

Document No. 143: Czechoslovak Description of
“Vltava-89” Exercise, May 23, 1989

The 1989 “Vltava” exercise in Czechoslovakia differed significantly from previous such maneuvers. It showed that the Warsaw Pact had already begun to implement the transformation from an offensive to a defensive strategy introduced by Gorbachev. It exposed a number of practical implications that resulted from this important change. For example, there were difficulties in timing the retaliatory measures that were anticipated in the event of a NATO attack. Exercise directors also found it hard to simulate the release of nuclear weapons because their staffs no longer knew how to do so—one of several signs at the time that the Warsaw Pact’s elaborate planning had been slipping.

In connection with the plan for joint measures to prepare the Unified Armed Forces in the 1988–1989 training year, from May 22–26, 1989, a joint frontal command-staff exercise of the Czechoslovak People’s Army and the Central Group of Forces “Vltava-89” was carried out. Its theme was “The preparation of a defensive operation with the front of the coalition. Driving back aggression by the adversary in the face of incomplete mobilization and deployment of forces. Conduct of combat operations to keep [control of] the tactical defense zone, and execution of a counter-strike by the front.”

The exercise was based on the requirements of the military doctrine of the member-states of the Warsaw Pact as a defensive doctrine, on the decisions of the meeting of the Political Consultative Council and of the sessions of the Committee of Defense Ministers and the Military Council of the Unified Armed Forces. What was new in the exercise was [...] that the Czechoslovak People’s Army and the Central Group of Forces were integrated within a new organizational [...] structure. Austria retained her neutrality.

[...]

At the first stage, the participants noted difficulties in organizing and supplying the counter-engagement operations, especially those by the air forces, and those of the illumination support on the battlefield. The exercise confirmed our lagging behind the NATO armies in terms of air force equipment with means enabling combat operations at night, and also showed that such equipment in other branches of the armed forces required further perfection.

[...]

The experience of “Vltava-89” revealed the difficulties the participants in the exercise had in choosing the time period for carrying out counter-engagements in conformity with the principles of our defensive military doctrine.

[...]

At the second stage, in the course of 2 days and 4 hours (after an operational leap to D-7), the participants practiced the destruction of enemy forces that had penetrated into [our] defenses with the use of nuclear weapons. They made decisions on the restoration of the fighting capabilities of the troops, the development of combat operations, and the elimination of the effects of nuclear strikes by the enemy. Headquarters of the territorial military districts throughout the exercise solved problems connected with the protection and defense of territory, the evacuation of the population, the elimination of the consequences of the destruction of the nuclear power stations, and the formation of reserves and compensation for troop losses of the front.

[...]

The shift to nuclear weapons by both sides at the second stage of the exercise allowed the commanders and staff to resurrect somewhat lost practical skills in solving tasks [related to] directing the delivery of nuclear strikes and restoring the fighting capacity of the troops.

[Source: VS, KaMO, 1989, č.j. 60060/29, VÚA. Translated by Malcolm Byrne for the National Security Archive.]