

On Some Issues Related to the Planned Use of the Czechoslovak People's Army in the European Theatre in the 1960s

Interview with Colonel Karel Štěpánek

In the 1960s, Colonel of the General Staff (Ret.) Ing. Karel Štěpánek was one of prominent officers of the Operations Directorate of the General Staff. Because of his disagreement with the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia, he was dismissed from the army. In 1990, he was rehabilitated; three years ago, he was awarded the "Memorial Badge of the Operations Section of the General Staff" by the current Chief of the General Staff of the Czech Armed Forces, Lieutenant General Ing. Pavel Štefka.

In his memoirs, *The Czechoslovak Army on the Rhine*, Colonel Štěpánek analyzes in detail the issues related to the planned use of the Czechoslovak People's Army in the European theatre in the 1960s. At the moment, the book is being prepared for publication. He has also participated in a translation from Russian of "The Planned Use of the Czechoslovak People's Army in Wartime", published by Petr Lunák in *Soudobé dějiny* (Contemporary History) and on the website of the "NATO and Warsaw Pact Parallel History Project" (<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/php>) in 2000.

In the present interview, Colonel Štěpánek describes an operational-strategic reconnaissance of the European theatre, which took place in 1966 and in which he personally participated.

What is your education and what staff and command positions did you hold in the Czechoslovak Army?

I am a graduate of a secondary school; after 1945, I opted for a military career. I successfully completed the Military Academy in Hranice na Morave, and then the Military University in Prague (in 1951, it was renamed to the Military Academy of Klement Gottwald). I served as a divisional chief of staff, and held various posts in the Operations Department of the Operations Directorate of the General Staff for a total time of fourteen years. Between 1964 and 1969, I was the Chief of the General Staff Ops Room Working Group.

In wartime, I was supposed to be the Chief of the Operations Group of the Czechoslovak Front. This is why I was able to attend, between 1962 and 1967, all so-called strategic war games in Legnica, Poland, which were conducted under the control and management of the General Staff of the Soviet Armed Forces. After the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Soviet forces, I was dismissed from the army for political reasons. I was fully rehabilitated in 1990.

Can you describe the purpose and methods of work of the Ops Room of the General Staff?

The Ops Room of the General Staff was probably the most important part of the General Staff, and indeed of the whole army. It was dealing with fundamental issues of comprehensive development of the Czechoslovak People's Army, as well as essential questions regarding its use in a planned

campaign in the European theatre in the framework of Warsaw Pact armies.

Access to the Ops Room was limited, and only the following officials were allowed there: Members of the so-called Military Commission of Defence of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, i.e. the President/First Secretary of the Central Committee, Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Interior and Minister of Defence (he was accompanied by his Soviet advisor). The role of the Military Commission of Defence was later taken over by the National Defence Council.

As to army personnel, those authorised to enter the Ops Room included: Chief of the General Staff, Chief of the Operations Directorate of the General Staff (who was also the Chief of Staff's deputy responsible for operational matters), Chief of the Operations Department and his deputy, and Chief of the General Staff Ops Room Working Group and his two subordinates.

No one else had access to the Ops Room.

All in all, there were twelve Czechoslovak nationals, plus the Soviet advisor.

In 1966, you were tasked to conduct a reconnaissance mission in the field, to reconnoitre the Czechoslovak part of the European theatre. Can you tell us who made the decision to conduct the mission and what instructions you received in this respect?

The wartime mission given to our armed forces by the General Staff of the Soviet Armed Forces at that time – in 1964 – was very demanding for the whole country, but particularly as regarded the development and expansion of the Czechoslovak People's Army. After 1964, the requirements often exceeded the capabilities of our country. Some high officers of our General Staff also believed that the Soviet over-tasking of our armed forces might also pursue yet another objective – to initiate discussions on the matter of a Soviet offer to deploy Soviet forces in our territory even in peacetime.

The growing disputes were to be sorted out at the General Staff of the Soviet Armed Forces in Moscow in the second half of 1966. General Vitanovský, Chief of the Operations Directorate of the General Staff, was tasked to make preparations for those talks. In order to obtain a comprehensive idea of our capabilities and ability to fulfil our task also from the viewpoint of terrain conditions in that part of the enemy territory where our armed forces were expected to conduct operations, General Vitanovský made a recommendation to the Chief of Staff, suggesting that a selected officer of the General Staff should conduct a top-secret operational-strategic reconnaissance mission of the European theatre, with an emphasis on the area of operations of the Czechoslovak Front in the Federal Republic of Germany and France. As to France, banks on either side of the Saône and Rhône rivers were to be reconnoitred as well.

Acting upon General Vitanovský's recommendation, the Chief of Staff, General Rytír, entrusted the operational-strategic reconnaissance mission to the Chief of the General Staff Ops Room Working Group. The mission was coordinated with the Chief of the Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff, who was ordered to cooperate with the appointed Ops Room officer and to collect information for his own purposes in the area to be reconnoitred. His job was also to make

sure, in cooperation with our military attaché in France, that our planned trip would not encounter any problems. The mission took some three weeks to accomplish (end of June and early July 1966).

There were rather strict rules applying to officers of the Czechoslovak People's Army travelling abroad, not to mention trips to NATO countries. You were one of the twelve people in our army, who knew the entire operations plan, the "Planned Use of the Czechoslovak People's Army in Wartime". Was your trip so important that our army representatives were willing to take the risk?

I think this is a question that should be asked of the two top General Staff officers referred to above. I only know I had full trust of General Vitanovský, who had personally known me since 1955 and who regarded the results of the reconnaissance mission positively.

I also believe that the information on "our" part of the European theatre, which had been acquired by the reconnaissance mission, might have spoken in our favour during the talks with the General Staff of the Soviet Armed Forces – especially as an argument in support of our justified objections against a further expansion of our operational and strategic task of 1964.

What was the route of your reconnaissance mission? Did you depart from it anywhere?

The main focus of the mission was on the area of the planned main thrust of the Czechoslovak Front – i.e. the Nuremberg – Stuttgart – Strasbourg – Épinal – Dijon line. In this respect, emphasis was placed on manoeuvring possibilities of main forces, both of the Czechoslovak Front and of the enemy. We also paid a great deal of attention of potential major obstacles that could thwart rapid advance of troops – such as big cities, road and highway bottlenecks, possibilities of manoeuvring without the use of roads and highways, the Neckar and Rhine rivers and the mountains of Schwarzwald and Vosges.

Some military historians claim that the Czechoslovak Front was expected to accomplish its Western theatre mission in nine days (e.g. Petr Lunák in his study published in *Soudobé dejiny* (Contemporary History) in 2000). In the "Planned Use of the Czechoslovak People's Army in Wartime", representatives of the Czechoslovak People's Army clearly state that the operation's objective – to be achieved on the seventh or eighth day – is to take control of the Langres – Besancon line. There is no mention whatsoever about nine days.

Having completed our reconnaissance around Dijon, we moved to France, where General Burda attended to his other professional interests.

Our time in Paris coincided with the time of the relocation of the NATO Headquarters and Staff from France, more specifically Fontainebleau, to Belgium (Brussels). We tried to verify the information and drove straight to Fontainebleau. The whole chateau premises, including a vast surrounding park, were made available to the Alliance. The chateau itself was a historical seat of Napoleon.

We managed to walk past the main building, where preparations for the relocation were in full swing, without being checked. We could see various documents lying on desks, and in two

cases even maps (although we could not discern what was drawn on them), through open windows on the ground floor. We also took a full walk through the park, where we were meeting – and sometimes also exchanging greetings – with NATO officers. No one cared about us. When leaving the chateau perimeter, we waved to an officer standing at a window on the first floor, and he waved back. They really were not worried too much about keeping their relocation in secrecy.

When talking to tradesmen in Fontainebleau, we found out they were rather angry at de Gaulle for being the prime mover of the relocation of the NATO Headquarters to Brussels. They lost business because of him.

The whole mission in the territory of France was concluded by reconnoitring the terrain along the Saône and Rhône rivers, as far as Marseille. On the way back through France, we reconnoitred the western part of the Alps, especially in the Grenoble – Chambéry area, and along the Danube in the territory of Germany.

We took a few photographs and film shots during the reconnaissance mission, for further use by the General Staff. We also wrote a brief report on the mission, and delivered an oral briefing to the Chief of Staff in the Ops Room.

What was, in your opinion, the purpose of the reconnaissance mission?

I have already said that the objective was to obtain information on terrain features that could have affected manoeuvres of the Czechoslovak Front during the performance of the task which we had been assigned. In this respect, the reconnaissance mission confirmed that performing and accomplishing the task over the entire depth of the frontal operation (i.e. as far as Dijon) might be complicated and ultimately uncertain.

I believe the outcome of the reconnaissance mission could have favourably affected the talks between General Vitanovský and the Soviet Chief of Staff, which were held in the second half of 1966 in Moscow. I am referring to discussions whether the tasks assigned to us by the “Planned Use of the Czechoslovak People’s Army in Wartime” were realistic or not.

Did you attract any attention of local authorities, or even French or German security services, during your trip? What was your official legend?

We had been issued special passports for the reconnaissance mission. They were blue, and allegedly for people earmarked for important business negotiations. As far as I can recall, our destinations were Paris and then Marseille. Upon our entry onto the French territory in Strasbourg, we were expected by our military attaché, who accompanied us as necessary throughout our stay in France. He was directly subordinated to General Burda.

We were driving a Mercedes with Prague license plates. I cannot say we attracted extraordinary attention when travelling in the territory of Germany or France. Just one exception – when we were travelling from Lyon to Valence, there were two pairs of policemen on motorcycles tailing our car, and when spending a night in Valence, we had a feeling that our luggage was checked when we were away from our hotel room. However, this could also have been due to the fact that we were Eastern foreigners and that there were French nuclear facilities in the region –

somewhere in the Massif Central.

Was it worth it? What is your overall assessment?

The operational-strategic reconnaissance mission of the European theatre was the first mission of its kind – and I believe the last one as well. The mission provided solid information on terrain configuration, which helped assess whether the operational-strategic task assigned to us was realistic or not. It confirmed that the tasks assigned to the Czechoslovak People's Army by the Soviets were not entirely realistic. In this respect, the reconnaissance mission that we conducted was worth it.