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Staging Post for Bosnia Fortifies U.S.-Hungarian Alliance

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TASZAR, Hungary -- When the first American troops arrived here 14 months ago to set up a forward staging post for NATO peacekeeping operations in Bosnia, the 2,500 residents of this tiny village in southwestern Hungary prepared for the worst.

The last of 65,000 Soviet troops "temporarily stationed" on their territory for more than four decades had departed in 1991. Then, barely four years later, the world's only remaining superpower -- demonized as the enemy during the Cold War -- was dispatching thousands of its forces to take control of the sprawling local air base and its 12,000-foot runway.

Having been bullied by the Russians and abandoned by the West during the 1956 uprising, the sense of trepidation that many Hungarians felt in leasing the base to the Americans was understandable.

"All we knew about you guys came from 'Rambo' and those other violent action movies," said Lt. Col Imre Mesztergnyi, a Hungarian officer and liaison with the Americans. Indeed, even the old Warsaw Pact gunnery targets here depict U.S. soldiers as ominous silhouettes 10 feet tall.

But to expressions of delight and surprise on both sides, relations between the Americans and their Hungarian hosts have blossomed into a friendly partnership that may foreshadow the new era anticipated by NATO as it looks east for new members.

Even as the United States and its allies strive to reassure Moscow that NATO expansion poses no threat to its interests, they are pressing ahead with an expanding web of military relationships to the east. Through bilateral contacts and NATO's Partnership for Peace program, Western countries are seeking not just to prepare former communist states for eventual alliance membership, but to calm fears about a security vacuum developing in parts of the continent that have long been prone to instability.

For Mayor Jozsef Kovacs, the arrival of the Americans has meant economic salvation in the form of 1,500 new jobs and an infusion of millions of dollars in construction projects. And with U.S. troops largely confined to the base, the local nightmare of carousing soldiers spreading AIDS and crime through their community has not materialized.

For the Americans and NATO allies, the Hungarian staging post near the border with Croatia has proved indispensable to the success of their peacekeeping mission. Nearly all soldiers and equipment destined for Bosnia pass through Taszar, where four railheads and two major highways provide an ideal platform for launching allied military power into the volatile Balkan region.

But most of all, the Taszar experience may clinch early NATO membership for the government of Prime Minister Gyula Horn. At a summit meeting in Madrid in July, NATO heads of government will announce the first round of candidates to join the alliance from the former communist countries of Eastern Europe.

Following his election in 1994, Horn made meeting key criteria to join the Western military alliance a top priority: consolidation of a democratic government, establishment of a free-market economy, and civilian control of the military. In addition, he has taken a politically courageous step to fulfill a NATO requirement for "good neighborliness" by resolving a long-standing border dispute with Romania.

Despite cries of outrage from opposition parties, Horn's government agreed to affirm the 1920 border and drop autonomy demands for ethnic Hungarians in Romania in return for protection of minority rights. Hungarians living in bordering states are the second-largest minority community in Europe, and previous governments insisted as a matter of honor on their allegiance. But Horn realized that unless Hungary abandoned those claims, it would never be embraced as a full member of Western institutions such as NATO and the European Union.

Hungary's last hurdle to NATO membership remains a formidable one: the transformation of its military into a modern, Western-oriented force that is compatible with NATO's operations and command structure. In that sense, the new partnership built with the Americans -- and epitomized by the 1,200 Hungarians working closely with the 3,200 U.S. troops stationed at Taszar -- has provided a valuable learning opportunity.

The United States leased the Taszar base, on terms that have not been made public, just two weeks before the first American troops were dispatched to Bosnia on the NATO-led peacekeeping mission in December, 1995. The deal was overwhelmingly endorsed by Hungary's parliament. The United States has spent more than \$100 million, much of it to upgrade local military infrastructure, and the U.S. Army now conducts 60 programs to improve the quality of Hungary's troops.

For Mesztecnyei, exposure to the Americans has been a transforming experience as he struggles to cope with American slang, NATO acronyms and mess hall grub that he readily agrees far surpasses the daily rations of bread and soup in the communist days.

"There are so many differences with the old Soviet system, I don't know where to start explaining," he said. "We realize we must reorganize our whole army to make it work with the Americans and NATO. And we must do so as we cut our draftees back from two years [of service] to nine months. But we must do it, no matter how difficult, because our future lies with the West."

In the eyes of the Americans, too, what began as a matter of geographic convenience has evolved into an important exercise in training former enemy soldiers from the communist camp for a future as military friends and allies.

"Taszar has clearly helped Hungary's national security interests by securing peace and stopping the fighting on its southern border," says Col. Jon L. Martinson, senior defense attache at the U.S. Embassy in Budapest. "But it has also given their soldiers an enormous boost in their reeducation process so they can think and act NATO."

The number of Hungarian officers who now speak English has more than

doubled, up from just 500 a year ago. Many officers in the senior staff have received refresher courses at American or British military schools. Hungary's chief of the armed forces, Lt. Gen. Ferenc Vegh, a 1993 graduate of the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle Barracks, Pa., says his goal is to make all of his officers "NATO-oriented" in their strategic and tactical approach to military operations by the end of the year.

Vegh is supervising a dramatic restructuring of Hungary's military, paring it down to 60,000 troops from the 150,000 at the end of the Cold War era seven years ago. The top-heavy general staff has been trimmed from 2,000 to just 600. Hungary is switching to an American-style command structure and hopes to create an all-volunteer army that is fully compatible with NATO doctrine and training within five years.

But shedding the old Soviet-made arsenal in favor of modern American fighting equipment poses a serious financial burden that Hungary is not prepared to take on. Plans to buy big-ticket items such as Hawk surface-to-air missiles and F-16 fighter planes have been put on hold. Hungary's most advanced fighters are the 28 MiG-29 all-weather interceptors it received from Russia in 1993 as part of a trade to pay off \$1.7 billion in old debts run up by the former Soviet army.

Instead, Hungary's defense chiefs have decided to focus precious resources on simpler equipment, such as communications gear, so that their troops can become "inter-operable" with NATO forces.

"They have made a conscious decision to go small," Martinson said. "They are making the shifts in the right area. Nobody wants them to pay huge sums on arms purchases that would hurt their economy. It's not a matter of buying your way into NATO."

Col. John Drinkwater, chief of international operations at the U.S. Army's European headquarters in Heidelberg, Germany, now supervises American military liaison teams with 16 former communist countries. He believes the mental hurdle remains the most difficult one to overcome for soldiers who were trained and indoctrinated under the Warsaw Pact.

"The biggest adaptation difficulties lie with their noncommissioned officer corps," Drinkwater said in an interview. "Getting their sergeants to do things that are second nature for American sergeants is more difficult than you can imagine. They were never trained to take the initiative. Every kind of decision was pushed up to a higher level."

At the Taszar base, American troops say their dealings with the Hungarian soldiers working with them on security details or air traffic control have provided a source of amusement as well as a way to bridge the cultural divide.

"The first thing they want to know, after our name, age and rank, is how much money we make," says Sgt. 1st Class David Soltysik. "I never thought I would end up on this side of the Iron Curtain working with soldiers from the other side. But it turns out they are interested in the same material matters as we are."

Other U.S. soldiers say the tour of duty at the first American base inside a Warsaw Pact country has helped debunk the stereotypes that prevailed on both sides. The Hungarians, in particular, have discovered that the Americans are completely unlike the Russians who came before them.

"They like to tease us by explaining why the Russians must have the fastest army in the world and the Americans must have the slowest," said Maj. Bob

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Guyon. "They say the Russians got here even before they were invited. And the Americans arrived 40 years too late."

GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH NATO

When NATO decides in July which East European countries will join the alliance first -- most likely Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic -- Hungary will already have had plenty of contact with U.S. troops, having been the host for NATO's first base behind the former Iron Curtain, the staging base at Taszar for NATO's Bosnia operation.

HUNGARY

Total armed forces: 66,000 active

173,000 reserve

Main battle tanks: 835

Armored fighting vehicles: 1,540

Total artillery: 840

Combat aircraft: 144

Attack helicopters: 59

POLAND

Total armed forces: 233,800 active,

466,000 reserve

Main battle tanks: 1,721

Armored fighting vehicles: 1,455

Total artillery: 1,581

Combat aircraft: 400

Attack helicopters: 92

CZECH REPUBLIC

Total armed forces: 62,800 active

Main battle tanks: 957

Armored fighting vehicles: 1,363

Total artillery: 767

Combat aircraft: 187

Attack helicopters: 36

NOTE: Personnel and equipment based on data declared Jan.1, 1996.

SOURCE: International Institute for Strategic Studies/Military Balance.