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MATĚJ BÍLÝ
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Abstract

This paper reviews Matěj Bílý's second book on the Warsaw Pact history outlining the final years of Pact's functioning and its demise, parallel to the demise of the Soviet Union and its domination in the Central and Eastern Europe.

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Thirty years which had passed by 2021 since the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, or in fact the formal confirmation of the collapse thereof, should provide historiography with a sufficiently safe perspective for the analysis and description of even the most controversial phenomena and events. However, this has not resulted – certainly not in Poland – in a flood of papers devoted to the political and military relations of the Soviet Union with its satellite states/allies in Central and Eastern Europe and in Southern Europe between 1945 and 1991. Although such restraint might seem commendable – at least from a methodological point of view, given that fundamental source materials of Soviet origin remain inaccessible – considering the increasing opportunities offered by the archives of other member states of the alliance, any failure to undertake such research may be regarded as a form of opportunism or an unwillingness to take on difficult challenges. Introducing a national perspective, even in fragmentary studies, undoubtedly allows a better understanding of the mechanisms by which the alliance of “people’s democracies” under Soviet leadership functioned. It makes it possible to discern a somewhat more nuanced mechanism of dependence and the non-unilateral nature of interactions between the hegemonic power and its clients.

At the forefront of publications which, in their own way, marked the 65th anniversary of the formation and the 30th anniversary of the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, stands the work of Matěj Bílý, a Czech historian who, since his studies at Charles University in Prague, has consistently researched the history of the Pact. His master’s thesis was devoted to the first fifteen years of the alliance’s existence – from its establishment in 1955 to 1969 (the author’s biography was published on the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes website, now it is available on the Institute of Contemporary History of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic website; see “PhDr. Matěj Bílý, Ph.D.”). In his doctoral dissertation, published in 2016 by the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (*Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů, ÚSTR*), he presented the alliance’s heyday between 1969 and 1985 (see Bílý 2016; the English edition was published by Academica Press: Bílý 2020). His latest book documents the final years of the alliance’s existence, its disintegration and dissolution, in the radically different political landscape of 1991.

As in his earlier works, Matěj Bílý focused primarily on the mechanics of the Warsaw Pact as a political organisation, devoting less attention to its military aspects, although – as he himself repeatedly noted – throughout the entire existence of the Pact, its military structures operated more effectively than its political ones.

The author made an attempt to characterise the internal transformations and the efforts aimed at reforming not only the methods and style of operation but also the political structures of the Warsaw Pact. In the context of a new approach to international policy proclaimed by the new leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, and, consequently, the greater subjectivity of the other member states of the alliance, certain structural reforms were intended to be carried out, bringing the Warsaw Pact closer to its Western antagonist – NATO. The growing divergence of interests among the individual states of the Pact, which also affected the hitherto exceptionally cohesive “group of six” (the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic – GDR, Hungary, and Bulgaria), did not allow for the introduction of any major changes. Although some bodies met more frequently and regularly, and the exchange of views during their meetings ceased to resemble the ritualistic incantations of newspeak (so distinctive of the Brezhnev-era stagnation), apart from the creation of a dozen working groups, it was not possible to strengthen – following the North Atlantic model – the role of the Secretariat and the Secretary of the Warsaw Pact. Recognising the peculiar organisational dualism and the operational autonomy of the military structures, the author discussed separately the activities of the political bodies on the international stage between 1985 and 1989 and the functioning of the alliance’s military agencies. The third part of the work was devoted to the period 1989–1991, marked by an increasingly rapid disintegration of the Warsaw Pact structures, reflecting the internal processes, namely the collapse of the existing regimes in Eastern Europe. The military role of the Pact declined even more rapidly than its political significance. The 1991 meeting in Prague was, in essence, nothing more than a *coup de grâce* for an organisation which no longer had any *raison d’être* in the new, changed realities.

In attempting to outline a comprehensive vision of the history of the Warsaw Pact during the final period of its existence, Bílý focused primarily on the initiatives and activities of the alliance as a supranational political structure, taking due account of the internal context – the momentous transformations taking place within the

member states of the alliance. Certain topics – particularly issues concerning military cooperation – were only outlined or mentioned briefly. In line with the theoretical model of the “decentralisation of the Cold War,” Bilyý saw smaller countries as actors that were independent to a certain extent, not treating them as part of a satellite monolith that implemented a line imposed by Moscow, but rather as entities attempting to pursue their own goals, both in the international arena and in their relations with Moscow.

The author sought to guard against a sort of Czechocentrism arising from the relatively better – though not always easier – access to sources held in Czech archives. In addition to the archives of party and administrative authorities, he succeeded in gaining access to documents of the Warsaw Pact concealed under the designation of the Operational Directorate of the Czechoslovak General Staff, which – somewhat by chance – were made available to him at the turn of the first and second decades of the 21st century. As far as relations with the Warsaw Pact are concerned, these materials are similar to those stored in the Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance as Collection of Documents concerning the Warsaw Pact, which, pursuant to the 1991 agreement, were not available to researchers for many years. The author, for instance, made use of records of military meetings of Warsaw Pact bodies in Czech translation, although copies of these documents in their original language – Russian – can often be found in Poland. Certain issues – such as plans for the development of the armed forces during the final five years of the alliance’s existence as a military pact, or the reorganisation and reduction of the armed forces, partly as a result of the Warsaw Pact’s shift to a defensive doctrine – were discussed by the author using the example of the Czechoslovak People’s Army. Broader use of Polish materials would, in all likelihood, have lent greater legitimacy to some of the author’s conclusions. The actions undertaken by the Czechoslovak authorities – given the far-reaching unification of military policy among the member states of the Warsaw Pact in the mid-1980s – may be regarded as representative or exemplary of the activities of the military leaderships of the other countries of the Pact.

In addition to Czech sources, the author also used Polish documents from the Archives of Modern Records (materials of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party) and documentation of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Second Directorate of the General Staff of the Polish Army, and the aforementioned Warsaw Pact documents held in the Archives of the Institute of National

Remembrance. He also accessed valuable materials of the leadership of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, SED) and records of meetings of the Warsaw Pact's decision-making bodies preserved in the collections of the Bundesarchiv Abteilung Berlin-Lichterfelde. Of great importance were materials of the CPSU leadership stored in the Dmitri Volkogonov's Collection at the Library of Congress, as well as documentation held at the National Security Archive in Washington. The author also skilfully used the exceptionally valuable archival collections compiled by the international research team called the Parallel History Project (PHP), including documentation of meetings of the Warsaw Pact's governing bodies posted on the project's website (see Parallel History Project On Cooperative Security website). Unfortunately, it should be noted that some of the links provided by the Author to these webpages are no longer active.

Among the source publications, the most valuable proved to be the collection of archival materials on the history of the Warsaw Pact, *A Cardboard Castle?*, prepared by Vojtech Mastny and Malcolm Byrne (Mastny and Byrne 2005). One of the most frequently cited sources is the semi-memoir work by Polish diplomat Jerzy Nowak devoted to the final years of the Warsaw Pact (Nowak 2011). The author also made use of the rather limited literature, including studies concerning the final period of the alliance's history, presented from national perspectives by Jordan Baev (Baev 2000), Csaba Békés (Békés 2003), and Wanda Jarzabek (Jarzabek 2010). However, the list of sources used does not include the final volume of Andrzej Skrzypek's trilogy on Polish-Soviet relations in the post-war period (Skrzypek 2008), or the works of General Franciszek Puchała on the military aspects of Polish-Soviet relations within the Warsaw Pact (Puchała 2011). Despite drawing on many German publications, the omission of important works such as Oliver Bange's study on the GDR's military and alliance policy from 1969–1990 (Bange 2017), Daniel Niemetz's analysis of the National People's Army and security agencies during the crisis and transition period of 1985–1990 (Niemetz 2020), see also recent book by Winfried Heinemann (2011, 2025), and Colonel Siegfried Lautsch's interesting work on operational planning in the 1980s, leaves a certain sense of incompleteness (Lautsch 2013). Russian-language studies – for example those by Rudolf Pikhov and Irina Bystrova (Bystrova 2006), Vladimir Zolotaryov (Zolotaryov and Putilin 2014), and others – should not have been overlooked. A language barrier prevented the author from using Romanian publications on Romania's

stance towards the Warsaw Pact (*Sozialistische Waffenbrüder...* 2020; Opriš 2008), as well as the highly interesting work by Miklós Horváth on Hungary's functioning within the structures of the Warsaw Pact (Horváth and Kovács 2016). It would undoubtedly have been worthwhile to draw also on publications devoted to the disarmament negotiations conducted during the 1980s. Bílý focuses primarily on the Soviet and East European reception of these negotiations and the assessment of the Western position. According to the author, a crucial turning point in the history of the Warsaw Pact was the rise to power in the Soviet Union of a very young – for the time – ideological and reform-minded General Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee, Mikhail Gorbachev. He intended to change the form and, to a considerable extent, also the substance of cooperation within the Warsaw Pact. This was part of Gorbachev's vaguely defined strategy towards the Eastern Bloc. The purpose of increasing the emancipation of the Eastern Bloc countries was to reduce the political and economic cost of maintaining these territories within the Soviet sphere of influence. These changes were supposed to be beneficial for both sides, but they did not proceed at a satisfactory pace. In the spring of 1987, Gorbachev began to conclude that his ideas could be realised only through more radical reforms. Consequently, alongside the acceleration of changes in domestic policy in 1988, the issue of expediting transformations in the internal policies of the allied countries appeared on the agenda of the meetings of the Warsaw Pact's highest political body. This complicated relations with many of the Pact's allies, which continued to be led by conservative and traditionalist groups.

After 1985, the political structures of the Pact began to function in a more regular manner. The Soviet side became more willing and efficient in providing information and presenting new foreign policy initiatives. The growing activity of the alliance translated into an increase in the prestige and significance of the Warsaw Pact. Since the attention of the Pact's members was focused on inter-bloc relations within Europe, this entailed a weakening of cooperation with non-European socialist countries.

According to Bílý, the Kremlin ceased to surprise its allies with initiatives on the international stage, announcing them in advance. Moscow attempted to transform the alliance from an organisation focused on military issues and on formulating joint – often general – positions toward ideological opponents into a platform for cooperation between the countries of the Eastern Bloc, where

a wide range of mainly political issues would be discussed. Military issues were to move into the background. Attempts were also made to identify new areas of activity, such as economic integration and issues of internal development in socialist countries.

Despite significant changes in its mode of operation, the structures of the Pact were reformed only to a small extent. Moreover, discussions on organisational reforms never became particularly heated. On the most important disarmament issues in the dialogue between the superpowers, the Pact had a similar role to that before 1985, namely to fully support Soviet policy and positions.

The political transformation of the alliance in the face of changes in international politics, the evolution of internal situations, and the dilution of Soviet control increasingly led to strong confrontations of views. At the same time, the gap between the position of the “group of six” and that of Romania, which had previously tended to dissent, became ever smaller. The convergence towards the Soviet position occurred above all in connection with disarmament initiatives and cuts in military spending. Differences, which had not been so serious until 1988, began to grow in tandem with the internal changes taking place within those countries and the increasingly explicit articulation of their own national foreign policy goals. In the absence of a culture of open and constructive debate, the issue of the Pact’s effectiveness became ever more apparent.

Unlike civilian structures, the military institutions of the alliance operated without major changes until 1989. New trends arrived with a delay and became noticeable only in 1988. One of the most important issues was the adoption of a statute of the Warsaw Pact for times of peace and war. However, the attempts made in this regard essentially dissolved into discussions and constant changes and comments made by individual alliance states. In the military sphere, the re-evaluation of military policy, the shift in the Pact’s doctrine from offensive to defensive, and a new approach to disarmament talks proved to be key developments.

The specific metamorphosis of the military doctrine in 1987 did not, in the author’s view, appear merely as a result of Gorbachev’s reformist policy, but rather stemmed primarily from the deep defensive position in which the alliance had found itself since the early 1980s, resulting from its increasingly evident and widening technological and economic lag behind the West. While for the marshals and generals it was a matter of making concessions, as small as possible, dictated by realities, for Gorbachev’s milieu, ideologically communist as it was,

it was a departure from the dogma that war was to be the decisive historical confrontation ensuring the ultimate victory of socialism worldwide.

In 1988, Gorbachev came to the conclusion that he could not end the “Cold War” without making serious concessions that would allay Western suspicions and improve the image of the USSR in the world. The decisive factor was economic: it had been no longer feasible to sustain the existing pace of armament. In 1988, problems with the implementation of the “military five-year plan” in the Warsaw Pact countries became fully apparent. Although top-level delegations from individual countries agreed with the recommendations of the Warsaw Pact High Command, they were increasingly unable to implement them – and indeed implemented such recommendations to a lesser and lesser extent. The rift that emerged between Gorbachev’s milieu and the dogmatically minded Soviet generals led political authorities to take a closer look at the functioning of the Pact’s military structures and to introduce personnel changes at the highest positions. The First Deputy Minister of Defence of the USSR and Supreme Commander of the Unified Armed Forces of the States Parties to the Warsaw Pact (UAF), Marshal Viktor Kulikov (born 1921 – died 2013), as well as the Chief of Staff of the UAF, Army General Anatoly Gribkov (born 1919 – died 2008), were dismissed. The military began to take greater account of both political and economic realities.

Economic difficulties also led to even greater interest in disarmament talks than before. The Warsaw Pact countries, keen to slow the deadly pace of armament that was crippling their inefficient economies, were inclined to make greater concessions in terms of military reduction, and even to undertake unilateral action. According to Bílý, the proposals put forward by the Warsaw Pact were more constructive, and the flexibility, forced by the economic situation, was greater than that shown by the NATO countries.

The international situation, coupled with the evolution of the internal situation within the individual member states of the alliance, meant that not only Romania, but over time also the reform-minded Hungary and Poland, began from 1988 onwards to pursue their own goals within the Warsaw Pact to an ever greater degree. By the late 1980s, their course clearly began to move beyond the limits set by Gorbachev. Fear of radical reforms brought Romania closer to the Soviet Union. In 1989, the conservative regimes of Czechoslovakia and East Germany watched developments among their neighbours with concern. The gradual fragmentation of the alliance meant that any

military action to protect communist rule had become both unfeasible and unimaginable.

According to Bílý's assessment, by 1990 Gorbachev had failed to strengthen the Warsaw Pact internally, had found no new cohesive substance to bind the alliance together, and had failed to secure new legitimacy for the organisation. The Soviet leadership was guided by the idea of transforming the alliance along NATO lines. This was not only to adapt the reformed organisation to new needs but also to ensure its existence until such time as the Warsaw Pact and NATO would merge into a new, pan-European security system. The continued existence of the Pact was to result, among other things, from economic factors and geopolitical realities – the functioning of the alliance was expected to provide a sense of stability to its member states during turbulent times. However, the new, non-communist authorities in the Warsaw Pact member states were either indifferent or even suspicious of Soviet intentions, treating the USSR as a threat to their national interests. Only Bulgaria welcomed the Soviet proposals, while Czechoslovakia took an entirely negative stance, fearing, for example, internal chaos within the USSR. After 1968, there were growing concerns that the Warsaw Pact could be used again as an instrument of interference in internal affairs. The Soviet leadership, increasingly preoccupied with its own internal crisis, began in 1990 and 1991 to treat its former sphere of influence as a lower priority. The unification of Germany also dealt a heavy blow to the Pact's preservation. The attitude of the alliance's representatives during the 1990 meetings, who were opposing Soviet initiatives, clearly indicated that even from the USSR's point of view, the Warsaw Pact had ceased to perform its political and military functions. It was no longer an effective mechanism for maintaining influence and dominance in the countries of Eastern Europe, and following the political transformations in the former socialist states and the fall of their previous political elites, participation in the Warsaw Pact no longer conferred legitimacy on the new leaderships. The radically changed security geography of Europe also nullified the alliance's previously stabilising function in the international arena.

Bílý's analysis of the factors leading to the destabilisation and collapse of the alliance, which were a function of the internal crises of the socialist bloc countries under the USSR's leadership, often required emphasising the importance of the economic aspect. The inefficiency of the political and economic system led to an internal crisis and, through the inability to keep pace in the arms race of

the “Second Cold War,” affected the ability to achieve objectives on the international stage. This fact, repeatedly pointed out by the author, gives the impression of certain repetitions in the narrative. Likewise, the division of the description into the institutional sphere, and separately into actions in the international and military arenas, contributed to a situation in which Bílý returns in several places to certain threads – such as the specific position and (gradually softening) obstruction by Romania, or the emancipation of Hungary.

Focusing on the analysis of the Warsaw Pact as a political phenomenon, the author devotes considerable space to certain military aspects. It is here, as in his previous work, that most of the shortcomings and errors can be found. Despite his declaration that he would use native terminology – that is, Soviet or Warsaw Pact designations of weapon systems – he persistently refers to the medium-range missile known in the West as the SS-20 (including its modifications) as the RSD-10, even though this was a fictional designation adopted for the purposes of the Soviet-American arms control agreement. In fact, the system’s codename was “Pioneer,” and its actual internal designation was “complex 15P645 with missile 15Zh45” (and the modification: “Pioneer UTTH”, complex 15P653 with missile 15Zh53). A similar situation applies to the “operational-tactical missile system” OTR-22, which actually bore the designation 9K76, codename “Temp-S” (p. 302). When discussing disarmament negotiations, he briefly mentions, without elaborating further, a very important factor raised by Warsaw Pact representatives, concerning not only the quantitative but also the qualitative characteristics of displayed armaments. Both sides – the East and the West – were aware of the varying capabilities of particular combat systems on the battlefield. The Soviet side, for example, assessed that the combat potential of the latest American and German tanks, the Abrams and Leopard 2, was two-and-a-half times greater than that of the T-55, the Warsaw Pact’s standard tank. Similarly, the F-4E Phantom multirole aircraft had twice the combat value of, for instance, the MiG-21s, and nearly four times that of the MiG-21PFM. Similarly, focusing solely on the number of tactical units of ground forces deployed in Europe led to the wrong conclusion that the Warsaw Pact countries enjoyed a multiple advantage in this regard. The Warsaw Pact military was aware of this, assessing, for example, that a Polish armoured division was almost two-and-a-half times weaker than its West German counterpart (Puchała 2010, p. 118). On p. 322, Matěj Bílý incorrectly identifies the border of the European area (as defined in

disarmament agreements) as the Ural River (in fact, it is the Ural Mountains), and on p. 315 he assigns the withdrawn Soviet divisions to the Northern Group of Forces (units of the Soviet Army stationed in Poland), rather than to the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany. The reduction of Soviet troops in Central Europe announced in 1988 was to involve 50,000 soldiers and 5,000 tanks, not only in the GDR but also in Czechoslovakia and Hungary (p. 315). Incidentally, this was to be accompanied by a generational renewal of armoured equipment. On pp. 316–318, the author cites data disclosed in January 1989 by the Committee of Defence Ministers of the Warsaw Pact countries regarding the size of the Warsaw Pact and NATO armed forces. Unfortunately, he does not provide a breakdown by the armed forces of individual states, nor does he note that the information referred to the situation as of 1 July 1988, neither does he compare these figures with slightly differing numbers published in a communiqué in the press of socialist countries on 30 January 1989. It would have been interesting, for instance using Poland and Romania as examples, to show the actual methodology for calculating the main types of armament and troop numbers. Similarly, when analysing the execution of army development plans for 1981–1985 using the Czechoslovak People's Army as an example, the author calculates in great detail the surplus with which Czechoslovakia fulfilled those plans, without, however, providing information on the main objectives achieved during this period (p. 198).

Despite certain flaws and shortcomings, including the limited use of literature in less common (Russian) and more “exotic” languages (Romanian, Hungarian, Bulgarian), Bílý's work appears to be the first so extensive and comprehensive account of the history – primarily from the perspective of political activity – of the Warsaw Pact in the last six years of its existence. The author avoids excessively evaluative or stigmatising opinions. He is therefore far from presenting an unjustified – as can be seen from the line of his argumentation and conclusions – one-sided, let alone diabolical, picture of the Pact in its final period. He devotes considerable attention to Gorbachev's attempts to make the Warsaw Pact more closely resemble a NATO-style political and military alliance, with more genuinely partnership-based relations. A detailed analysis and skilful insight into the newspeak that still dominated at meetings of leaders and other bodies of socialist countries allow us to trace the fascinating differences of opinion among individual members of the alliance, which externally appeared monolithic, and their skilful handling of their own affairs and attempts to pursue

national or particular interests. Although access to sources of Soviet origin was limited to individual documents and does not always allow for a full reconstruction of the origins of certain Kremlin initiatives and actions, it is possible to trace their implementation and the reactions of other allies through access to records of meetings of the Pact's institutions and agencies, as well as internal documents of the party authorities and diplomatic records from Czechoslovakia, Germany, and Poland. Matěj Bílý's work should therefore be regarded as a pioneering, original, interesting, and valuable attempt at reconstructing the final fragment of the political and military history of the alliance of "people's democracies," which, at the moment it was transforming into an important forum for exchanging views and establishing a common political line for the Eastern Bloc, disintegrated and collapsed. At the same time, the Warsaw Pact, conceived largely as an instrument for maintaining Soviet influence and domination over its satellite states, upon the initiation of structural reforms, came into open conflict with its previous mission and purpose and moved inexorably towards annihilation, accelerated by the fundamental systemic transformations taking place in the countries of Central and Southern Europe.

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