
Record of conversation with Colonel (retired) Karel Štěpánek
conducted by Petr Luňák on 28 March 2000

Q: What were the circumstances leading to the 1964 plan?

Col. Štěpánek: In 1964 I was appointed chief of the operations room of the General Staff. There the work was on an operational plan, the basic questions concerning its use and the buildup of the army. I would like to say that this operational plan was obviously the result – and I can only talk about the period after 1964 – a result of what had developed at the beginning of the 60's after the events in Berlin and Cuba. In this context there also arose the staff of the Czechoslovak front, and the official readying of this front for the fulfillment of its tasks in the event of war began. The staff was perfectly organized, materially secure and gradually trained so that it was able to take part in the war games, which took place in Legnica in Poland. These war games were prepared by the general staff of the armed forces of the USSR and were personally directed by the Minister of Defense of the USSR. When I think of these war games, which were later repeated, I come to the conclusion that the operational plan, which we now have in front of us here and which I saw in the operations room and took part in the preparation of, is the first official document of its kind. This operational plan demonstrates and confirms the position of the Czechoslovak front in the first strategic line of the troops of the Warsaw Pact. Its role was in cooperation with its neighbors – that was the first front (i.e. the 8th Guards Army) which was to attack northwards from the Czechoslovak front - taking advantage of the effects of a nuclear first-strike against enemy troops to begin an offensive operation in the direction of Nuremberg – Stuttgart – Dijon and to reach the area of Dijon within 7 to 8 days and to then be ready for further offensives in the Saône and Rhône valleys in the direction of Lyon.

Q: What were the circumstances and how was the Czechoslovak General Staff assigned to the Soviet General Staff?

Col. Štěpánek: I can only state what I know from my experience. The representatives of the Czechoslovak army - sometimes the Minister of Defense, but mainly the Chief of the General Staff and chief of the operations administration and chief of the operations department - were invited to the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the USSR where they obtained the guidelines for the Czechoslovak front. The Czechoslovak General Staff thought out this operation, and it then was confirmed by the General Staff of the USSR – at that time it was Marshal Zakharov – after arriving in Prague. This plan was worked on in detail as a document for the session of the military council, and it was then approved in the operations room. In connection with this, the question of building-up the army was also approved, i.e. a protocol about the buildup of the army in which the extent and nature of this buildup was given in the operational plan so it could be carried out. This protocol about the buildup of the army was discussed and approved by the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the USSR.

Q: If I have understood you correctly, Colonel, this was the first plan of this nature to be developed?

Col. Štěpánek: I can state that if such documents existed earlier, then they were documents which did not necessarily have this range of strategic operational use of the Czechoslovak army.

Q: Colonel sir, could you return to how the plans and thinking of the Czechoslovak and Soviet General Staffs changed in the 1950's?

Col. Štěpánek: I must say that in the 50's I was an ordinary officer in the operations department, so I can only judge by the extent of my observations and knowledge. In fact up until the establishment of the Warsaw Pact no active use of the Czechoslovak army was planned. Czechoslovak thinking was limited to the defense of the Czechoslovak territory, from the Czechoslovak territory. But with the establishment of the Warsaw

Pact, our army became part of the first line of troops of the Warsaw Pact; and then it did not depend on us but on the command of the Warsaw Pact (i.e. the USSR.) Decisions were never made by the staff of the Strategic Armed Forces of the Warsaw Pact but by the General Staff of the Soviet Army, whether they liked it or not. Well, the staff of the Warsaw Pact was made up of 30 officers and generals, who were exclusively Soviet; and from the other armies, such as the Polish or Hungarian, there was only ever one single representative who carried out the function of liaison officer. The staff of the Strategic Forces of the Warsaw Pact could not even resolve these problems.

Q: The whole thing was directed from Moscow?

Col. Štěpánek: The Warsaw Pact was the official reaction to the entry of the Federal Republic of Germany into NATO. In my opinion it was really about the legalization of the use of the troops of the satellite countries in the case of an outbreak of war.

Q: You, then, cannot say from your military experience exactly when there was a change from a plan of territorial defense to the thinking implied in the plan of 1964.

Col. Štěpánek: I cannot.

Q: How long could it take to develop such a plan?

Col. Štěpánek: If it were a question of a time, of tension on the edge of conflict, then it would be a matter of days. However, if it were a process between general staffs then it would be a matter of months because the plan must be developed by all services. Then it must be gone over by the appropriate chiefs, commanders of the forces, and service chiefs, and then it must be "brought" to the troops . . . that is to the front line of the army.

Q: With a little courage to speculate: they must have started working on the plan only in 1964?

Col. Štěpánek: That could be said.

Q: How often should the plan have been updated, and what was its shelf life?

Col. Štěpánek: It could be said that its validity never changed. It was just updated. This resulted from an evaluation of the bi-lateral ratio of strength between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The space widened or shrank a bit, but basically the objective (up to Dijon) did not change. At least not until 1968.

Q: Did anything in the operation plan change after the fall of Khrushchev in 1964?

Col. Štěpánek: No.

Q: How did the thinking change in 1968? And did that result in any concrete plan?

Col. Štěpánek: It did happen, even before 1968. Of course – I can't say officially – there were certain hints already in 1966, 1967 when there was pressure on our general staff to further increase the strength of the army and extend its tasks. But because there were not then the means, the state did not then have to position further divisions or further special troops so there was disagreement when discussing the operational plan, which became evident in a loss of faith in our general staff after 1966. In 1967 it led to a change of the plan in the sense that the Czechoslovak front no longer had as its task operations on the River Rhine. It's not by chance that in our country, in northern Bohemia and in Moravia, a strong Soviet army was supposed to be installed, several divisions with their own aircraft and nuclear weapons. It was definitely to replace those that had been withdrawn from the Czechoslovak front.

Q: What happened to this plan after 1968?

Col. Štěpánek: Unfortunately I don't know.

Q: What could have been filed in the command room?

Col. Štěpánek: I suppose that... written plans up to 1968 were filed in a special place and they were all worked on again.

Q: Do any records exist about the change in thinking from territorial defense to the plan of 1964?

Col. Štěpánek: The completion of the task had to be reflected in the deployment of forces. So then in switching to an active, that is an aggressive, concept of battle, the dislocation must have changed too. This basic change (i.e. the basic change in deployment) occurred at the turn of the 50's and 60's. At that time the majority of troops were relocated to the territories of Bohemia and Moravia. Here is a concrete example of the divisions – in Bohemia six divisions were deployed, in Moravia two and in Slovakia one.

Q: Colonel, what was the role of Austria and France in the strategic thinking and exercises of the 60's?

Col. Štěpánek: I can only speak from the experience of the war games that took place along the entire strategic front line of the forces of the Warsaw Pact, and I have to state that in all exercises the neutrality of Austria was consistently maintained. One more interesting thing – although the plan counted on operations in France, in the strategic games we only exercised in the territory of the Federal Republic of Germany, at the most creating a bridgehead at the River Rhine. I cannot recall exercises of war formations on French territory.

Q: Was 1966, the year when France left the military structure of NATO, a turning point in the thinking of the Warsaw Pact?

Col. Štěpánek: That can be seen in the war games that took place in 1962. All was played out as I have said – the neutrality of Austria and no exercises on French territory. But a battle with the First French army was expected on German territory. However, I must say that the plan that I have in my hand is the plan of the actions of the first line. This does not dismiss the possibility of battles on French territory and to the west of the Rhine being carried out by units of the second line.

Q: What was the timetable of the first and second line?

Col. Štěpánek: First line to D+7–8, then the second line.

Q: Do you have any knowledge as to what the forces of the conquered territories should do?

Col. Štěpánek: This question was never discussed or exercised, at least as far as I know.

Q: You mentioned military-strategic games. When did these begin and what was the outcome in connection with our plan of 1964?

Col. Štěpánek: These games had the aim of solidifying the whole front line of forces of the Warsaw Pact. I don't know how it was prior to 1962 when the games began. I imagine it was then that the Soviet command began to be interested in making use of the East European armies in a European war.

Q: Thank you for your time.