

## The “Ogarkov Doctrine” and the End of World Bipolarity. A historical perspective

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### Abstract

During the 1980s, an underground conflict between two power groups was taking place within the Soviet Union. On the one hand, the exponents of the political élite, on the other that of the military leaders, divided on the choice regarding the allocation of domestic financial resources. Passing almost unnoticed by the general public, this debate had important echoes in Western think-tanks and decision-making centers, especially in the United States, up to the condition of the internal political evolution of the Soviet Union and its relations with the Western bloc in the last phase of the Cold War.

**Keywords:** *Cold War; Mikhail Gorbachev, NATO, Nikolai Vasilevich Ogarkov, nuclear warfare, Soviet military doctrine, Warsaw Pact.*

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## **1. 1988: The Ideological Surrender of Gorbachev**

At a meeting held on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1988, the general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU)<sup>1</sup> and chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, Mikhail Sergeyeovich Gorbachev, expressed to some of his closest advisers his intention to arrive at a decisive break with past Soviet positions about the European chessboard<sup>2</sup>. Gorbachev expressed to them his intention to offer his Western interlocutors substantial reductions in Soviet forces in Europe as a unilateral act of détente<sup>3</sup>. It was also on the basis of this decision that, on the following December 7<sup>th</sup>, the Soviet reformist leader explicitly conceived of his own address to the United Nations as diametrically opposed to that of Fulton in 1946, when former British prime minister Sir Winston Spencer Churchill used the expression “Iron Curtain” to refer to that line from Stettin to Trieste that marked the geopolitical boundary between a Soviet-ruled East-Central Europe and the remaining European-Western countries. Gorbachev, explaining the meaning of his speech to his staff, stated: “In general, this speech should be an anti-Fulton [...] Fulton in reverse”<sup>4</sup>. In this way Gorbachev hinted that in 1988 the long parenthesis represented by the East/West opposition should now be considered over<sup>5</sup>. By offering significant reductions in Soviet Army units<sup>6</sup>, Gorbachev also intended to reassure his international interlocutors about the goodwill of Soviet policy at a juncture when the threat of war in the European theater seemed to be strongly felt within the Western bloc, especially in view of the considerable superiority of Soviet (that is Warsaw Pact<sup>7</sup>) conventional forces deployed in East-Central Europe<sup>8</sup>. It must be remembered that in 1981 the Warsaw Pact had conducted the Zapad-81 military drill, while in 1983 NATO enacted the Able Archer exercise<sup>9</sup>. Both simulated a large-scale war scenario on the

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1 Ru. transliterated in Latin characters: Kommunističeskaja partija Sovetskogo Sojuza.

2 <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB261/index.htm> [Accessed April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023].

3 <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB261/sov03.pdf> [Accessed April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023].

4 Archive of the Gorbachev Foundation, *Conference with advisers*, October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1988, Fond 2. Notes of A.S. Chernyaev. On file at the National Security Archive. Translated by Svetlana Savranskaya (URL in footnote [3]).

5 *Ibidem*.

6 Ru. transliterated in Latin characters: Sovetskaja armija.

7 Formally Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, signed in Warsaw (Poland) on May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1955.

8 On the situation of Soviet forces in Europe in the 1980s, see the series of documents collected under the title *Soviet Military Power* by the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (URL [https://fas.org/irp/dia/product/smp\\_index.htm](https://fas.org/irp/dia/product/smp_index.htm) [Accessed April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023]), and also data from NATO (URL <https://archives.nato.int/force-comparison-1987-nato-and-warsaw-pact;isad> [Accessed April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023]).

9 See e.g. Blackwill, Robert D., & Legro, Jeffrey W. Constraining Ground Force Exercises of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. *International Security* Vol. 14, No. 3 (Winter, 1989-1990), pp. 68-98.

European continent. Moreover, in 1981, on the eve of the 26<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU, that was to open on February 23<sup>rd</sup>, the Soviet minister of Defense marshal Dmitry Fyodorovich Ustinov gave (on February 21<sup>st</sup>) a speech in which he accused the United States and its allies: << of seeking to revive the Cold War and subvert the “socialist” community, and, indeed, making active preparations for war, including a preemptive attack on the Warsaw Pact >><sup>10</sup>. On the other hand, in 2005 Polish Defense minister Radoslaw Sikorski made public some Warsaw Pact documents showing that as early as 1979 Moscow had conceived war-game plans, code-named “Seven Days to the Rhine River”<sup>11</sup>, that envisioned a nuclear clash in Europe between Soviet forces, supported by their allies, and NATO. In 1988, reiterating the centrality of the Helsinki Accords for the stability of the international security architecture, Gorbachev had affirmed the importance of the principle of self-determination of the states, as a political value in regard to which no exceptions would be tolerated<sup>12</sup>. However, the aspect that aroused the greatest surprise, especially within NATO<sup>13</sup> and the CIA<sup>14</sup>, was the announcement of the decision to proceed with the reduction of 500,000 in the Soviet armed forces and the unilateral withdrawal of six armored divisions along with 50,000 Soviet military personnel deployed in Eastern Europe<sup>15</sup>, including the assault units with all the equipment assigned to them<sup>16</sup>. In an editorial that appeared on December 8<sup>th</sup> in the American newspaper *The New York Times*, the Soviet leader’s speech – because of its contents – was compared to Woodrow Wilson’s declaration of the Fourteen Points in 1918, and the promulgation of the Atlantic Charter by Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Churchill in 1941<sup>17</sup>. The most significant comment, however, came from the US<sup>18</sup> congressional senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who called Gorbachev’s statement the most stunning surrender speech in the history of ideological struggle<sup>19</sup>. Gorbachev also added that all Soviet divisions still remaining on the territory of European

10 FRUS, 1981-1988, Vol. III, Soviet Union, January 1981-January 1983, Document 21.

11 See URL <https://css.ethz.ch/content/specialinterest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/en/services/digital-library/articles/article.html/107840> [Accessed April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2023].

12 <http://www.literaster.com/writing/gorbachevs-speech-un-7-december-1988> [Accessed April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023].

13 North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

14 Central Intelligence Agency.

15 <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB261/index.htm> [Accessed April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023].

16 *Mikhail Gorbachev’s address ...*, cit., ibidem

17 See footnote [12].

18 United States [of America].

19 Ibidem.

countries allied with the USSR<sup>20</sup> would be reorganized, specifying that they would be given a different structure, than the one existing at that time, that is, such that they would assume an unambiguously defensive posture<sup>21</sup>. Why did Gorbachev feel the need to include within his speech this last emphasis? In an attempt to offer an answer to this question, it is necessary to go back to the debate that arose in the 1980s about the role of a pivotal figure in the Soviet armed forces: the Deputy Defense minister, Chief of the [Military] General Staff, and Hero of the Soviet Union marshal Nikolai Vasilevich Ogarkov (1917-1994).

## **2. The Struggle for Consensus in the Soviet Civilian and Military Élite in the 1980s**

As he himself revealed in 1983, in an interview with *The New York Times*, Ogarkov was concerned about his country’s lag behind the United States in the development of information technology applied to the civilian sector and to the military compartment<sup>22</sup>. According to the senior Soviet official, such a gap would constitute a crucial vulnus to the USSR’s military doctrine, so much so that it led him to state prophetically, that because of this reason, the Soviet Union would eventually lose the confrontation with the western bloc<sup>23</sup>. How to interpret these words: astute boutade or concrete concern of the highest representative, at that juncture, of Soviet military thought? In fact, the debate opened by Ogarkov – already during 1970s – within the Soviet political-military intelligentsia reached its peak in the eighties, revealing all its vehemence, so much so that in some circles of Western block intelligence (i.e. in the United States) the need arose to put it under the magnifying glass. For example, specific studies were commissioned from the RAND Corporation, such as the 1987 report entitled *Ogarkov’s Complaint and Gorbachev’s Dilemma: The Soviet Defense Budget and Party-Military Conflict*. Already in the title was contained all the substance of the matter. This is the dilemma which Mikhail Gorbachev seemed to be holding hostage, namely the decision on which and how much monetary

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20 Union of Soviet Socialist Republics [Ru. transliterated in Latin characters: Sojúz Sovétskikh Socialističeskikh Respublík].

21 *Mikhail Gorbachev’s address ...*, cit., ibidem. Additionally, on the existence of a dichotomy between doctrine and Soviet (military) strategy see Scott, William F. Another Look at the USSR’s “Defensive” Doctrine. *Air&Space Force Magazine*, March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1988, URL <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/0388ussr/> [Accessed December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023].

22 Cfr. Lubar, Steven. *InfoCulture. The Smithsonian Book of Information Age Inventions*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993, p. 311.

23 Ibidem.

means should be allocated to Soviet defence funds within the wider framework for allocating financial resources. Two sides were described: on the one hand the military, led by personalities such as Ogarkov and grouped in what was called the military-party, on the other the Soviet Communist Party. The argument was summed up with the conventional expression “the military-Party conflict”. The report stressed not only the conflict in question, but also the possibility that failure to keep the promises made by Gorbachev could, in future, aggravate the conflict with the military élite. It was, in some ways, a far-sighted anticipation of some of the causes behind the 1991 coup d’état, in which fringes (dissatisfied) took part of the Soviet armed forces together with elements of the State Security Committee (KGB)<sup>24</sup>.

Another interesting aspect concerned the dialectical tools – including internal propaganda – used by both sides to obtain the greatest useful consensus for the affirmation of their own theses. Citing previous CIA and DIA<sup>25</sup> analyses, the study pointed out that one of the effects of Ogarkov’s request for more financial resources for high technology in the military environment could include greater control by the armed forces over the Soviet Academy of Sciences<sup>26</sup>. It was also noted that Gorbachev came to power with the intention of speeding up reforms aimed at modernizing the Soviet economy, but to achieve this he needed to avoid objections from the military led by Ogarkov. Such was Gorbachev’s military-economic dilemma. In this scenario, Ogarkov pushed for more appropriations to be allocated to the Defense budget mainly for the advance of newly developed conventional weapons. Otherwise, Gorbachev seemed more inclined to fuel the development of the domestic economy. The RAND study pointed out that the dilemma had emerged in all its gravity especially in the late 1980s, although – as US intelligence pointed out – it had its roots in the Brezhnev

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24 Ru. transliterated in Latin characters: Komitet Gosudarstvennoj Bezopasnosti.

25 Defense Intelligence Agency.

26 Becker, Abraham S. *Ogarkov’s Complaint and Gorbachev Dilemma. The Soviet Defense Budget and Party-Military Conflict*. RAND Corporation, December 1987, p. vi. On Ogarkov see in particular: Erickson, John, & Erickson, Ljubica. *The Soviet Armed Forces, 1918-1992: A Research Guide to Soviet Sources*. Bloomsbury Academic, 1996; Fitzgerald, Mary C. Marshal Ogarkov on the Modern Theater Operation. *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Autumn 1986), pp. 6-25; Kokoshin, Andrei A. *Soviet Strategic Thought, 1917-91*. Paperback, January 15<sup>th</sup>, 1998, MIT Press; Larrabee, Stephen F. Gorbachev and the Soviet Military. *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 66, No. 5 (Summer, 1988), pp. 1002-1026; Odom, William E. Soviet Military Doctrine. *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Winter, 1988), pp. 114-134. Rice, Condoleezza. The Party, the Military, and Decision Authority in the Soviet Union. *World Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Oct., 1987), pp. 55-81; Westwood, James T. Conventional War and Marshal Ogarkov’s Continuing Role. *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Winter 1987), pp. 98-100;

era, a decade earlier, when Ogarkov had reached the top of the Soviet military hierarchy<sup>27</sup>. Was it for these reasons that already in the first half of the eighties Gorbachev and the leaders of the Politburo, decided to resolve the dilemma gorily by removing the charismatic marshal? Ogarkov, in fact, fell into disgrace at that particular time, being removed from his post, and in September 1984 destined to an unspecified unified command in Europe. The speculations that followed the fall of Ogarkov were, both at home and abroad, many and of different nature, especially because there was already a Soviet supreme command with authority over the forces deployed in the Warsaw Pact countries. So why create a duplicate? We will see later how the answer to this question is not insignificant due to the strategic-military implications that it revealed in that particular phase of the history of the Soviet Union, and more generally of the bipolarity era. The circumstances surrounding the removal of Ogarkov in 1984 and the dismissal in 1987 of his successor as Chief of the General Staff marshal Sergey Leonidovich Sokolov (which was also minister of Defence), revealed a detail that in the eyes of public opinion (both Soviet and Western) was not known: the existence of a dichotomy, quite marked, if not even profound, between the Soviet Communist Party and military circles in Moscow<sup>28</sup>. The peak of the crisis was reached in May 1987 with the accident of the Red Square, when a small plane driven by a citizen of West Germany, Mathias Rust, landed undisturbed in the heart of the Soviet capital. The episode offered Gorbachev the reason to carry out a purge in the higher ranks of the Soviet Army, as not seen since the days of the so-called Tikhachevsky affair<sup>29</sup>.

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27 Ibidem. In a memorandum from the Special Assistant to the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs William Courtney dated October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1985 it was indicated that: "As Ogarkov's May 1984 article hinted, the Soviet military may now want nuclear reductions in order to free more resources for high-technology conventional forces, and to reduce the risk of NATO escalation to nuclear conflict in Europe" (See FRUS 1981-1988, Vol. V, Soviet Union, March 1985-October 1986, Document 112).

28 A dichotomy that as far as Soviet intelligence was concerned was also revealed in the coexistence of two distinct agencies: on the one hand, the KGB, which as political intelligence was emanation of the Party (i.e. its interests and ideology) and, on the other, the GRU (Ru. transliterated in Latin characters: Glavnoje Razvedyvatel'noje Upravlenije), that is, the information and intelligence structure of the Soviet armed forces. A significant comment was recorded on April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1986 at a high-level meeting chaired by the President of the United States when the director of the Department of Defense's Office of Net Assessment Andrew Marshall stated that Soviet generals "can get into trouble if they are too vocal, e.g., Ogarkov received a demotion when he spoke out about cuts in military spending" (See FRUS 1981-1988, Volume V, Soviet Union, March 1985-October 1986, Document 214).

29 See, in particular: Balticus. The Russian Mystery: Behind the Tikhachevsky Plot. *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Oct., 1937), pp. 44-63; Blackstock, Paul W. The Tikhachevsky Affair, *The Russian Review*. Vol. 28, No. 2 (Apr., 1969), pp. 171-190; Campbell, Kenneth. Walter Schellenberg: SD Chief. *American Intelligence Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Winter 2007/2008), pp. 88-94; Furr, Grover C. III. New Light on Old Stories About Marshal Tikhachevskii: Some Documents Reconsidered. *Russian History*, Vol. 13, No. 2/3, Labor and Society in the 1920s and 1930s (Summer-Fall 1986 / Ete-Automne 1986) pp. 293-308; Whitewood, Peter. The Purge

Interestingly, according to the interpretation provided by an authoritative Italian scholar of Soviet history as Andrea Graziosi, this purge was also conceived to cut the wings to any future temptation for a coup d'état<sup>30</sup>. In fact, Gorbachev demanded the resignation of marshal Sokolov and other high ranks, and sent on trial about one hundred and fifty officers and generals. Sokolov was replaced by general Dmitry Timofeyevich Jazov. For an irony of History, in 1991 Jazov was among those who became protagonists of the coup against Gorbachev. In the second half of the eighties, the purge of the military, which ceased to be a power group to deal with, allowed Gorbachev to declare that NATO was no longer a threat to the USSR, making a new, drastic break with the positions of the past<sup>31</sup>. In October 1987, a second report, prepared for the USAF<sup>32</sup>, and entitled *Conflict and Consensus in the Soviet Armed Forces*, analyzed the evolution of the confrontation on modernization within the Soviet armed forces, and the dialectical tools used to create the necessary consensus to resolve the dispute between the mid-1970s and 1988. The document, also fruit of the RAND Corporation, highlighted the earthquake caused by the Soviet armed forces as a result of Gorbachev's reforms. In the summary it was stated that, already at the beginning of the seventies, in some circles of the Soviet Army had understood the importance of replicating the successes achieved by the Western bloc, thanks to the latest technological innovations<sup>33</sup>. It was illustrated how the Soviet General Staff traditionally held enormous power within the Soviet Union. The report described a flattering portrait of marshal Ogarkov defined: "a forceful and intelligent theoretician, headed the General Staff during six of the years covered". In the following lines it was explained that:

Ogarkov recognized that nuclear parity with the United States, which his country had achieved with great effort, would not solve all of the USSR's strategic problems and that the Soviet defense establishment would have to catch up with the high-technology revolution in the West despite increasing budgetary constraints. His solution involved the rapid implementation of changes that would transform the Soviet Armed Forces with high-technology weapons and equipment and new strategy and tactics for their use<sup>34</sup>.

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of the Red Army and the Soviet Mass Operations, 1937–38. *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 93, No. 2 (April 2015), pp. 286-314.

30 Graziosi, Andrea. *L'Urss dal trionfo al degrado. Storia dell'Unione Sovietica 1945-1991*. Il Mulino, 2008, p. 547.

31 Ibidem.

32 United States Air Force.

33 Gottemoeller, Rose E. *Conflict and Consensus in the Soviet Armed Forces*. RAND, October 1989, p. v.

34 Ibidem.



In a subsequent passage we touched on the core of the question raised by Ogarkov, who proposed to his fellow officers the immediate adaptation to new technologies and a substantial change in the strategy and tactics in use in the Soviet Army. There was also a reference to a (sort of) opposition between officers of the Strategic Missile Forces and followers of what was (already) called “Ogarkov Doctrine” which seemed to favour the rapid-projection of conventional forces over the traditional nuclear component. According to the report, however, Gorbachev’s arrival could have upset the process of changing the Soviet military doctrine as laid down by Ogarkov, so much so that it concluded – very prophetically – that the new Gorbachev approach could probably lead to a new phase of internal political confrontation. Like the previous report, this also considered the time period during which Ogarkov’s strategic thinking began to take shape, namely the Brezhnev era. It was also argued that Ogarkov’s entourage was aware that if the effective development of new technologies applied to armaments were to be achieved, it would have to go hand in hand with a change in strategic and tactical thinking. It also highlighted how the debate, already in the seventies, from within had moved on the pages of the Soviet specialized press. The emergence of the discussion and therefore the search for an extension of the internal consensus, revealed the conflict between the (communist) party and the military of which it was said. Suddenly, for Western analysts, the growing publicity of the debate seemed to reveal clues in support of the existence of a deep internal rift. It was in 1972 that a decisive factor for shifting the debate in favor of the development of conventional armaments was presented: the signing of the SALT<sup>35</sup> I Agreement, which guaranteed (at least formally) the strategic nuclear parity between the United States and the Soviet Union, by freezing, limiting the number of ICBM<sup>36</sup> and ABM<sup>37</sup> systems that can be deployed by both superpowers. The RAND study thus illustrated Ogarkov’s reasoning about the close connection between conventional weapons, new technologies and changing needs of military doctrine:

In addition to reconsidering their reliance on nuclear weapons, the Soviets recognized the approach of “a new revolution in military affairs”. According to Soviet theory, such a revolution occurs under the influence of scientific-technical progress, which brings changes in weapon systems, in the organization

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35 Strategic Armaments Limitations Talks.

36 Intercontinental Ballistic Missile.

37 Anti-Ballistic Missile.



and training of the Armed Forces, and in combat methods. The first modern revolution in military affairs, according to Soviet theorists, grew out of advances during the 1950s in nuclear weapons, radioelectronic technology, and automation. The new revolution, they state, is likewise based on advances in electronics, but also on weapons “based on new physical principles” and on longer-range conventional as well as nuclear weapons. Conventional weapons and weapons based on new physical principles became an explicit element of this new revolution only in the late 1970s, with marshal of the Soviet Union N. V. Ogarkov as its main exponent<sup>38</sup>.

In the continuation of the report the thought of the marshal was directly quoted, reporting how he wrote in 1971 that the evolution in armaments (both nuclear and conventional) would radically change the forms of conduct of military operations, by posing profound questions for the Soviet scientific-military thought, as well as for the ideological-theoretical and professional training of the army and navy cadres<sup>39</sup>. In the concluding lines of the report drawn up by RAND it was illustrated how Ogarkov had created among his officers a kind of think-tank with the task of conceptually elaborating the application of new high technologies to the military doctrine of the Soviet Army<sup>40</sup>. In essence, Ogarkov was consolidating a school of thought within the Soviet General Staff whose results could have had a decisive impact on USSR’s military strategic doctrine, eventually influencing the confrontation with the United States and the blockade of Western European countries. In October 1986, this was confirmed by another Soviet marshal, namely Sergey Fyodorovich Akhromeyev (1923-1992), during a conversation he had with the US Chief Negotiator and Special Advisor on Arms Control (with the rank of ambassador) lieutenant-general Edward Leon Rowny, on the sidelines of the Reykjavik summit between US president Ronald Reagan and Gorbachev. Akhromeyev reported to Rowny that Ogarkov was providing the Soviet army with solid strategic thinking and continuing to do so, calling him a creative and imaginative strategist<sup>41</sup>. Nevertheless, at the height of his career, Ogarkov – as mentioned earlier – seemed to fall victim to a purge. It is reasonable to suppose that this disastrous fall may have been attributable to the success of Gorbachev’s political line in the aforementioned political confrontation, and to the war of succession

38 Gottemoeller, p. 3.

39 Ogarkov, Nikolai. *Krasnaya Zvezda*. September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1971; English version in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service Soviet Union Daily Report* (FBIS), September 10<sup>th</sup>, 1971.

40 Gottemoeller, p. 7.

41 FRUS 1981-1989, Vol. XI, START I, Document 166.

which began on the eve of his death (1985) by Konstantin Ustinovich Chernenko<sup>42</sup>. A data seems to emerge: both the circumstances of his ouster from the top position in the Soviet military apparatus and those relating to his sudden return to vogue can at last reveal what kind of atmosphere was hovering in Moscow, and, consequently, in Western power circles about the situation that seemed to be maturing in Europe in the mid-1980s. This situation – for a series of indications that we will shortly examine – seemed very close to a conflict between the Warsaw Pact and NATO.

### **3. The Scenario for a Victory in the West According to Ogarkov’s Strategic Thinking**

As mentioned before, immediately after his defenestration (September 6<sup>th</sup>, 1984) rumors began to arise – especially in the West – about the assignment to Ogarkov of an operational command in a combat area. The new post was the result of a precise strategic decision taken by the Supreme Council of Soviet Defense, that entrusted to the marshal the command of what was called “theater of western front”<sup>43</sup>, in fact making Ogarkov: “the supreme representative of the Soviet military command in what could become the most important operational and strategic sector in case of conflict”<sup>44</sup>. In his new role, Ogarkov sought to strengthen ties with the USSR’s most important ally in that area: the German Democratic Republic (GDR). In October, the Soviet marshal had a meeting with the leaders of East Germany, being received with the highest honors. On that occasion, the GDR’s official news agency<sup>45</sup> reported that the discussions had touched on the issue of strengthening the military alliance in view of improving the efficiency and combat readiness of the Warsaw Pact<sup>46</sup>. Commenting on the incident, the Italian press pointed out that the USSR had taken: “another opportunity to remember its special rights of control over the future of its most important ally and in general on the German question”<sup>47</sup>. Rumours about Ogarkov’s unspecified new assignment began to fade in the second half of October, when it became clear that the marshal had actually been given command of the main Soviet forces in the West

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42 General secretary of the CPSU and president of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union.

43 See URL <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1984/09/19/il-maresciallo-ogarkov-sara-forse-assegnato-al.html> [Accessed April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023].

44 Ibidem.

45 Allgemeiner Deutscher Nachrichtendienst.

46 <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1984/10/14/ogarkov-accolto-con-massimi-onori-nella-germania.html?ref=search> [Accessed April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023].

47 Ibidem.

with a special assignment. In Europe the news was unofficially attributed by Finnish television to a member of the Politburo, Grigory Vasilyevich Romanov, although no official confirmation came from Moscow<sup>48</sup>. The aura of mystery about the special nature of the new assignment still pushed the Italian press to comment as follows:

It is not [...] clear what exactly “major forces of the USSR in the West” means, as no subdivision of Soviet military zones responds to this indication. This formula may include the forces located in central Europe or the entire belt that extends from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea affecting most of the 18 military districts of the Soviet Union. Western experts point out in any case that this “unified command” has reason to be only in case of war. According to a reductive interpretation, Ogarkov may be responsible for the Soviet forces [...] of the Warsaw Pact, but in that case it would still not be clear what his relationship would be with marshal Kulikov, supreme commander of the Pact forces. The Ogarkov mystery therefore does not seem definitively clarified [...]<sup>49</sup>.

The mystery was finally solved a few days later when, in the British specialized magazine *Jane's Defense Weekly*, the expert in strategic issues and advisor to the Washington Government, Yossef Bodansky<sup>50</sup> wrote – confirming earlier rumors however coming as we have seen from Soviet sources – that Ogarkov had actually assumed: “the supreme command of the forces stationed in the Western operating theatre”<sup>51</sup> and the exact date of his investiture on September 7<sup>th</sup>. Over the course of a year, marshal Ogarkov had thus gone from appearing as an outcast to being once again a decisive figure in the USSR's strategy. Suddenly, in Italy, some journalistic speculation even suggested that he might have been appointed commander of the Warsaw Pact forces in place of marshal Viktor Georgiyevich Kulikov. Despite these speculations, the chronicle of the time, however, had the merit of deepening the analysis of the situation by evoking questions that, in hindsight, appear worthy of being considered, such as the clash of power that arose after the departure of Chernenko mentioned earlier. In this regard, the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* wrote:

48 <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1984/10/16/ogarkov-comandera-il-fronte-occidentale-sovietico.html?ref=search> [Accessed April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023].

49 Ibidem.

50 At that time he was Analyst for Mid-Atlantic Research Associates. For a complete profile view URL <https://www.harpercollins.com/blogs/authors/yossef-bodansky> [Accessed April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023].

51 <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1984/10/24/ogarkov-nominato-comandante-del-fronte-occidentale.html?ref=search> [Accessed April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023].

The exact reasons for Ogarkov’s removal have never been very clear. Soviet sources then suggested that the marshal had manifested tendencies [...] Bonapartist accumulating excessive power within the armed forces. Others said that they had damaged some “non-party” positions and in contrast to Defense minister Ustinov. More credible, however, is a version of his military thinking, the kind of strategy he would try to impose in the “Stavka”<sup>52</sup>, the USSR military General Headquarters. According to an interview he gave to the newspaper of the Soviet armed forces *Krasnaja Zvezda* on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1984, Ogarkov hinted that the deployment of new NATO missiles did not increase the risk of an American “first blow” against the [Soviet] Union because the US-USSR strategic balance remained anchored to the principle of “mutual assured destruction” [...] The periodic appearances of Ogarkov in some military delegations, the publication of his articles in Soviet newspapers, His presence at the sessions of the Supreme Soviet was, on the other hand, confirmation that the star of the marshal had not been definitively clouded and that his departure probably coincided with the tensions existing in the Kremlin against the various factions Soviet forces engaged in the succession to power. However, his eventual return must be interpreted not only in the context of internal adjustments [...] but above all as a re-evaluation of political-strategic thinking [...]<sup>53</sup>.

It should be noted that the accusation of Bonapartism made by some Soviet circles to Ogarkov was identical to that attributed to marshal Mikhail Nikolayevich Tukhachevsky in 1936. The analysis made by American intelligence after the purge of Ogarkov in September 1984 is also very interesting. In a memorandum – at that time secret – entitled *Some Further Thoughts on Ogarkov*, drafted by the National Intelligence Officer for the president of the National Intelligence Council with responsibility for Europe, George Kolt, were described three possible new destinations for the marshal<sup>54</sup>. In the first case, Ogarkov – it was written – could have been assigned to the Inspectorate General of the armed forces<sup>55</sup>. This scenario – it was argued – would almost certainly have meant a relegation and consequently the end of his career<sup>56</sup>. A second hypothesis concerned the possibility that he was entrusted with the Ministry of Defence, a decision that would have created a completely new situation<sup>57</sup>. The third

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52 It was created on June 23<sup>rd</sup> 1941, see <https://www.prlib.ru/en/history/619333> [Accessed December 12<sup>th</sup> 2023].

53 See footnote [51].

54 <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP87R00529R000200160010-5.pdf> [Accessed April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023].

55 Ibidem.

56 Ibidem.

57 Ibidem.

possibility – described as intriguing in the memorandum – contemplated the hypothesis that Ogarkov could be given command of the Soviet forces in Afghanistan, a circumstance that would have guaranteed the Soviets an intelligent commander, energetic and probably more assertive in that delicate theatre of operations: it was also added that, for these reasons, the chances of further, eventual, Soviet action against Pakistan would increase<sup>58</sup>. Given these aspects, the surprise – and therefore the alarm – that aroused in Western countries the decision to assign instead to Ogarkov the command of what was called the theater of western war can be understood. It was again Bodansky who clarified the mystery. He did so on July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1985, in an article in *The Washington Times* newspaper devoted entirely to the strategic thinking of the Soviet marshal. The importance of this article is indicated by the fact that a copy is kept in the CIA digital archives<sup>59</sup>. Bodansky, calling him the most important Soviet in uniform, wrote that Ogarkov was the creator of a new military grand strategy that provided – in the hypothetical case of a confrontation with the West – not (only) the use of nuclear weapons, but (also) the use of modern conventional forces for a first surprise attack against Western Europe. Thus the Soviet forces could have achieved a strategic victory over NATO without necessarily having to resort to nuclear arsenals. Relying on the supposed American reservations about the unilateral use of nuclear weapons in the event of a conventional Soviet invasion of Western Europe, Ogarkov believed he could rapidly implement and complete the conquest already during the initial phase of a large-scale conflict, without recourse to nuclear weapons, that is before Washington could take a decisive decision in support of the European allies. For Bodansky, Ogarkov's military thought did not stop at this only hazard. The Soviet marshal believed that the first reaction of the United States would be to consider the use of nuclear weapons [we can suppose non-strategic nuclear weapons] to stop the Soviet advance in Western Europe. In order to avoid this, it would have been essential to show in Europe a considerable superiority in nuclear weapons, so as to discourage the nuclear escalation of the conflict, placing the United States at risk of being subjected to atomic retaliation on its territory or fulfilling commitments arising from its extended nuclear deterrence policy. The debate on this option would have lengthened Washington's reaction

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58 Ibidem.

59 <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP90-00965R000100580003-8.pdf> [Accessed April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023].

time, by providing an additional advantage to the USSR to complete its conventional advance in Western Europe.

#### **4. Significance and Legacy of the so-called “Ogarkov Doctrine”**

In a secret CIA report of April 1981 (released in 2012), entitled *The Development of Soviet Military Power: Trends Since 1965 and Prospects for the 1980s*, were reported an article signed by Ogarkov in which the Soviet marshal had expressed some considerations about a future hypothetical global conflict that would involve the Soviet Union. The report noted that, according to the contents of that article, a new world conflict “could be conducted at a conventional level for an indeterminate time”<sup>60</sup>, but added that “the article also states that it could lead to general nuclear war”<sup>61</sup>. An interesting aspect was the hypothesis that local conflicts could reach the threshold of a global conflict, without however excluding that, on the contrary, they could also assume the nature of a frozen war (or protracted conflict). In fact, there was reference to: “long wars [...] limited in area and scope”<sup>62</sup>. Five years after that CIA report, Bodansky, in his previously mentioned article (published by *The Washington Times*)<sup>63</sup>, noted that Ogarkov had been the main planner of the Zapad-81 exercise “in which the Soviet military forces confirmed their ability to conduct a non-nuclear, strategic deep offensive”<sup>64</sup>. Bodansky also recalled that in April 1986 one of Ogarkov’s main tasks was to reactivate the Chief Directorate of Strategic Maskirovka (GUSM<sup>65</sup>). Both the 1981 CIA report and Bodansky’s analysis agreed that the concept of victory in a regional or global conflict was predominant in Soviet military leadership. In 1991, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent liquidation of the Warsaw Pact have consigned to History the strategic thought of Ogarkov. Today the condition relating to the European chessboard appears reversed, if we consider the new strategic balances deriving mainly from the enlargement of NATO. For example, with regard to the military doctrine, or the scenarios in which it could be applied today, Virgilio Ilari<sup>66</sup> noted that this reversal emerges mainly from the assumption that in the case of a

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60 [https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC\\_0000964634.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000964634.pdf) [Accessed April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023].

61 Ibidem.

62 Ibidem.

63 See footnote [54].

64 <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP90-00965R000100580003-8.pdf> [Accessed April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023].

65 Ru. transliterated in Latin characters: Glavnoye upravleniye Strategicheskoy Maskirovki.

66 Professor Emeritus, President of the Italian Society for Military History (SISM).

crisis between the Russian Federation and NATO “the Russians would not react with a strategic nuclear attack, but would try to de-escalate the conflict with tactical nuclear weapons”<sup>67</sup>, adding “[...] just as NATO would have done during the Cold War [...]”<sup>68</sup>. Ilari also added: “At that point the United States should choose whether to scale further risking retaliation against the national territory, or withdraw, accepting defeat”<sup>69</sup>. Above all, from this last consideration emerges a correlation with the strategic concept at the time expressed by Ogarkov and summarized in the West, among others, by Bodanksy. In fact, the legacy of the “Ogarkov Doctrine” also consists in the mechanism illustrated by Ilari, that we can partially recognize in the current Russian Military Doctrine, also conceived to win a regional conventional conflict, which could harm the vital interests of the Russian State, through the graduated use of nuclear weapons. Contemporary Western strategic thinking has defined this approach with the expression “escalate to de-escalate”<sup>70</sup>, although in the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation (approved by the Russian president Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin on December 25<sup>th</sup>, 2014) there is no trace of an equivalent expression. However, this circumstance has not prevented Western conception from taking for granted the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons. According to Russian’s Military Doctrine the use of its atomic arsenals is made explicit in Article 27, which is reproduced below in the English language version published on the Internet, on June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015, by the Russian Embassy in the United Kingdom:

The Russian Federation shall reserve the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction against it and/or its allies, as well as in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy.

The decision to use nuclear weapons shall be taken by the President of the Russian Federation<sup>71</sup>.

67 [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269332492\\_Dancing\\_with\\_the\\_Grizzly](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269332492_Dancing_with_the_Grizzly) [Accessed April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023].

68 Ibidem.

69 Ibidem.

70 See URL <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF> [Accessed April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023].

71 [https://london.mid.ru/en/press-centre/gb\\_en\\_fnapr\\_1947/](https://london.mid.ru/en/press-centre/gb_en_fnapr_1947/) [Accessed April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023]. The same principle is contained in Article 17 of the document entitled *Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence*, approved by Executive Order of the President of the Russian Federation of June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020 No.35. For the text see URL [https://archive.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign\\_policy/international\\_safety/](https://archive.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/)



We can notice a detail. Although the common principle of proportionality probably suggests the validity of the scenario evoked by the (Western) thought contained in the formula “escalate to de-escalate”, this passage of the Russian Military Doctrine does not specify which type of nuclear weapons would be used, if whether low-yield (or even very low-yield) non-strategic or strategic fusion bombs. Another aspect of marshal Ogarkov’s thinking that seems to have survived the end of the bipolarity era is that related to the importance of strategic deception. In fact, it has been seen that Ogarkov in 1986 had taken care to reactivate the characteristic functions of the GUSM. In 2014 this same aspect was part of the Russian hybrid warfare in Crimea<sup>72</sup>. From a strictly historiographical point of view, it is also possible to discern parallels between the international condition of the USSR in the 1930s and that existing in the 1980s. Given this aspect, both the purge of which marshal Tukhachevsky was a victim and that suffered by Ogarkov seem to have some elements of similarity. Both military leaders felt the need to adapt Soviet military doctrine to the challenges posed by an external enemy: in Tukhachevsky’s case the National Socialist Germany, while for Ogarkov the North Atlantic Alliance. Tukhachevsky had illustrated very clearly the insidiousness posed by the rearmament of National Socialist Germany in a speech on January 15<sup>th</sup> 1936, during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Session of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR, advocating the idea of increased funding for the Red Army<sup>73</sup>. As for the Soviet military élite of the 1980s, it was seen that they did not entirely rule out the possibility of a Western bloc first strike against the Warsaw Pact. Both courses of action – that of Tukhachevsky and that embodied by Ogarkov in the 1980s – were, however, effectively countered by the Soviet political leadership of the time with two purges: that of Stalin and that of Gorbachev. Regarding the motives that led to Tukhachevsky’s downfall, it is plausible to assume that, in order to protect the international status quo (especially in East-Central Europe) against any possible German revisionist attempts, Stalin did not desire a clean break in relations with Berlin at all, especially at a juncture when the Soviet Union was engaged in boundary clashes with Japan in Asia (i.e. Manchuria and Mongolia). In the 1980s, for his part,

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disarmament/-/asset\_publisher/rp0fiUBmANaH/content/id/4152094 [Accessed December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023].

72 Cfr. DeBenedictis, Kent. *Russian “Hybrid Warfare” and the Annexation of Crimea. The Modern Application of Soviet Political Warfare*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021. See also Galeotti, Mark. *HEAVY METAL DIPLOMACY: RUSSIA’S POLITICAL USE OF ITS MILITARY IN EUROPE SINCE 2014*. European Council on Foreign Relations, 2016, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21613>. [Accessed April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2024]; Murawiec, Laurent. Putin’s Precursors. *The National Interest*, No. 60 (Summer 2000), pp. 50-54.

73 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4203165> [Accessed April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2023].

Gorbachev believed that he could avoid a rise in the level of confrontation with the Western bloc with a policy of détente, which would simultaneously allow resources to be allocated to the civilian sector as an economic prerequisite to the development of domestic political reforms. Indeed, the Soviet Union was engaged in as many as three different theaters of crisis. Firstly, in Europe, where the tug-of-war with Washington and NATO over Euromissiles was ongoing. Secondly, in Central Asia, where since 1979 the Soviet Army had penetrated Afghanistan. Finally in Central America, where the Soviets were providing support to Nicaraguan Sandinista groups<sup>74</sup> (and where in 1983 the United States had intervened militarily by overthrowing Hudson Austin's Marxist-Leninist regime in Grenada). Moscow therefore could not have afforded to take the risk of a conflict in Europe that could have proved fatal for its own survival. The victory of the political line embodied by Gorbachev over the military faction led by Ogarkov can also be read as the conclusion of a decades-long dual strategy that, first adopted by the USSR leadership for international policy purposes, would later become de facto institutionalized by eventually influencing Soviet domestic political debate. In this regard a significant clue is provided by the *Pipes memorandum*<sup>75</sup>, drafted in February 1981 for the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs Richard V. Allen. This document, a product of the National Security Council Staff, stated: << the Soviet leadership seems to have decided to travel simultaneously on two roads: the aggressive "low road" given to Ustinov and the conciliatory "high road" assigned to Brezhnev. Such a dual strategy gives the Soviet Union greater flexibility in meeting the challenges of the new American Administration >><sup>76</sup>. Another element of continuity that we can consider is the assumed vulnerability of the extended US nuclear deterrent, which Ogarkov seemed to be so clear about, so much so that he wanted to exploit it with the goal of avoiding escalation to the atomic threshold in a possible large-scale conflict scenario in Europe. In this regard, it is interesting to note that today within the Atlantic Alliance and in the Western press such a debate appears to be alive, as evidenced, for example, by the 2020 study *Recalibrating NATO Nuclear Policy*<sup>77</sup> (published by NATO Defense College), and two interventions authored by Olivier Zajec<sup>78</sup> that appeared

74 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20751350> [Accessed April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2023].

75 See footnote [10] for the text.

76 Ibidem.

77 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25147.1> [Accessed April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023].

78 Jean Moulin University – Lyon III.

on April 2022 in the pages of the French magazine *Le Monde Diplomatique*, with the titles “La menace d’une guerre nucléaire en Europe”<sup>79</sup> and “A third nuclear age may be dawning in Ukraine”<sup>80</sup>. In conclusion, it is intended here to argue that in the Soviet Union, during the 1980s, the outcome of the clash, discussed in this study, between a faction more assertive toward the Western bloc (the soviet military party led by personalities such as Ogarkov, Sokolov, Ustinov) and another one more inclined toward dialogue and favoring the allocation of resources toward the domestic economy<sup>81</sup> (the nomenklatura referring to Gorbachev) would sensitively connote the nature of the last phase of the age of bipolarity. This aspect is considered important in suggesting how such internal contrast deserves the attention of both scholars, so that through historical research the events that ended the so-called Short Century may be better understood, and international relations analysts, so that elements of continuity<sup>82</sup> between Soviet military thinking and that currently dominant in the Russian leadership may be traced.

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79 <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2022/04/ZAJEC/64552> [Accessed April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023].

80 <https://mondediplo.com/2022/04/03nuclear> [Accessed April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023].

81 See in particular Bova, Russell. The Soviet Military and Economic Reform. *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Jul., 1988), pp. 385-405; Herspring, Dale R. Gorbachev and the Soviet Military. *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science*, Vol. 36, No. 4, Soviet Foreign Policy (1987), pp. 42-53.

82 See in particular: Palmer, Diego A. Ruiz. *Back to the Future? Russia’s Hybrid Warfare, Revolutions in Military Affairs, and Cold War Comparisons*. Research Paper – Research Division, NATO Defense College, Rome – No. 120 - October 2015, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep10267> [Accessed April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2024].