

50TH-ANNIVERSARY SYMPOSIUM

THE WARSAW PACT: FROM ITS FOUNDING TO ITS COLLAPSE, 1955-1991

**Symposium Organized by
Cold War International History Project (Washington, DC),
Harvard Project on Cold War Studies (Cambridge, MA),
Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt (Potsdam), and
The Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies**

INTRODUCTION

When the Warsaw Pact was founded on 14 May 1955, it was not intended to be a permanent body. The Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, was hoping to use the Pact to bring about the dissolution of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This objective proved illusory, and the Pact over time – especially after Khrushchev was removed – had a far-reaching impact on both the Soviet bloc and East-West relations. To mark the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Warsaw Pact, the Cold War International History Project (CWIHP), the Harvard Project on Cold War Studies (HPCWS), and the Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt (MGFA) are co-organizing a special, two-day symposium, “The Warsaw Pact: From Its Founding to Its Collapse,” which will be held at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC, on 26-27 May 2005.

BACKGROUND

The founding of the Warsaw Pact – an alliance initially comprising the Soviet Union, Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Romania – came during a brief lull in the Cold War. The death of Joseph Stalin in March 1953 led to significant improvements in East-West relations, heralded by the settlement of the Korean War in July 1953, the signing of the Austrian State Treaty in May 1955, and the summit meeting in Geneva between Khrushchev and President Dwight Eisenhower in July 1955. Stalin’s death also led to an easing of Soviet domination in Eastern Europe. Within months of Stalin’s death, the tyrannical conditions he had imposed in the region were relaxed, and Khrushchev began to seek a new modus operandi for the Communist bloc. In line with that effort, the Soviet leader traveled to Poland in May 1955, the day before the Austrian State Treaty was finalized. At a ceremony in the Polish capital, Khrushchev and his East European counterparts signed a treaty on mutual cooperation

and friendship that established the Warsaw Pact.

The membership of the Warsaw Pact varied only slightly over time. East Germany was brought into the Pact in 1956, and Albania formally left the alliance in 1968 to protest the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Other than those changes, the membership remained stable until the end of the Cold War. The Pact was never used in actual combat, but it came close in 1956 during the revolution in Hungary and even closer in 1968 during the Soviet-Czechoslovak crisis. In 1956 the Romanian and Czechoslovak leaders had proposed using the Pact as a command organ for troops sent into Hungary, but Khrushchev rejected the idea and relied instead on a purely Soviet operation. In 1968, preparations by troops from the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, East Germany, Hungary, and Poland were coordinated by Warsaw Pact commanders in the lead-up to the invasion of Czechoslovakia, but, a few days before the combined forces moved into Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Politburo accepted Defense Minister Andrei Grechko's recommendation that command of the operation be transferred to the Soviet High Command. In 1980-1981, the Warsaw Pact might have been used in a command role if Soviet, East German, and Czechoslovak troops had been sent into Poland, but the successful imposition of martial law in Poland by General Wojciech Jaruzelski precluded the need for any external military intervention. Even though the Pact was never used in an actual military operation, it played an important role from the early 1960s through the late 1980s in preparing Soviet and East European troops for a war with NATO and in organizing joint military exercises that could bring pressure to bear on East European governments and populations.

Declassified materials from archives in East-Central Europe, the former Soviet Union, and Western countries have shed enormous light both on the founding of the Warsaw Pact and on its subsequent evolution. The CWIHP, the HPCWS, and the Parallel History Project have collected vast quantities of declassified documents (photocopies, microfilms, and published materials) pertaining to the Warsaw Pact. Huge quantities of other documents are stored in the various archives and are available to researchers who go there. Although some important collections (especially the Pact's highly classified war plans, which were stored exclusively in Moscow) have not been released, a wealth of documentation and a large number of memoirs have greatly enriched our understanding of the Warsaw Pact and its role in the Cold War. The two-day symposium will take advantage of this material to review what "we now know" about the Warsaw Pact.