



**Director of  
Central  
Intelligence**

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# **The Status of Cuban Military Forces in Ethiopia**

**Interagency Intelligence Memorandum**

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## THE STATUS OF CUBAN MILITARY FORCES IN ETHIOPIA

Information available as of 31 August 1981 was  
used in the preparation of this Memorandum.

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## KEY JUDGMENTS

Fidel Castro's decision to intervene militarily in Ethiopia was largely at Moscow's behest and reflected a convergence of Cuban and Soviet interests. Moscow, in particular, prized Ethiopia as the major power in a strategic region.

- Some 11,000 to 13,000 Cuban military personnel now serve in Ethiopia. About 3,000 to 5,000 are advisers, technicians, and support personnel, while some 8,000 are combat troops.
- Cuban combat troops are organized into four brigades. One brigade is stationed on the outskirts of the capital, where its primary mission is probably to protect the pro-Soviet government from possible coup attempts. The remaining three brigades serve mainly as a strategic reserve for the Ogaden.
- Cuban combat units have a marked edge over any conventional opposition in the region such as the Somali Army. But they have conducted no major combat operations since the end of the Ogaden war.
- Most Cuban advisers and troops are rotated after a two-year tour. Most now travel to and from Ethiopia by ship.
- The Soviets supply virtually all the equipment, ammunition, and petroleum used by the Cubans. The Ethiopians, however, retain ownership of major end items.
- From 1976 to 1980, Ethiopia purchased about \$2 billion worth of Soviet arms, mostly under concessionary terms. About one-third of the Ethiopians' major ground weapons are at the disposal of the Cubans.

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Note: This Interagency Intelligence Memorandum was requested by the Department of State's Policy Planning Staff and the Assistant Secretaries for Inter-American and African Affairs. It is limited in scope, and responds to specific questions concerning the status and functions of Cuban military forces in Ethiopia. This Memorandum was prepared under the auspices of the National Intelligence Officer for Africa with contributions from the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Defense Intelligence Agency. It was coordinated with the National Foreign Assessment Center, Central Intelligence Agency; the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State; the Defense Intelligence Agency; the National Security Agency; and the intelligence organizations of the military services.

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- Cuban combat troops in Ethiopia suffer from serious morale problems. Disciplinary problems became so severe last year that the Cubans instituted strong corrective measures, including more frequent use of courts-martial.
- Many Ethiopian officers resent the presence of the Cubans and question the wisdom of retaining them, especially now that they are not involved in combat. The Ethiopians who come in contact with the Cubans prefer them to the cliquish and arrogant Soviets.
- The military need for Cuban combat troops in Ethiopia has steadily diminished since the end of the Ogaden war in March 1978 and the end of large-scale fighting in Eritrea in late 1979. Moscow, however, probably sees the Cuban troops as a means of furthering its aims in Ethiopia.

Finally, we think that Mengistu may request a reduction of the Cuban military presence within the next year or two. He would be unlikely to do so, however, if he came to view the Somali-US connection as a direct threat to his regime's security. Although the Soviets would be unlikely to agree readily to a reduction, they would probably acquiesce if Mengistu insisted.

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## DISCUSSION

## Introduction

1. Fidel Castro's decision to intervene militarily in Ethiopia was largely at Moscow's behest and reflected a convergence of Cuban and Soviet interests. Havana and Moscow viewed Chairman Mengistu Haile-Mariam as a revolutionary trying to transform Ethiopian society. Moscow, in particular, prized Ethiopia as the major power in a strategic region.

2. At one time, the USSR and Cuba had been committed to Somalia. The Soviets and Somalis established a military relationship in 1963, and the Cubans and Somalis did so in 1974. In December 1976, however, the Soviets signed an arms agreement with Ethiopia. Afterward, they tried to play both sides in the Horn.

3. In March 1977, Castro visited Addis Ababa and decided to provide Cuban military advisers to train the Ethiopian militia to combat the country's various insurgencies. Castro may have attempted to get the Ethiopians to concentrate on the Eritrean insurgency rather than the Somali-backed insurgency in the Ogaden, because he was then following the Soviet lead in trying to mediate a political settlement between Ethiopia and Somalia. About 75 Cuban advisers arrived in Ethiopia in April and May 1977, and their numbers increased to about 160 by October.

4. After the Somali regular forces invaded the Ogaden in July 1977, however, the precarious position of the Ethiopian Army there and the consequent threat to Mengistu's rule caused Havana and Moscow to rethink Ethiopia's military needs. As a consequence:

- The Soviets accelerated their military aid to Ethiopia, but slowed their assistance to Somalia to almost nothing.
- The Cubans began to provide combat support to the hard-pressed Ethiopians.

5. The details of the initial Cuban combat intervention may have been worked out in early October 1977, when the Cuban Armed Forces Chief of Staff visited Ethiopia. In late October, Mengistu traveled to Cuba

and the USSR. Shortly afterward, Cuban Armed Forces Minister Raul Castro went to the USSR. He was accompanied by two Cuban generals who were later to have major responsibilities in the Ogaden campaign.

6. On 13 November 1977, Mogadishu broke diplomatic relations with Havana and ousted both Cuban and Soviet advisers. Later that month Soviet General V. I. Petrov visited Ethiopia to plan increased military aid.

7. The Somali invasion of the Ogaden and the subsequent eviction of the Soviets and Cubans from Somalia caused them to opt for Ethiopia. Moscow and Havana:

- Calculated that Cuban military intervention in Ethiopia would be decisive.
- Doubted that the United States would intervene on the Somali side.
- Claimed that they were defending a Third World country's territorial integrity at the request of its government.

8. An airlift from Havana via Moscow began on 28 November. It brought some 1,000 Cuban troops to Ethiopia by mid-December and another 1,000 by early January 1978. In mid-January, a daily airlift from Havana via Angola got under way and continued for 11 weeks. Soviet ships brought additional troops.

9. Four Cuban combat brigades totaling 10,000 to 12,000 men, and a contingent of some 30 Cuban pilots flying Soviet-supplied jet fighters and helicopters, played the decisive role in driving the Somali Army from the Ogaden by 9 March. Logistic and battlefield cooperation between the Soviets and Cubans was much closer during the Ogaden war than during the Angolan conflict.

10. Some 16,000 to 17,000 Cuban military personnel were in Ethiopia by April 1978. Since then the Cuban military presence has gradually decreased to its present level of 11,000 to 13,000 men.

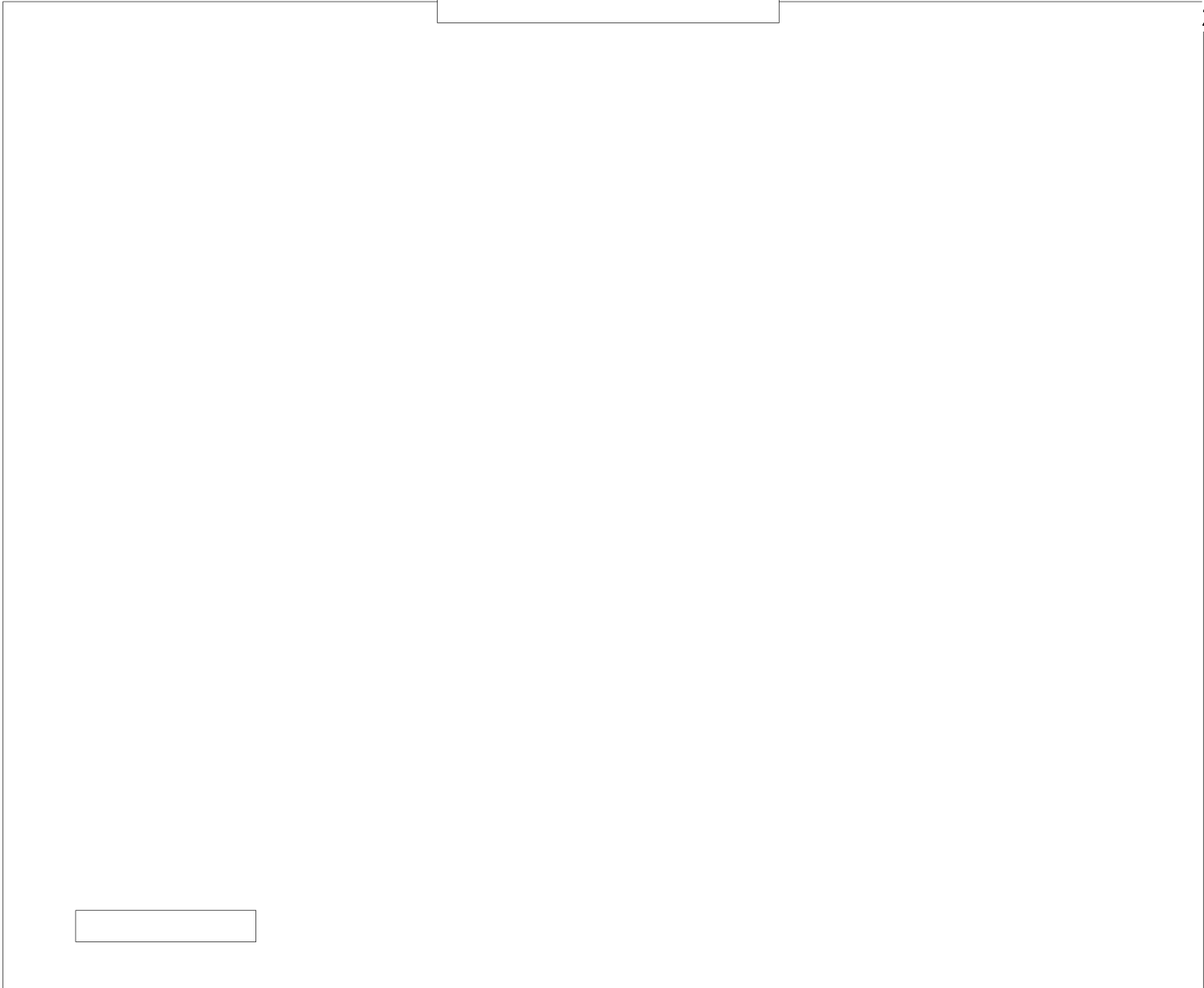
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**Advisers**

11. About 3,000 to 5,000 Cuban military advisers, technicians, and support personnel now serve in Ethiopia, mainly in the central and eastern parts of the country. They work with Ethiopian Air Force, air defense, and Army units, although we do not know precisely how they are distributed among the Ethiopian services. They train Ethiopians and perform maintenance on complex air defense and ground equipment. (About 1,400 Soviet military personnel are also in Ethiopia.)

12. The various Cuban advisory groups report directly to the central Cuban military headquarters in Addis Ababa, which commands all Cuban advisers and

combat forces in Ethiopia. (The Soviet headquarters in Addis Ababa would probably make important combat decisions for the Cubans.)

**Combat Units**

13. About 8,000 Cuban combat troops are in the country, mainly at three locations—Tatek, near Addis Ababa; Dire Dawa, a key transportation hub; and Jijiga, a strategic military town in the northern Oga-den. The Cuban field headquarters is at Arba. (There are no Soviet combat units in Ethiopia.) [Redacted]

14. Cuban combat units in Ethiopia are organized into four brigades: one mechanized infantry brigade, two armored brigades, and one field artillery brigade. [Redacted]

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15. The mechanized infantry brigade is stationed on the outskirts of the capital, where its primary mission is probably to protect the government from possible coup attempts. [redacted] One armored brigade is at Dire Dawa, where it protects the rail line running from Djibouti. The other armored brigade and the field artillery brigade are at Jijiga. The units at Dire Dawa and Jijiga serve as a strategic reserve for Ethiopian forces in the Ogaden and as a deterrent to large-scale Somali attacks.

16. With one exception, the Cuban units have been at the same locations since returning to garrison in September 1978. At that time, the mechanized infantry brigade deployed from the Ogaden to Alemaya between Dire Dawa and Jijiga. It went from Alemaya to Tatek in early 1979.

17. Cuban units in Ethiopia have probably been involved in at least two out-of-country deployments. In June 1978, Soviet aircraft transported about 1,000 Cuban troops from Ethiopia to South Yemen, following a coup there. These troops returned to Ethiopia in October. In March 1979, Soviet aircraft flew about 1,500 Cuban troops to South Yemen during an open conflict between Aden and Sanaa. These troops returned to Ethiopia after less than a month.

**Combat Capability**

18. Cuban combat units in Ethiopia form a well-equipped ground force, designed and trained to fight a conventional war. Their tanks [redacted], armored personnel carriers, and field artillery are 1960-70 vintage Soviet items, which are highly effective in a Third World context. The Cubans have a marked edge in firepower and mobility over any conventional opposition in the region such as the Somali Army.

19. The Cubans have conducted no major combat operations in Ethiopia since the end of the Ogaden war. They do, however, conduct periodic training that involves unit maneuvers and live-fire exercises. The Cubans have also improved their installations in the country. [redacted]



**Rotation of Personnel**

20. Most Cuban advisers and troops are normally rotated after two years in Ethiopia. Some officers and advisers may serve for different lengths of time, but we cannot confirm this.

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21. When Cuban military personnel first started to arrive in large numbers in late 1977 and early 1978, they flew from Cuba to the Soviet Union on Aeroflot planes. In the Soviet Union, the Cubans received training for weapons such as the BMP armored combat vehicle and the D-30 122-mm howitzer, which were not in Cuban units at the time. Some Cubans then flew to Ethiopia on Soviet military transports, while others went by Soviet ships.

22. Since then Cuban military personnel have generally moved by two routes:

- First, Cuban civil aircraft and leased Aeroflot aircraft fly some personnel to Luanda, Angola. Ethiopian civil aircraft then move them to Ethiopia.
- Second, passenger ships transport Cuban military personnel directly from Cuba to Ethiopia via the Suez Canal. Soviet ships have made almost all these trips. [redacted]

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23. During the initial rapid deployment in late 1977 and early 1978, most Cuban personnel went to Ethiopia in planes. Now, however, most move by Soviet passenger ships—whether going or coming.

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**Logistics**

24. The Soviets supply virtually all the equipment, ammunition, and petroleum used by the Cubans. The Ethiopians, however, retain ownership of major end items.

25. The Cubans with Soviet help maintain their own logistic system, in part because they fear theft and mishandling by the Ethiopians. Soviet ships and aircraft transport supplies directly from the USSR to the port at Assab or the airfield at Addis Ababa, where they are picked up by Cuban vehicles and moved to Cuban depots in the Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa, and Jijiga areas.

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26. Since major end items are owned by the Ethiopians, the Cubans would probably leave such equipment behind if they deployed elsewhere in the region, and receive other equipment at their destination. Alternatively, they might serve in a support, security, or light-infantry role not requiring heavy weapons.

[redacted] we estimate that in 1980 the total expense for keeping Cuban military personnel in Ethiopia was \$175 million. This would probably include food, housing, medical expenses, transportation to and from Cuba, and salaries.

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**Costs**

27. From 1976 to 1980, Ethiopia purchased and received nearly \$2 billion worth of Soviet arms, mostly

29. We assume that the Soviets pay most of this cost, at least indirectly. The Ethiopians probably pay only a small portion of the total. We doubt that the Cubans bear any expense for their forces in Ethiopia.

**Morale**

[redacted] A \$1.7-billion military sales agreement was also signed in 1981 under similar terms. About one-third of Ethiopia's heavy ground weapons are now at the disposal of the Cubans, while remaining under Ethiopian ownership.

30. Cuban troops in Ethiopia suffer from serious morale problems because of homesickness, limited pay, and lack of leave. Many are reservists, and most are in their late teens and early twenties. They are bored and prone to misconduct and drunkenness. Some have apparently sold goods on the black market to get money to buy narcotics.

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28. [redacted]

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31. The Cubans have had some problems in getting food to their liking. Occasional failures in getting food to the troops on a timely basis have forced them to steal from the local population.

32. Most Cuban troops are housed in wooden barracks—an improvement over the tents they used when first arriving in Ethiopia. The troops at Tatek are generally forbidden from leaving the base except for official business. Elsewhere, they are freer to go into town.

33. A Cuban soldier's typical day apparently consists of long, highly structured duty hours of equipment maintenance, political indoctrination, and military training. Nevertheless, there is also some time for recreational activities, including baseball and movies on base.

34. Combat units suffer from a high rate of absenteeism and some desertions. Disciplinary problems

became so severe last year that the headquarters in Addis Ababa instituted strong corrective measures, including more frequent use of courts-martial.

#### **Ethiopian Reactions**

35. The Ethiopian military welcomed Cuban combat help in turning back the Somali invaders during the Ogaden war. But the initial enthusiasm has eroded over the past three years.

36. Many Ethiopian officers question the wisdom of maintaining and equipping the Cuban forces, especially now that they are not involved in combat. The Ethiopians believe the equipment provided the Cubans—much of it is kept in storage and used only during exercises—could be better employed. These problems are aggravated by traditional Ethiopian xenophobia, and by resentment in the officer corps that the Ethiopian military is seen as needing foreign troops for support.

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37. Mengistu is aware of this dissatisfaction. He may also resent the failure of the Cubans to undertake major combat operations since the end of the Ogaden war. We know, for example, that Cuba's refusal to get involved in the fighting in Eritrea has caused strains between Addis Ababa and Havana.

38. The Ethiopians who come in contact with the Cubans seem to prefer them to the cliquish and arrogant Soviets. The Cubans are more inclined than the Soviets to generate good will by learning the local language and customs. The most serious problems between Ethiopian civilians and the Cubans—incidents often involving women and drinking—occur around major military garrisons such as Dire Dawa.

#### Prospects

39. The military need for Cuban combat troops in Ethiopia has steadily diminished since the end of the

Ogaden war in March 1978 and the end of large-scale fighting in Eritrea in late 1979. Over the past two and a half years, the three Cuban brigades in the Dire Dawa and Jijiga areas have augmented the growing Ethiopian military superiority over Somalia, but have not been critical to Ethiopia's defense, especially since the withdrawal of major Somali regular forces from the Ogaden in late 1980.

40. Addis Ababa almost certainly could with its own forces repel a renewed Somali attack into Ethiopia. In addition, Cuban forces are unlikely to participate in renewed fighting in Eritrea or in minor Ethiopian incursions into Somali territory. As a consequence, Addis Ababa probably views the Cuban forces as assets of declining military importance.

41. Given the resentment of Ethiopian officers over the Cuban troops, Mengistu may request a reduction of the Cuban military presence within the next year or

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two. We believe such a request would be unlikely, however, if he came to view the Somali-US connection as a direct threat to his regime's security. In any event, Mengistu may wish to retain the Cuban brigade near Addis Ababa, since it apparently helps protect his regime against domestic enemies.

42. Castro asserted [redacted] 1981 that he would like to withdraw his troops from Ethiopia, but cautioned that he would be unable to do so without Soviet approval. Nevertheless, he probably agrees with Moscow that the Cuban troops:

- Support pro-Soviet regimes in Ethiopia and South Yemen.
- Counter US influence in the region, particularly in Somalia.

— Provide a base for the potential deployment of Cuban forces to other areas in the region.

43. Furthermore, the USSR does not appear to have any pressing financial or military reasons to favor the reduction of the Cuban forces. Moscow would like to acquire formal base rights on the Red Sea and to encourage the development of a solid Marxist-Leninist party structure that would put its relationship with Ethiopia on a more permanent basis.

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44. Moscow may see the Cuban troops as a means of furthering its aims in Ethiopia and exerting psychological leverage on the Mengistu regime. Moscow would, therefore, attempt to dissuade Mengistu from requesting a reduction of their presence. But the Soviets would probably acquiesce if Mengistu insisted.





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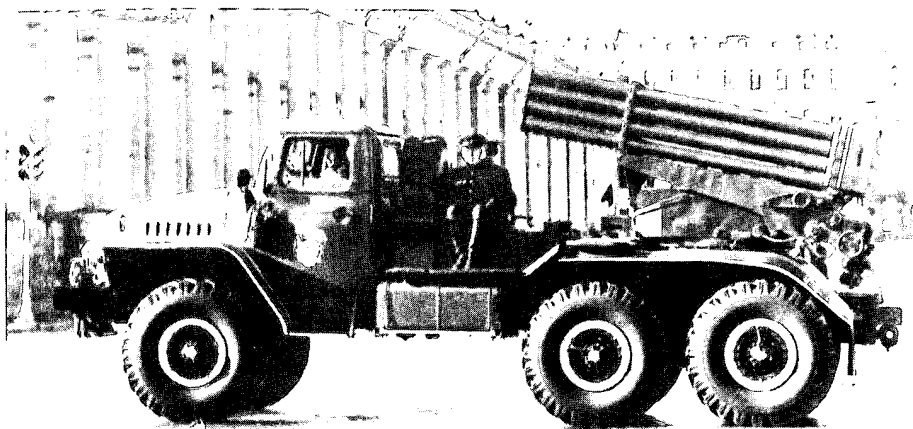
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BMP Infantry  
Fighting Vehicle



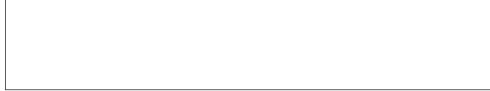
A-2  
BM-21 Multiple  
Rocket Launcher



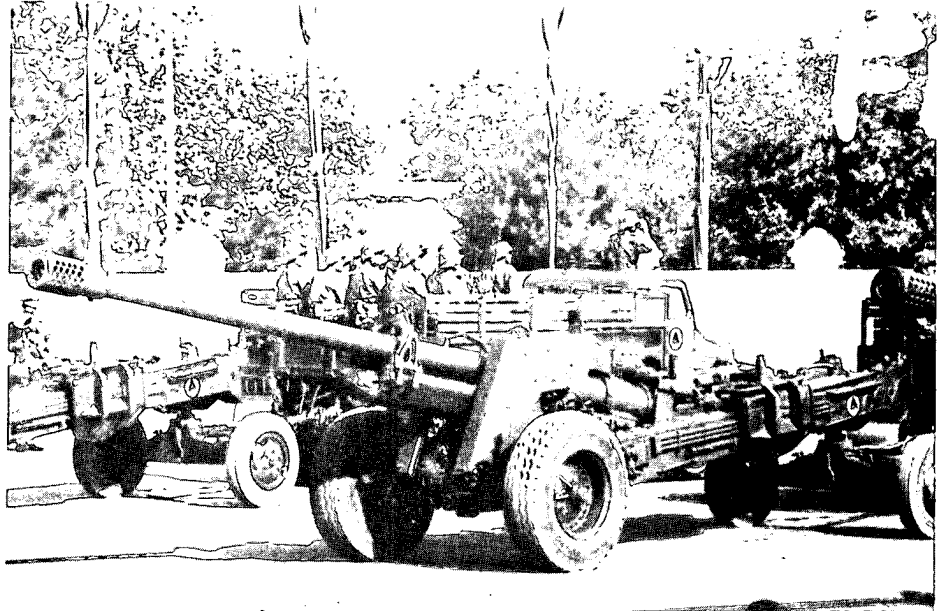
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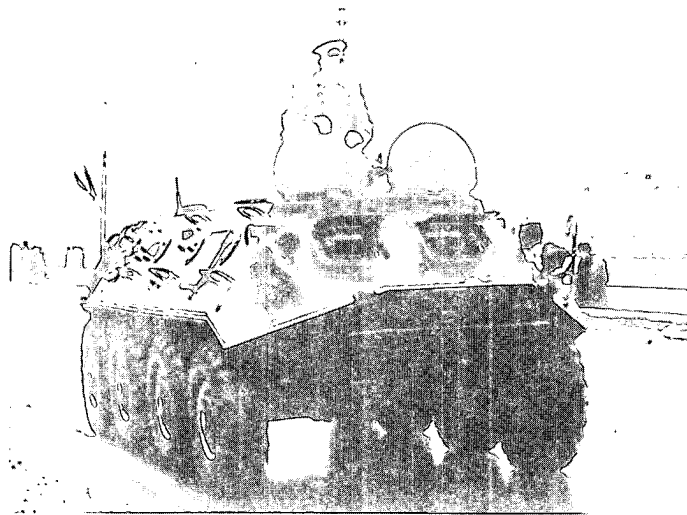
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A-3  
130-mm Field  
Gun M-46



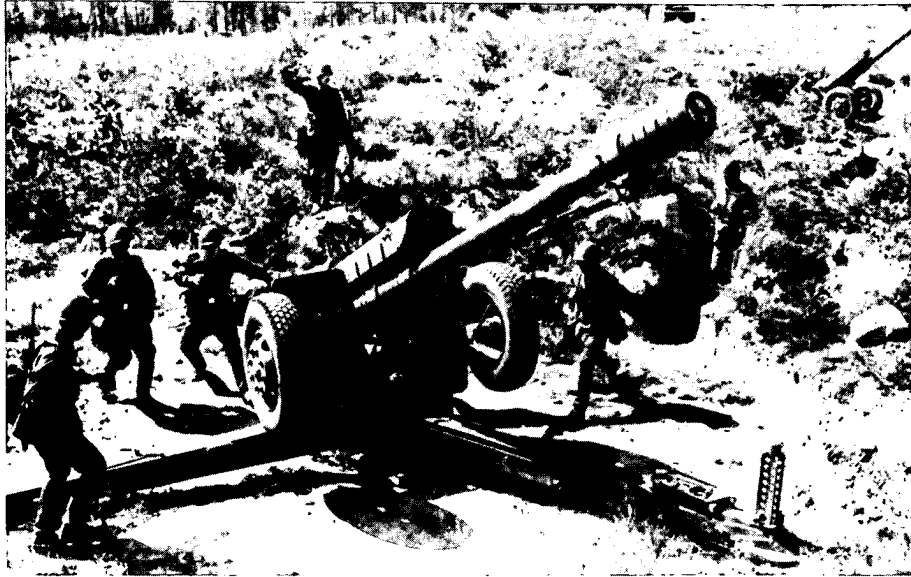
A-4  
BTR-60PB Armored  
Personnel Carrier



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A-5  
122-mm Howitzer D-30



A-6  
T-55 Medium Tank



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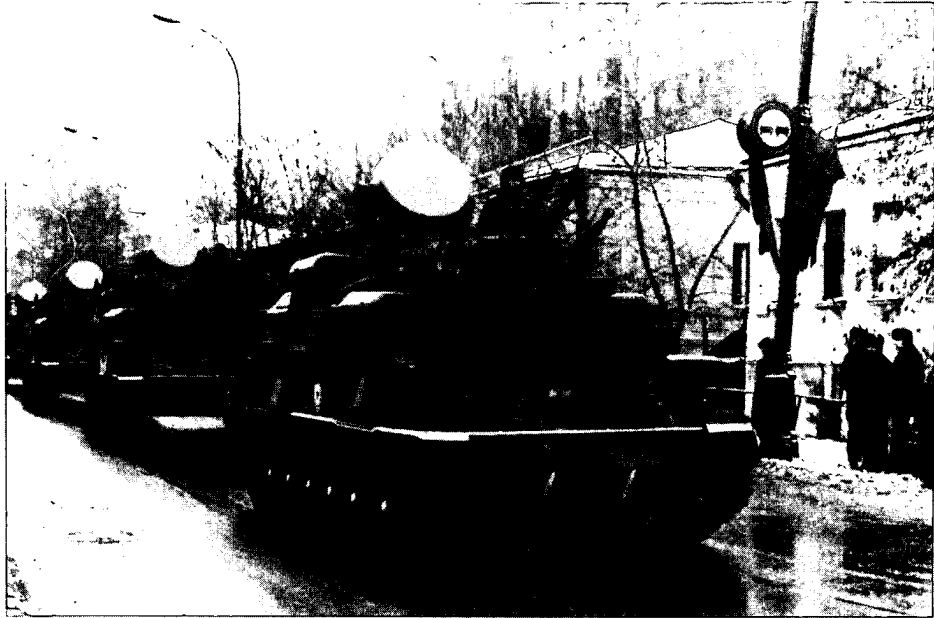
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A-7

ZSU-23/4 Self-Propelled  
Antiaircraft Gun



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