. Officially all the doctrines were defensive, but in reality, the Soviet way of war was all about the offensive. For Hungary, the rebuilding of the military was a priority, and the Soviet advisors took a prominent role in the process. All the HDF (and later HPA) was rebuilt around the Soviet WW2 experiences, with an emphasis on the (mechanized) ground forces. The country was naturally an agricultural one, so the first step was the creation of a heavy, military-industrial complex. It was a rapid, mainly forced process: without any real natural resources for it, the price was huge. A large part of the post-war Gross Domestic Product (hereafter: GDP) was spent on these industrial facilities, from large steel plants to underground ammunition factories.[6]

During the whole Cold War period, Hungary's industrial capacity was not advanced enough to produce tanks and/or aircraft, so the heaviest equipment made here were the Csepel 944 PSZH (hung. *Páncélozott Szállító Harcjármű*, literally a simple translation of the Armored Personnel Carrier) artillery pieces and mortars.[7] All the HPA's heavy equipment was made in the Soviet Union or in the other eastern bloc countries. Altogether starting from the late 1940s and through the early 1950s (the so-called Rákosi-era) more than 20% of the country's yearly GDP went directly to the military or to a military related (industrial, infrastructure, etc.) spending.[8] It happened in a time, when the post war rebuilding, the stalinist type of purges and the uncontrolled state terror were already severely effected the peoples' standard of living.

The next step was to build up the numbers of the armed forces. The main problem was how to „sovietize" the military's mentality and organizational culture, which was more of a conservative one. The communist took

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5 János Jakus, „Az államhatár biztosításának problémái az ötvenes évek elején," *Rendvédelemtörténeti füzetek* no. 20 (2009): 45.

6 Tamás Nagy, „A Magyar Néphadsereg története 1948–1956," in *A Magyar Honvédség 1848–1989*, vol. 2, ed. Tamás Csikány (Budapest: ZMNE, 2004), 238.

7 Miklós Horváth and Vilmos Kovács, *Magyarország az atomháború árnyékában* (Budapest: Zrínyi, 2016), 283. The military equipment production was distributed between the Eastern Bloc countries, and Hungary (due to its lack of heavy industry capacity) was tasked to produce mostly lighter equipment (communication pieces, optics, artillery and mortars, etc). First it was under direct Soviet control, but later it was coordinated through the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance, but the decisions were still made in Moscow.

8 Nagy, *A Magyar Néphadsereg*, 238.

over the Ministry of Defence (hereafter: MoD), and started a deep purging.[9] The effect was immediate: an acute shortage of officers, which was an even greater problem in case of a characteristically officer-heavy military. To handle this shortage, from 1951 the educational system changed from the traditional, multi year long Military Academy model to a short, course like 1 year „branch school" one.[10] The number of officers immediately started to grow, but the side effect was that the (general) educational level of the officer corps dropped dramatically. A lot of officers came from politically trustable worker or agricultural classes, but sometimes they were totally lacking a true professional (and even basic) education.[11] To handle this problem, Soviet advisors (active officers) were sent to every unit, down to the regiment level. Due to the lack of trust and the low level of professionalism in the military[12] for a short period of time there was a dual leadership model in the military (there was a commander and a political officer – commissar – in charge of every unit), but in 1952 the commander's undivided authority was reestablished, and a political deputy position was created.[13]

The number of units also started to grow, and every 6 months a new order of battle and table of organization was issued by the MoD, sometimes doubling the number of troops and/or units from the previous one.[14] Conscripted soldiers served for 3 years, but the standards of living in the military were very low.[15] Some units lived in tents for months (almost years), because their new barracks were not yet built. Also, the equipment was never ready, there was a shortage of everything, from fighter jets through tanks to rifles: in some units only 20–30% of the needed was present.[16]

The operational planning during the early Cold War was all about the coming war with Yugoslavia. The main idea was that the „imperialists" (the western/NATO countries) will use the Balkans as a beachhead for an

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[9] Imre Okváth, *Bástya a béke frontján. A magyar haderő és katonapolitika 1945–1956* (Budapest: Aquila, 1998), 96; Nagy, *Magyar Néphadsereg*, 231.

[10] Antal Oroszi, „A fegyvernemi tisztiiskolák felállítása (1949–1951)," *Hadtudomány* no. 3–4 (2009): 135.

[11] Horváth and Kovács, *Magyarország*, 25.

[12] The „old guard" Non-commissioned officer (hereafter: NCO) corps was dissolved, some of them were removed from the military, the others became officers.

[13] Nagy, *A Magyar Néphadsereg*, 232.

[14] Ibid., 232.

[15] Ibid., 239–240. This became 2 years, and finally changed to 18 months in 1980. Róbert Somkutas, *Álcaruhában. Fejezetek a hadműveleti–harcászati és csapatfelderítés történetéből (1945–2000)* (Budapest: Zrínyi, 2014), 139.

[16] Okváth, *Bástya*, 232–233.

Adriatic sea landing, so they will attack through Yugoslavia (considered a western sympathizer at that time). The dislocation of the Hungarian (and occupying Soviet) units were created in regard to the three operational directions:[17]

- Southern direction: The area between the rivers Danube and Tisza (Subotica – Kecskemét – Budapest operational direction),
- Southwestern direction: The Zalaegerszeg – Székesfehérvár (mostly to the Balaton – Budapest general direction) axis, that covered the most important Hungarian oil fields in the south-western part of the country. Closest direction to the Adriatic sea.
- Western direction: Vienna – Budapest axis between Lake Balaton and the river Danube. The assessed main effort of the western forces in the case of World War 3. This direction was through Austria, the frontline country at the early 1950s.[18]

In the planned war against Yugoslavia, the HDF/HPA's role was to defend and hold the territory of southern Hungary, to defeat the attackers, and to provide a good opportunity for the second echelon Soviet troops to conduct an attack against the Balkans. For the success of this defensive task, a hundreds of kilometers long field fortification (with concrete bunkers at the most important places) system was built all along the southern border from Romania to Austria.

It was called Southern Defence System („the Hungarian Maginot Line" or the „Rákosi line"), and it was a combination of static defenses (trenches, earth or concrete bunkers, gun emplacements, etc.) and minefields, with the further preparation of the battlefield (operation environment), like repaired road system for the reserves (sometimes more than a hundred kilometers deep). After the death of Stalin in 1953, the relationship between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia started to normalize, and the whole defense line became pointless.[19] Although the building costs were so huge,

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[17] Róbert Ehrenberger, *A béketábor magyar hadserege*, Hadtörténelmi levéltári kiadványok (Budapest: Petite-Real, 2001), 98 [Summary Report of the HPA's GS J3 about the HPA's politico-military & strategic situation, and assessed operational directions (Original document, created on 31 December 1952)].

[18] Ibid., 98.

[19] Contrary to the political pressure to ease the tension, the Hungarian military leadership (MoD) still prepared for war against a NATO-Yugoslavian alliance, even in 1954. According to the intel reports, the combined Balkan powers (Greece, Turkey and Yugoslavia) had the same amount of manpower as of the theater eastern bloc states (Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary), their advantage in tanks and modern equipment was overwhelming. Okváth, „A magyar hadsereg háborús haditervei, 1948–1962," *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, no. 1 (2006): 38, accessed October 10, 2022, http://epa.oszk.hu/00000/00018/00069/pdf/EPA00018_hadtortenelmi_2006_01_034-053.pdf.

that it almost crippled the state, most of it was finally dismantled in 1956, and the building material was re-used by the local population (nowadays only a few concrete bunkers are left there to see).[20]

The effect of the 1956 revolution on the Hungarian People's Army

After a few years of slow reforms Rakosi's bunch came back to power in 1955. Multiple causes lead to the explosion in 1956, and many are out of the reach of this paper, such as the events – but not the consequences on the HPA during/after the revolution and the Soviet attack.

From the early days of the Revolution, the Soviet military organization (called the „Special Corps", with its HQ in Székesfehérvár) was on the move: armored columns marched to Budapest. The Soviet plan behind this was called „Operation Wave"), which was about securing key infrastructure and supporting the Hungarian Military and the Internal (Police, State Security, etc.) Forces to oppress civil unrest.[21] The main problem with these plans was that the internal forces fell apart in hours, and the HPA was reluctant to either support or oppress the revolution. Some units were taking part in the training of the young people fighting against the Soviets, some of them were fighting directly. Some units shot into the crowds, but in general, most troops stayed neutral due to many factors, like the recruiting schedules, lack of command and control, etc. Due to these, the HPA was disarmed by the Soviets during and immediately after the revolution.[22]

After the Soviet attack (4 November 1956: „Operation WHIRLWIND"), the Revolution failed, and a long retribution period came. The main scapegoat for this period was the HPA, because of the (political) performance during the fighting. The new Hungarian communist leader, János Kádár was also not in support for the military during his long time in power (he was in charge from 1956 to 1988/89, literally until his death). The immediate effect of the Revolution on the military was the dramatic cutback of the numbers, and the officer corps, also most of the heaviest military hardware were sent back to the Soviet Union, due to the debts of the state. Until the

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[20] Levente Jamrik, „A Rákosi erődvonal a láncos kutya árnyékában," Falanszter.blog.hu, accessed October 10, 2022, https://falanszter.blog.hu/2012/09/21/a_rakosi_erodvonal_a_lancos_kutya_arnyekaban.

[21] Horváth, *Once Again Sovereignty. Studies from the History of Hungary after 1945* (Budapest: Argumentum, 2016), 37.

[22] Horváth, „A Magyar Néphadsereg az 1956-os forradalomban," in *A Magyar Honvédség* 2:314–315.

next decade, the HPA was totally sidelined, the new leadership had no real concept what kind of military they wanted to, and what they must have.[23]

The HPA during the Czinege-era (1960–1984)

In 1960, a new five-year planning period started.[24] Also, the new Minister of Defence, Lajos Czinege (a non-military, political figure, promoted to General from a civilian in a very short period of time) came into power. In this time, the Soviets pushed hard the Hungarian government to catch up with the other Warsaw Pact members: the 1950s were all about raising the number of troops, no matter what quality, but from the 1960s it was all about keeping the numbers low, while raising the quality. A lot of important changes took place in the 1960s, while the main focus of the politicians was the stabilization of the economy, and raising of the standards of living, to keep the people happy and to avoid any possible future uprisings. In these times there were many constraints on the HPA – the numbers were effectively carved in stone, to keep the army relatively „cheap".[25]

Due to the new, more strict Soviet control of the Warsaw Pact military cooperation (after 1956, there was no chance to have an independent Hungarian front sized unit again) created new organizations came to existence. In charge of the HPA's highest operational control, in 1961, the 5th Army (its HQ was in Székesfehérvár), with 4 divisions (3 motorized, later mechanized and 1 tank division), and in 1966, the second echelon (independent) 3rd Corps (HQ in Cegléd) with 2 motorized divisions were established.[26]

The Soviet Army (with a lot of changes during the period, but for most of the time it was 4 divisions, 2 mechanized and 2 tanks) and Soviet Air Force (2nd, later 36th Air Army) units were directly under the control of the new Southern Group of Forces (hereafter: SGF, its HQ was in Mátyásföld, Budapest).[27] In the post-Austrian neutrality era, the edge of the possible operational area now started at the western borders of Hungary. In case of a future war with NATO, the country became the western springboard

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[23] After a period of US nuclear monopoly, deterrence became more and more important. From the 1960s, both sides were rethinking their war plans, and in this era not having a strong HPA was a luxury for the Soviets.

[24] The five-years plans covered what the industry had to produce for the military, what equipment the Soviets will sell (on a yearly basis), and all the orders of battles and updated plans for that period; Jakus, „A VSZ gyakorlatainak jellemző vonásai a feltételezett délnyugati hadszíntéren," *Hadtudomány* no. 3 (2005): 61–62.

[25] Okváth, *A magyar hadsereg*, 41.

[26] Before that, all the divisions were led directly by the MoD; József Cseh, „A Magyar Néphadsereg újjászervezése 1956–1968 között," PhD thesis, Eötvös Loránd University, 2018, 71.

[27] Jakus, „A VSZ," 65; Károly Vándor, *Légierő társbérletben*, vol. 1 (Karcag: VPP, 2009), 39.

Picture no. 1. Echelonment of Warsaw Pact Forces in 1979

Source: CIA, „Warsaw Pact Forces Opposite NATO, NIE 11-14-79, Top Secret; partially declassified, 31 January 1979," 28, sightraider.com, accessed October 10, 2022, https://www.sightraider.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/DOC_0005517771.pdf

of the reframed soviet South-Western Theater of Military Operations (hereafter: SWTMO, with its Direction HQ in Kishinev, Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic).[28]

[28] The creation of SWTMO was part of the Soviet partition of the European theater, with the main effort being the Western Theater of Military Operations. It was a supporting effort

Picture no. 2. CIA Assessment of the Soviet Strategic Directions in the Southwestern Theater of Military Operations in 1979

Source: CIA, „Warsaw Pact Forces Opposite NATO, NIE 11-14-79, Top Secret; partially declassified, 31 January 1979," 65, sightraider.com, accessed October 9, 2022, https://www.sightraider.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/DOC_0005517771.pdf

All the planning was done on a bilateral basis, so the Soviets only shared the needed information with the „allied" states of the Warsaw Pact. This meant that the central planning was made in Moscow, just tasks were designated to the national militaries. Every five years (updated yearly), all the wartime plans were made in three copies (one in Hungarian and two in Russian language), and only contained the information about the HPA and the Soviet forces present, not the other Warsaw Pact Members. The Hungarian MoD had only very limited knowledge of the planned activity

along with the North/North-Western Theater of Military Operations. The SWTMO covered southern Central Europe, the southern part of the Soviet Union (in Europe), the Black and the Mediterranean Sea, and the Balkans. The authority and command and control were not well defined, the national responsibility (towards the nation's own people) was not clarified. There was a growing resistance from the Warsaw Pact countries, to accept total multinational (Soviet) control; Jakus, „A VSZ," 63; Horváth and Kovács, *Magyarország*, 163.

even of the other intra-theater forces, like the Romanian, Bulgarian, etc. militaries.[29]

There were two strategic directions in the theater: The Northern Italian, and the Balkans (Greek/Turkish), and Hungary was involved in the first one. The Soviets measured their capacity in how many fronts (army groups) they could absorb: both strategic directions were 1–2 front sized. Based on the many Warsaw Pact exercises, from the 1960s the HPA, the Soviet units of the Southern Group of Forces and some units from the Carpathian Military District (nowadays mostly Western Ukraine)[30] in wartime would have formed the South-Western Front[31] (Army Group, with the SGF and the HPA's GS members as its staff), in charge of the operations in Austria, Italy and Southern (West) Germany.[32]

From the early 1960s there were two operational directions for the HPA heading to the Northern Italian strategic direction: the Northern Italian Operational Direction (Szombathely/Raab Valley – Graz – Klagenfurt – Udine, earlier simply called: Maribor-Milano) and the Danube Valley (Győr/Sopron – Vienna – Danube Valley – Linz – Munich/Salzburg: depending on the year).[33] Both of these directions covered Austria, a then neutral country and the high mountainous regions of the Alps. The assessment of the Warsaw Pact planners was that in case of a war, Austria likely join NATO, while Yugoslavia (also neutral) would join the Warsaw Pact. Also, in any case of a NATO violation of its territory, they considered Austria as a legitimate target for any attacks (nuclear included). In both directions, the HPA was usually in the first echelon, which meant it had most of its units in the western part of the country in high readiness.[34]

During the 1960s, all the exercises were dominated by the mass use of nuclear weapons to break the opposing forces in days („nuclear Blitzkrieg").[35] The reality was, that Hungary had no equipment to deliver

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[29] Jakus, „A VSZ," 63.

[30] Ibid., 65.

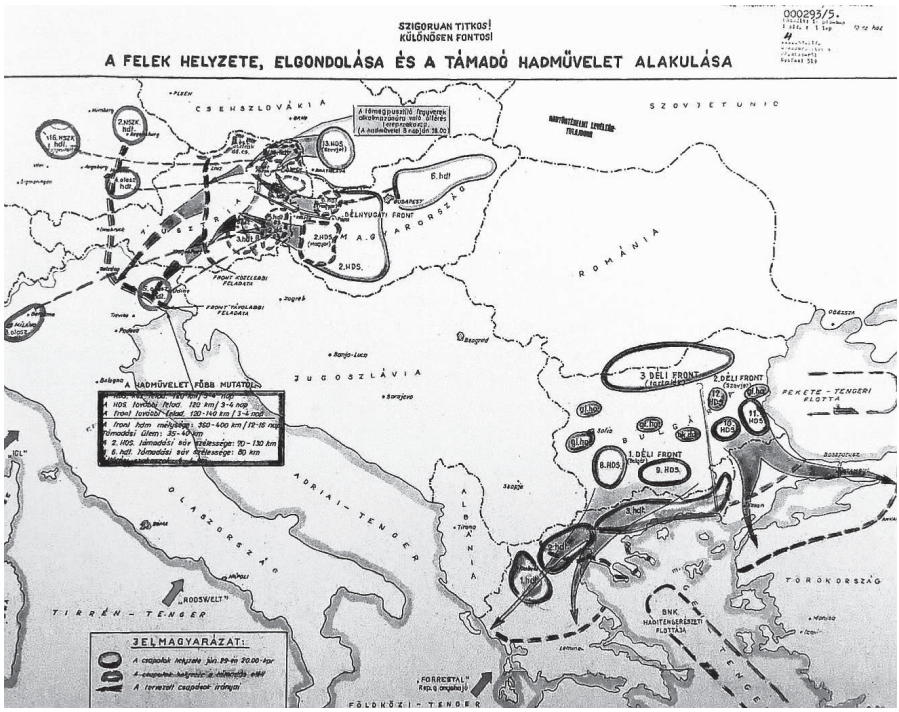
[31] Sometimes they used different designations (like Balatoni Front, because of the Lake Balaton and the Transdanubian area /Western Hungary/ of operations) and allocation of forces, but this was the standard for most of the time.

[32] Jakus, „A VSZ," 61.

[33] Ibid.

[34] László Antal Mészáros, *Rubin-feladat. A Magyar Néphadsereg szárazföldi csapatainak hadrendi változásai 1987-ben (Kitekintéssel a Magyar Néphadsereg egészére)* (Budapest: Zrínyi, 2020), 32.

[35] Due to Hungary's size and geographic location it was assessed, that in case of a western nuclear strike, in less than an hour all the parts of the could be reached by NATO bombers. This forced the military-industry planners to reassess their estimates about their estimated length of a future war, the mobilisation and the survival capability of the country;



Picture no. 3. SWTMO exercise plans from 1970[36]

Source: Hungarian Military Archives, published by Miklós Horváth and Vilmos Kovács, *Magyarország az atomháború árnyékában* (Budapest: Zrínyi, 2016), 61.

those weapons, all of them were to be released by the Soviets. This changed during the decade, since some tactical rocket launcher capability (LUNA, NATO code: FROG-7) was established.[37] The warheads for the Warsaw

Pál Germuska, „A totális mozgósítástól a stratégiai tervezésig. Az Országos Tervhivatal Általános Szervezési Főosztályának története, 1948–1971," *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 121, no. 1 (2008): 90, accessed October 10, 2022, http://epa.oszk.hu/00000/00018/00061/pdf/EPA00018_hadtortenelmi_2008_01.pdf.

[36] There was a one week long Warsaw Pact wargame in Hungary, where the HPA's 5th Army attacked towards Northern Italy, The 3rd Corps attacked towards the Danube Valley direction. In reality the HPA's 3rd Corps was not a first echelon force, it was a Category B (or C) formation; Cseh, „A Magyar," 74.

[37] The first tracked R-30/70 missile batteries appeared from 1962 at the division level, and from the next year the organization process of an independent tactical-operational missile brigade (with R-170, later R-300 missiles) began at Tapolca. It became subordinated directly to the 5th Army HQ: the HPA 1480 (*Magyar Nephadsereg* 1480), the most secretive Hungarian unit of the Cold War period. All of the nuclear capable missile units were called „armor reconnaissance" units, to cover their true identity for security reasons; Szabó, *Szupertitkos*

Pact and the Hungarian armed forces were stored by the Soviets, only to hand over them in wartime.[38]

The Hungarian Air Force (hereafter: HUAF, hung. *Magyar Legierő*) had no bomber capability during the Cold War (only for a short period of time during the 1950s, and after it, in the 1990s). Mostly reconnaissance aircraft, fighters and interceptors were in use. From the 1950s until the 1980s, they were subordinated to the command of the integrated air defense system, together with the anti aircraft missiles, radars, etc.[39] The main type was the Mig-21, and there was a push from the Soviets to modernize the HUAF, so a regiment of Mig-23 was also operational in the 1980s.[40] Based on the doctrines, most of the support of the HPA ground forces were the task of the rotary wing forces, as „flying artillery". From the late 1970s the Mi-24 attack helicopter was fit for the role.

Picture no. 4. Soviet Nuclear Storage Facilities in Hungary

Source: CIA, „Warsaw Pact Forces Opposite NATO, NIE 11-14-79, Top Secret; partially declassified, 31 January 1979," 46, IPFM, accessed October 9, 2022, https://fissilematerials.org/library/jh99.pdf

In charge of all the air releasable nuclear weapons were the Soviet Air Force units stationed in Hungary.[41] According to the Soviet doctrines, some of the wartime stocks were stationed here all the time (Kiskunlacháza/

alakulat. Az MN 1480 hadműveleti-harcászati rakétadandár története (1963–1991) (Budapest: Zrínyi, 2010).

[38] The main Soviet facility to store the HPA's nuclear warheads was in Nagyvázsony, it was called „Little-Moscow" by the Hungarians.

[39] Mészáros, *Rubin-feladat*, 11.

[40] Michael Napier, *In Cold War Skies: NATO and Soviet Air Power, 1949–89* (London: Osprey, 2020), 305.

[41] The Soviet fighter-bomber regiment in Debrecen (with 1 special nuclear bomber squadron) was in charge of the targets in Northern-Italy, the Soviet fighter-bomber regiment in Kunmadaras (with 1 special nuclear bomber squadron) was in charge of the targets in Austria; Károly Vándor, *Légierő Társbérletben,* vol. 2 (Karcag: VPP, 2010), 17.

Tököl, Kunmadaras/Debrecen, see picture no. 4.), and some were kept in central storages far behind.[42] From 1981, Su-24 aircraft was the mainstay type of these units, before that Jak-28/Il-28's were scheduled for the same role.[43]

The staff system and planning methods of the HPA

In 1967, a new Professional Military Education model was established. A four years long Military Academy (basic higher education) became the standard, with the possibility to get an education at a fellow Warsaw Pact member nation's academy. In Hungary, three new academies were established (Lajos Kossuth for the combat units, János Bolyai for the engineers and support, and Máté Zalka for the air force), and there was a dedicated goal to raise the level of education, with the integration of civilian courses too. After a few years of service, the next stop was the tactical-operation level for a two-four years education: *Zrínyi Miklós Katonai Akadémia* (hereafter: ZMKA) in Hungary or in an allied military institution, like the Mikhail Vasilyevich Frunze Academy in Moscow.

This education method was based on the Soviet model, and shows how every member of the Warsaw Pact had to adopt the leading nations' methods and tools. This was all the same in the case of doctrines – the national military manuals were mostly just mere translations of the original Soviet ones. Also the principles of training, organization and military technology were determined by the Soviets, to help the integration (literally to ease the command and control) of the national militaries interoperability in the alliance.

The tactics and procedures were all Soviet, as were the planning methods. For the HPA, as mentioned earlier, all the higher level plans were approved and signed in Moscow, even if they were mostly Hungary related. So the wartime operational plans and objectives were sent by the Soviets to the HPA, not chosen by them.

The whole planning process was heavy for the commander – based on his experiences and training, he made almost all the decisions by himself, the staff only provided the needed information to do that successfully, and later disseminated the written orders. In this leadership model, time was the decisive factor, since all the decisions were made by a single person. To speed up things, the superior HQ's (at the army/division

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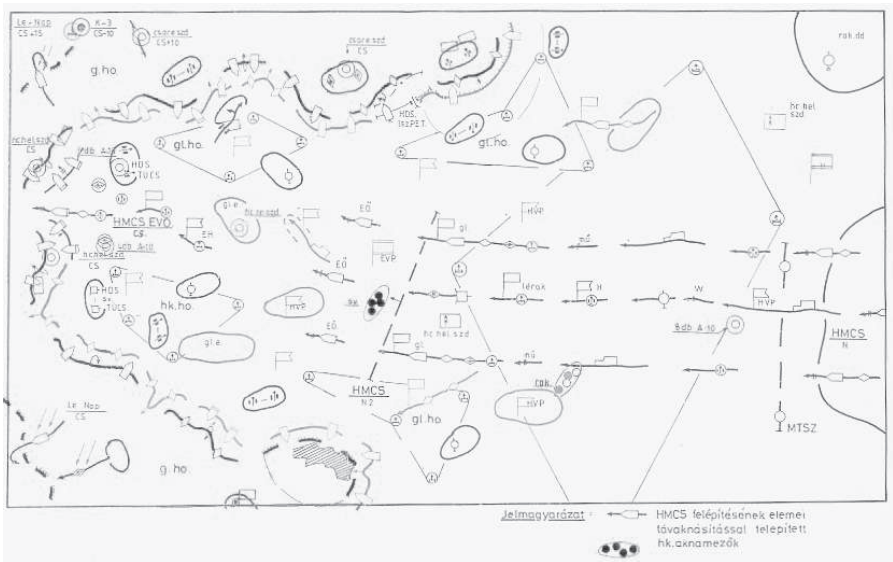
[42] Based on some of the exercises, there are 2 categories for nuclear weapon storage: in-country and deployable. Also, some of the Soviet strategic bomber units had regular training in special airfields built for them in northern Hungary (Mezőkövesd Airfield) during the period; ibid., 17.

[43] Ibid., 13.



Picture no. 5. OMG movement to contact (Theoretical)

Source: Imre Fülöp, „A hadsereg hadműveleti manővercsoport alkalmazása az összfegyvernemi hadsereg támadó hadműveletének kifejlesztése során, különös tekintettel a várható hadműveleti irány sajátosságaira," PhD Thesis, ZMKA, 1986, Annex 16 [Declassified in 1991].

level) created detailed orders, supported by long and complex mathematical combat models and charts.[44]

This detailed order system left the subunit leaders (the NCO corps was already dysfunctional since the 1950s) without much freedom of decision, so they were reluctant to make many moves on their own initiative. This follows the order by the letter type leadership fitted the way how the Soviet and Warsaw Pact doctrines handled fire support, as the key element of the much anticipated breakthrough. The barrages were against an area, not point targets, and usually were scheduled by time, not by the call for fire of the on scene commanders.

The emphasis on the individual decision making came back (although in a limited way) in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the HPA (following the Soviet trends) began experimenting with the Operational Maneuver Group (hereafter: OMG) concept. The main problem with this was

[44] The many large scale (allied and national) exercise's documents left in the archives support this. In modern day NATO the golden rule of planning is the sharing of time by thirds: a 1/3 of the available time is for the superior, the 2/3 is for the subordinate. In Warsaw Pact times, the higher level leadership's planning was much more detailed and time consuming, the lower levels had few options next to execute the precise orders.

the planned area of operations: the narrow river valleys, and the canalizing high mountainous, rugged terrain.[45]

To support this concept and to maintain the high operational tempo, many tactical units (battalions and companies) were trained to operate alone in the enemy depth or on the flanks to cover all the directions in the mountains. In the Northern Italian operational direction, the value of the air assault forces greatly increased. In the HPA, there were the so called „deep reconnaissance" units, that combined the capability of real recce troops (halfway between recce troops and nowadays special forces) unique dual use capabilities of the paratrooper units.[46]

The assessed line of commitment for the OMG was around the Graz basin, after the breakthrough or a successful meeting engagement. The assessed tempo of the division was 80–100 km a day (50 km in mountainous terrain), and they prepared to operate 50–80 km in advance of the first echelon troops (1 day in advance). The total distance of advance assigned for the First Echelon OMG mechanized infantry division was about 250–300 km during a 4–5 days operation time.[47]

The HPA during the 1980s

During the late 1970s both the global political system and the Warsaw Pact decision making became very rigid. Romania distanced itself from the other members (in the 1960s the cooperation between the HPA and its Romanian counterpart was good), but Bulgaria stepped up to take its leading place in the Balkans direction. Meanwhile the so-called Military-Technical Revolution became the obsession of the Soviet leadership. This pushed the Warsaw Pact forces to a force modernization spiral, but in Hungary, the

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[45] The OMG was usually built around a tank division in the Western Strategic Direction. However in the Northern-Italian operational direction, due to the rugged terrain, the OMG was based on a Mechanized Rifle Division (1 BMP and 2 PSZH based mechanized rifle regiments, 1 tank and 1 self propelled artillery regiments) heavily reinforced with air assault and desant forces (at least with 20 Mi-24D and 20 Mi-8 helicopters, with Airborne Command & Control elements); Imre Fülöp, „A hadsereg hadműveleti manővercsoport alkalmazása az összfegyvernemi hadsereg támadó hadműveletének kifejlesztése során, különös tekintettel a várható hadműveleti irány sajátosságaira," PhD Thesis, Zrínyi Miklós Katonai Akadémia (hereafter: ZMKA), 1986, Annex 11 [Declassified in 1991].

[46] The reconnaissance system was developed and tested heavily through 1970s. The Strategic level (HPA) was covered by the 34th Recce Battalion (Szolnok), the Operational (5th Army) by the 27th Independent Recce Company (with 13 deep recce groups!) and the tactical by the division level recce battalions; János Iszaszegi, ed., *Legendák és titkok katonái – A mélységi felderítés története* (Budapest: Zrínyi, 2012), 11–17, 95.

[47] József Munkácsi, „A hadsereg hadműveleti manővercsoport felderítő biztosításának feltételei a délnyugati hadszíntéren," PhD Thesis, ZMKA, 1986, 34.

post-1956 political leadership (and personally János Kádár) put a serious constraint on the size of the military. The main topic of development of the armed forces was limited to raising the quality of the HPA capabilities, but without raising the numbers. Since the new military hardware needed a different approach in tactical use, sustainment and many other ways, it was impossible to keep up with the evolution without changing the force structure. At the end of the 1970s it was all blocked by the political leadership.

The answer of the HPA leadership was to „empty" some of the units to create skeleton formations, and move their troops to other units, equipped with more modern weapon systems.[48] The number of new officer cadets was also dropped, and the higher HQ's were naturally more popular for the career officers than the skeleton units. During the early 1980s, the Chief of the HPA's GS, later Minister of Defence, Gen. István Oláh ordered a study about changing the force structure from the regiment-division-corps/army model to a more fit battalion-brigade-corps-army one.[49] This was blocked by the Soviets, who were keen on keeping the Warsaw Pact military organizations identical to their own, to help planning and ease leadership in case of a war.

In 1985, the wind of change arrived to the Eastern Bloc. The new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev was more flexible in these questions, so the force structure modernization got a green light. The reorganization took two years, so from 1985 to 1987 the HPA prepared for the „Task RUBIN", the most serious change of the order of battle since the 1960s. In 1987 they created a more capable armed force:

- 5th Army HQ remained in charge for operational control,
- 1st, 2nd, 3rd, Mechanized Corps were established instead of the divisions. This saved a lot of officers, to be sent to the new brigade staffs,
- Instead of the single arm regiments, more independent combined formations (brigades) were created. It meant more flexibility at the tactical level, without the loss of the combat power (fighting battalions).[50]

Although the reorganization was successful, it took years to learn how to fight with combined arms tactical formations (brigades) instead of single arm regiments. This happened after the cold war, when the freedom to create new manuals, etc. became possible. After the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, most former eastern bloc countries changed to the battalion-brigade type organizations.

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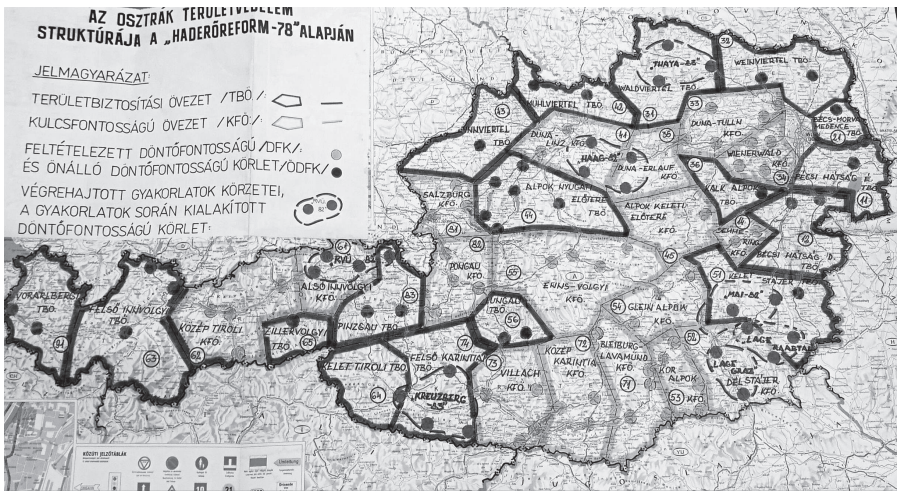
[48] Mészáros, *Rubin-feladat*, 11.

[49] Ibid., 10.

[50] Ibid., 156.

War planning in the late Cold War

Austria reorganized its military in 1978, and it was not left unnoticed in Hungary and by the Warsaw Pact. The continuous defense lines concept was dropped, and the ring like, zone based defense was implemented instead. There were Territorial Security Zones (hung. *Területbiztosítási Övezetek*, TBÖ) and Key Defensive Zones (hung. *Kulcsfontosságú Övezetek*, KFÖ) to delay and disrupt any attacks. The latters were built around the smaller but more important, Decisive Defense Areas (hung. *Döntőfontosságú Körletek*, DFK) or Independent Decisive Defense Areas (hung. *Önálló Döntőfontosságú Körletek*, ÖDFK) along the main valleys and possible axis of advances.[51]



Picture no. 6. Post-1978 Austrian Territorial Defense Zones assessed by the HPA planners in the 1980s. The Territorial Security/Key Defensive Zone (TBŐ/KFŐ) boundaries with lines, and the Decisive Defensive Areas/Independent Decisive Decisive Areas (DFK/ÖDFK) with dots. The dots and the dotted lines are the previous Austrian exercises.

Source: Kálmán Varga, „Az É.olasz és a dunavölgyi hadműveleti irány osztrák területén átvezető irányszakaszainak katonaföldrajzi jellemzése és kihatásai a hadműveleti és harcászati felderítő erők és eszközök alkalmazására," PhD Thesis, ZMKA, 1985, 152 [Declassified in 1996].

These Decisive Defense Areas were reinforced by concrete fortresses and man made obstacles. The light infantry (*jäger*) and territorial forces were in charge of using those areas for static defense, while the mechanized (the Austrian military had no nuclear weapons and the *Bundesheer* was also lacking

[51] Péter Gál, „Az összfegyvernemi hadsereg védelmének kialakulása az észak-olasz hadműveleti irányban, megtervezése és megszervezése csak hagyományos, illetve atomfegyverek korlátlan alkalmazása esetén," PhD thesis, ZMKA, 1981, 144–145.

armament at that time, so the doctrine was considered totally defensive) forces were prepared to counterattack from the nearby areas.

The neutral country was in the operational directions towards Southern Germany and Northern Italy, and their geography made it a very hard terrain to fight. This led to the creation of the HPA's mountain warfare center, north of the Lake Balaton (in Rezi), which was a very similar terrain (rocky, mountainous) than the Glein or Koralps.[52]

In the late Cold War period for the HPA and the wartime Southwestern Front, the multinational exercises usually started with a NATO attack from the Adriatic Sea, the Graz-Szombathely direction.[53] Therefore the basin around the Austrian City of Graz became the first key objective to capture, to close (or seize) the passes of the different Alps ridges towards Italy. The seizing of the terrain was anticipated without much resistance or in case of a loss of time, with a meeting engagement against the Italian mechanized and armored forces (3rd or 5th Army Corps were the main threat for the HPA. The first Italian units were expected to arrive in the Graz area from 36 to 48 hours after the outbreak of the war).

There were multiple directions to advance on Graz (the two most common during the planning were the Szombathely and Raab Valley directions), but the main question was the position of Yugoslavia, for its control over the Drava river valley (Maribor). For the control of the Graz basin, the HPA planners created detailed plans, covering the water power plant south of the city (key terrain). The water reservoirs north and west of the city was holding millions of cubic meters of water, capable of destroying the roads and cutting lines of communication between Graz and Maribor, for the whole length of the river valley for 3–7 days (for a single tracked vehicles or columns). The HPA's hydrologists researched even the possible use of nuclear strikes and nuclear mines around the powerplant to protect the troops and keep the expected flood under control.[54] They also prepared the engineering units to build bridges for the fighting units

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[52] Ottó Füzesi, „Felderítő tisztképzés a Kossuth Lajos Katonai Főiskolán (1967–1997)," *Hadtudományi Szemle* no. 2 (2012): 35, accesed October 19, 2022, https://epa.oszk.hu/02400/02463/00013/pdf/EPA02463_hadtudomanyi_szemle_2012_3-4_008-127.pdf.

[53] Until 1987, the HPA was not really prepared for defense, neither did the Warsaw Pact. It is important to clarify this, since in the diplomatic, information, etc. domains, it was labeled as a collective defence treaty organization, and was officially for peace. Horváth and Kovács, *Magyarország*, 148.

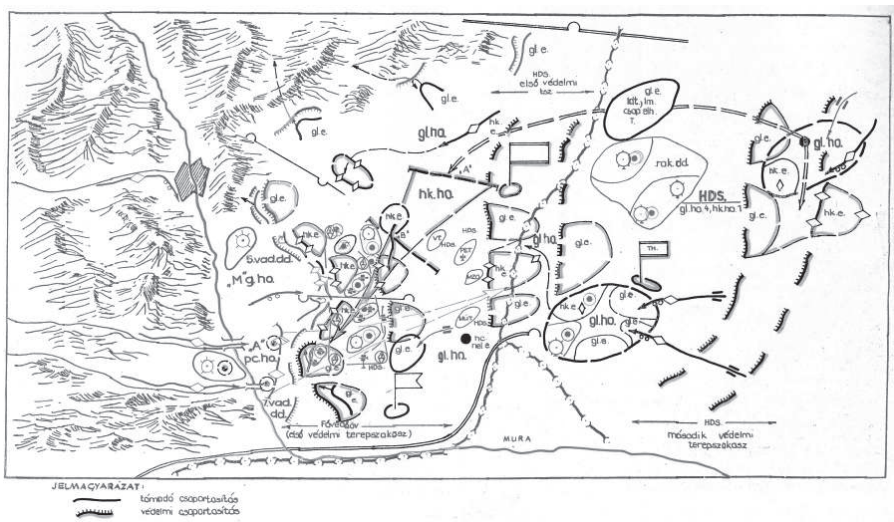
[54] Gyula Léka [later MG Gyula Léka, the last Chief of the Engineer Branch of the HPA], „A hidrotechnikai zárak hadműveleti–harcászati jelentősége és a fegyveres harcra gyakorolt hatásuk az ausztriai hadműveleti irányokban," PhD Thesis, ZMKA, 1975, 56–57 [Declassified in 1998].

south of Leibnitz and planned a training programme for flood control and rescue teams.[55]

The second most important key terrain in this direction was the long and narrow valley around Klagenfurt (Austria). This area was literally the gate of Northern Italy, and was a well defendable terrain.

In the Northern Italian operational direction, the HPA's 5th Army's task was to:

- Destroy the Austrian forces in the Security Area of the battlefield (Border Guard forces, and the forward deployed troops), as fast as possible,
- Breakthrough the fortress lines and fortified areas (Bruck, Klagenfurt, etc.),
- Capture the important mountain passes, reservoirs and junctions with the use of airborne and air assault (heliborne desant) forces and OMG's,
- Capture key terrain before the enemy reserves move forward – and defeat them in meeting engagement (the anticipated tempo of the operations was 25–30 km/day during the 1960's),
- Cross the Alps' passes before the enemy could destroy them.[56]



Picture no. 7. The Combined Arms Army changing posture from the Offensive to the Defensive due to opposing forces mass nuclear strikes (Theory). Although not named, the terrain heavily resembles to the Graz basin, while Mechanized Infantry Division „M" and Armored Division „A" sounds very similar to Italian units Mantova and Ariete, whom are supported by the 5th and 7th [Austrian] Jäger Brigades

Source: Péter Gál, „Az összfegyvernemi hadsereg védelmének kialakulása az észak-olasz hadműveleti irányban, megtervezése és megszervezése csak hagyományos, illetve atomfegyverek korlátlan alkalmazása esetén," PhD Thesis, ZMKA, 1981, Annex 9.

55 Ibid., 150–151.

56 Jakus, „A VSZ," 66.

Picture no. 8. Warsaw Pact Multinational Exercise TEMP (1980), „From Szombathely to Trapani"

Source: Miklós Horváth, *Once again Soveriegnty* (Budapest: Argumentum, 2016), 172.

During the preparation for war it was always questionable how far the Hungarian troops should and can go. Usually an army level formations' objectives are measured in hundreds of kilometers, so in the Northern-Italian direction (the main effort of the HPA in most exercises) it was the equivalent of the plain of the Po river, in between Udine and Bolzano. However all the exercises started with a NATO aggression, and the scenario was built around the violation of Austrian neutrality, so the Alps became the

area of a preventive thrust from the Warsaw Pact forces, to push out the advancing Italian and American (sometimes French and/or West German) troops. The reality was that the Soviets' (the strategic second echelon's) task was to conquer the whole of Italy (probably with some minor Hungarian reinforcements), using the Po river valley as a bridgehead. This was covered by the 1980 „Exercise TEMP" very well.

The other operational direction (on the northern side of the main ridgeline of the Alps, since it served as the boundary between the operational directions), considered to be the better for large mechanized formations, due to its more wide nature. Also the terrain was less likely to be disrupted for a long time period by the floods caused by the destruction of the reservoirs (also the more dense population was more vulnerable to collateral damage).

The Danube Valley thrust towards Munich and Salzburg was less times the main effort of the Hungarian People's Army during the exercises.[57] It usually was the area of operations of the Soviet units of the peacetime Southern Group Area of Operations, with or without the help of the HPA's 3rd Corps. During the the 1960s the wartime operations of the Southwestern Front (strategic first echelon) consisted of:

- Main Effort: the HPA's 5th Army, reinforced with a Soviet division from the SGF attacked towards Northern Italy (total of 5 divisions),
- The HPA's 3rd Corps Attacked toward Vienna (2 Divisions),
- 2 Soviet divisions from the SGF reinforced with additional divisions form the Carpathian Military District attacked on the left bank of the river Danube, and maintained contact with the Czechoslovak People's Army (2–4 divisions),
- 1 Soviet division from the SGF was the Front Reserve (1 division).[58]

Altogether from the 1960s in the SWTMO the first strategic echelon (the Warsaw Pacts's Southwestern Front) concentrated 10 to 12 divisions (at least 3 of them tank divisions) to the Northern Italian strategic direction. Based on „Exercise TEMP", for its operations, the Front had more than 25 megatons of nuclear weapons available: these were mostly to destroy urban centers[59] and the concentrations of the Austrian (and Italian) troops while they are still in the mountainous areas.[60]

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[57] Usually the West German Army, the *Bundeswehr* was considered one of the best militaries of the NATO, and their appearance was highly likely in the Danube Valley operational direction, and that sometimes justified the heavier Soviet involvement. The Italian Armed Forces were considered less effective, so they were more in line with the HPA's general technical level.

[58] Jakus, „A VSZ," 66.

[59] Based on contemporary Soviet (and therefore Warsaw Pact) doctrines, time and tempo were essential, so sieges and urban fighting were considered too time consuming. Most of the time, nuclear strikes were designed to destroy large cities like Vienna, Milan, etc.

[60] Horváth, *Once Again*, 174.

Conclusions

The unwilling Hungarian People's Army (as a result of the purges), started the Cold War with too few and usually terribly undereducated new officer corps, underdeveloped infrastructure, no real heavy industry to support its efforts and a large number of undermotivated conscripts. According to Stalin's directives, the HPA prepared itself for a war against Yugoslavia, which cost an unacceptably high sum in the desperate post war rebuilding times.

These added a lot to the already rising tension that led to the 1956 Revolution, where the mostly passive military became the scapegoat of the events. For a few years, the Hungarian armed forces were literally non-existent, and any kind of development started only in the 1960s, and due to Soviet pressure. After years of preparation for an attack in the southern direction, the HPA suddenly became the first echelon of the coming war with NATO and the whole West.

This role was taken by the 5th Army (formed in 1961) that slowly became the most important Hungarian military organization during the Cold War. The Austrian Area of Operations was highly mountainous, not like the most part of Hungary. The mechanized and armoured divisions' task was to rapidly rush through the narrow river valleys, protected by obstacles, fortress areas and a system of reservoirs, just to destroy an Italian Army's corps in a meeting engagement in the Alps to capture the passes leading to the Po river plain. It was an ambitious task for any military!

During the last decade of the Cold War, the constraints put on the HPA caused the emptying of the operational units, and many of them became just skeleton formations. This led to an important force structure modernization that was followed by most eastern bloc countries in the 1990s.

The Hungarian People's Army's late Cold War war planning is still not a well known topic even in Hungary, since the military historians are just slowly processing the huge amount of documents of the period. Most of our knowledge is coming from the many multinational exercises documentation – especially valuable are the high level staff exercises. Although sometimes they were scripted at various levels, there are still easy to find objective behind them.

Nowadays most military history enthusiasts and former (usually western) military people are contributing to the collective remembrance that covers the frontlines between East and West Germany, but I hope that this article helps to widen the international community's perspective on the less known Soviet South-Western Theater of Military Operations.

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STRESZCZENIE

Zoltán Harangi-Tóth, Węgierska Armia Ludowa w czasie zimnej wojny

Niniejszy artykuł stanowi krótkie podsumowanie historii Węgierskiej Armii Ludowej (*Magyar Néphadsereg*), z naciskiem na jej zadania operacyjne, strukturę i planowane zastosowanie wojenne w okresie zimnej wojny.

Węgierska Republika Ludowa była członkiem Układu Warszawskiego, a planowanie rozmieszczenia wojsk tego kraju odbywało się w ramach sowieckiego

Południowo-Zachodniego Teatru Działań Wojennych, tzw. Północno-Włoskiego i Naddunajskiego Kierunku Operacyjnego.

Słowa kluczowe: Węgierska Armia Ludowa, zimna wojna, Południowo-Zachodni Teatr Operacyjny, Północno-Włoski Kierunek Operacyjny, Naddunajski Kierunek Operacyjny

SUMMARY

Zoltán Harangi-Tóth, The Hungarian People's Army during the Cold War

This article is a short summary of the History of the Hungarian People's Army (*Magyar Néphadsereg*), with emphasis placed on its operational tasks, structure and planned wartime application during the Cold War period.

The Hungarian People's Republic was a member of the Warsaw Pact, so the above mentioned tasks were signed in Moscow, and the planned deployment of the country's military was covered by the Soviet South-Western Theater of Military Operations so-called Northern-Italian and Danube Valley Operational Directions.

Keywords: Hungarian People's Army, Cold War, Soviet South-Western Theater of Military Operations, Northern-Italian Operational Direction, Danube Valley Operational Direction

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Zoltán Harangi-Tóth, Die Ungarische Volksarmee im Kalten Krieg

Dieser Aufsatz ist eine kurze Zusammenfassung der Geschichte der Ungarische Volksarmee (*Magyar Néphadsereg*), mit Schwerpunkt auf ihren operativen Aufgaben, ihrer Struktur und ihrem geplanten Kriegseinsatz in der Zeit des Kalten Krieges.

Die Ungarische Volksrepublik war Mitglied des Warschauer Paktes, und die Planungen für ihren Militäreinsatz fanden im Rahmen des sowjetischen Südwestlichen Kriegsschauplatzes, der sogenannten Operationsrichtung Norditalien und Donau, statt.

Stichworte: Ungarische Volksarmee, Kalter Krieg, Südwestliches Kriegsschauplatz, Nördlich-italienische Operationsrichtung, Donautal-Operationsrichtung