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SPECIAL NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

# SOVIET TACTICS IN THE BERLIN CRISIS

Supplement SNE R 10-69

- Possibility of early radical action
- Attitude toward negotiations



NOTE: This is the final version of the estimate and additional  
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Date 5 October 1961 2/18/94

SUBJECT: SNIE 11-10/1-61: SOVIET TACTICS IN THE BERLIN CRISIS

HRP 94-3

THE PROBLEM

To estimate Soviet tactics in the Berlin crisis over the next few months, with particular reference to reported Soviet intentions to take radical unilateral action during this period.

BACKGROUND

A recent report from a source, judged at this time to be reliable, states that Soviet and Satellite forces will be brought to a high state of combat readiness in exercises "of unprecedented scope" beginning in early October and lasting for one month. This source supplies many details supporting this theme, citing personal observation and the remarks of senior officials, mostly military officers. He reports learning from a senior commander that Khrushchev's present policy is to hold back, putting the brakes on international tensions until the Party Congress, at which time he will abruptly go over to a highly

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militant line. According to this story, a separate peace treaty with East Germany will then be signed immediately after the Congress. Without specifically so stating, the report implies that a challenge to Allied access will follow promptly upon the signing of the treaty. It is thought that perhaps the West will "swallow the second pill" (the first having been the border closure in Berlin); if not, Bloc forces, already at a high state of readiness, will "strike first if the situation warrants."\*

THE ESTIMATE

1. The fourth quarter is normally the peak of the annual military training cycle in the USSR and Eastern Europe. In addition, there is an unusual stress on readiness at the present time, and the 25 September announcement of exercises by the Warsaw Pact forces suggests that these will be on a larger scale than on any previous occasion. Such preparations are clearly intended to convince the West of Communist military strength, readiness, and determination in the Berlin crisis and to increase pressure on the West either to make concessions or to acquiesce

\* We have examined closely the possibility that the source could be, wittingly or unwittingly, a channel for deception material. Our present judgment, based mainly on the sensitivity and volume of the material he is providing, is that this is unlikely.

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in Communist encroachments. They are also aimed at strengthening the USSR's military posture for the period of crisis and uncertainty which the Soviets foresee. But the preparations of which we are at present aware from all sources of information are not of such a scope and nature as to support a conclusion that the USSR is "peaking" all its forces for general war in the near future.

2. On the basis of his previous reporting and independent confirmation of portions of this report, we accept the source's statements concerning measures of military preparedness as correct in many although not in all respects. He is not in a position, however, to report reliably or completely on deliberations and decisions of the highest military and political bodies in Moscow. His statements concerning a decision to sign a separate treaty in October and, if conditions warrant, to strike an initial military blow, appear to us to fall into the category of speculation arising from knowledge he has acquired about contingency military planning.

3. It is evident that the Soviets must have contingency plans for the next phases of the Berlin crisis, but we doubt strongly that the USSR has made any irrevocable decisions

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concerning the timing of a separate treaty and of unilateral steps thereafter against the status quo in Berlin. We continue to believe that the USSR regards negotiations as the least risky method of advancing toward its objectives, and also that Khrushchev still hopes that the threat of unilateral action will force the Allies to make at least some concessions to his demands. And, if these hopes fail to materialize, he has at his disposal a wide range of unilateral actions, each of which, he believes, is limited enough to create only a minimal risk of forceful Western response, yet each of which can bring the USSR a step closer to its aims.

4. Currently the USSR is seeking to display a more positive attitude toward negotiations; it has ceased to reiterate deadlines for a separate treaty and has indicated some flexibility in its approach to negotiations. These maneuvers are designed in part to appear responsive to the calls for peaceful compromise emanating from the Belgrade Conference and the General Assembly. They are also intended to encourage those sectors of opinion which are urging the Allies to consider concessions to Soviet demands. Perhaps most important, they are intended to probe the Allied position in order to determine whether negotiations are

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likely to bring some progress toward their objectives. We continue to believe that the Soviets prefer to enter negotiations before undertaking major unilateral steps or signing a separate treaty with the GDR.

5. Along with this, however, Khrushchev has several times voiced concern that the Allies would use negotiations merely as a device for stalling. He recognizes that, once formal talks are under way, any move on his part to break them off and turn to unilateral measures might solidify NATO unity and forfeit the support for his Berlin policy which he has tried to develop among the non-aligned nations. However, he would feel it necessary to respond positively to a formal Allied tender of negotiations. But he would also attempt to assure himself in preliminary discussions that some advance toward his objectives would result from such a conference. If he felt that the prospects for this were poor, he would probably proceed at some point with a separate peace treaty, in part as a means of bringing the Allies under greater pressure to talk on Soviet terms.

6. If the Soviets decide to make a major unilateral move against Allied rights in Berlin, they would clearly wish to be in a state of maximum military readiness at the time, both to

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deter the Allies from a forceful reaction and to be prepared for any eventuality should deterrence fail. They recognize the dangers of a situation in which the West would feel itself confronted with the alternatives of deep humiliation or a military showdown, because they realize that such a situation might escape their control. They have deliberately left unclear the question of whether they would, immediately after a peace treaty back up with force their demands for new access procedures. The source's references to "striking first" are ambiguous and could mean any level of military action, possibly undertaken only after a judgment was reached that the West was about to resort to force locally. We think it very unlikely, however, that the Soviets would "strike first" in the sense of launching a major military offensive, unless they were convinced that a large-scale Western attack was inevitable and imminent.

7. In conclusion, we believe that the course of action outlined in the present report -- signature of a separate peace treaty in late October followed by a prompt challenge to Allied access -- has been construed by the source and others from their knowledge of military preparations. We do not believe that firm decisions of this kind have been taken by the top Soviet

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leadership. But the considerations outlined above do suggest that the higher state of military readiness to be achieved in October/November will make this a favorable period, from the Soviet standpoint, for limited unilateral moves against Western rights in Berlin, if their prospects for advancing toward their objectives at that time via negotiations appear dim.

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