
Defense Report

AUSA



The Soviet Army — A Tough Nut With Some Very Big Problems

Comparing armies, one against the other, has long been a favorite past-time of people who should know enough to be very cautious in their balancing. Unfortunately, some of those comparisons have turned out to be ill-conceived or without caution. We see this reflected in many attempts to balance the strength and weaknesses of the United States Army with those of the Soviet Army, the most likely adversaries among the world's major ground forces, where, on the primary basis of numbers alone the U.S. Army is almost sure to come out no better than third. There are 2.4 Soviet soldiers to every American, 7.8 Soviet divisions to every U.S. division, four tanks to every U.S. tank — and so forth through almost every category of numbers. Too many pundits forget that our alliances with other nations of the free world make a one-on-one Soviet/U.S. fight very unlikely.

But the "experts" also tend to portray the Soviet soldier in terms of superlatives he does not deserve. One shortcoming of the Soviet Army is the very sharp differences in language and culture between the Russian-speaking majority and the many non-Russian minorities. Only 74 percent of the men conscripted into the Soviet Army in 1974 were Russian-speaking Slavs and the declining birthrate in the Russian USSR is expected to drive that figure down to about 60 percent in 1985. As a matter of course the soldiers from the minority, non-Russian speaking Soviet Republics are relegated to secondary roles, with frequent allusions to their questionable loyalty to "Mother Russia."

Problems with alcoholism in the Soviet forces make the incidence of drug abuse in the U.S. services seem minor. The unquestionably tough peasant in the Red Army is not so readily trainable to perform sophisticated tasks; much of their maintenance beyond the driver/operator level must be done in rear area depots. Conditions in the ranks of the conscripts are so harsh that few soldiers make the transition from conscriptee to career soldier, inducing a heavy turnover every two years. At any given time about 77 percent of the Red Army is composed of conscripts while about 60 percent of the U.S. Army is in the "career" category.

The U.S. Army falls short only in terms of numbers that often don't mean very much.