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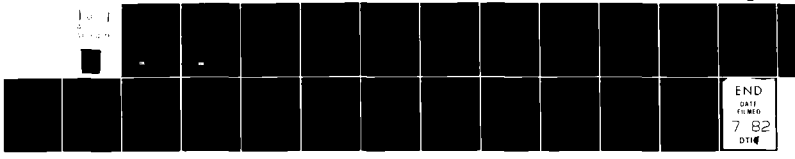

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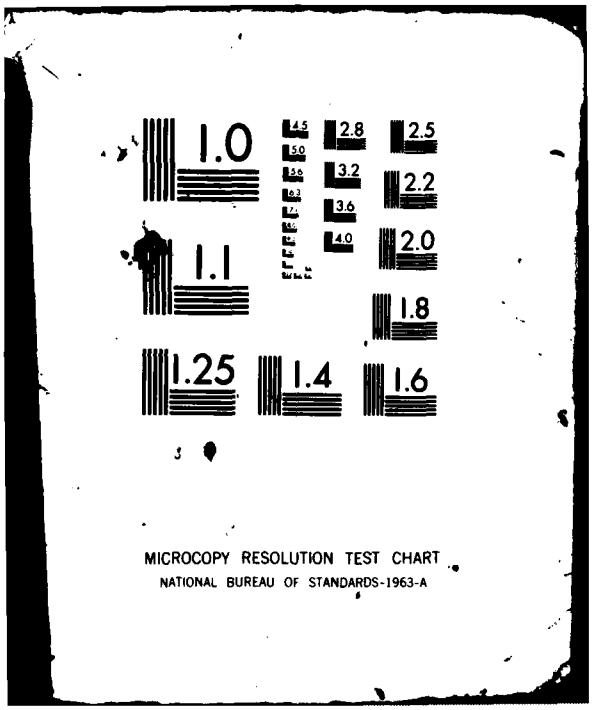
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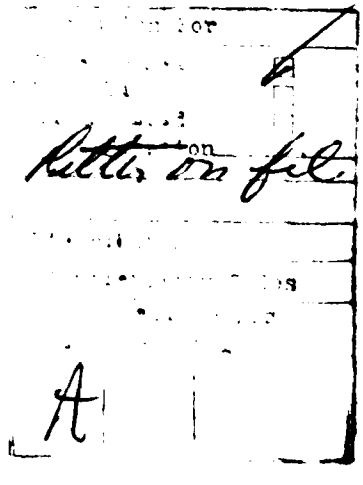

THE TURKISH STRAITS AND THE SOVIET NAVY IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

The Turkish Straits and the Montreux Convention, which once served primarily to protect the Soviet Union from superior hostile fleets, now also limit what would otherwise be a major Soviet advantage: proximity of a large fleet and its bases to a major theater of crisis and potential war. In this respect the Montreux Convention has been a problem for the Soviets since 1964, when they began maintaining a permanent naval presence in the Mediterranean. The objective of this article is to examine how the Soviets have designed their patterns of operations in the Mediterranean in order to overcome the barriers of the treaty and the Turkish and Balkan land masses, and to what extent limitations remain on the flexibility of Soviet naval forces in the Mediterranean that can still be exploited by the West.

One of the main features of the Mediterranean as a theater for naval operations is that access to it from the outside is limited. Ships must enter through one of three narrow straits, which can be blocked by political agreement or military action. In addition, with the exception of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet, the major fleets that might want to operate there are separated from it by substantial distances. This is true to some extent for the Royal Navy, and is much more of a problem for the main external protagonists today: the U.S. Navy and the Soviet Northern and Baltic Fleets. Into the 1960s, this situation gave the U.S. Navy a substantial advantage. NATO controlled the two

principal straits, Gibraltar and the Turkish Straits. In addition, the largest naval and air forces within the Mediterranean were aligned with NATO, creating a friendly environment for U.S. naval forces. Finally, the U.S. Navy, with the help of its allies, had developed the operating procedures and support facilities needed to operate a major fleet far from its home bases while the Soviet Navy had not.

A change in the Mediterranean naval balance began to be seen in 1964 with the establishment of a permanent Soviet naval presence in the Mediterranean. This change became significant in the June 1967 Arab-Israeli War when the Soviet Mediterranean Squadron participated in its first major crisis-management effort. During the period from 1964 to 1970, the Soviets appear to have developed their own answers to the three main problems facing non-riparian navies in the Mediterranean: how to maintain a permanent naval presence in the Mediterranean, how to use naval forces there to respond to crises, and how to fight a war there.

The Soviet response to all three was affected by the specific nature of the constraints on their freedom of action. There are three primary constraints. First, geography imposes long transit times on ships coming to the Mediterranean from the Northern or Baltic Fleets (the latter must also pass the choke point of the Danish Straits). In this respect, these fleets are not much better off than U.S. Navy ships coming from the U.S. East Coast. Second, the Turkish and Balkan land

masses effectively prevent operations over the Mediterranean by aircraft based in the Soviet Union. Finally, the Montreux Convention limits in very specific ways the number and types of warships that can transit the Turkish Straits.

The Montreux Convention contains many detailed provisions, of which the following are the most important in this context. It allows "light surface vessels" (ships smaller than 10,000 tons and with guns not exceeding 203 mm), minor war vessels, and naval auxiliaries, to pass through the Straits with only a few restrictions. The maximum tonnage of foreign warships in transit at any one time may not exceed 15,000 tons, and all warship transits must be declared to Turkish authorities at least eight days before they occur. Black Sea powers have two privileges not allowed to non-Black Sea powers: they can send singly through the Straits capital ships (defined in the annex to the treaty as surface vessels of war, other than aircraft carriers, exceeding the limits of light surface vessels) and they can send singly through the Straits submarines, provided they are coming from or going to a shipyard for repairs. The clause making submarine transits contingent on repairs has effectively prohibited the use of the Straits by the Soviets to maintain their submarine force in the Mediterranean. On the other hand, a special exemption originally included in the treaty to benefit the French permits the Soviets to send single tankers through the Straits without advance declaration and without reference to the 15,000-ton limit. The treaty provides for free transit of the Straits by civil

aircraft but not by military aircraft, which are governed exclusively by Turkish law. The entire treaty, as it applies to warships, may be suspended if Turkey is at war or if she considers herself "to be threatened with imminent danger of war." In these cases the passage of warships is left entirely to the discretion of the Turkish Government.

Perhaps the most basic problem that the Soviets had to resolve was how to fight a naval war in the Mediterranean despite the constraints on their operations there, for their crisis and routine peacetime behavior clearly are based upon their plans for war. Although we have not seen the Soviet Mediterranean Squadron go to war, Soviet behavior in peacetime exercises and in crises has given us a good idea as to what they would do if they did go to war. The Soviets clearly want us to have this understanding, for it gives added impact to their crisis and peacetime operations. The standard Soviet scenario for a naval conflict in the Mediterranean appears to be the "D-Day shootout": Soviet surface ships and submarines, prepositioned within weapons range of opposing naval forces (normally U.S. carrier battle groups), launch their weapons simultaneously before or at the very moment that hostilities break out elsewhere.

It seems unlikely that the Soviets would expect many of their surface ships to survive such engagements, but, even so, a strike that disabled U.S. carriers in the Mediterranean would accomplish two things--it would prevent NATO from supporting a Southern Flank campaign

with sea-based aircraft and troops, and it would make it more difficult for NATO to protect its Mediterranean sea lanes from the portion of the Soviet Mediterranean Squadron that could be expected to survive an initial shootout in a strength--its nuclear and diesel submarines.

The main constraint of Mediterranean geography on this scenario is that it does not appear to allow for use of aircraft in the initial strike--large grous of armed aircraft taking off from Black Sea bases would provide advance warning of the strike and might not get through NATO air defenses in Turkey and Greece. The Soviets must therefore rely on ships in the initial phases of a war to a greater extent in the Mediterranean than in other theaters, where aircraft have unimpeded access to their targets. This need to rely on ships also compels the Soviets to preposition their attack forces before hostilities start and use a surprise preemptive strike, since under any other conditions Soviet naval forces deployed in the Mediterranean, even if heavily reinforced, would be inferior in strike capability to two or three U.S. carrier battle groups. This situation would, of course, be profoundly altered to NATO's disadvantage if the Soviets obtained air bases in a Mediterranean country that they could reliably count on using in wartime.

The Mediterranean is also important as a region of international crises. While most attention these days is focused on a possibility of a cutoff of oil supplies in the Persian Gulf, the political events that

could trigger such a cutoff might well originate in the Mediterranean area, notably in the Arab-Israeli conflict or in Lebanon. There are also a number of potential trouble spots along the North African coast. The Soviets can be expected to try to exploit Mediterranean crises, both to cause problems for the West and to increase their own influence in and access to the region. Since 1967, they have actively used their navy in such efforts.

Soviet naval crisis-management behavior in the Mediterranean has reflected their warfighting scenario.* It appears that the principal (though not the only) objective of Soviet naval activity in the Mediterranean crises has been to "neutralize" the Sixth Fleet: to make it manifestly risky for the U.S. to use the fleet in an effort to affect events ashore. In severe crises, the Soviets have augmented their deployed forces until they are able to threaten each Western carrier with a preemptive strike, and have moved their forces into positions from which such a strike could be launched. Once this is accomplished, the Soviets have on occasion used other forces to carry out other crisis missions.

This type of activity was first seen in the June 1967 war, although in an incomplete form. At the beginning of the crisis in May,

* For more details on Soviet crisis and peacetime operations in the Mediterranean and on their access to shore facilities there, see Bradford Dismukes and James McConnell, Soviet Naval Diplomacy (New York and Oxford, Pergamon, 1979).

the Soviet force in the Mediterranean included only two large combatants, the old cruiser Slava and a destroyer. The Soviets' first crisis move was to augment this force. On or before 22 May, they issued declarations for transits of the Turkish Straits by ten warships which, according to the terms of the Montreux Convention, would begin eight days later. Five destroyers transited under these declarations, one on 31 May, three on 3 June and one on 4 June. Meanwhile, Soviet combatants in the Mediterranean adopted what was then a new tactic: single destroyers or frigates began trailing Western carriers in the central and eastern Mediterranean, presumably reporting their positions and activities.

The next major Soviet crisis response in the Mediterranean benefited from the lessons of 1967. First, their force in the Mediterranean at the outbreak of the crisis was much larger, reflecting a substantial increase in routine Soviet naval presence in the Mediterranean since 1967. This time, its large surface combatants were two cruisers and six destroyers. Second, the Soviets used this force, not just to trail U.S. carriers in the eastern Mediterranean, but to surround them with task groups capable of launching a preemptive strike against them. These groups were easily recognized: typically their surface component consisted of a cruiser equipped with anti-ship missiles or large guns and one or two destroyers. (Submarines were probably also associated with these groups: perhaps in an effort to

stress this point, a Juliett-class cruise-missile submarine operated on the surface for part of the Jordan crisis.)

By 1970 the Soviets had also paved the way for a more rapid augmentation of their forces by getting around one of the provisions of the Montreux Convention: the requirement to wait eight days between the declaration and the execution of a transit of the Turkish Straits. Soon after the June War, the Soviets began declaring transits that they had no intention of making, and by keeping one or more such "contingency declarations" continuously on file they ensured that reinforcing task groups could be dispatched as soon as needed. This capability was put to effective use in the Jordan crisis: on 20 September a ready-made anti-carrier group (a cruiser and two destroyers) entered the Mediterranean, possibly in response to the eastward movement of a U.S. carrier, and on 10 October another cruiser and a destroyer entered the Mediterranean to offset a third U.S. carrier that had arrived from the U.S. East Coast. Including the ships already in the Mediterranean, the Soviets thus provided themselves with the forces necessary to form anti-carrier groups against each of the three U.S. carriers.

The same pattern of behavior was followed by the Soviets in the October 1973 war. Again the Soviet Union had substantial naval forces in place at the outbreak of the crisis: its large surface combatants included two cruisers and seven destroyers, to which it soon added another cruiser and two more destroyers which transited the Turkish

Straits on 10 October in order to make a previously-arranged port visit in Italy. Within a couple of days of the outbreak of the war, the single U.S. carrier in the Eastern Mediterranean was covered by an anti-carrier group, led by a Kynda-class cruiser. When the second U.S. carrier moved from the western to the central Mediterranean on 16 October, she acquired a single Soviet combatant as a "tattletale," and when she moved to the eastern Mediterranean after the U.S. alert of 25 October, she was covered by another full anti-carrier group. On 29 October a third anti-carrier group, including another Kynda-class cruiser, transited the Turkish Straits to cover a third U.S. carrier which had arrived from the U.S. East Coast. Soviet coverage of U.S. forces in the October War also contained two additional features. At the peak of the crisis, a Soviet anti-carrier group began conducting anti-carrier warfare exercises against a U.S. carrier--a very intense diplomatic signal equivalent to cocking a loaded pistol. In addition, a fourth anti-carrier group was formed around the U.S. amphibious force, the first time amphibious ships as well as carriers had been so targeted. By 31 October, all major U.S. forces (the three carriers and the amphibious group) were covered by Soviet task groups.

During the October War, the Soviet Navy also supported at least two additional objectives that had nothing to do with the U.S. Navy. Some ships evacuated Soviet nationals from Egypt and Syria at the outbreak of the war, and later in the war others stood by, first off Syria and then off Egypt, in apparent readiness to evacuate additional

personnel and perhaps sensitive equipment. Perhaps more significant as an indicator as to what the Soviet Mediterranean Squadron might do in wartime was the support that it gave to the airlift and sealift that resupplied Egypt and Syria during the war. Missile-armed combatants escorted merchantmen off Syria in an area also transited by Soviet aircraft, and Soviet amphibious ships also appear to have carried cargo to Syria. This type of activity could also have supported a Soviet airborne intervention, which, in the absence of strong amphibious forces and sea-based tactical air, is the primary Soviet means for projecting power overseas.

Since 1973, there has not been a crisis in the Mediterranean area approaching the October War in intensity. However, several smaller crises suggest that the crisis missions of the Soviet Mediterranean Squadron continue to include both countering U.S. and NATO naval forces and supporting Soviet objectives. In the 1974 Cyprus crisis the Soviets showed some interest in the movements of U.S. and British forces, although most of their naval activity appears to have been motivated by concern over the safety of Soviet nationals in Cyprus. In the 1976 Lebanon crisis, the first U.S. Navy evacuation of Beirut, which occurred in June, was covered by several Soviet naval units including a cruiser. (The second evacuation, in July, was covered by much smaller forces.) Finally, during the 1981 dispute over Syrian missiles in Lebanon, U.S. forces in the eastern Mediterranean were joined by

significant Soviet forces. None of these crises required augmentation of regularly-deployed Soviet forces.

The starting point for these crisis operations has been the forces that the Soviets maintain on a routine basis in the Mediterranean. Soviet policy concerning routine naval presence in the Mediterranean has differed substantially from that of the U.S., particularly during the first decade or so of the Soviet presence. U.S. policy calls for maintenance in the Mediterranean of a fixed number of ships: two carriers, their escorts and support ships. The Soviet presence has been much more variable: figure 1 shows the variations from month to month in the number of major surface combatants (Petya/Mirka and larger). The Soviets tend to maintain a relatively low level of forces continuously deployed and rely on augmentations, not just for crises but also for exercises and other routine requirements such as ceremonial port calls. The proximity of Black Sea bases clearly plays a major role in this policy--it is worth noting that submarine force levels (which have to be supported from the distant Northern and Baltic Fleets due to the Montreux Convention) are less variable than surface-ship force levels.

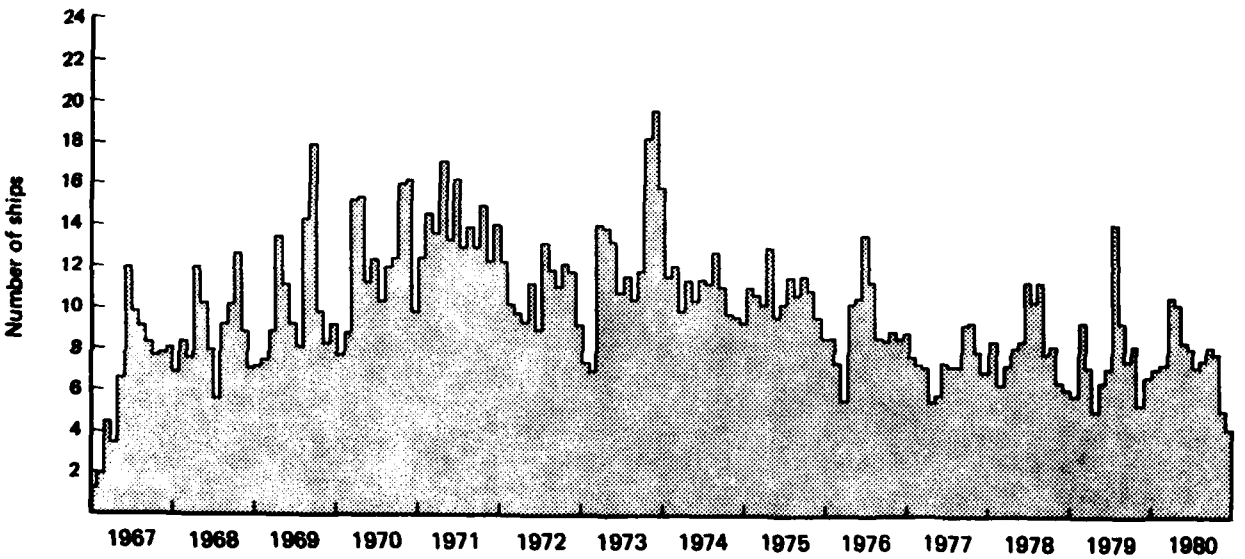

Figure 1. Average number of Soviet major surface combatants in the Mediterranean (by month), 1967-1980.

The Turkish Straits thus support the routine Soviet naval presence in the Mediterranean by permitting a relatively frequent turnover of surface combatants. They are also the main route by which the Soviet Mediterranean Squadron receives logistic support. Deployed combatants (including submarines) receive fuel, supplies and munitions from a large number of auxiliaries that incessantly shuttle between the fleet and Soviet Black Sea bases. The Soviets appear to be concerned over the difficulty and vulnerability of this supply line, for they consume these resources slowly: their ships spend a substantial part of their deployments moored at anchorages. Since the loss of their shore facilities in Alexandria in 1976, the Soviets must also rely on Black Sea bases for most repairs that cannot be accomplished by repair ships at anchorages, although some regular overhauls are now being performed in shipyards in Yugoslavia and, to a lesser extent, in Tunisia and Greece. No logistic support of any importance comes from the Northern or Baltic Fleet, even for the submarines, and maintenance of logistic communications with the Black Sea is clearly essential to maintenance of the Soviet naval presence in the Mediterranean at its current level, as well as supporting any prolonged crisis response.

We can thus see that the Soviets have overcome some of the constraints on their Mediterranean naval operations imposed by geography and the Montreux Convention. They have circumvented the eight-day waiting period on warship transits through the use of contingency declarations, enabling them not only to use Black Sea Fleet ships to

maintain a permanent force of surface ships in the Mediterranean but also to augment that force quickly enough to meet most, if not all, crisis situations. They have also circumvented an implied ban in the Montreux Convention on transits of the Straits by aircraft carriers by classifying as ASW cruisers (capital ships under the Convention) the Kiev-class ships, which everyone else (including, on occasions, Turkey) calls aircraft carriers. Finally, they have made effective use of the provision that allows naval tankers to transit the Straits essentially without restriction. These actions, combined with observance of the other terms of the Montreux Convention, have become essential elements in the maintenance of Soviet surface naval forces in the Mediterranean in peacetime and in crises, and there appears to be no way short of force to modify this behavior.

There are still important limitations on the flexibility of the Soviet naval presence in the Mediterranean. Two of these would be of the utmost importance in a major crisis or war. First, the Soviets have not yet found a way around the restrictions of the Montreux Convention on transits of the Turkish Straits by submarines, and all their submarines in the Mediterranean must therefore come from the Northern and Baltic Fleets. This limits the number of submarines they can maintain in the Mediterranean on a routine basis, and also limits the speed with which they can augment the Mediterranean submarine force in a crisis. Second, they have not been able to fly aircraft from Black Sea bases over the Mediterranean either in peacetime or in crises, and

cannot count on being able to do so in a preemptive strike at the outbreak of a war. This feature, perhaps more than any other, has shaped the way the Soviets use their naval forces in the Mediterranean to respond to crises. One other limitation is worth noting: the Soviets may have been able to pass off the Kiev-class ships as cruisers due to their cruiser-type bows, but, if, as seems likely,* they are going to build in a Black Sea shipyard a ship that is unambiguously an aircraft carrier, they will have a much harder time justifying its transit of the Straits.

What can NATO do to exploit these limitations? In a NATO-Warsaw Pact war the question would be simply to find the most effective way to use military force, since Turkey would be a belligerant and the Montreux Convention would lapse. Turkish and Greek shore defenses, air power, submarines, and fast patrol craft would have a very good chance of blocking all traffic between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean so long as the southern flank's land defenses are held. (British, American, Spanish and Portuguese ASW forces would bear the brunt of the action in the Straits of Gibraltar.) During crises, force could only be used legitimately to block the Turkish Straits if Turkey felt she was threatened with imminent danger of war and decided to close the Straits. Otherwise, peacetime rules would apply.

* See Warship International 2/81, Naval News and Pictures.

In peacetime the Soviets could tackle the problem of treaty restrictions on their access to the Mediterranean in two ways: undermine them by salami tactics or outflank them. The Kiev transit could be seen as the first step in a progressive encroachment on the Convention: first Kiev, then a full-sized carrier, then, perhaps, submarines. NATO could, of course, reply with similar salami tactics. (Deployment of Invincible to the Black Sea would be a fitting, though perhaps not a wise, answer to Kiev's transit: at a minimum, it would get the Soviets' attention.) However, NATO currently appears to gain more from the Convention (notably the limitation on submarines) than it has lost from the Soviet encroachments we have seen so far, and it might prove wiser to base our position on a strict interpretation of treaty terms. If this policy is chosen (as it appears to have been to date), Turkey becomes the key to the Straits. She is the ultimate authority for deciding whether a violation of the Convention has occurred, and action by the West to enforce the Convention without Turkish assent is inconceivable. (The Convention is, in fact, ambiguous on the issue of enforcement of any type.) If Turkey is given strong, dependable backing, she is likely to continue to make NATO interpretations of the treaty the basis for her actions. If not, she can be expected to remember that the Soviet Union is her next-door neighbor and act accordingly. (One way for the Soviets to "solve" the Straits problem would be to reorient Turkey from the West to the East.)

The Soviets could also outflank both the geographic and legal restrictions on their naval operations in the Mediterranean by obtaining dependable shore bases in the Mediterranean. Air bases there could give strike aircraft access to the Mediterranean, while submarine bases with maintenance and recreation facilities could greatly reduce the difficulties the Soviets currently experience in maintaining their submarines there. Either type of base could have a profound impact on the Mediterranean naval balance. To date the Soviets have met little success in gaining such bases. While they did obtain access to facilities in Egypt beginning in 1967, they never operated missile-carrying strike aircraft from them and lost all access to Egypt in 1976. Their failure to gain a dependable foothold in Mediterranean bases is due in some part to NATO vigilance but primarily to the realization among littoral states, even those vehemently opposed to NATO, that such bases would impair their sovereignty and risk involving them in a conflict not of their own making. So long as these states do not lose sight of these truths, and so long as Turkey continues to guard the Straits and the Montreux Convention, the Soviet Mediterranean Squadron will continue to experience significant limitations on its flexibility.

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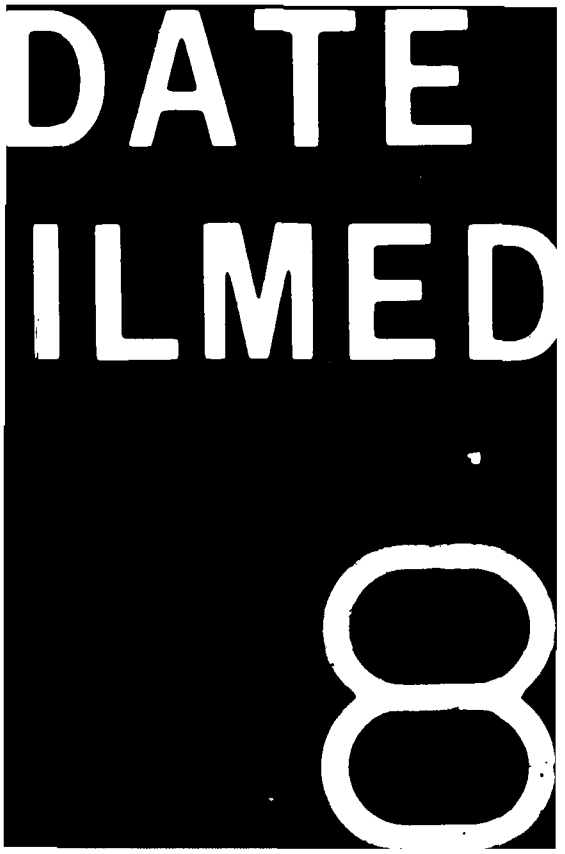
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