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# The Bulgarian Land Forces in the Cold War

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## Abstract

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During the Cold War, information in Western open sources about Bulgarian Land Forces' war plans, organisation, and order of battle was absent or very general, until the last years of the 1980s. Yet there is much more information now available after 30 years, and this is a very valid topic for research. Bulgaria was drawn into Soviet war planning for the elimination of capitalism. Bulgaria's planned part in this was helping to seize the Turkish Straits, either with or without the use of tactical nuclear weapons. It now appears that there would have been two Fronts advancing in this area, one predominantly Soviet Odessa Military District forces to seize the Turkish Straits, and the other more heavily Bulgarian in composition attacking towards central Greece. Both would have been supported by tactical air forces and, if the circumstances dictated, nuclear weapons. Later, with the commitment of strategic reserves, it was hoped to develop the offensive in depth towards the Syrian border. The forces formed to carry this mission out were reorganized repeatedly from 1945-55, as the Communist Party tightened its control over the country. The organisation of the Land Forces was much more settled after the early 1960s. Bulgarian history will be better served by more open debate over these issues.

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### Keywords:

Bulgarian Land Forces; Warsaw Pact; Southwestern Theatre of Military Operations; Soviet Ground Forces; offensive plans; war plans; motor rifle division; military historiography.

Throughout and to the very end of the Cold War, there was little reliable and open information available in the West on the organisation, order of battle, and war plans of the Bulgarian Land Forces (BLF, but strictly Сухопътни войски (CB)). Eastern Bloc military secrecy prevented anything but meaninglessly general data from being released, and what information was available in the West was often incorrect.

The end of the Cold War changed all that. The Cold War International History Project, perhaps most prominently, has unearthed vast amounts of at least the political history of the East Bloc. Yet little has been done in the last 10-15 years to gather the newly arriving data into a more concise, comprehensive and accurate picture of the BLF from 1945-1990. The issue is past, politics is turbulent; Bulgaria eventually joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO); and the Bulgarian military history community and armed forces veterans retain a strong focus on the Royalist period of their history. Bulgaria's struggle for independence is a much happier subject than the Communist period. The fourth volume of the Almanac of Bulgarian Land Forces, part of an enormous popular history of the Bulgarian Army's infantry divisions and regiments, published in 2018, describes the "Immortal Divisions of Bulgaria" as the divisions which fought the Balkan Wars and First World War, sworn to the service of the Knyaz (prince) and later Tsar of Bulgaria ([Tsvetkov and al. 2018](#)).

In stark contrast, this author had to sift through scattered references to uncover the initial formation details of the 21st Motor Rifle Division of the Communist-era Bulgaria People's Army. The resentment in some cases is palpable. There is no problem with such an emphasis, especially when coupled with rigorous historical analysis. Yet the Cold War Bulgarian Land Forces are more recent and deserve attention as well. There can be both pride and sadness when those involved in the Land Forces of 1945-1990 look back on the Cold War. But allowing more light onto the period, and honest debate, should allow Bulgaria to better fulfil its ample potential.

To address this gap, this historical article will first, sketch Bulgaria's grand strategic position and anticipated place in Warsaw Pact war plans, drawing on declassified U.S. documents and published sources since 1990; then, second, contrast the picture available in Western open sources up until the late 1980s with, third, the information which has become available in the last decades, to sketch the BLF's evolution and order of battle. Open debate on contemporary military history will always have value.

## Strategic Setting

At the start of the Cold War, Bulgaria had always been one of the Soviet Union's most loyal allies. This dated back to hundreds of years of Ottoman domination

“during which tsarist Russia represented the only hope of liberation” (Curtis 1993, 229). Russia then played a leading role in creating the modern Bulgarian state in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78. Bulgaria built a strong and effective military tradition during the Balkan Wars of 1912-13, but even if it won several significant victories, it was defeated in the First World War. Revanchist former officers became a significant political faction in the fifteen years that followed, helping to stage coups.

British diplomats in the 1960s wrote that the Soviets “...we must assume, regard Bulgaria as the most reliable of their European satellites” (D. Dimitrov, Soviet Bulgaria. From the Foreign Office Records, Book 1, 1956-1963 (London, BBC World Service, 1994), 67, cited in Baev 2008, 195-196). Thirty years later, nothing substantial had changed: “In contrast to the other Communist states in the Balkans, the [People’s Republic of Bulgaria] has never sought to follow an independent foreign or defence policy. In the 43 years since its formation, it has been the one permanent supporter of the USSR in the region, never openly disagreeing with Moscow over any major policy decision” (Ashley 1989, 109). The Socialist worldview and system were heavily militarised. This militarization extended to the point that Military Economic Science required Communist societies to provide all the resources that the Armed Forces deemed necessary to protect and spread the Revolution internationally (Young 2017, 19,51) In some later years, the military budget reached 12% of GDP. In contrast, NATO today argues that member states should spend 2% of GDP on defence. Control of the armed forces was a matter of loyalty to the Bulgarian Communist Party, ensured through extensive political control and indoctrination networks (Kramer 1984, 46).

This posture led to the whole-hearted adoption of Soviet military practices, including a predilection for the offensive. At the very beginning of the 1980s, “public pronouncements by Bulgarian leaders repeatedly affirm[ed] a determination to perform their Pact mission wholeheartedly if called upon” (Lewis 1982, 132). Research since 1990 supports the previous common belief that Bulgaria, in the event of a general NATO-Warsaw Pact war, would have joined with its Soviet overlord to launch attacks against Greece and Turkey (Saychuk 2021).

## Organisation and War Plans

The Bulgarian People’s Army included Land Forces, Air and Air Defence Forces, the Navy, and the Construction Troops (Lewis 1982, 135; Belcheva 2014; Velikov 2022). In addition to the BPA, there were an additional set of armed forces, many without direct counterparts in Western Europe. Closely associated but under the Ministry of the Interior were the Border Troops and Interior Troops. There were also static-support Troops of the Ministry of Transport, mostly railway troops, though including a pontoon brigade, and Troops of the Committee for Posts and Telecommunications (Комитет за поща и далекосъобщения) which fell respectively under the Ministry

of Transport and the Committee for Posts and Telecommunications. In wartime, the post & telecommunications troops would have fallen under the Ministry of People's Defence. This author has scanned the available 1980s open sources without finding mention of either the Troops of the Ministry of Transport or the Troops of the Committee of Posts and Telecommunications.

To start discussing Bulgarian war plans, the best place to start is Soviet war planning, as Bulgaria was so closely aligned with the Soviet Union. At its deeper levels, Marxism-Leninism is a significant factor in explaining the shape of the Soviet Armed Forces and the kinds of war plans they formulated (Odom 1998, 11); (Donnelly 1988, 106-108). The same is true more generally; liberal philosophies shape Anglo-American views on war (Howard 2008). Based on a class analysis, the General Staff in Moscow potentially had to consider war with all countries where private ownership of the means of production existed. A world war could break out; if it did, the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc would confront the entire capitalist world. Since Mikhail Frunze in the 1920s, Soviet military philosophy had also been almost entirely offensive. Soviet and Soviet-inspired forces would aim to seize the initiative and attack first at the very beginning of the war. Swift, large, highly mechanised combined arms forces were built to accomplish this aim.

From 1945 and 1990, the General Staff in Moscow carried out all planning to militarily liberate Bulgaria's potential target countries from the clutches of capitalism. By philosophy and a few years of Soviet military presence after 1945, Bulgaria was drawn into this approach to war. This was significantly removed from 21st-century Western European concepts of defence and force development planning. These plans and instructions were not really discussed with Bulgarian authorities for amendment; instead, they were communicated to Bulgaria for implementation – and Bulgaria was required to find the necessary resources.

Piecing Bulgarian war plans has been difficult until very recently. There is little published, specific, discussion and the most authoritative sources, such as General William Odom's *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (1998) focus on the view from Moscow, with few details. The General Staff archives in Moscow remain tightly closed. However, since the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency began to upload large numbers of Cold War-era documents to the Internet in 2016 (Kivimäki 2017), it is possible to fashion an overview. Better still, credible material from the headquarters of the Odessa Military District, long tasked with orchestrating the Warsaw Pact advance to the Turkish Straits, is now available (Saychuk 2021).

As always with considering a NATO-Warsaw Pact war, a large number of assumptions are required. Plans changed over the decades; the role of nuclear weapons developed; and war is as always subject to chance and Clausewitzian friction. The overall picture is however outlined by Soviet documents obtained by U.S. espionage. One classified article from March 1962 on "Some Questions in the Preparation and Conduct of

Initial Offensive Operations by Colonel-General A. Babadzhanyan,” in the Soviet military-theoretical journal *Military Thought* wrote ([Babadzhanyan 1962](#)):

*...the goals of a strategic offensive on the European continent can be defined as the destruction of the armed forces of the aggressor countries located there and reaching the seacoasts of the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. In terms of depth, this consists of various strategic axes from 600 to 800 km (Southwestern Theatre of Military Operations--TVD) and from 1200 to 2000 km (Western TVD). ...the offensive operations of formations must follow one after the other without operational pauses.*

As Babadzhanyan wrote, the Soviet Armed Forces divided Europe into two theatres, the Western – the primary focus – and the Southwestern, where Bulgaria was. In 1984, two Main or High Commands of Forces were created, for the Western and Southwestern Theatres ([Odom 1998, 78, V.I.](#); [Feskov, et al. 2013, 88-93](#)).<sup>1</sup> The Western TVD would launch land and air forces, Soviet and Warsaw Pact, from East Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic westward as far as France and the English Channel. Soviet and Warsaw Pact staff training was focused on preparing for a high-speed offensive ([Odom, 1998, 278](#)). The Главное Командование Войск Юго-Западного Направления - Southwestern Theatre of Military Operations – had lower priority, but the seizure of the Turkish Straits was crucial. Significant Soviet and Bulgarian forces were assigned this task. Seizing the Straits would allow Warsaw Pact naval forces, Soviet, Bulgarian, and Romanian, to enter the Mediterranean and block NATO from using the area ([National Intelligence Council 1979, IV-24](#)). However, U.S. intelligence organs were not clear on “what role Romanian forces would have” because of Romania’s wavering allegiance to the Soviets ([National Intelligence Council 1983, 9](#)). Further advances would depend upon the fortunes of war, but planning foresaw advances at least to the Turkish-Syrian border.

Warsaw Pact planning to seize the Turkish Straits appears to date from the 1962 exercise “Hemus.” Both the CIA and Soviet documents obtained by Saychuk, emphasize two separate axes of advance, towards the Turkish Straits and towards Greece. The 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Balkan Fronts were named to attack in these two directions in May 1964, though they were often named during exercises as the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Southern Fronts ([Saychuk 2021, 376](#)). The Chief of Staff of the Odessa Military District (MD), General Lieutenant Vladimir Meretskov, envisaged each as numbering three combined-arms armies (общевойсковая армия) during discussions in 1978. Also, part of the overall effort would have been naval forces; Airborne Troops; and elements of Long-Range Aviation ([Saychuk 2021, 376-378](#)). A third Front would have been deployed in Romania as a reserve. A standing headquarters for the 1<sup>st</sup> Balkan Front was established by the BPA in 1959. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Balkan

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<sup>1</sup> The remainder of this paragraph largely draws on the quoted U.S. National Intelligence Estimates. Before 1984, it appears that the General Staff in Moscow probably would have followed their Second World War practice of supervising all the fronts and fleets (with Warsaw Pact forces included in each) directly, probably using Supreme High Command representatives and liaison parties with dedicated communications. This is an inference from Soviet practice after the beginning of Operation Barbarossa, July 1941; the wording of V.I. Feskov et al 2013, 88; and National Intelligence Council, 1979, III-7.

Front was to be established by mobilizing the Odessa MD. In the course of numerous exercises in the 1960s-80s, it was named the Maritime Front. It was to include three combined arms armies, one being Bulgarian; a multi-brigade army corps of the new type to be made ready upon mobilization ([Saychuk correspondence 2023](#))<sup>2</sup>; and three to four other divisions, including one airborne division. The 98<sup>th</sup> Guards Airborne Division had been based at Bolgrad in Odessa Oblast and earmarked for this task since 1969. Two divisions were earmarked for amphibious operations. The Front took in two Soviet armies, one to be formed on mobilization (quite possibly 14<sup>th</sup> Guards and 25<sup>th</sup> Armies ([Feskov 2013](#), 124), and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army of the BLF ([Saychuk 2021](#), 380).

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<sup>2</sup> From 1982 two new army corps were created in the Soviet Ground Forces to carry on attacks deep into the enemy's rear once enemy lines had been broken. They comprised four larger-than-usual brigades instead of divisions. See [r/warno description, 2022](#); [Holm 2016a](#); [Holm 2016b](#); [CIA 1983](#); and [Feskov et al 2013](#), 125-126. On mobilisation, it was planned to expand a division in the Odessa MD to form such an exploitation army corps.

<sup>3</sup> This paragraph is based on General Dimitrov's notes. General Dimitrov served as a senior assistant in the Operational Department of the General Staff from 1982-86. In 1980, he defended a dissertation on "Fundamentals, preparation and conduct of the offensive operation to central Greece" at the Military Academy in Sofia.

While the Soviet data from Odessa MD headquarters is the most credible, the unanimous Bulgarian view is different. Instead of two fronts, Bulgarian sources speak of only one Front, with both Soviet and Bulgarian troops. From General Stefan Dimitrov's time within the General Staff's Operations Directorate from 1982, the Balkan Front was anticipated to have been made up of Bulgarian troops (up to three combined-arms armies); a Soviet army from the Odessa MD; and a Romanian combined-arms army ([Dimitrov 2023](#)).<sup>3</sup> In common with previously released Warsaw Pact plans and exercise data from Central Europe, planning started with an initial defensive phase, for which the last defence line would be the Balkan Mountains (Stara Planina), which divide Northern and Southern Bulgaria. The counteroffensive would then seize the Turkish Straits, and after the commitment of strategic reserves, would develop in depth towards Syria. By this time many of the first echelon divisions would have been badly degraded by continuous fighting. It is not possible to be clear as of yet why Soviet sources consistently speak of two or more Fronts, while Bulgarian sources only mention one.

War plans were developed with two variants: without the use of nuclear weapons and with the use of nuclear weapons. At the Front level, this would have included R-11 Zemlya surface-to-surface missiles with 10, 20, or 40 kiloton (kT) warheads and a range of about 300 kilometres, later superseded by R-17 Elbrus SSMS. For comparison, the two atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were about 15 and 20 kT, respectively. During exercises, the forces of the Odessa Military District simulated the use of up to 700 nuclear weapons, 70% to be delivered by aircraft ([Saychuk 2021](#), 482-483).

During the Warsaw Pact Exercise "Shield 82" (ЩИТ-82), the Front Headquarters was provided by the Soviet Union and the Soviet Ground Forces; Bulgarian troops were subordinated to it; a group from the Headquarters of the 14<sup>th</sup> Guards Army from the Odessa MD took part; and parts of the 59<sup>th</sup> Guards Motor Rifle Division also from the Odessa MD, three aviation regiments, and a number of other forces ([Saychuk 2021](#), 468).

A group made up of Bulgarian troops from the 1st Army, plus Soviet troops, was also intended to launch an offensive towards Greece, as well ([Dimitrov 2023](#)).

Movement of Soviet forces from the Odessa MD up to attack the Turkish Straits might give NATO advance warning of an attack ([National Intelligence Council 1979](#)). Amphibious and airborne operations would support the advance. Soviet Naval Infantry were expected to be landed, possibly east of Istanbul, followed by a Soviet motor rifle regiment 'probably' to be landed from merchant ships after initial assault landings ([Central Intelligence Agency 1979, 12/47](#); [Saychuk 2017](#)). Behind the Odessa MD were the forces of the Kiev MD, originally intended to attack Austria and Bavaria. But from 1970 the Kiev MD's focus was increasingly shifted, to sending second-echelon forces to ensure the final defeat of Turkey by advancing on Ankara ([Saychuk 2021, 393-394](#)). A corridor for the passage of the Kiev MD forces south through Romania was created annually during staff training exercises in 1975-89.

It may be worth clarifying here the West and East Bloc understandings of what Fronts and Armies consist of. The Western concept of an Army Group is often the starting point for understanding what a Soviet Front comprised. Such Army Groups reached their pinnacle in the Second World War, being made up of armies, each of multiple corps, each of multiple divisions. A division is very roughly 10,000 strong.<sup>4</sup> But, the Soviets had often relied heavily on smaller groupings, placing the emphasis on a multi-divisional force without intervening corps headquarters. This dates back to the groupings of the Russian Civil War and even the famed *Конáрмия*, the First Cavalry Army, which did not usually employ intermediate corps HQs to supervise its divisions. Shortages of either fighting personnel to fill out required *умам*, *штат*, Tables of Organisation, or formation headquarters also contributed. Fifteen years later, as the Soviet Ground Forces were being switched to an all-mechanised model, combined arms or tank armies were reduced to 4-5 divisions, a mix of tank and motor rifle divisions ([Glantz 2010](#); [Feskov 2013, 123](#)). Fronts and armies would have their subordinate manoeuvre formations adjusted depending upon the circumstances ([Dimitrov 2023](#)). Bulgarian armies could include four to six major manoeuvre formations – three to four motor rifle divisions, one to two tank brigades, plus artillery and other forces. As the war went on, new combat formations plus combat support formations such as artillery and engineers could be added or subtracted. In peacetime, Bulgarian first echelon divisions were at 70-90% of strength; second echelon, up to 50%; and reserve divisions less than 10%.

An oddity from a Western viewpoint in a front is a tactical air grouping, usually an Air Army, of several air divisions (roughly 150 combat aircraft per air division) ([Lewis 1982, 67](#)). These were directly under the control of the Front commander. Western reporting of the 1980s regarding the largest and most important Soviet air army, the 16th, in Germany, described a split

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<sup>4</sup> Contemporary personnel figures for Soviet motor rifle divisions can be found at [Lewis 1982, 32-39](#); and [Carey Schofield, Inside the Soviet Army, 117](#).

into a northern and southern tactical air corps, totalling five ground attack divisions between them (Jane's Defence Weekly c1991; (Lewis 1982, 186). East German forces might have added two more regiments of aircraft. But there was always a strong possibility that during a transition to war, each tactical air corps might end up on a different Front – and end up being elevated to the status of an Air Army. Further back, no Soviet air army in the interior had anything more than four divisions of combat aircraft during the 1980s, and some much less.<sup>5</sup> So, despite the use of the term 'Army' implying multiple corps to a Westerner, the air forces had also reduced in size. So, Fronts would maybe have up to 12-14 divisions, in up to three or four armies, and hundreds of tactical aircraft.

<sup>5</sup> V.I. Feskov et al 2004, corrected, checked and amended by Holm 2013 for air forces, which draws on "Военная авиация отечества - Организация, вооружение, дислокация (1991/2000 г.г.)" by A.G. Lenskiy and M.M. Tsybin, Saint Petersburg 2004, the Air Forces' order of battle in 1990 and 2000 sourced from the CFE treaty data exchange; myriad earlier personal notes.

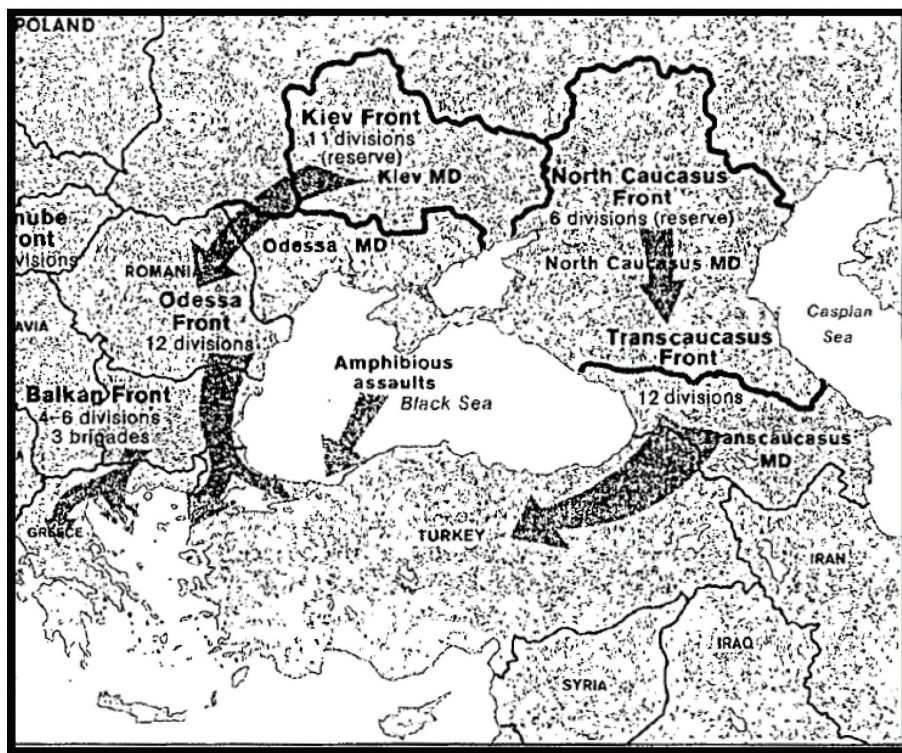


Figure 1: Soviet and NSWP Planned Lines of Advance estimated by U.S. National Intelligence Council, early 1979. It appears according to Saychuk's research the two Fronts west of the Black Sea would have been larger than estimated here. (Source: National Intelligence Council 1979)

## Western Knowledge in the 1980s

So much for the larger strategic picture, as far as it can be perceived from the vantage point of 30 to 40 years later. But what of the evolution of the Bulgarian Land Forces? What kind of information was available in the West during the Cold War itself? What were the information gaps?

By August 1966, the Institute for Strategic Studies in London was reporting that Bulgaria had a total of eight motorized infantry divisions (Institute for



Strategic Studies, 1966, 6). By the early 1980s, sources usually repeated the bare details, that the Bulgarian Land Forces included eight motor rifle divisions (three cadre, Category 3) and five tank brigades, with little amplifying data (Keefe 1974, 290; Keegan 1982; Lewis 1982, 133; Foss 1986). Only the *Military Balance* consistently listed other units.<sup>6</sup> To explain the general lack of modern equipment, much was made of Bulgaria's "lack of skilled manpower," "geographical isolation from potential conflict with NATO," and the "austerity of the armed forces" (Lewis 1982, 131,133). It was only towards the end of the 1980s that additional data on the Land Forces slowly became available, with sources such as Rottman & Volstad 1987, Isby 1990's *Armies of the Warsaw Pact*, Ashley in Eyal 1989, and Curtis 1993. The earliest data on the Land Forces' order of battle appears to have been published by Rottman & Volstad in 1987: a number of formation details were incorrect. There were also two articles by Daniel Nelson, plus his chapter in *NATO-Warsaw Pact Force Mobilization*, RAND, 1988, presenting a more general view. Amid the tumultuous events of 1988 onwards, these sources did however tend to give snapshots that rapidly become incorrect.

### A Better Picture

Thirty years have now passed, and a host of further information, in much more detail, has become available.

Plans, organisation and structure are a reasonable scaffold to start to understand an army, but essentially and vitally, armies are about people too (Goldstone 2000, 31-32). They are social organisms. So this paper is about one aspect, rather than the whole story. Within the grand strategic framework described above, there was considerable scope for variation. Individual people (all men, in this case, at least as regards formal power) can have a significant and lasting impact on an organisation. A change in senior generals, or a change in politicians, can result in fundamental changes to what the organisation does and the way it does it. Here there was a considerable difference between NATO and the Eastern Bloc. Few chiefs of staff spend anything more than about four years in post in the developed West. As a result, a Western army or defence chief can both (a) inject fresh "blood", new ideas and methods, and stimulate creativity, change and development<sup>7</sup>, but also (b) implement ideas that his successor reverses, causing turbulence. In the Eastern Bloc, time in office could be much longer. General Atanas Semerdzhiev was Chief of the General Staff from 1962 to 1989, for example. There was very significant turbulence in the force structure from 1945 to the late 1950s, but this was more a product of the infant People's Republic of Bulgaria and its growing pains, plus trying to adapt to rapid technological and strategic change. Perhaps the only significant example of a senior official's effect on the force structure was Lieutenant General Petar Panchevski, the

<sup>6</sup> For most of the 1980s the *Military Balance* listed three MDs; the eight MRDs (3 cadre) and five tank brigades; plus three SSM brigades (with Scud SSMs); four artillery regiments; three anti-aircraft artillery regiments; two surface-to-air missile regiments; a mountain battalion and two recce battalion which first changed to a parachute regiment in the 1983-84 edition; and special commando companies (MB 1983-84). This picture continued unchanged until the 1988-89 edition, in which the number of MRDs and tank brigades per MD were detailed.

<sup>7</sup> My thanks go to Vladimir Milenski for emphasising this point. Generally, this author would argue that military innovation and lessons implementation works best with both regular command and staff rotations.

Minister of People's Defence (1950-1958) and later Ambassador to China, advocating for tank manoeuvre forces of the largest possible size. Panchevski had an outsize degree of influence partially due to his prior service in the Red Army. He may also have been involved in the attempted coup against then-BCP leader Todor Zhivkov in March-April 1965 ([Plovdivnow.bg](http://Plovdivnow.bg) 2023). At the other end of the spectrum, Ivaylo Grouev described the "depersonalizing" 1974 conscript service experience for an English-speaking audience in an article published in 2007 ([Grouev 2007](http://Grouev.com)).

Another crucial point about the material below, tracing the structural history of the Land Forces from the 1950s to the late 1980s, regards authorship and sourcing. Almost all of it is based upon repeated and extensive discussions with Borislav Velikov, on his extensive personal research, and a number of Bulgarian published works.<sup>8</sup> I have selected, rejigged, paraphrased, pruned, interpreted and often verified the information, but Mr. Velikov made most of it available to me. After the initial versions of the manuscript were almost finished, Mykola Saychuk allowed me to quote extensively from his 2021 book on operational-strategic planning for nuclear war in southern Europe ([Saychuk 2021](http://Saychuk.com)).

The Bulgarian Land Forces of the Cold War had their origins in the Second World War. Bulgaria allied itself with the Axis powers in April 1941. But it limited its active involvement to the Balkans, sending troops to Yugoslavia to fight the partisans. At the same time, a Communist-partisan movement arose within Bulgaria itself, thought in purely military terms it was not very successful (Curtis 1993, 231-232). Then the Soviets declared war just before the Red Army entered the country. The new First Bulgarian Army, of 99,000 men in five divisions, then fought with the Soviets against the Germans until the end of the war. The First Army included the 3rd and 4th Corps and army troops. The other four armies returned to Bulgaria and even before V-E Day, army HQs, divisions, brigades, and some regiments began to be disbanded. By May 15, 1945, the army's peacetime structure included three armies; their army troops; 12 infantry divisions; 35 infantry regiments; two armoured brigades (one seemingly with German Second World War vehicles); and one horse (cavalry) division.<sup>9</sup>

As the war was unfolding, Turkey stood aloof, trying to remain outside the war and minimizing its economic effects. Turkey suffered greatly during the First World War, and its army was little changed from that conflict ([Deringil 2004](http://Deringil.com); [Humbaraci 1958](http://Humbaraci.com), 37-38). "In 1948 the [Turkish] army was still horse-drawn, equipped with World War I weapons, ill-trained, poorly fed, and inadequately clothed. The military hierarchy froze and went into suspended animation... so steeped in tradition that any change was difficult to introduce without reorganizing and remanning the officer corps. Rarely were men assigned to

<sup>8</sup> Among the most helpful works regarding Bulgaria are the memoirs of the former commander of the 3rd Army, General Iordan Mufatchiev, *На главното направление; Издателство "Propeller,"* [ISBN 978-954-392-242-0]; *Voennoto razuznavane na Bălgarija i studenata vojna; Izdat. Bălgarska Knižnica/Zikulov, Vasil S./2007; Voennijat flot na Bălgarija; v godinite na Studenata vojna; (1947 - 1990 g.); istoričesko četivo/Jotov, Joto I./2004, ISBN 9546075191.*

<sup>9</sup> ДВИА, ф 9, оп.1, а.е 75, Схема на мирновременната дислокация на българската войска към 15 май 1945г. (СМНА, Fund 9, Opis 1, Archive Unit 75 - Peacetime Location Scheme of the Bulgarian Army by May 15, 1945.)

tasks on the basis of ability” (Lerner and Robinson 1960, 27-28). In February 1945 Turkey entered the Second World War at almost the last moment, in order to gain favour from the Allies as the post-war order took shape (VanderLippe 2001, 80). But while Bulgaria became a Soviet client regime, it was also a defeated country. Sensing some vulnerability, Bulgaria established the Covering Front along the Turkish border and army divisions were cycled through it until the end of 1945. The tension gradually settled, but the reinforcement of the Turkish border remained a major priority (Velikov 2022).

There was constant turbulence in the Bulgarian Land Forces’ order of battle for the next decade. Stalinist purges, with the prominent involvement of Andrey Vishinsky, Soviet jurist and Deputy People’s Commissioner of Foreign Affairs, began to destroy and reshape the army’s leadership.

The discovery of imaginary plots and purges of politically undesirable personnel were accompanied by accelerated training of men the Communists found acceptable, to fill the gaps. Saychuk writes that “special 8-month courses were organised for officers from among former partisans and anti-fascists. After these courses, they were appointed to armed forces command positions, and some were sent to Moscow to study at the Frunze Military Academy. After their return in 1950 back to Bulgaria, they were appointed to senior positions in the Ministry of Defence and the General Staff. At the end of 1948, another 350 officers from all branches of the army, including commanders of most battalions and regiments, went to the USSR for training. A total of 160 Bulgarian generals and senior officers studied at Soviet military academies between 1945 and 1955, and more than 2,000 officers had short-term training in the USSR.” (Saychuk 2021, 226-227).

A decisive purge against the precommunist military took place in 1947, and from 1949 the Communist Party dominated the armed forces (Curtis 1993, 233). There were structural changes made, then reversed; decisions taken, but not implemented, and then superseded due to other developments; manpower shortages; equipment shortages, and constant attention to what the Soviets were doing. Communist Party leader Georgi Dimitrov wanted the armed forces to be exactly like those of the Soviet Union (Curtis 1993, 229). Sometimes the Soviets made changes which were almost immediately copied by their Bulgarian “fellow Slavs.” In the late 1940s, the traditional Bulgarian designation ‘войска’ was changed to ‘армия’ to match ‘Красная армия’ (the Red Army), and thus the title Bulgarian People’s Army appeared.

There were little if any traditions and continuity between the Bulgarian units and formations of the Second World War and beforehand, and those of the reshaped Communist army.<sup>10</sup> After 1944, city monuments dedicated to military units and distinguished commanders were demolished. In the smaller

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<sup>10</sup> Paragraph written by Borislav Velikov.

towns, monuments dedicated to local men killed in battle were left, but so-called “combatants against fascism” were added to them, and later they were demolished, to be replaced by bigger Communist monuments. Infrastructure projects were deliberately planned on the grounds of military installations, and monuments of the Bulgarian Kingdom as an excuse for their demolition, so the memories about them could be erased. These demolitions were done hastily, attracting as little attention as possible. One such example was the monument to the 1st and 6th Infantry Regiments in Sofia. It was torn down overnight without notice and instead, a large sculpture, commemorating the 1300th anniversary of the Bulgarian state, was put up.

Reshaping the armed forces into a Communist form was reinforced by large numbers of returning emigre Bulgarians who had left for the Soviet Union in the 1920s (Saychuk 2021, 226-227).<sup>11</sup> Those who survived until 1944 returned to Bulgaria and took up leading state and armed forces positions. Saychuk writes that “for example, a graduate of the Frunze Military Academy in Moscow, a member of the Comintern, Georgi Damyanov in 1946-1950 was Minister of Defence and then Chairman of the Presidium of the Bulgarian People’s Assembly (Parliament).” As noted above, former Soviet General Petar Panchevski served as Minister of Defence from 1950 to 1958. Saychuk writes that following Panchevski “the next Minister of Defence was Soviet Colonel Ivan Mikhailov. He then became deputy head of the Bulgarian government for 20 years. A lecturer at the Soviet Naval School in Baku, Branimir Ormanov commanded the Bulgarian Navy in 1950-1960” (Saychuk 2021, 226-227). Ormanov was eventually promoted to the rank of full Admiral.”

In addition to the Bulgarian returning emigres, there were several dozen Soviet military advisers. Saychuk writes that “they were attached to all the heads of departments and divisions of the Ministry of Defence and the General Staff, to all troop headquarters and military schools, to army commanders and division commanders. In 1961 the institute of military advisers was abolished, and in its place the institute of permanent military representations in Bulgaria was established. These were the Representation of the High Command of the United Armed Forces of the Warsaw Pact States to the BPA and Soviet representatives of units that were to move forward to Bulgaria in the event of war” (Saychuk 2021, 226-227).

Saychuk goes on to say that “At the same time, Bulgarian officers of the Border and Internal Troops, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and State Security studied in the USSR. This practice would continue until 1990. For example, in 1985-1990, 350 Bulgarian officers studied at Soviet military academies (Saychuk 2021, 226-227).

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<sup>11</sup> These three following paragraphs translated by Mykola Saychuk from his 2021 book with my minor reedits.

In February 1947 Bulgaria signed the Paris Peace Treaty ending the Second World War and on September 15, 1947, the restrictions took effect. The armed forces were limited to a strength of 65,500. Velikov writes that the Land Forces and the Interior Ministry's Border Troops, together, numbered 55,300 at the time. But within three months, in accordance with Decree № 25 of December 4, 1947, of the Presidium of the National Assembly, the limitations were broken ([Dinov and Mikhailov 2020](#)). The Ministry of War became the Ministry of People's Defence; preparations to form the 1st Tank Division at Kazanlak began; and two infantry divisions and five infantry regiments were restored to full strength.

There was a large-scale redesignation of the infantry in May 1950 to follow the Soviet convention of "Rifle" [стрелкови] rather than "Infantry" [пехотна]. The infantry divisions were renumbered and given new honorific titles. The 1st Guards Division in Sofia, heavily made up of Communist-aligned personnel, gained the name "J.V. Stalin" after the Soviet leader, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division was named for the Bulgarian Communist leader Giorgi Dimitrov. The renumbered 7<sup>th</sup> Division was named after the marshal that had led the Red Army into Bulgaria, Fyodor Tolbukhin.

From December 4-5, 1947 two tank divisions were established within the Land Forces. Initially, the 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Division was at Kazanlak, but this formation was redesignated the 5<sup>th</sup> Tank Division some months later. Parts of the 1st Tank Division were moved to Sofia in 1950 and became the basis for the 9<sup>th</sup> Tank Division, while the Kazanlak formation became the 5<sup>th</sup> Tank Division. In June 1950 Lieutenant General Petar Panchevski, the Minister of People's Defence, officially proposed that the 5th Tank Division be transformed into the 10th Mechanised Corps "Yosif Visarionovich Stalin". The move was later reversed before being fully implemented and the 5th TD was itself disbanded, used to expand the 4th, 11th and 13th Tank Brigades and the formation of a new tank brigade in Sofia reporting to the General Staff. Now declassified CIA documents show that the United States had reports of a tank division at Kazanluk and what they assessed as a tank brigade at Sofia, plus the remaining cavalry ("Horse") division in Dobrich, in the first months of 1951 ([Central Intelligence Agency 1951](#), 3-4).

Due to Panchevski's insistence, the previous decision to split armoured forces into smaller and more nimble formations was reversed, and the 5th (in Kazanlak) and 9th (in Sofia) Tank Divisions were formed again in 1952. Yet, technical advancement was constant and the weight of tanks increased. Therefore, it was decided in the mid-1950s that operating tanks in divisional strength was not the best option. Rivers and mountains restrict the terrain to the point that tank divisions could not have been used effectively, especially in southern Bulgaria. Thus in 1955, the 5<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Tank Divisions were reduced to brigades. Unique among the Warsaw Pact, BLF tank forces remained at brigade and regimental strength until almost the very end of the Cold War ([Velikov 2023](#); [Tsvetkov, et al. 2019](#), 85-86).

By 1953 the total strength of the BPA numbered 180,287 people. About another 80,000 people were military personnel under other ministries, so the total number of Bulgarian armed services exceeded 260,000. Supporting this force size was an enormous strain on the country's economy.

With the signing of the Warsaw Pact Treaty on May 14, 1955, a new stage in the build-up of the Bulgarian Land Forces began. 1954 and 1955 saw intense reorganisation. Bulgaria pledged the 2nd, 7th and 17th Rifle Divisions to the Warsaw Pact Joint Armed Forces and therefore they had priority in receiving modern weaponry and promising officers.<sup>12</sup> Each of the three high-readiness divisions established an airborne battalion.<sup>13</sup> In addition, parachute reconnaissance companies were formed for each of the three armies. The creation of these units shows the emphasis on the advance seizure of objectives, ahead of the main manoeuvre force. In 1956-58, following the Soviet example, the three army corps became armies. When the three armies mobilized for war, the three army districts ("армейски военни окръзи" (ABO) were to split from the field army commands and fall under the General Staff of the BPA. They would take over garrison duties in the army rear areas and provide replacement personnel for the frontline units. In mid-1958 the locations and designations of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Rifle Division were switched.<sup>14</sup>

The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 changed matters again. In early 1957 the Minister of People's Defence requested that the Council of Ministers approve an increase in the size of the armed forces. This would bring the total BPA personnel to 136,400 personnel. But numbers were reduced in 1958. Peacetime numbers came down to about 100,000 and wartime strength to 440,000. This meant a decrease of 10,500 in peacetime and 40,000 in the wartime BLF personnel figures.

From 1954 Marshal of the Soviet Union Georgi Zhukov set in motion the mechanisation of the whole Soviet Ground Forces (Glantz 2010, 42; Feskov 2013, 138-139). In May 1957 rifle and mechanised divisions were retitled "motor rifle" divisions. Within three years the same process was set in motion for Bulgaria. In February 1960, an agreement to partially mechanise the BPA was signed in Moscow between the Bulgarian Ministry of People's Defence and the Commander of the Joint Armed Forces of the Warsaw Pact. This led to Council of Ministers' Resolution 862/1960, which called for the re-classification of the first-line rifle formations to motor rifles. The planned force structure included seven motor rifle divisions, five rifle divisions, the 3rd Separate Rifle Brigade, and the 16th Separate Mountain Rifle Brigade. In February 1961, the 16<sup>th</sup> Separate Mountain Brigade was expanded into the 16th Motor Rifle Division with headquarters in Burgas (Tsvetkov, et al. 2018). Three months later the 3<sup>rd</sup> Mountain Brigade became the 3<sup>rd</sup> Motor

<sup>12</sup> Tsvetkov, Andreev, et al, 2019, 38. At the end of 1955 the BLF "had a peacetime structure of two armies and two independent rifle corps, made up of a total of nine rifle divisions and 14 other formations. In war 5 more rifle divisions and 9 other formations would mobilize." Tsvetkov July 19, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Tsvetkov, Andreev, et al, 2019, 109. In 2nd Rifle Division (RD) the airborne rifle battalion was part of 38th Rifle Regiment in Kardzhali (later moved to Stara Zagora); in 7th RD the airborne battalion was part of 33rd Rifle Regiment in Yambol; and in 17th RD the airborne battalion was part of the 31st Rifle Regiment in Haskovo. All three battalions reverted to regular rifle units in 1958.

<sup>14</sup> In accordance with Ministry of People's Defence Order 00250 issued on August 7, 1958, Headquarters 2nd Rifle Division was moved to Stara Zagora, and Headquarters 17th Rifle Division to Haskovo, both remaining in Second Army. Three regiments were moved. The redesignation took place on August 14, 1958, a week after the order was signed. Both divisions became motor rifle divisions in March 1960. Tsvetkov et al 2018, 43-44, 137-138.

Rifle Division.<sup>15</sup> In 1968, the 21st Motor Rifle Division, with its headquarters at Pazardzhik, was established.<sup>16</sup>

After a Soviet decision of June 1961, R-11M “Zemlya” surface-to-surface missiles (SSMs) were delivered to the smaller Warsaw Pact armies.<sup>17</sup> Thus in the next two years, three Bulgarian SSM brigades were established (Tsvetkov, et al 2019). The 46th Rocket Brigade in Samokov under the 1st Army; the 56th Rocket Brigade in Marino Pole near Karlovo under the 2nd Army and the 66th Rocket Brigade in Kabile near Yambol under the 3rd Army were all established. In addition to the Army-level rocket brigade, each division had a rocket battalion (division (дивизион)). The 76th Rocket Regiment (was a Reserve of the High Command formation (Резерв на Главното Командване (ПГК)), armed with the R-400 Oka missile system and based in Telish near Pleven. It was upgraded to a brigade in 1980.

From April 1, 1963, a stable Land Forces structure was put into place.<sup>18</sup> Overall BPA peacetime strength was set at no less than 100,000 men. The Land Forces had four motor rifle divisions, five tank brigades at full strength and three more motor rifle divisions at reduced strength. During wartime, the BPA was to reach over 400,000 men with 18 Land Forces tactical formations. Some anti-tank artillery units were redesignated as anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) units. The 3M6 and 9M14 Malyutka (US designation AT-1 and AT-3, NATO reporting names Snapper and Sagger) entered service with the Soviet Ground Forces from 1960. The AT-3 “Sagger” was to gain considerable prominence when Israeli tank forces encountered them and initially suffered large losses against Egypt during the October War of 1973. There were also a number of “second complement” counterpart formations to all the tank brigades and motor rifle divisions, which would be activated upon mobilization. If and when mobilization orders were issued, the divisions and brigades active in peacetime would ready themselves for operations. Meanwhile, their shadow second complement counterparts would have been activated. Key commanders and staff would have been transferred from the active division to the second complement formation, and remained in the barracks areas to supervise the arrival of thousands of recalled reservists (Robinson 2017, 399-402; Donnelly 1988). Data from 1962 appears to indicate that six additional “second complement” divisions would be available after full mobilization, often “parented” by training regiments or schools.<sup>19</sup>

In 1963 a permanent nucleus for a wartime Bulgarian Front was established – the Main Directorate for Training of the Troops. In wartime, this Directorate would have become the Balkan Front and commanded multiple armies and supporting air forces. However, two years later, it was disestablished. Instead, a Front HQ was supposed to be formed in the lead-up to war by personnel from the General Staff and Ministry of Defence. Exercise experience showed

<sup>15</sup> See also Central Military Historical Archive, Archive Funds (Files) 67 1949-1987 3-та отделна планинска стрелкова бригада – под. (40550) 26400; Archive Fund 536a 1950 – 1992 21-ва планинска стрелкова бригада – под. 60020; Archive Fund 2254 1951-1987 16-а отделна планинска стрелкова бригада – под. 70120. [https://www.archives.government.bg/288-Списък\\_на\\_фондовете](https://www.archives.government.bg/288-Списък_на_фондовете)

<sup>16</sup> General Dimitrov writes the division was established in 1968. Information supplied by Borislav Velikov implies that it was established in accordance with Ministry of People’s Defence Order 00264 of August 31, 1961.

<sup>17</sup> Record Group (RG) 218, Geographical File 1958, Box 12; RG 263, Entry 29, Box 11; RG 319, Boxes 1155-1156, File 951 871, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington DC., cited in Baev 2017, 135.

<sup>18</sup> In accordance with Order of the Ministry of People’s Defence No. 00101. Tsvetkov July 19, 2013; Velikov 2023; K. Tsvetkov, B. Andreev et al 2019.

<sup>19</sup> 8th MRD Vratsa; 10th MRD Stanke Dimitrov; 15th MRD at Pleven; 52nd MRD; 68th MRD Veliko Tarnovo; and 72nd MRD at Pazardzhik. Velikov 2022; Velkov 2023; K. Tsvetkov, B. Andreev et al 2019.

this to be unwise (Saychuk 2021). Instead, in accordance with Decision No. 553 of the Politburo of the Bulgarian Communist Party on 18 September 1973, the Land Forces Command was established, with more organisational powers, which would play the same role in wartime. In peacetime, it was in charge of combat, operational, and mobilization training.

## **Bulgarian Involvement in the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia**

The available data on Bulgarian involvement in “Operation Danube,” the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, is a little sparse. However, it is clear that two Bulgarian regiments were dispatched to take part in to help crush the “Prague Spring” uprising against orthodox Soviet socialism.

The 12th Motor Rifle Regiment at Elhovo, 7<sup>th</sup> Motor Rifle Division, was transported by ship from Varna to Odessa and then deployed to Zhnyatino in Zakarpattia Oblast, Ukraine (Tsvetkov, et al. 2019) (Saychuk 2021, 424). There it came under command of the 128th Guards Motor Rifle Division, 38<sup>th</sup> Army, Carpathian Front. After a 20-hour-long advance, the regiment received an order to take the towns of Zvolen and Banská Bystrica in Slovakia. The regiment had 26 old T-34 tanks, and 43 wheeled armoured personnel carriers and reconnaissance vehicles (Saychuk 2021, 424). The regiment’s peacetime location was on the frontline against any confrontation with Turkey, its garrison being no more than about 25 kilometres from the border. Senior officers must have been relatively confident of little to no danger from Turkey to dispatch a regiment stationed in such a crucial location for service abroad.

The 22nd Motor Rifle Regiment (2 MRD, 2 Army, Harmanli), at a reduced strength of 967, with 37 wheeled armoured personnel carriers and reconnaissance vehicles, was moved by air through a Soviet airbase near Kolomiya (Western Ukraine). It then came under the control of the 20th Combined Arms Army (from the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany) on the Central Front (Tsvetkov, et al. 2018, 44). It set up a circular defence of Rozine and Vodohodi airports near Prague and was warned that it might have to reinforce the Soviet 7<sup>th</sup> Guards Air Assault Division [7-й гвардейской воздушно-десантной дивизии] in Prague.

*Until October 22, the Bulgarian units [performed] tasks for the protection and defence of their designated areas. [However]... for some actions the staff was not prepared - closing of a printing house, prosecution of illegal illegal radio stations and others without the use of weapons”* (Tsvetkov, et al. 2018, 44). There was little or no provision in normal training norms for such tasks.

The two regiments had 2164 personnel in total at the time of the incursion and 2177 at the time of the departure from Czechoslovakia, most likely due to the officers embedded within the various Soviet headquarters (Central Military Archive of the Republic of Bulgaria, Archive Fund. 24; Velikov 2023). One soldier was killed by the Czechs while trying to defect.



## The 1970s Onwards

The BLF's structure remained mostly unchanged for 25 years after 1963. Constant reshuffles of the motor rifle and tank troops ended. The Land Forces Command was established in 1973. However, two Training Parachute Reconnaissance Bases, focused on Greece and Turkey, respectively, were merged into the 68<sup>th</sup> Separate Parachute-Reconnaissance Regiment on 1 October 1975. In the late 1970s, the Warsaw Pact staff recommended the creation of a BLF tank division.<sup>20</sup>

By the late 1980s with the constant growth of the Bulgarian People's Army, and new formations and units, personnel shortages may have grown to over 10,000. In addition, the state was growing more and more insolvent. So as a cost-cutting measure, several motor rifle divisions were reduced to Territorial Training Centres (TTCs; ТУЦ, териториален учебен център) (Tsvetkov, et al. 2019). These TTCs were in essence motor rifle divisions with their personnel reduced by about 70-80%, to the strength of a single regiment. Some of the units were reduced to zero strength in peacetime, such as the air defence artillery, with their equipment in store. Their main purpose was to train wartime mobilization personnel. In the Soviet Union mobilization divisions were being renamed Territorial Training Centres from 1987.

The political upheavals of 1989 led to sharp and deep changes, which will only be briefly sketched here. In 1988 the strength of the whole Bulgarian Peoples' Army – Land Forces, air forces, navy, Construction Troops etc. - stood at about 152,000 (Curtis 1993). In the next three years, the Socialist system shrivelled and effectively disappeared from Europe. Instead, Bulgaria began to move towards the genuine expression of the people's will through the ballot box – with much attendant disruption and some sharp pain. By 1991 the Armed Forces were 107,000 strong in total. A new “defence in all directions” concept was adopted in 1991, and significant reductions in force size began, as well as a transition from a front-army-division-regiment system to a corps and brigade-focused organisation. Then-Colonel Eng. Dr. S. Dimitrov, whose notes I have drawn on for the above Cold War period, was transferred to President Zhelyu Zhelev's office as Chief of the Military Cabinet in order for the President and Supreme Commander to control these reforms.

## Conclusions

When the Bulgarian Communist Party came to power after the Second World War Bulgaria was drawn into Soviet military thinking. That foresaw a military confrontation to eliminate world capitalism. To make this possible, Socialist societies were heavily militarized. Society was required to provide the Armed

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<sup>20</sup> Velikov 2023; information from Velikov and K. Tsvetkov, B. Andreev et al 2019, 85, 86. I have removed more extensive notes on this division's brief establishment in 1989 because General Dimitrov writes that it did not occur.

Forces with the resources necessary to destroy world capitalism if the moment came. The gap in thinking between West and East is thus stark. Military Economic Science advocated a much larger force structure and burden on the economy that Western Europeans or this author as a liberal social democrat would see as appropriate.

As part of the Warsaw Pact, planning envisaged the seizure of the Turkish Straits, probably large parts of Greece, and an eventual advance across the entirety of Turkey all the way to the Syrian border. It is not at all clear how such an advance would have worked in reality. For example, no one can fully judge how the use of nuclear weapons would have altered such a war. A large mechanised and combined arms force was created to make these offensives possible. The Land Forces' structure saw considerable turbulence from the late 1940s to the late 1950s, in large part to remove some of the imprints of pre-Communist Bulgarian military history. From the early 1960s force structures started to settle down, with none of the constant reshuffles that had reached their heights in the mid-1950s.

After 1989 the strategic situation changed enormously. The growing wars in the former Yugoslavia and the divide in Moldova emerged as the only nearby conflicts. These wars and their ethnic divides could not be “won” or altered in Bulgaria’s favour by a large-scale tank-heavy mechanised invasion, supported by air forces. Neither would there be any ideological reason to do so. So slowly the Land Forces’ force structure changed out of all recognition. Early official concerns about significant numbers of Turkish forces in Thrace and western Anatolia (Curtis 1993) did not lead to war. Turkish military *capabilities* did not mean that Turkey had any *intention* to invade Bulgaria. Bulgaria joined NATO in 2004 and the European Union in 2007. As with the remainder of NATO, and indeed Russia (Whisler 2021; Robinson 2005), Bulgaria moved towards smaller, higher-readiness, higher-quality forces. These have been reoriented for crisis reaction or peace support operations. Bulgaria no longer needed to defend itself on its own – that is what the NATO Article V guarantee is for. Many of the most expensive and capable weapon systems are maintained by the Alliance as a whole, such as airborne early warning aircraft, or almost exclusively by the United States.

During the Second World War Bulgaria had maintained significant land forces in Yugoslavia and had been making its own strategic plans, decisions, and force structures. After 1945 the Soviet General Staff’s importance in these matters quickly grew to the point that virtually all planning and programmes for the socialist liberation of Bulgaria’s target countries were being formulated in Moscow. Milenski argues that the disappearance of any indigenous *Bulgarian* responsibility for such matters “explains to a large extent why the Bulgarian military and political establishment of today finds so difficult to do realistic and achievable defence and force planning” (Milenski 2023). In addition, Eastern Bloc generals had received great operational and staff training, but in political terms, they had learned an ideology, rather than a wide understanding of international affairs (Orr 2003, 2-3).

The new situation often confounded them. The last months of 1989 led to a sharp and permanent reversion to Bulgaria having to make more and more of its own defence decisions, in a totally transformed ideological environment.

History, arguably, does not repeat itself, but historical situations reoccur. To properly understand and draw from history, what happened in the past should be well understood. To do this in the military field for Bulgaria, debate over its plans and forces from 1945 to 1990 should always be encouraged. Ample archives have been opened in other former Warsaw Pact states; the Bulgarian military archives, after 30 years, should be opened as well ([Dimitrov 2023](#)).

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