



Christoph Meißner/Jörg Morré (eds.)

# The Withdrawal of Soviet Troops from East Central Europe

National Perspectives in Comparison





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Christoph Meißner, Jörg Morré

## Introduction

Around 30 years ago, an era came to an end with the withdrawal of Soviet and, from 1992, Russian troops from Central and Eastern Europe. Their presence had played a decisive role in shaping the European post-war order. During the Cold War, they formed the counterpart to the NATO forces stationed in Western Europe. In the face of an arms race that went on unchecked for decades, it was, as many contemporary witnesses saw it, only mutually assured destruction that could secure the status quo and, with it, peace in Europe. Although forces had been stationed in eastern Germany (the former Soviet occupation zone and later the GDR), Poland, and Hungary without interruption since the end of the war in 1945, forces in Czechoslovakia (ČSSR) had been withdrawn in late 1945. However, they returned in 1968 to violently end the reformist policies of the Prague Spring.<sup>1</sup> Soviet soldiers had already put down popular uprisings in the GDR and Hungary in 1953 and 1956. It had thus been made unmistakably clear to the stationing countries that the presence of the Soviet Army would always be a factor in their domestic political order. Against this backdrop, the withdrawal of Soviet troops represented a decisive historical break. It was made possible by the change of direction in Soviet policy under Mikhail Gorbachev, who took office as a reformer of the Soviet Union and the socialist camp. The results were the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, the dissolution of the 'Eastern Bloc', and the break-up of the Soviet Union. Last but not least, the process of German reunification provided the framework for the complete disappearance of the Soviet Army from the countries of Eastern Europe. When the Commander-in-Chief of the Western Group of Forces stationed in Germany announced that the withdrawal had been completed before the President of the Russian Federation at Berlin's Gendarmenmarkt on 31 August 1994, it was the final symbolic act in a development that had begun barely ten years earlier.

The exact point in time at which the Soviet leadership decided to withdraw remains vague. There are indications that a withdrawal, at least from Czechoslovakia, was already being considered in March 1987. Gorbachev condemned the Soviet

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1 For military details on the Soviet Army troops stationed abroad between 1945 and 1991, see Fes'kov Vitalii et. al: *Vooruzhjonnye Sily SSSR posle Vtoroj mirovoj vojny: ot Krasnoj Armii k Sovetskoj. Chast' 1: Suhoputnye vojska* [Soviet Armed Forces after World War II from the Red Army to the Soviet Army. Part 1: Ground Forces], Tomsk 2013, pp. 379–428.

invasion of 1968, but at the same time he wanted to leave the deployments in Poland, Hungary, and the GDR untouched.<sup>2</sup> Yet Poland and Hungary had strong opposition movements at the time, which the ruling, Moscow-oriented elites could not control. It quickly became clear to the Soviet leadership under Gorbachev that it could not just be a matter of selective reparations for a historical aberration in one country. Eduard Shevardnadze, the Soviet Union's minister of foreign affairs at the time, commented on this in his memoirs: 'Our military presence in Eastern Europe was questioned long before the start of events in 1989/90. And it was not just the governments that came to power in those years that demanded the withdrawal of Soviet troops, but their predecessors [had done so] as well. Some of them told us in strictest confidence, using very cautious formulations, that the continued presence of Soviet troops in their countries would create serious problems for them. It would be better for us to take steps ourselves in this direction, they said, than to be forced later to move in haste under the pressure of events.'<sup>3</sup> And yet Gorbachev's offer in December 1988 to unilaterally withdraw six Soviet tank divisions, with a total of 50,000 men and 5000 tanks, from the GDR, the ČSSR, and Hungary<sup>4</sup> was not directed at Moscow's satellite states, but at the American adversary in the Cold War. In doing so, he wanted to prove to the United States on the global stage that the Soviet Union was ready to take further steps one year after the signing of the first major disarmament treaty, the INF Treaty, in December 1987. It was an offer in line with Soviet interests that had not been discussed within the leading bodies of the Warsaw Pact. In the old style, Gorbachev acted autonomously and without consulting his allies.<sup>5</sup> Only when domestic political pressure in the so-called brother countries became too great and national reform movements actively demanded the withdrawal of Soviet troops did the Soviet leaders have to decide. In line with Gorbachev's reform policy of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, they allowed more and more emancipation for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. With the abandonment of the Brezhnev Doctrine, the Soviet Union finally explicitly

2 Proposal from Georgy Shakhnazarov to the CPSU for a Partial Soviet Troop Withdrawal from the ČSSR, March 1987, in: Safranskaya, Svetlana/Blanton, Thomas/Zubok, Vladislav (eds.): *Masterpieces of History. The peaceful end of the Cold War in Europe 1989*, Budapest/New York 2010, doc. 10, pp. 244–246.

3 Shevardnadze, Eduard: *Moi vybor v zashhitu demokratii i svobody*, Moskva 1991, p. 206.

4 Diehl, Ole: *Die Strategiediskussion in der Sowjetunion: Zum Wandel der Sowjetischen Kriegsführungskonzeption in den achtziger Jahren [The Strategy Discussion in the Soviet Union: On the Change in the Soviet Concept of Warfare in the Eighties]*, Wiesbaden 1993, p. 264.

5 Safranskaya, Svetlana: *The Logic of 1989: The Soviet Peaceful Withdrawal from Eastern Europe*, in: Safranskaya/Blanton/Zubok (eds.): *Masterpieces of History*, pp. 1–45, here: p. 45.

refrained from exerting influence on their internal developments.<sup>6</sup> This developed its own dynamic. The withdrawal of Soviet soldiers was demanded sooner or later, louder or quieter, by every opposition movement. At a certain point, it was clear that Soviet soldiers would no longer be Moscow's lever of influence. Even if they did not leave the country immediately, they stayed in their barracks from then on.<sup>7</sup>

Between February 1990 and August 1994, about half a million soldiers returned home along with about 320,000 of their family members. Nearly two thirds of them had been stationed in Germany. A period of four years was planned to completely repatriate them and their military equipment. And while the withdrawal of 90,000 soldiers from Czechoslovakia and 44,500 soldiers from Hungary was already completed after 16 and 15 months respectively in June 1991, the process was only just beginning in Germany. Around 340,000 soldiers were stationed in Germany, and it took four years to repatriate them and their military equipment. The German and the Soviet side were both able to draw on the experience of the withdrawals from Czechoslovakia and Hungary. The withdrawal from Germany, more precisely from the territory of the former GDR, attracted the most attention and not just because of the large numbers. Divided Germany, and Berlin in particular, had been the nexus of the Cold War. The Group of Soviet Forces in Germany (GSFG) was far more dynamic in terms of troop transfers and regroupings, stationing strength, and the arms and mobility of its military units than the Northern, Central, and Southern Group of Forces in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. By contrast, the withdrawal of 56,000 Soviet soldiers from Poland did not begin until April 1991 and dragged on for two years, until September 1993.

In all honesty, the editors must admit that the withdrawal from a unified Germany, often celebrated as a logistical masterpiece and the largest peaceful movement of troops in military history, was the starting point for their reflections. Yet the withdrawal was barely noticed by contemporaries, as it was overshadowed by the brilliant events that accompanied it at the beginning of the re-unified German state. Although a great deal of documentary photographs of the departing soldiers and their equipment as well as the subsequent search for clues in the military paraphernalia they left behind testify to the public's interest.<sup>8</sup> Based on the activities of the

6 Ibid.; Loth; Winfried: *Moscow, Prague and Warsaw: Overcoming the Brezhnev Doctrine*, in: *Cold War History* 2/1 (2001), pp. 103–118; Jones, Robert A.: *The Soviet Concept Of 'Limited Sovereignty' From Lenin To Gorbachev: The Brezhnev Doctrine*, New York 1990.

7 Kramer, Marc: *The Warsaw Pact Alliance, 1985–1991. Reform, Adaptation, and Collapse*, in: Küsters, Hanns Jürgen (ed.): *Der Zerfall des Sowjetimperiums und Deutschlands Wiedervereinigung. The Decline of the Soviet Empire and Germany's Reunification*, Köln et. al 2016, pp. 69–103, here: pp. 100–101.

8 *Deutsch-Russisches Museum Berlin-Karlshorst* (ed.): *Russischer Soldatenalltag in Deutschland 1990–1994. Bilder des Militärfotografen Wladimir Borissow [Russian Soldiers' Everyday Life in Germany 1990–1994. Photographs by Military Photographer Vladimir Borisov]*, Berlin 2008; Gehrke,



German-Russian Museum on the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Germany,<sup>9</sup> the perception emerged that a historical retrospective in the overall context of Central and Eastern Europe had remained unattended to. In contrast to the conference volume *The Great Withdrawal*,<sup>10</sup> which was published in 2005 and in which eyewitnesses from competent sources elaborated on military aspects, the present volume is intended to take stock of historical research. For, although the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the accompanying reorganisation of security policy have been well researched, comparatively little attention has been paid to the withdrawal of forces from Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>11</sup> Nor is it sufficient to perceive the topic merely in the course of research on the disintegration of the Soviet Union and its alliance systems.<sup>12</sup> The time of the withdrawal of Soviet soldiers, most of whom were despised as occupiers, holds an important place in the national narratives of the transition period. The successful disengagement from Moscow manifested itself in very different sorts of public acts in each country. In Prague, people celebrated 27 June 1991, when the last Soviet soldier left the country, with a big rock concert and fireworks. Poland deliberately set the last day on which the commander-in-chief of Russia's Northern Group of

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Tilo: Das Erbe der Sowjetarmee in Deutschland. Eine Bild- und Textdokumentation [The Legacy of the Soviet Army in Germany. A picture and text documentation], Berlin 2008; Liebe, Joachim: Vergessene Sieger. Jahre danach [Forgotten Victors. Years after], Halle/Saale 2015; Riboldi, Carlo: Soviet Ghosts in Germany, 2021.

9 Deutsch-Russisches Museum Berlin-Karlshorst (ed.): Der Abzug. Die letzten Jahre der russischen Truppen in Deutschland. Eine fotografische Dokumentation von Detlev Steinberg [The Withdrawal. The last years of the Russian troops in Germany. A photographic documentation by Detlev Steinberg], Berlin 2016; Deutsch-Russisches Museum Berlin-Karlshorst (ed.): Alltag-Politik-Kampfauftrag. Sowjetische Truppen in Deutschland 1945–1994 [Everyday Life-Politics-Combat Mission. Soviet Troops in Germany 1945–1994], Berlin 2019.

10 Nadovič, Svetozár et al.: The Great Withdrawal. Withdrawal of the Soviet-Russian Army from Central Europe, 1990–1994, Bratislava 2005.

11 See among others Savranskaya/Blanton/Zubok (eds.): Masterpieces of History; Kosová, Jana: Odchod sovětských vojsk z území Německa, Československa a Polska [The Withdrawal of Soviet Troops from Territory of Germany, Czechoslovakia and Poland], Prague 2012.

12 See among others Adomeit, Hannes: Imperial Overstretch: Germany in Soviet Policy from Stalin to Gorbachev, Baden-Baden 1998; Zubok, Vladimir: A Failed Empire. The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev, London 2007; Brown, Archie: The Gorbachev Factor, Oxford 2003; Grachev, Andrei: Gorbachev's Gamble. Soviet Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War, Cambridge 2008; Savranskaya/Blanton/Zubok (eds.): Masterpieces of History; Mastny, Vojtech/Byrne, Malcolm (eds.): A Cardboard Castle? An Inside History of the Warsaw Pact, New York 2005; Umbach, Frank: Das rote Bündnis. Entwicklung und Zerfall des Warschauer Paktes 1955–1991 [The Red Alliance. Development and Disintegration of the Warsaw Pact 1955–1991], Berlin 2005; Bange, Oliver: Sicherheit und Staat. Die Bündnis- und Militärpolitik der DDR im internationalen Kontext 1969 bis 1990 [Security and State. The GDR's Alliance Policy in the International Context 1969 to 1990], Berlin 2017; Kramer: The Warsaw Pact Alliance.

Forces delivered his message of completion to Polish President Lech Wałęsa in 1993 on the historic 17<sup>th</sup> of September. On the same day 54 years earlier, the Red Army, in collusion with Germany, had invaded the eastern half of Poland, which was later annexed by the Soviet Union. Hungary made 19 June 1991 Hungarian Independence Day, although not until ten years after the withdrawal. And while it did not become a no-work holiday, it has nevertheless acquired highly symbolic significance. Germany, on the other hand, attempted an amicable final act on 31 August 1994 with a joint military ceremony involving the Bundeswehr and the last Russian unit.

In the Russian Federation, as the legal successor to the Soviet Union, however, the withdrawal is still perceived to this day in the context of the break-up of the Soviet Union and as a defeat. Hardly any Russian historians deal with this period, and those who do mostly focus on the connections within the Soviet Union that led to its disintegration, in order to find someone to blame.

This anthology was originally intended to be published as the results of a conference entitled ‘Withdrawals – the departure of Soviet and Russian troops from the sphere of power of the (former) USSR since 1985’. It sought to examine the preconditions and course of events transnationally, starting from the historical moment of withdrawal. The conference was planned in March 2020 by the German-Russian Museum Berlin-Karlshorst in cooperation with the German Society for Eastern European Studies (DGO), the German Historical Institute Moscow (DHI Moscow), the Centre for Military History and Social Sciences of the Bundeswehr (ZMSBw), and the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO). Unfortunately, one week before the colloquium was scheduled to begin, the coronavirus pandemic hit Europe. Travel restrictions and lockdowns made it impossible to align national perspectives in face-to-face meetings and direct discussion. As a substitute, we invited the speakers to present their contributions in written form, even though this cannot replace the direct discussion that we still consider to be necessary. But at least the present anthology can offer a survey of perspectives, which hopefully will stimulate further discussion.

The volume brings together 20 authors who report on the withdrawal of Soviet and Russian troops from seven countries. A relatively large part is devoted to the withdrawal from Germany. This has to do with the special status of Germany, which results, on the one hand, from the sheer number of troops stationed in the GDR and the area they occupied – at least three times larger than those in neighbouring countries – and, on the other hand, from the historical circumstance of reunification. Long-time Cold War adversaries suddenly became partners in managing the withdrawal. This is another specific feature of the German situation – the old, Soviet-socialist military and political elites did not play a decisive role in shaping the withdrawal. In all other countries, by contrast, decision-makers who were united by the Warsaw Pact alliance worked together. Whether this made a

substantial difference in the euphoria of national independence remains to be seen. But at least one knew one's counterpart.

In addition to Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, the book also deals with the Baltic states, Georgia, and Moldova. For them too, the withdrawal of Soviet forces was an important aspect of state sovereignty. However, in contrast to Central and Eastern Europe, that group of countries has interdependencies in the post-Soviet space that continue to impact them today.

While, from a European perspective, the withdrawal can be seen as something historical that has been completed, the situation is different in the Soviet successor states. There it has been more of a reduction than a complete withdrawal of Soviet, and now Russian, soldiers. It is a matter of military bases and renegotiated stationing modalities.

Finally, we asked our authors for overview articles on security thinking and disarmament negotiations within the Cold War. The softening of ossified patterns of perception in the bipolar world of the Warsaw Pact and NATO remains a historical merit of Soviet foreign policy, with Gorbachev as the driving force. On the large international stage, this led to concrete disarmament steps and troop reductions. The withdrawal from Central and Eastern Europe was a major disarmament step in which war equipment was destroyed, military areas were converted to civilian use, and soldiers were transferred to a new civilian professional life. This brought burdens in the social, economic, and ecological spheres, which are addressed in this volume but are not the focus of attention. Some of the work on this has been done separately,<sup>13</sup> but for the most part it remains a research desideratum. Similarly, we do not pursue the development of new security structures, the transformation of existing ones, or simply the absence of both, in this volume.

The first part in this anthology deals with the international framework conditions for the withdrawals and the situation in the Soviet Union, without whose active initiative the withdrawals would not have been possible. They place the withdrawal, and often the reduction in Soviet troops and their weapons, in the larger context of disarmament and the settlement of the Cold War. In his contribution, *Tim Geiger* shows how in the 1980s, despite the deployment of new weapons systems on both sides, the arms race, which had been unchecked until then, was successfully diverted into negotiations on arms control. In the process, it reveals that initially there were

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13 For example the special issues of *Český lid/The Czech Ethnological Journal* 4/106 (2019) and *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, 70/2017; Herndon, Roy C. et. al. (eds.): *Clean-up of Former Soviet Military Instalations. Identification and Selection of Environmental Technologies for Use in Central and Eastern Europe*, Berlin 1995; Kleinheiz, Ralf G.: *Die räumlichen Auswirkungen der Liegenschaftskonversion dargestellt am Abzug der Westgruppe der Truppen (WGT) im Land Brandenburg [The spatial effects of property conversion illustrated by the withdrawal of the Western Group of Forces (WGF) in the state of Brandenburg]*, Euskirchen 1994.

reservations on both sides that had to be overcome until finally, in November 1990, with the Charter of Paris, a fundamental document for a new global security order became possible.

The article by *Hans-Henning Schröder* and *Christoph Meißner* sheds light on the internal Soviet discussions. The new Soviet leadership around Mikhail Gorbachev first had to free itself from the thinking and constraints of the past and overcome resistance from the ranks of the Soviet Army. The goal was to develop a new security architecture in Europe that would renounce the use of force. We know today that this did not succeed in the long term.

The contribution by *Markus Mirschel* and *Michael Galbas* on the complete Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan draws attention to the accompanying social consequences. Afghanistan certainly cannot be seen as a withdrawal in the proper sense. The whole situation can hardly be compared to that in Central and Eastern Europe. It was more of a military retreat than a withdrawal, or, as it would be called today, 'ending the military mission'. And yet, in retrospect, when the Soviets left Afghanistan it was like a blueprint for their European withdrawals in the 1990s. The example of Afghanistan can be used to illustrate social consequences as well as problems of acceptance within the army as well as in Soviet society.

*Christoph Meißner's* contribution describes Moscow's failed attempt to save the structures of Soviet security policy by transforming the Soviet Army into a coalition army of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

The volume's second group of topics deals with the withdrawal from Germany. *Matthias Uhl* examines the specific effects that the new Soviet military policy would have on the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany (GSFG). Soviet troops in Germany came to be seen no longer as the front-line defenders of the Soviet Union, but as bargaining chips vis-à-vis the West and NATO in order to achieve national security through international treaties. *Alexei Sindeyev* shows that the policy Soviet leaders pursued internationally was overwhelmed by events in the GDR in autumn 1989 – particularly the fall of the Berlin Wall. Driven by those developments, decisions were made within a small leadership circle that ultimately led to the complete withdrawal of Soviet forces from Germany. It was important to the author, so much so that the editors could not dissuade him, to present the current relevance of the withdrawal for Russian-European relations in the second part of his contribution.

*Christoph Meißner* and *Christoph Lorke* examine the political, military, and social framework conditions in their contributions. While Meißner's article gives an overview of the withdrawal from a German and Soviet/Russian perspective, Lorke's article deals with the perception of the withdrawal by German society. Whereas people in the political and diplomatic realm were fond of referring to it as a 'dignified withdrawal', Lorke describes how, in reality, the Soviet/Russian soldiers leaving for an uncertain future were not always treated with dignity.

*Sascha Gunold's* contribution discusses the hitherto largely unknown intelligence operations of the Bundeswehr. Some of these operations took place in conjunction with Western partners, with the objective of continuing to provide reconnaissance of their former enemy.

*Markus Hennen* submitted a paper on conversion using the state of Brandenburg as an example. The majority of Soviet troops stationed on German soil were in Brandenburg. The properties they left behind sometimes contained heavily polluted areas of enormous proportions. Hennen describes conversion as a long-term task that will probably take several generations to solve.

The third part of the anthology is dedicated to the withdrawals from Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. *David Kiss* first illuminates the withdrawal of Soviet forces from the Hungarian perspective, which is closely interwoven with the trauma of the suppressed popular uprising of 1956. He explains that the withdrawal was accompanied by the search for a new Hungarian security policy, with Hungary actively working to dissolve the Warsaw Pact. It tried to assert its interests in changing bilateral alliances. *Barnabas Vajda* analyses the withdrawal from Czechoslovakia and the effects it had on the internal development of a country that – in contrast to Germany – was in the process of dividing. Using the example of Fort Komárno, located on the Danube at the Slovak-Hungarian border, he vividly illustrates the difficulty of dealing with the echos of Soviet occupation in Slovakia.

*Agnieszka Kastory* also narrates the withdrawal from Poland from the perspective of domestic political debates, in which the Polish view of the transit of the Western Group of Forces played a weighty role in their withdrawal from Germany. What was at first an uncompromising negotiating strategy on the part of Poland plays a central role in her analysis. All three articles make it clear that the process of negotiating with the Soviet, and later Russian, side was equally difficult for Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland, because neither the Soviet/Russian generals nor their political negotiators had come to terms with the new circumstances. They continued to follow the reactionary patterns of the outdated Soviet supremacy. As was the case during the withdrawal from Germany later on, there was a hard struggle over how to distribute the costs of removing and repairing dilapidated and heavily polluted barracks and military training grounds.

The final section of the volume turns to the withdrawals from the former Soviet republics. In contrast to the withdrawal from the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the Soviet/Russian leadership felt it was being displaced from a region that it perceived as its very own, centuries-old sphere of influence. Its resistance was correspondingly strong, as reflected in ongoing threats and territorial claims that remain unresolved to this day. Each former Soviet republic dealt with its still-powerful Russian neighbour differently.

In the Baltic states, where the withdrawal ended at the same time as Germany, on 31 August 1994, it was, as *Sophie Momzikoff* points out, the problem of the

Russian minority. In part, their settlement was interwoven with the stationing of Soviet soldiers; in part, it was citizens of the Soviet Union with Russian roots who had settled there. While the Baltic states wanted to see the former Soviet and now Russian army withdraw as quickly as possible, the Russian government tied this matter to resolving the question of rights for its compatriots. The new governments in the Baltics insisted on strict rules for residence and citizenship, where language skills (in the difficult Baltic languages) became a touchstone, as well as a commitment to the culture and history of the Baltic countries. Only through international mediation, mainly by the United States, could these conflicts be resolved, at least temporarily, and an agreement be reached on the complete withdrawal of Russian troops. Nevertheless, the accession of the Baltic states to the European Union and NATO created further areas of conflict, a subject explored in the article by *Dovilė Jakniūnaitė* and *Valentinas Beržiūnas*. They impressively show the political effect of the search for national identity through a recollection of one's own history and territory, now vacated by foreign troops. In doing so, the authors do not conceal the real and perceived fears that go hand in hand with this, even though, according to the authors, the line between the two cannot always be clearly drawn.

The situation is similar in the case of Georgia, which is analysed by *David Darchiashvili* and *Michael Machavariani*. Here, the conflicts over Abkhazia and South Ossetia play a central role. Starting from the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the internal political situation in Georgia, which was marked by civil war, the two authors trace the efforts to withdraw Russian troops. In the end, it was not a complete withdrawal, because Russia and its soldiers remained a force for maintaining order in the region. The situation is much the same in the case of the Republic of Moldova. In their contribution, *Nadja Douglas* and *Simon Muschik* analyse the problem of Transnistria as that of a 'frozen conflict' that ultimately cannot be resolved. Their contribution shows how, over the last 30 years, there have been repeated attempts at a complete Russian withdrawal from the conflict zone. International negotiations and ceasefires have been signed, but Russian troops are still present in the region today.

The editors are aware that the studies presented are a matter for debate. We have already had such debates with the authors during the course of editing all their contributions. We sincerely hope that a broad-based academic evaluation will follow. The anthology is intended to fulfil two functions. On the one hand, by presenting current research, it aims to present stored knowledge about the historical events of the departures from Central and Eastern Europe; and, on the other hand, it strives to at least begin to show the perspectives that future historical research on the topic might take up.

To conclude, we would like to express our sincere thanks to several people. First of all, to our colleagues at the Centre for Military History and Social Sciences of the

Bundeswehr, Dr Rüdiger Wenzke and its former director, Dr Jörg Hillmann, both of whom were absolutely critical in producing this volume. We are particularly thankful for the Centre's generous financial support in printing this volume. The museum and the centre have enjoyed a long and fruitful relationship, which has produced, among other things, online documentation of all locations of the Soviet armed forces in Germany. This resource is always being updated.<sup>14</sup> We would also like to thank the German Society for Eastern European Studies, particularly its executive director, Dr Gabriele Freitag, for the indispensable assistance she provided with conceiving a general framework for the volume and the conference that was scheduled for spring 2020. The same applies for the deputy director of the German Historical Institute Moscow, Dr Andreas Hilger, for his tireless contributions to conception and implementation. Special thanks go to the translators of the AV Translation and Interpreting Service (Berlin) led by Alexei Khorkov and to Alison Borrowman. Christina Wheeler, the editor, transformed the contributions submitted to us into easily readable English articles, for which we would like to express our sincere thanks. We would also like to thank the publisher, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, represented by Kai Pätzke, for their extremely effective collaboration and for including our volume in the publishing line-up.

Berlin, May 2021

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.sowjetische-militaerstandorte-in-deutschland.de/>, last access: 15 April 2021.

# The Context of the Withdrawals from East Central Europe





Tim Geiger

## Disarmament and the End of the Cold War

### The Military-Strategic Background of the International Change, 1985–1991

The Cold War was a political, economic, ideological, and cultural dispute on a global scale, but ultimately a military conflict as well, even if it, fortunately enough, didn't evolve into a 'hot' war – at least not in Europe. Up to the historical watershed of 1989–1990, the entire European continent, especially Germany, was divided into two antagonistic military blocs: NATO and the Warsaw Pact confronted each other with enormous arsenals for nuclear annihilation. In the 1980s, roughly 1.5 million soldiers were stationed within the two German States: In the West, there was the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) army, the *Bundeswehr*, with about 500,000 men and about 400,000 soldiers from allied NATO troops, half of them were from the United States of America. Alongside these two Western 'lead nations' stood troops from Denmark, the Netherlands, Britain, and Belgium in West Germany (all close to the 'Iron curtain'), as well as French and Canadian forces (in the south-western backyard of the FRG). In the GDR, there was the *Nationale Volksarmee* with around 180,000 men and 400,000 soldiers from the 'Group of Soviet Forces in Germany' (renamed in 1989 the 'Western Group of Forces', WGF).<sup>1</sup> More Soviet forces were deployed in Czechoslovakia (80,000), Hungary (55,000), and Poland (40,000).<sup>2</sup> In 1980, more than 5000 American nuclear warheads were stored in West German territory alone – no doubt, the highest concentration of atomic weapons in the world.<sup>3</sup> According to Valentin Falin, head of the International Department

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- 1 Wieck, Hans-Georg: Bündnispolitik und Nationales Interesse. Wertungen aus politischer und diplomatischer Sicht [Alliance Policy and National Interest. Assessments from a Political and Diplomatic Perspective], in: Thoß, Bruno (ed.): Vom Kalten Krieg zur deutschen Einheit. Analysen und Zeitzeugenberichte zur deutschen Militärgeschichte 1945 bis 1995, München 1995, pp. 507–524, here: p. 517.
  - 2 See Memorandum of the Head of NATO Desk of the Auswärtige Amt (AA, i.e. FRG's Foreign Office), Dreher, 'Soviet Troops in Non-Soviet Warsaw Pact Countries', 23.1.1990, in: Geiger, Tim/Ploetz, Michael/ Hofmann, Jens Jost (eds.): Akten zur Auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (henceforth AAPD) 1990, Boston/Berlin 2021, Doc. 13, p. 60.
  - 3 Memorandum of Conversation (henceforth: MemCon) of Bundeskanzler Schmidt with US President Carter in Venice, 21 June 1980, in: Geiger, Tim/Das Gupta, Amit/Szatkowski, Tim (eds.): AAPD 1980, Munich 2011, Doc. 182, p. 954. According to a GDR-Study the bulk (circa 3800) of the around 6000 Nukes in Western Europe could be found in the FRG, see Weber, Wolfgang (ed.): Die Streitkräfte der NATO auf dem Territorium der BRD [NATO's armed forces on the territory of the FRG], Berlin (East) 1986, p. 83.

in the Central Committee of CPSU, in spring 1990, the concentration of weapons in Germany still surpassed the levels of all other countries by a tenfold.<sup>4</sup> No wonder that nuclear Armageddon fears were widespread in the 1980s – one primary reason why millions of people in West Germany and other Western countries took to the streets as ‘peace protesters’ in the first half of this crucial decade.

Against this background, the fundamental international change that transpired at the end of the decade, namely the End of the Cold War, is even more sensational. How could the vicious circle of armament be broken? How could politicians turn the decade from the mid-1980s to 1990s into *the* era of arms control and disarmament such that the foundations of European security would be established and cemented for the next thirty years?

Certainly, such complex international developments like the end of the Cold War have a plethora of divergent causes. Amongst them is one that can hardly be overestimated: disarmament. Disarmament had a key role in initiating and facilitating the radical political change of the late 1980s/early 1990s. However, the road toward disarmament was a thorny one full of setbacks.

The following article is divided into two parts: first, nuclear disarmament is scrutinized, especially the INF Treaty of 1987, the first real disarmament treaty of the Cold War ever, by which an entire category of nuclear weapons was abolished. Moreover, START – the reduction of strategic, namely intercontinental nuclear weapons – will be examined, as well as the controversies about the SNF, the Short-Range Nuclear Forces. The second part of this article is devoted to lesser known but still no less significant problems of conventional disarmament, with the sub-items of the ill-fated Mutual and Balance Forces Reductions (MBFR) talks in Vienna 1973–1989, the Stockholm Conference on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures and Disarmament in Europe in 1986, and the ‘Vienna Talks’ of 1989–1990 with its two components, the ‘Conventional Forces in Europe’ (CFE) and the ‘Confidence- and Security Buildings Measures’ (CSBM).

## 1. Nuclear disarmament: Melting down the arsenals of Armageddon

On 12 December 1979, NATO announced its ‘Double-Track Decision.’ Here is not the place to recount its genesis and the serious crisis of détente since the late 1970s.<sup>5</sup>

4 MemCon between Falin and GDR’s Minister for Disarmament and Defence, Eppelmann, in Moscow, 8.5.1990, in: Lehmann, Ines (ed.): Die Außenpolitik der DDR 1989/90. Eine dokumentierte Rekonstruktion [The Foreign Policy of the GDR 1989/90. A Documented Reconstruction], Baden-Baden 2010, Doc. 99, p. 618.

5 Risse-Kappen, Thomas: Null-Lösung. Entscheidungsprozesse zu den Mittelstreckenwaffen 1970–1987 [Zero solution. Decision-making Processes on intermedium-range Weapons 1970–1987], Frank-

In short, the Western Alliance faced a substantial modernisation of the Soviet Union's intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF), particularly the replacement of SS-4 and SS-5 missiles with only one nuclear warhead, with the accurate, mobile SS-20 and its improved range of up to 5500 km and its arming with three individually controllable nuclear warheads. Above all, the SS-20's range was considered critical: even if deployed beyond the Urals, the SS-20s could hit targets all over Western Europe, but none in the United States. This fact was directly aimed at the most fragile fault of the Atlantic Alliance: it questioned the US guarantee to protect Western Europe with nuclear arms ('extended nuclear deterrence'). The impending SALT II agreement, with its intended draw at the strategic, namely intercontinental nuclear arsenals of the superpowers, exacerbated the political and military danger of this 'sub-strategic imbalance' for the Western European countries. Thus, NATO decided to deploy 572 new American INF (with ranges between 500 and 5500 km in Western Europe) from 1983 onward if previous disarmament talks between the USA and the USSR in Geneva about a reduction their INF weapons failed. That was the core of the 'Double-Track Decision': the announcement of a built-up of arms, on the one hand, that would not take place, on the other hand, if the Soviet Union would accept the offer to disarm this category of weapons.

Since 1981, however, the Geneva talks did not lead to appreciable results. Thus, in November 1983, NATO started to deploy the first of altogether 108 Pershing II missiles in the FRG, as well Ground-Launched Cruise Missiles (GLCM) in Great Britain and Italy, from 1985 onward in Belgium, as well, and (if only in theory) in the Netherlands. In the end, 464 GLCMs would be stationed in Great Britain (160), Italy (112), in West Germany (96 – in addition to the 108 Pershings), Belgium, and the Netherlands (48 each). In turn, 2400 outdated nuclear warheads were removed from Western Europe in the next couple of years.<sup>6</sup>

However, the newly deployed missiles were far more dangerous for the Soviet Union, because they reached right into the Soviet heartland. The ballistic Pershing

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furt a. M. 1988; Geiger, Tim: Die Regierung Schmidt-Genscher und der NATO-Doppelbeschluss [The Schmidt-Genscher Government and the NATO Double-Track Decision], in: Gassert, Philipp/Geiger, Tim/Wentker, Hermann (eds.): *Zweiter Kalter Krieg und Friedensbewegung. Der NATO-Doppelbeschluss in deutsch-deutscher und internationaler Perspektive*, Munich 2011, pp. 95–122; Geiger, Tim: *The NATO Double-Track Decision: Genesis and Implementation*, in: Becker-Schaum, Christoph et. al. (eds.): *The Nuclear Crisis. The Arms Race, Cold War Anxiety, and the German Peace Movement of the 1980s*, New York/Oxford 2016, pp. 52–69; Nuti, Leopoldo: *The Origins of the 1979 Dual Track Decision – A survey*, in: *ibid.* (ed.): *Crisis of Détente in Europe: From Helsinki to Gorbachev 1975–1985*, New York 2009, pp. 57–71.

<sup>6</sup> The retreat of 1000 old-fashioned war heads as barter for the new missiles were laid out in NATO's Double-Track Decision. In October 1983, the removal of another 1400 nuclear weapons in the next six years was announced; <https://www.nato.int/docu/comm/49-95/c831027a.htm>, last access: 8 April 2021.

II missiles (range 1800–2000 km) were especially threatening. The Warsaw Pact countries and Western Peace Movements claimed that the flight-time of Pershing II from launch to impact would add up to five to eight minutes whereas NATO's military experts calculated 15 to 20 minutes (what equalled the flight-times of SS-20). This difference was due to the fact that the Warsaw Pact's flight reconnaissance had a lower performance than NATO's. It thus could verify Pershing II launches only after about 10 minutes – which left only some minutes to react.<sup>7</sup> The GLCMs travelled much more slowly but were no less difficult to detect, due to their low-flying height underneath the Warsaw Pact's radar.

The Soviet reaction to NATO's implementation of its Double-Track Decision was a walkout on the Geneva talks and the deployment of additional Short-Range Nuclear Forces (SNF; SS-12, SS-20, and SS-23) in the GDR and ČSSR.<sup>8</sup>

However, the new 'ice age' in East-West relations didn't last long. The Kremlin realized that all hopes to thwart NATO's rearmament had failed. In November 1984, Ronald Reagan was re-elected for another four years as US president. A wait-and-see approach made no sense – particularly because Reagan further promoted his favourite project, a space-based missiles defence system ('Strategic Defence Initiative'/SDI). Although most experts cast doubts regarding Reagan's SDI dreams ever reaching reality, the project increased pressure on the Soviet leadership to tackle another, more exacerbated arms race that Moscow could no longer afford. The ailing Soviet economy desperately needed a cutback of its oversized military complex. For the Kremlin, disarmament became a political and economic necessity.

At their 7–8 January 1985 meeting in Geneva, US Secretary of State George Shultz and his Soviet colleague Andrei Gromyko agreed to resume American-Soviet disarmament negotiations. These Geneva talks would start in March and be structured in three, intertwined groups: strategic offensive weapons (START), Intermediate-Range Nuclear Weapons (INF) and nuclear defensive and Space weapons (SDI/ABM).<sup>9</sup>

It was providential that a new general-secretary of the CPSU was chosen in the same month: Mikhail Gorbachev, a dynamic leader who differed substantially from his gerontocratic predecessors. Gorbachev realized that fundamental changes with the Soviet system were indispensable. To enable reforms, a dramatic reduction in the USSR's oversized defence spending was critical: this required a reduction of the

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7 Even Security Experts in the West took quite some time to realize the causes of these differences in data; see AAPD 1983, Doc 20, p. 103, fn. 8.

8 Garthoff, Raymond L.: *The Great Transition. American–Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War*, Washington D.C. 1994, p. 566.

9 Shultz-Gromyko conversations in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988*, Vol. IV, docs. 355–361, pp. 1285–1352. For their joint statement *Europa-Archiv* 1985, D 60.

Cold War confrontation. Soon, Gorbachev impressed the world with a fireworks display of disarmament proposals.

A first summit meeting in Geneva between Gorbachev and Reagan in November 1985 – the first superpower summit after six years – did not culminate in many concrete results. Yet, their leaders learned to trust one another. The two superpowers ‘agreed that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought’. Recognizing the catastrophic consequences of any military clash between the USSR and the USA, the joint statement emphasized ‘the importance of preventing any war between them, whether nuclear or conventional’. Moreover, the superpowers obliged themselves to the ‘the principle of 50 per cent reductions in the[ir] nuclear arms’, but this intent remained vague.<sup>10</sup>

At the next summit on 11–12 October 1986 in Reykjavik, Gorbachev and Reagan were close to agreeing to the most radical nuclear disarmament deal imaginable – a complete abolishment of all American and Soviet nuclear weapons. Ultimately, it was primarily Reagan’s stubborn adherence to SDI that thwarted this revolutionary step – much to the relief of their political advisors and allies.<sup>11</sup> The West Europeans were not consulted at all, although their security fundamentally dependent on America’s nuclear umbrella. According to NATO’s strategy of ‘flexible response’, the West always maintained the option for nuclear strike if, in case of war, the attack of Warsaw Pact’s forces could no longer be checked by conventional forces. Thus, the idea in Reykjavik to scrap all nuclear weapons was a real shock for NATO allies.

Nevertheless, Reykjavik was a milestone. Both superpowers agreed that they could abolish intermediate-range nuclear weapons. This became relevant when, in February 1987, Gorbachev agreed to unty the disarmament package upon which the USSR had so far insisted: that no deal in one of the three Geneva disarmament groups could be reached without respective progress in the two other categories. Now, the General-Secretary proposed jumpstarting the INF negotiations – regardless of the standstill at START or Space Talks. Gorbachev accepted the Western approach of an INF ‘zero solution’, that means: a complete abolishment of these systems.<sup>12</sup>

10 Joint Soviet-US statement on the Geneva Summit, 21 November 1985, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/joint-soviet-united-states-statement-the-summit-meeting-geneva>, last access: 8 April 2021.

11 For the records of the summit Safranskaya, Svetlana/Blanton, Thomas (eds.): *The Last Superpower Summits. Gorbachev, Reagan, and Bush. Conversations That Ended the Cold War*, Budapest/New York 2016, docs. 29–33, pp. 180–235.

12 Savranskaya, Svetlana/Blanton, Thomas: *The Nuclear Abolition Package of 1986 and the Soviet Road to INF*, in: Gassert, Philipp/Geiger, Tim/Wentker, Hermann (eds.): *The INF Treaty: A Reappraisal*, Göttingen 2021, pp. 71–87, here: pp. 81 f.