

Pleasant Lunches:
WesternTrack-Two Influence on
Gorbachev's Conventional Forces Initiative of 1988

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Recently Carl Conetta and Charles Knight, colleagues and dear friends from the days of the good old Cold War, drew my attention to a book which I had unfortunately overlooked. It is Matthew Evangelista's well-received study entitled Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War, Cornell University Press, 1999.

Evangelista introduces me as the founder of SAS, the International Study Group on Alternative Security policy, which left its conceptual mark from 1980 onwards. He continues: "Unterseher's work became particularly influential in Kokoshin's thinking" (p. 314). This is quite flattering.

I have always felt that Andrei Kokoshin and I, and also Major-General Valentin Larionov, were on the same wavelength. Kokoshin and Larionov were close advisors to Secretary General Gorbachev. They are said to have played key roles in designing and planning the far-reaching measures of unilateral disarmament combined with a defensively-oriented structural change of the Soviet conventional forces announced by Gorbachev at the United Nations' General Assembly on December 7, 1988.

What did SAS thinking and these Soviet measures have in common? It was the idea of creating an area-covering system consisting of relatively light, defensively specialized formations that would serve in a supporting function as a force multiplier for much reduced armored elements confined to tactical counter-attacks. It was about creating a non-offensive synergy. The heavy forces being only truly lethal as long as they relied on the supporting scheme, but rather ineffective when operating outside it.

We thought that such an approach, promising flexible and robust resistance while at the same time reducing provocation, would lend itself to unilateral implementation – opening the path to reciprocal steps of disarmament.

Evangelista suggests that visits by Western politicians and peace researchers to Moscow were important in promoting this approach. He mentions, in particular, a trip by Egon Bahr, the prominent German Social Democrat, in March 1988 and by Randall Forsberg, director of the Brookline, Massachusetts-based Institute for Defense and Disarmament Studies, in September of the same year.

It is unlikely though that trips to Moscow by Western politicians, researchers, or activists in 1988 had an appreciable influence on Soviet planning. What Gorbachev presented in December of 1988 would have required thorough preparations taking a year or longer.

In the case of Bahr, the guru of Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik*, it should also be remembered that throughout his political life he remained a fervent advocate of bilateralism when it came to the question of disarmament. He opposed any kind of unilateral restructuring. Why do I know that? He, as chairman, forcefully suppressed any sympathies for this approach in the German Social Democratic Committee on Security Policy (of which I was an advisory member between 1983 and 1991.)

Contacts between a representative of the Soviet Union and SAS began in January 1987. In my role as the study group's director, I was approached by Vladimir Vladimirovich Semyonov, officially the then Bonn-based Soviet embassy's attaché for cultural affairs. We had a series of long pleasant lunches in a downtown Italian restaurant (courtesy of the Soviet Union.)

He and his wife Yelena even came to one of the SAS wine-tasting events in our headquarters outside Bonn. There he incidentally bumped into a three-star General of the Bundeswehr (German Federal Armed Forces) and had a vivid chat with him. I remember having felt a little uneasy about that.

We all assumed that the Russian visitor was either a KGB or GRU (military intelligence) agent because he showed a particularly keen interest in our unpublished studies. We were not much concerned though, as the idea of unilateral confidence-building through defensive restructuring demands transparency.

After a while, two of our senior members, Paul-Werner Krapke, the father of the Leopard-2 tank program, and Hartmut Bebermeyer, a high-ranking public servant (former personal assistant to chancellor Ludwig Erhard), insisted that I should inform our Inland Intelligence. I complied and the *Bundesamt fuer Verfassungsschutz* (Office of the Protection of the Constitution), headquartered in Cologne, dispatched a youngish and

smart special agent. Our contact resulted in yet another series of pleasant Italian lunches (courtesy of the German taxpayer.)

We got the green light to continue our contact with Colonel Semyonov – as long as we were willing to report on his *modus operandi*. And yes, we were.

Interestingly the German agent did not show the slightest interest in the contents of the papers we conveyed to the Russian colonel. And the latter did not appear to have a grasp of our studies' substance. We were confident though that he took great care getting the papers to Moscow.

On October 17, 1987 I flew, on a special permit issued by the East German government, to East Berlin with the intention to assist Walter Romberg in preparing a presentation for an upcoming conference in Varna, Bulgaria on "European Security and Non-Offensive Defence." Walter Romberg (former editor-in-chief of East Germany's official *Mathematics Magazine*, non-communist, but loyal to his government) was a *de-facto* SAS member.

In the morning of October 19, after one and a half days and a night of work, we flew to Varna. The conference turned out to be asymmetric: high-ranking officials from the East, peace and security researchers from the West who could only speak for themselves as private citizens, and Walter (a citizen of East Germany) and myself (a citizen of West Germany) in the capacity of "honorary" members of the official delegation of the German Democratic Republic. There were no official participants from the West.

Walter Romberg gave his talk in the afternoon of October 20, after a buffet lunch rich with sheeps' cheese salad (which, just one and a half years after Tchernobyl, was likely to have been highly radioactive.) Walter demonstrated in very concrete terms, down to the level of individual military formations, how a process of reciprocal unilateral measures of restructuring and disarmament could be implemented.

There was no immediate reaction from the audience to Romberg's talk. After a while, a few Westerners made some general comments, but the Easterners remained silent, perhaps stunned that a private person from East Germany, not even a Party member, had just demonstrated more thorough knowledge of the opposing military postures in Central Europe than an average general in the Soviet Army.

Surprisingly Walter's initiative was not reprimanded. Instead, his paper got published soon after the event: Walter Romberg "Towards non-

offensive defence through unilateral, limited and reciprocated reductions:
On a gradualistic approach to military crisis stability in Central Europe,"
World Federation of Scientific Workers (ed.), European Security and
Non-Offensive Defence, Berlin (East) 1988.

Although several measures later envisaged by Gorbachev resembled the
steps proposed by Romberg, his initiative remained largely unnoticed in
the West.

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