

March 13, 1968

Informal remarks by Czechoslovak Chief of General Staff, Gen. Otakar Rytír, at a Confidential Meeting of General Staff Officials, Prague

Citation:

"Informal remarks by Czechoslovak Chief of General Staff, Gen. Otakar Rytír, at a Confidential Meeting of General Staff Officials, Prague", March 13, 1968, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Antonín Benčík, Jaromír Navrátil, and Jan Paulík, ed., *Vojenské otázky československé reformy, 1967-1970: Vojenská varianta řešení s. krize (1967-1968)* [Military Problems of the Czechoslovak Reform, 1967-1970: The Military Option in the Solution of the Czechoslovak Crisis], (Brno: Doplněk, 1996), pp. 78-80. Translated for CWIHP by Vojtech Mastny. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117166>

Summary:

General Otakar Rytír examines Czechoslovakia's role within the Warsaw Treaty and discusses how it must be militarily independent, while still remaining loyal to the USSR.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Leon Levy Foundation

Original Language:

Czech

Contents:

Translation - English

. . . Finally, there is our foreign policy. It has been said that while staying loyal to our friendship with the Soviet Union and proletarian internationalism we must show greater independence. This also concerns our armed forces, and quite considerably so. I am going to spend some time on this, because it is at the root of the problem that you, too, have touched upon in your presentations.

What is it about, comrades? The thing is, to tell you the truth, we are in a bind today, we have no room, no material means, no people. We've got into a situation when our task, as it has been set, is beyond the means of our state-both human and economic. What's the reason, comrades? The reason is, I think, at the heart of the Warsaw Treaty. We've been talking for ten years and can't agree about creating an organ, a military organ of the Warsaw Treaty, the staff and the military council that is, which would work out the military concept of the Warsaw Treaty as its top priority.

We can't do without a concept. But the concept must not only come out of the General Staff of the Soviet army. Since it is a coalition concept it must come out of the coalition. This means that the members of the Warsaw Treaty must take part. It's a fundamental question, comrades. I'm sorry I can't talk much about it in any great detail, it would lead me too far; it would get me into the area of strategic operational plans, and this I can't do no matter how much I am trying, and believe me I am sincerely trying, to make the complexity of this problem clearer to you.

This is the thing, comrades. If there were an organ we could agree on this matter. Through that organ, we would be able to make our voice heard, so that we would be listened to. Today our voice comes through as our views or opinions but certainly not as pressure. That's because we have no legal grounds for being effective. And so we are getting the assignment for our army in case of war from the joint command, which does not really exist except as some transmission office. I have no doubt, of course, that, as far as the Soviet army is concerned, this assignment is backed by the economic and human potential of the Soviet Union. But it does not reflect our economic and human possibilities. And this applies not only to us but to our neighbors as well.

This is a situation we can't tolerate any longer; we have to act on it. We have called it to the attention of both our leaders and the Soviet leaders, but so far we've had no solution. Just take the following question, comrades. Look, once there used to be a doctrine-maybe for some of you, comrades, this will sound a bit complicated, but allow me to say it. Under Khrushchev, there used to be a doctrine: if there is a war, seven strikes at Germany, and Germany is liquidated. Eight, not seven, they said; I made a mistake. Count another number of strikes to destroy America. Comrades, it's hard to say it was bad, hard to say. Just look, comrades, maybe I'm wrong, but I would characterize the situation like this: thank God we have nuclear weapons. In my view, thanks to them there has been no World War III. I think-and here, mind you, I am telling you my opinion, and I have told this opinion to our Soviet comrades, too-that this point has also been noticed over there, by our potential enemies. And what have they done? They came up with the theory of limited war.[i] Because for them the threat of a nuclear strike was a real threat. They were really scared. There was panic. Not only among the public. There was panic in the staffs. And they realized what it meant, they took Khrushchev at his word; maybe what Khrushchev was saying was eighty-nine per cent propaganda, but they took him at his word, and said: Well, if you do this to us, we shall go at you another way-with the theory of limited war. The limited war theory allows for the possibility of conducting war without nuclear weapons. And with this theory, it seems to me, they a little bit, to put it plainly, cheated and misled our Soviet comrades, who took the bait-the limited war theory, that is. Maybe the theory suits the Soviet Union from its point of view. But from the point of view of our republic, it doesn't suit us. Why doesn't it suit us, comrades? Because the limited war theory means-what? Orientation toward classical warfare. And classical warfare means-what? It means saturating the troops with high technology and high manpower. In today's situation, in today's economic situation of

the capitalist and the socialist camps, this is something that the capitalist system can afford. Because its economy, like it or not, is superior, has greater possibilities. That's today. Maybe ten years from now it will be different. But today, that's the way it is. This means that we have agreed to-what, comrades? If we have accepted the limited war theory we have agreed to arming our units in competition with the West. Well, comrades, such a competition we can't win. Because their economy is vastly more powerful than ours. Today we say: careful, we must not stay behind. Of course, we can use the slogan: catch up and overtake the West in technology. But if we try to do that, comrades, we would be walking in lapti [Russian peasant footwear], or else barefooted.

Because we are not capable of keeping up in this competition. This, comrades, is the most vital question if you take the position of our republic. And we, the general staff and the ministry of defense, we must defend the interests of our army, even if we acknowledge our duties to international friendship under the Warsaw Treaty. But we must defend our interests.

I don't want to scare you, comrades, but we have made calculations, of course, what would happen in a possible conflict in a normal, classical war. This is not advantageous for us. I myself, comrades, am not for any kind of war, also not for nuclear war-it's clear to me, that would mean destruction of the world, destruction of mankind, even though the threat worked, it really did, under Khrushchev. Now, because of that threat-and this is my opinion but I can prove it-our Soviet comrades are going to push us to speed up the arming and buildup of our units; this was proved last year in the signing of the protocol.[ii] I had sharp clashes with the unified command when they came up with the demand to increase the number of our divisions. It took two days, two days it took, before I managed to convince one army general what is the economic and human potential of our republic. Unfortunately, comrades, I have to say that our political representatives do not pay enough attention to these questions. And yet these are fundamental questions. And this point, that is, more independence in foreign policy, I see, in a way, as being relevant to the Warsaw Treaty politics, not only in relation to the West, to West Germany.

We have to struggle to get a position of equality within the Warsaw Treaty.

[i] In the original, the term "local war" is used.

[ii] Three-year agreement on the development of the Czechoslovak armed forces, signed in 1967.