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Hungary: Soviet Forces Out and New Policies In

by Stephen R Bowers, James Madison University

For over forty years, the political and military policies of Hungary were tied to those of the Soviet Union. Hungary's political revolution of the late eighties was accomplished in a matter of months and received world media attention. The revolution in military policy, a direct result of the country's political transformation, went more slowly and was the focus of much less international attention. Disengagement from the Warsaw Pact was only the first step. Years of Soviet training, military thinking and technology could not immediately be reversed. Nor could the nation's dependence on Soviet-made equipment be repudiated by political decree. Hungary's military revolution did not create a sensation but revealed much about how the new government will treat the problems of the post-community era.

Throughout Eastern Europe today, military restructuring has emerged as one of the key issues during the transition from Marxist-Leninist regimes to the post-communist era. Hungary, a nation where political change preceded that of her neighbours, set the standard for an orderly transition from dictatorship to emergent democracy is now taking the lead in military restructuring. Prime Minister Jozsef Antall declared some months ago that the Warsaw Pact 'has lost its meaning under the present circumstances . . . Our country does not want to remain a member'. The Defence Minister, Lajos Fur, indicated that the 'Warsaw Pact has lost its earlier role' and that Hungary 'will leave its military organisation . . . by the end of 1991'.¹ In fact, by 1990, Hungarian forces had already stopped taking part in Warsaw Pact (WTO) exercises and other WTO troops were no longer allowed to conduct manoeuvres on Hungarian territory.

After establishing a new military policy, the most pressing concern of the new Hungarian government was to disengage from the Warsaw Pact and from any alliance with the Soviet Armed Forces. The stationing of Soviet troops in Hungary, as elsewhere in eastern Europe, was previously regulated through bilateral agreements with the USSR rather than under WTO arrangements. The first Soviet troops were stationed there in 1944 by the 'right' of a victorious power and later agreements were concluded in 1948 and 1957. Following the Austrian State Treaty of 1955, many Hungarians

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felt that the USSR lost any legal grounds for their military presence in Hungary. Hungarian and Soviet negotiators agreed on the date — 30 June 1991 — for the complete removal of Soviet forces from Hungarian territory.²

Efforts to remove Soviet troops from the barracks in Szolnok illustrate some of the complexities of disengagement. A Hungarian delegation arriving to inspect the barracks on 14 June 1990 was turned away by Soviet guards. Later, the local Russian commander apologised to the Hungarian inspection team and allowed the group to enter only to inform them that the projected date for departure from Szolnok would not be met, citing vague 'organisational reasons'. After a public outcry about such delays, the USSR's Southern Army Command headquarters reaffirmed the earlier Szolnok date as well as the June 1991 national withdrawal deadline. To meet this schedule, each day saw the departure of five or six trainloads of Soviet personnel and equipment.

The financial aspects of the move were amongst the most difficult to resolve. According to Hungarian-Soviet arrangements, the Soviet Southern Army Command was required to provide a list of moveable property that was available for purchase by Hungarian organisations. However, Technika Foreign Trade Enterprise, the Hungarian agency responsible for coordinating transfers complained that the Russians provided incomplete lists and that gravel, bricks, antifreeze, lubricants, containers or used cars promised had already gone by the time Technika arrived. Hungarian private citizens made direct exchanges for bottles of wine and other items in demand among the Soviet military community. The sale of between 100,000 to 200,000 tons of Soviet reserve fuels caused a special problem. The fuel was kept in underground storage tanks at seven locations not linked by pipelines. As the tanks did not comply with Hungarian standards and lacked galvanised protection, they posed an environmental hazard. Sometimes tanks contained substances that diluted the quality. Consequently, Shell refused to purchase the fuel while the Hungarian National Defence Forces indicated that they did not want it. Throughout most of last year, the Soviet authorities were unable to even arrange for negotiations with the few organisations that might have bought the fuel.

Sale of Soviet military property was hampered by inadequate legal arrangements, as well as with problems of quality control. One of the most difficult matters was the establishment of a system whereby materials could be moved to central locations. Hungarian representatives saw local sales as more efficient; such sales cut out the need to transport bulky materials. An additional problem was the requirement until last January that sales had to be made for transferable roubles rather than the more readily available Hungarian forints or perhaps even barter.

Given the Russian need for light structure residential buildings and

building panels as a way of providing housing in the Union, routine barter arrangements would have eased the disposal of Soviet military property.³ Failure to arrange for sufficient sales of movable Soviet property constituted a major threat to the timetable for withdrawal, since the Hungarians counted on not having to move to the USSR an estimated 260 trainloads of materials offered for sale. Transfer of Soviet real estate was an equally perplexing matter, involving sale of abandoned Soviet military airfields in Debrecen, Kalocsa, Sarmellek, Tokol, Kiskunlachaza and Csakvar. Under 1990 plans, the Hungarian government had begun this year to accept bids from foreign interests for the purchase of the airfields.⁴

Less significant in legal or political terms, but more disturbing as a threat to public safety, were the Soviet weapons and ammunition left by departing troops. In the Somogy district, railroad workers found a mine that Soviet forces had neglected to load as they withdrew from the area. Several pieces of ammunition and other explosives were found in Dombovar following the evacuation of Soviet installations. In the summer of 1990, there were numerous reports of sales of light machine guns for 90,000 forints each and submachine guns for as little as 3,000 forints. Ammunition for submachine guns was selling for one forint a round. Even RPG-7 armour piercing rockets were being offered by Soviet soldiers seeking a quick profit before their return to the USSR.⁵

There were often more sophisticated instances of profiteering by Hungarian officers finding themselves in key positions. According to a report in June 1990, some field-grade officers formed limited liability companies using connections made during their service and supplied goods, including old Soviet equipment, to the Hungarian army without going through the normal 'open' contract system. In the view of critics, arrangements such as these prevented competition and gave the suppliers an unfair advantage in dealing with the military. The flood of Soviet equipment has exacerbated what many nations had already experienced as a routine problem in providing for the military's material needs.⁶

A final problem associated with Hungary's disengagement from the Warsaw Pact was the interpretation of legal provisions governing the Hungarian-Soviet military relationship. Under the agreement on the stationing of Soviet forces in Hungary, the Soviet Union was to reimburse the Hungarian state for damages caused by their troops and provide for the restoration, maintenance and renewal of buildings which they used. This latter point became a major dispute and was complicated by the fact that the Russians had constructed buildings without permission and not in accordance with Hungarian standards. Disposal of the property at the time threatened negotiations on real estate financial settlements.

Reaction, when Hungarians offered the Soviet authorities only a fraction of the price demanded for a shop in the Dombovar barracks,

illustrated the difficulties. The departing Soviet troops demolished the building rather than sell at what they saw as a very low price. A similar incident occurred in Komarov-Esztergom, when no agreement could be reached on the sale of a block of Soviet apartments. Property left behind was often in a poor and polluted condition. Because of such environmental hazards, the US Martech Corporation was enlisted in May 1990 to clean sixty former Soviet installations plagued by severe pollution and unexploded ammunition stored underground.

In June 1990, Defence Minister Lajos Fur outlined the broad framework for a new policy with his declaration of three basic pillars for Hungarian security. These are the CSCE all-European security system, regional cooperation with Poland and Czechoslovakia, and bilateral agreements with neighbouring states.⁷ Armaments and equipment are already being changed to reflect the switch of the nation's military stance from an offensive to a defensive capability.

Hungary's recently announced personnel policies stressed the recruitment at the highest levels of individuals not associated with the country's old order. The dismissal of Major General Ferenc Szombathelyi in June 1990 illustrated the policy. When questioned about Szombathelyi's forced retirement, in spite of the fact that there had been no complaints about his professional service, Defence Minister Fur observed that the Ministry of Defence wanted to 'symbolise the change in system'. Age has also become an important factor earlier this year. Officers over 55 were being pensioned. Of the country's 39 generals in leading posts, 15 were told that they would be retired due to age.⁸

The Ministry of Defence, through the Defence Research Institute, has formulated five specific threat scenarios to meet the country's future military requirements. According to Colonel Tibor Koszegvari, the Institute's Director, the scenarios are, first, a natural or industrial disaster; second, the eruption of a remote armed conflict on the continent that threatens Hungarian interests; third, the eruption of an armed conflict or a civil war in a country bordering Hungary and the intrusion onto Hungarian territory of foreign groups looking for food, fuel or armaments; fourth, a direct attack on Hungary and, finally, fifth, the eruption of a civil war in Hungary.⁹

Defence policy is based on the assumption that the smaller forces will be capable of dealing with these possible challenges to national security. Defence spokesmen now recognise that Hungarian fighter planes are obsolete and that, in view of the costs of modern fighter aircraft, the nation may be forced to rely on a much more technologically limited force.

Given the Defence Ministry's interest in the territorial defence forces of Finland and Switzerland, a greater reliance on reserves seems inevitable.

Prime Minister Antall has proposed the formation of a Central-East

European Union to supplement Hungary's security arrangements. In Antall's view, the new military or security organisation would be established along the pattern of the Western European Union. It would be within the framework of NATO and would serve on an intermediate basis until the formation of a large institution that would bring NATO states together with former WTO nations such as Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland.¹⁰

The increasing westernisation of Hungarian military policy has been reflected in several developments. Probably most dramatic was the suggestion by the Defence Committee of the Hungarian National Assembly that a battalion of the Hungarian Armed Forces be sent to join the United Nations forces in Saudi Arabia.¹¹ Establishment of a formal, diplomatic relationship with NATO through the office of the Hungarian ambassador in Brussels is another indication of the direction of the new government's military policy. Prime Minister Antall believes that NATO will be a permanent feature of a new European order and that the Warsaw Pact is dead.

The establishment of a military intelligence command as an independent military security organisation was announced in October 1990. In discussing his new work, Colonel Dr Karoly Gyarakı stressed that, given the redefinition of European security, Hungary's military security organisation would cooperate with Western intelligence services, especially in sharing information about international terrorism and drug traffic. The reported provision of two US F-16 fighter planes for the Hungarian Air Force was another indication of the government's wish to orient their military policies towards the west. Technological requirements as well as considerations of image have been cited by Hungary's military leadership as reasons for replacing the MiG-21 and MiG-23 aircraft upon which the air force is now based.

On 22 February 1991, the Hungarian government announced that 72% of the Soviet soldiers stationed in Hungary and two thirds of their military equipment had been withdrawn.¹² This process alone, even at its conclusion, will not bring the final transformation of Hungarian military policy. It will set the stage, however, for the reorientation of the nation's military establishment and a restructuring of the country's military doctrine. This will happen only as Hungary emerges from an Eastern Europe dominated by the USSR into an all-European system motivated by a willingness to put the legacy of the Second World War finally to rest.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Nepszabadsag* (Budapest) 16 June 1990, p1 and June 18 1990, p3.
2. The last Soviet troop train left Hungary on Sunday 16 June 1991. The Southern Group of Forces (SGF) has now ceased to exist. Two motorised rifle divisions and one armoured division were withdrawn: a few weeks earlier another armoured division had been pulled

out. A USSR air army has also left together with missile and engineer units; in all 50,000 servicemen, or 100,000 including families, have gone. More than 500,000 tons of military property was shipped, day and night, through the border trans-shipment area near the town of Mandok. About three trains left Hungary for the USSR every day: due to the smallness of the border railway junction, the troop withdrawal took 1¼ years. Soviet divisions have been in Hungary since the autumn of 1944.

3. *Magyar Hirlap* (Budapest), 5 September 1990, p5. There have been occasional reports of barter arrangements. For example on 28 July 1990, *Nepszabadsag* reported the delivery of a wooden house to the Soviet authorities in exchange for a wrecked tank.
4. *Nepszabadsag* (Budapest), 22 September 1990, p11.
5. *Magyar Hirlap* (Budapest), 24 June 1990, p1 and August 14 1990, p1.
6. *Tallosz* (Budapest), 29 June 1990, pp1223-1224.
7. *Nepszabadsag* (Budapest), 21 June 1990, p5.
8. *Nepszabadsag* (Budapest), 21 June 1990, p5 and *Magyar Hirlap* (Budapest), 19 February 1991, p1.
9. *Ibid*, 29 September 1990, p17.
10. *Magyar Hirlap* (Budapest), 3 September 1990, p2.
11. *Nepszabadsag* (Budapest), 20 September 1990, p4.
12. Budapest Domestic Service, 22 February 1991, 1100 GMT.

Purple Patches

by

I D P Thorne

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