Introduction

In the closing months of World War II and the latter half of the 1940s, the Soviet Union oversaw the establishment of Communist regimes throughout Central and Eastern Europe. Over the next four decades, those regimes together with the USSR constituted what was informally known as the Soviet bloc. To help ensure the maintenance of Communist rule in East-Central Europe, the Soviet Union set up a military alliance system with the other countries in the bloc, initially through an interlocking series of bilateral defense agreements. At a meeting in Warsaw on May 14, 1955, the USSR and most of the East European states signed documents creating a formal multilateral alliance.[1] This new allied structure, known as the Warsaw Treaty Organization (or Warsaw Pact, for short), started out primarily as a buffer zone for the USSR rather than a full-fledged military organization.

The formation of the Warsaw Pact came a day before the Soviet Union joined the United States, Great Britain, France, and Austria in signing the Austrian State Treaty, which, among other things, provided for the withdrawal of all Soviet and Western occupation forces from Austria.[2] Until May 1955, the ostensible justification for Soviet military deployments in both Hungary and Romania had been that they were needed to preserve logistical and communications links with Soviet troops in Austria. The signing of the Austrian State Treaty would have eliminated the purported justification for the continued deployment of Soviet miliary units in Hungary and Romania, but the establishment of the multilateral Warsaw Pact the previous day provided a fresh rationale for keeping Soviet troops in those two countries even after all Soviet troops pulled out of Austria.

Although the signing of the Warsaw Pact was intended mainly as a symbolic counter to the admission of West Germany into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the legitimacy it conferred on the Soviet troop presence in allied countries was part of a larger Soviet effort under Nikita Khrushchev to codify the basic political and military structures of Soviet–East European relations. The status-of-forces agreements the Soviet government concluded with Poland (1956), Hungary (1957), East Germany (1957), Romania (1957), and Czechoslovakia

[1] "Podpisanie dogovora o druzhbe, sotrudnichestve i vzaimnoi pomoshchi," *Pravda* (Moscow), May 15, 1955, p. 1, and the text of the treaty on p. 2. The member-states, in addition to the Soviet Union, were Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. Albania withdrew from the Pact in 1968.

[2] Gerald Stourzh and Wolfgang Mueller, *A Cold War over Austria: The Struggle for the State Treaty, Neutrality, and the End of East-West Occupation, 1945–1955* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018); Arnold Suppan, Gerald Stourzh, and Wolfgang Mueller, eds., *Der österreichische Staatsvertrag* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2005); and Mark Kramer, "The USSR and Cold War Neutrality and Nonalignment in Europe," in Mark Kramer, Aryo Makko, and Peter Ruggenthaler, eds., *The Soviet Union and Cold War Neutrality and Nonalignment in Europe* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), pp. 533–565.

(1968), which devolved a large share of the stationing costs to the host countries, were bilateral in nature, but they bolstered the Warsaw Pact insofar as they gave the Soviet Union a reliable means of ensuring the indefinite continuation of the "temporary" presence of its ground and air forces in East-Central Europe.[3]

During the first several years after the Warsaw Pact was formed, the military role of the alliance was relatively meager, limited mainly to the integration of strategic air defense forces under Soviet command. When a severe crisis erupted in Hungary in the autumn of 1956, the Romanian, Bulgarian, and Czechoslovak authorities expressed willingness (even eagerness) to have their own troops take part alongside Soviet forces in what would have been a Warsaw Pact operation to quell the revolutionary unrest in Hungary, but the Soviet Union decided not to use the Pact and instead relied exclusively on its own army to crush the rebellion.[4] Although many of the Soviet troops entered Hungary from the territory of another Warsaw Pact member-state, Romania, this was undertaken via the USSR's bilateral defense agreement with Romania, rather than under the auspices of the Warsaw Pact.[5] Not until the early 1960s, when Soviet and East European troops initiated a series of joint military exercises connected with the Berlin crisis and Soviet leaders started pressuring the East European countries to expand and modernize their armies, did the alliance begin to take on greater significance for intra-bloc contingencies as well as external defense.

In 1968 the commander-in-chief of the Warsaw Pact's joint armed forces, Marshal Ivan Yakubovskii, played a key role during the Soviet-Czechoslovak crisis, particularly in organizing military exercises that were designed to intimidate the Czechoslovak authorities and population. Yakubovskii was originally slated to command the Soviet and East European military contingents that invaded Czechoslovakia in August 1968, but at the last minute he had to relinquish that assignment because Soviet Defense Minister Andrei Grechko, who had long disliked Yakubovskii, did not want him to get credit for overseeing the joint operation.[6] On August 17, a few days before the invasion of Czechoslovakia began, Grechko persuaded the leaders of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) to transfer control of allied forces from Yakubovskii and the Main Staff of

[3] For an astute appraisal, see U.S. Central Intelligence (CIA), "The Warsaw Pact: Its Role in Soviet Bloc Affairs from Its Origin to the Present Day," Intelligence Analytical Report, May 6, 1966, released September 2002, available in CIA, Electronic Reading Room (ERR), <www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/home>.

[4] Mark Kramer, "The Soviet Union and the 1956 Crises in Hungary and Poland: Reassessments and New Findings," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (April 1998), pp. 163–214.

[5] See Document No. 49 in Ioan Scurtu, ed., *România: Retragerea trupelor sovietice. 1958* (Bucharest: Didactică şi Pedagogică, 1996), pp. 247–249.

[6] Mark Kramer, "The Kremlin, the Prague Spring, and the Brezhnev Doctrine," in Vladimir Tismaneanu, ed., *Promises of 1968: Crisis, Illusion, and Utopia* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), pp. 251–252.

the Warsaw Pact to the Soviet High Command, a move that necessitated extensive last-minute reworking of combat directives and plans for an operation that was ultimately placed under the supervision of Army-General Ivan Pavlovskii, the commander-in-chief of Soviet Ground Forces.

This abrupt change of command authority was highly unusual, but it did not adumbrate a downgrading of the Warsaw Pact per se. Even though supreme control of the operation was transferred at the last moment from the allied Joint Command to the Soviet High Command, the Warsaw Pact's role in the crisis up to that point had been salient throughout and remained so afterward.[7] Brezhnev was determined to give the invasion a multilateral appearance (unlike the unilateral action in Hungary in 1956), and he obtained the cooperation of four other Warsaw Pact countries – East Germany, Poland, Bulgaria, and Hungary – to intervene with the Soviet Union against their ally, Czechoslovakia (though in the case of East Germany only a liaison unit took part after the Polish leader Władysław Gomułka and Czechoslovak hardliners warned Brezhnev that the entry of East German combat troops onto Czechoslovak territory would trigger a political backlash).[8]

The function that the Warsaw Pact performed in 1968 as a defender of "socialist gains" in Czechoslovakia was the touchstone for subsequent crises in Eastern Europe. In the wake of the 1968 invasion, Soviet officials and commentators enunciated what became known in the West as the Brezhnev Doctrine (named after the then leader of the USSR, Leonid Brezhnev). This "doctrine" linked the fate of each Warsaw Pact country with the fate of all others, stipulated that every member of the Pact must abide by the norms of Marxism-Leninism as interpreted in Moscow, and rejected "abstract sovereignty" in favor of the "laws of class struggle."[9] The Brezhnev Doctrine thus laid out even stricter "rules of the game" than in the past for the Soviet bloc:

> Without question, the peoples of the socialist countries and the Communist parties have and must have freedom to determine their country's path of development. Any decision they make, however, must not be inimical either

[7] For more on this, see ibid., pp. 358–360.

[8] See Gomulka 's secret speech on August 29, 1968 at a plenum of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, reproduced in "Gomułka o inwazji na Czechoslowacje w sierpniu '68: Mysmy ich zaskoczyli akcja wojskowa," *Polityka* (Warsaw), No. 35 (August 29, 1992), p. 13. The most authoritative analyses of the role of the East German Nationale Volksarmee (NVA) during the invasion have been produced by Rüdiger Wenzke, including his *Prager Frühling – Prager Herbst: Zur Intervention der Warschauer-Pakt-Streitkräfte in der ČSSR 1968, Fakten und Zusammenhange* (Berlin: Dunckere Humblot, 1990); and *Die NVA und der Prager Frühling 1968: Die Rolle Ulbrichts under der DDR-Streitkräfte bei der Niederschlagung der tschechoslowakischen Reformbewegung* (Berlin: Links Verlag, 1995).

[9] "Zashchita sotsializma – vysshii internatsional'nyi dolg," *Pravda* (Moscow), August 22, 1968, pp. 2–3; and S. Kovalev, "Suverenitet i internatsional'nye obyazannosti sotsialisticheskikh stran," *Pravda* (Moscow), September 26, 1968, p. 4.

> to socialism in their own country or to the fundamental interests of the other socialist countries . . . A socialist state that is in a system of other states composing the socialist commonwealth cannot be free of the common interests of that commonwealth. The sovereignty of individual socialist countries cannot be set against the interests of world socialism and the world revolutionary movement. . . . Each Communist party is free to apply the principles of Marxism-Leninism and socialism in its own country, but it is not free to deviate from these principles if it is to remain a Communist party. . . . The weakening of any of the links in the world system of socialism directly affects all the socialist countries, and they cannot look indifferently upon this.[10]

The Warsaw Pact's founding charter had stipulated that the organization was supposed to be "open to all states . . . irrespective of their social and political systems," but the Brezhnev Doctrine made clear that the members of the Pact would have to conform with the "common natural laws of socialist development, deviation from which could lead to a deviation from socialism as such." The Soviet Union reserved for itself the right to determine when "deviations" from the "common natural laws of socialist development" exceeded permissible bounds, and Soviet leaders claimed that Warsaw Pact members had a "sacred duty" to intervene when necessary to "protect socialist gains."[11]

After the enunciation of the Brezhnev Doctrine, Soviet officials and military commanders repeatedly emphasized that the use of force to keep orthodox Communist regimes in power was one of the chief military missions of the Warsaw Pact.[12] That function came to the fore in 1980–1981, when Marshal Viktor Kulikov, who had succeeded Yakubovskii in 1976 as commander-in-chief of the Pact's joint armed forces, played a crucial political as well as military role vis-à-vis Poland during the prolonged crisis that followed the emergence of the independent Solidarity labor movement in the summer of 1980.[13] In late August 1980, the CPSU Politburo authorized the mobilization of 100,000 Soviet

[10] Kovalev, "Suverenitet i internatsional'nye obyazannosti," p. 4.

[11] See the discussion in Kramer, "The Kremlin, the Prague Spring, and the Brezhnev Doctrine," pp. 362–370.

[12] See, for example, Army-General S. M. Shtemenko, "Bratstvo rozhdennoe v boyu," *Za rubezhom* (Moscow), No. 19 (May 1976), p. 7.

[13] Mark Kramer, "The Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact, and the Polish Crisis of 1980–1981," in Lee Trepanier, Spasimir Domaradzki, and Jaclyn Stanke, eds., *The Solidarity Movement and Perspectives on the Last Decade of the Cold War* (Kraków: Oficyna Wydawoicza, 2010), pp. 27–67; Mark Kramer, "Die Sowjetunion, der Warschauer Pakt und blockinterne Krisen während der Brežnev-Ära," in Torsten Diedrich, Winfried Heinemann, and Christian Ostermann, eds., *Der Warschauer Pakt: Von der Gründung bis zum Zusammenbruch 1955–1991* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2008), pp. 273–337; Mark Kramer, *Soviet Deliberations during the Polish Crisis, 1980–1981*, CWIHP Special Working Paper No. 1 (Washington, DC: Cold War International History Project, 1999); Mark Kramer, *The Kukliński Files and the Polish Crisis of 1980–1981: An Analysis of the Newly Released Documents on Ryszard Kukliński*, CWIHP Working Paper No. 59 (Washington, DC: Cold War International History Project, March 2009); Mark Kramer,

combat troops "in case military assistance is provided to Poland" by the Warsaw Pact. Kulikov oversaw numerous bilateral and multilateral military exercises in and around Poland, and he traveled to Warsaw many times on behalf of the CPSU Politburo and the USSR Defense Council to push for and facilitate the introduction of martial law by Polish forces.

Detailed plans for Soviet/Warsaw Pact military intervention in Poland were drafted, and in December 1980 and April 1981 large numbers of Soviet, East German, and Czechoslovak soldiers were mobilized for joint military action in Poland, though ultimately they were not sent in. A similar scenario could have materialized in December 1981 if the Polish Communist regime's operation to impose martial law had gone awry, causing civil war to erupt in Poland and endangering Soviet troops there.[14] But, as it turned out, the swift and successful introduction of martial law in Poland in December 1981 without the involvement of troops from other Warsaw Pact countries enabled Soviet leaders to avoid having to decide whether to move ahead with an invasion.

The Warsaw Pact's role in upholding orthodox Communist regimes in Eastern Europe against serious internal threats was reinforced by the alliance's military strategy, which in effect preserved a Soviet capability to intervene in other member-states. Warsaw Pact strategy was essentially identical to Soviet strategy for Europe in its emphasis on a blitzkrieg-style assault by combined Soviet and East European forces against NATO positions in Western Europe.[15] To support this strategy, the military establishments in Eastern Europe (other than Romania from the mid-1960s on) geared most of their training, tactics, and military planning toward offensive operations and devoted little time to defensive arrangements that would have impeded Soviet intervention in their own countries. Even the unique system of National Territorial Defense (*Obrona terytorium kraju*) in Poland, though defensive in nature, was designed entirely to protect against nuclear air attacks from the West. By inducing the East European states to concentrate exclusively on perceived threats from the West and not on threats

"Jaruzelski, the Soviet Union, and the Imposition of Martial Law in Poland: New Light on the Mystery of December 1981," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 11 (Winter 1998), pp. 5–32; Mark Kramer, "Colonel Kukliński and the Polish Crisis," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 11 (Winter 1998), pp. 48–59; Mark Kramer, "'In Case Military Assistance Is Provided to Poland': Soviet Preparations for Military Contingencies, August 1980," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 11 (Winter 1998), pp. 102–109; and Mark Kramer, "Poland, 1980–81: Soviet Policy during the Polish Crisis," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 5 (Spring 1995), pp. 1, 116–128.

[14] Mark Kramer, "The Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact, and the Polish Crisis of 1980–1981: Coercion and Delay in Crisis Management," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, forthcoming.

[15] See, for example, "Doświadczenia i wnioski z ćwiczenia 'Mazowsze'," Military Exercise Report (Top Secret – Special Designation), compiled by the Polish General Staff, June 1963, in Archiwum Akt Nowych, Archiwum Komitetu Centralnego PZPR, Sygnatura 5008.

from the East, the Warsaw Pact's strategy prevented those states from developing a defensive capacity against "fraternal" invasions.

Although the intra-bloc policing role of the Warsaw Pact was the alliance's main raison d'être, the Pact also increasingly played a vital role in external defense. From the 1960s through the late 1980s, the Pact served as the primary organ of Soviet and East European war preparations against NATO. The Soviet Union and its allies made elaborate plans and combat preparations for a large-scale "coalition" war against NATO, which would have involved extensive Soviet nuclear strikes as well as joint conventional operations by all Warsaw Pact member-states against NATO forces.

From the early 1970s on, the Warsaw Pact also acquired an important role in political coordination and consultation on a wide range of foreign policy and national security issues. This function proved especially important during the tortuous negotiations in the first half of the 1970s that led to the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), signed in Helsinki by thirty-five heads of state in August 1975.[16] During preparations for subsequent CSCE review conferences and for East–West arms control talks in the late 1970s and 1980s, the East European countries exercised considerable influence on political matters within the Warsaw Pact, taking advantage of organizational reforms introduced in 1969 and 1976 that gave them a greater voice.

On military matters, however, the East European members of the Warsaw Pact had much less leeway. Despite a few gestures at reform, the military command structure of the Pact's joint armed forces continued to be dominated by Soviet marshals and generals.[17] Soviet preponderance in the military chain of command was further strengthened in March 1980 by the secret adoption of a "Statute on the Combined Armed Forces of the Warsaw Pact Member-States and Their Command Organs for Wartime," which in the event of war would have placed East European forces under direct Soviet control.[18] Romanian leaders objected to this new statute and declined to go along with it, but all other Pact members

[16] See the voluminous declassified Soviet records on CSCE in "Soveshchanie po bezopasnosti i sotrudnichestvu v Evrope: Postanovleniya Politbyuro TsK KPSS s prilozheniyami i materialami, 1969–1975 gg.," in Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Noveishei Istorii (RGANI), Fond (F.) 3, Opis' (Op.) 73; and "Soveshchanie po bezopasnosti i sotrudnichestvu v Evrope: Zapisi besed sotrudnikov sovetskikh posol'stv s gosudarstvennymi i obshchestvennymi deyatelyami i sotrudnikami posol'stv zarubezhnykh stran, 1969–1976 gg.," in RGANI, F. 5, Op. 61, 62, 63, 64, 66, 67, 68, 69.

[17] See, for example, Michael Sadykiewicz, *The Warsaw Pact Command Structure in Peace and War*, RAND Report No. R-3558-RC (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, September 1988).

[18] U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Historical Review Program, *Warsaw Pact Wartime Statutes: Instruments of Control* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011). For the full text of the top-secret wartime statute, adopted on 18 March 1980, see "Grundsätze über die Vereinten Streitkräfte der Teilnehmerstaaten des Warschauer Vertrages und ihr Führungsorgane (für den Krieg)," in BA – Abt. MA, AZN 32854, Ss. 85–120.

signed on, giving Soviet commanders the kind of streamlined control mechanism they deemed necessary for all-out nuclear and conventional war in Europe.

By the time Mikhail Gorbachev became CPSU General Secretary in March 1985, the Warsaw Pact appeared to be a solid organization capable of waging a large-scale war in Europe and conducting operations overseas. The Soviet-led alliance, still under the command of Marshal Kulikov, was a formidable military counterweight to NATO and an effective mechanism of political consensus-building. In late April 1985, Gorbachev and the other Warsaw Pact leaders met in Warsaw to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the Pact and agreed to renew it for another thirty years (an initial twenty years plus an automatic ten-year extension). Yet only six years later, on the 1st of July 1991, the Warsaw Pact was formally disbanded, having been rendered obsolete by the political transformation of East-Central Europe over the previous two years – a transformation spurred by a combination of far-reaching change from above (change associated with Gorbachev's "new political thinking"), mass pressure from below, and the sudden loss of will among East European Communist leaders as they increasingly realized that the Soviet Union would no longer strive to maintain orthodox Communist regimes in power throughout the region.

The remarkable events of 1989 in East-Central Europe and the dissolution of the Soviet Union two years later have been analyzed in detail by scholars over the past thirty-five years.[19] The large and burgeoning literature on these topics has focused mainly on political, social, and economic developments, giving scant attention to military issues, including the fate of the Warsaw Pact.[20] Even William

[19] A range of perspectives (including my own) on the upheavals of 1989 in the Soviet bloc can be found in Mark Kramer and Vít Smetana, eds., *Imposing, Maintaining, and Tearing Open the Iron Curtain: The Cold War and East-Central Europe, 1945–1990* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013). See also Mark Kramer, "The Demise of the Soviet Bloc," *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 83, No. 4 (December 2011), pp. 788–854, published in expanded form in Vladimir Tismaneanu and Bogdan C. Iacob, eds., *The End and the Beginning: The Revolutions of 1989 and the Resurgence of History* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2012), pp. 171–256; Mark Kramer, "The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 3)," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Winter 2004–2005), pp. 3–96; Mark Kramer, "The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 2)," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Fall 2004), pp. 3–64; and Mark Kramer, "The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 1)," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Fall 2003), pp. 178–256.

[20] See, for example, Mark Kramer, "The Dissolution of the Soviet Union: A Case Study in Discontinuous Change," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Winter 2021–2022), pp. 188–218; Vladislav M. Zubok, *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021); Serhii Plokhy, *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Archie Brown; *The Human Factor: Gorbachev, Reagan, and Thatcher, and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000*, updated ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).