COMMENTARY

The "Soviet Threat": Intentions, Capabilities, and Context

In a number of recent public discussions, former U.S. secretary of defense William Perry has justified the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization into Eastern Europe by citing NATO's success during the Cold War in preventing war in Europe. Because the Soviet Union failed to demobilize its massive army in the wake of the defeat of Nazi Germany, Perry has argued, the United States was obliged to form a military alliance to preserve the peace. Fortunately, NATO achieved "its founding purpose of deterring attack from the Warsaw Pact."[1]

There are several problems with Perry's claim, besides the obvious anachronism: NATO was formed in 1949 whereas the Warsaw Pact was not established until 1955 (in response to the rearmament of the Federal Republic of Germany and its entry into the alliance the year before). The former defense secretary perpetuates the myth that the Soviet Union did not demobilize after World War II and that its military forces were poised to invade Western Europe. The article by Phillip Karber and Jerald Combs disputes the first point, by providing evidence that U.S. intelligence analysts were by and large aware of the extent of Soviet postwar demobilization. But it concedes the second point, by justifying U.S. military plans premised on worst-case assumptions about the Soviet armed forces. The article thus addresses an important debate in the historiography of the Cold War about Soviet military capabilities and intentions.

Karber and Combs offer a detailed discussion of U.S. intelligence reports on the organization and deployment of Soviet military forces and the mobilization plans that NATO officials devised to counter a potential Soviet invasion of Western Europe. They rely on documents that have not been available to other researchers and thus present some interesting new information. The article has several shortcomings, however. The authors pay little attention to Soviet sources, including archival documents that have been declassified and published in the past several years; the neglect of Russian sources led to several errors of fact and analysis. In their discussion of the late 1940s the authors make

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too sharp a distinction between Soviet capabilities and intentions. Under one set of assumptions, certain military forces could appear to signal benign intent, whereas under another they could seem threatening. To take a simple example, U.S. leaders find the prospect of one Iraqi nuclear weapon far more threatening than the reality of hundreds of British or French ones. Clearly U.S. military policy is not based solely on a country's capabilities. Finally, the authors' analysis neglects the overall political and economic context of the immediate postwar period. That context is necessary for understanding Soviet military policy as well as the factors that influenced Western assessments of it.

The authors' main thesis is that "what we now perceive to be erroneous Western estimates of Soviet conventional capabilities were neither deliberate nor particularly significant for the policy choices U.S. and NATO leaders made." They insist that the "overestimate of the size of Soviet conventional forces in 1948 was minor and did not betray Western political or military officials into believing that the Soviets were bent on a deliberate and imminent invasion of Europe." They argue that U.S. officials based "Western military policy on Soviet capabilities rather than intentions and on maximum rather than minimum capabilities" and it was this political decision "that determined the size and nature of the Western buildup, not the overestimate of those capabilities."

There are several issues to address: First, how significant was the exaggeration of Soviet military capability? Second, was the exaggeration deliberate? Third, what were the policy implications of a "worst-case analysis," emphasizing maximum capabilities and ignoring evidence of intentions? The three issues are closely linked.

The main purpose of my 1983 article on postwar Soviet military capabilities was not to engage in a bean-counting exercise.[2] I did point out that an East-West comparison based on numbers of soldiers rather than numbers of divisions greatly reduced the image of Soviet conventional superiority in the first years after the war. But my main point was that Soviet military forces in 1947–48 were not engaged in preparation for a major military offensive against the West and that they had substantially demobilized.[3] The remaining troops were involved in occupation duties in Eastern Europe; they carried out Soviet reparations policy (including pulling up and sending back to Russia many of the rail lines that would have been crucial for a rapid invasion); they worked on deactivating millions of German land mines, rebuilding basic infrastructure, and fighting against anti-Soviet partisans in the newly occupied lands of western Ukraine and the Baltic republics.

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2. Matthew Evangelista, "Stalin's Postwar Army Reappraised," *International Security* 7 (Winter 1982–1983): 110–38.

3. An excellent comparative study makes the same point, drawing on extensive U.S. archival documents and Russian-language sources, most of which do not overlap with the ones I used: Cristann Lea Gibson, "Patterns of Demobilization: The US and USSR after World War Two" (Ph.D. diss., University of Denver, 1983). In note 25 Karber and Combs cite Gibson's study but do not acknowledge the extent to which her evidence and arguments undermine theirs.

Such activities provide evidence of both capabilities and intentions – a point that some early U.S. intelligence reports recognized, but subsequent ones neglected, as do Karber and Combs. The actual size of the Soviet armed forces in 1948 numbered considerably fewer than what U.S. intelligence analysts had anticipated would be necessary. One report prepared for the Joint Chiefs of Staff in June 1946 predicted that the USSR would retain an armed force of 4.5 million soldiers, including 3.2 million in the ground forces, but excluding internal security troops. The report argued that "this figure is nearly commensurate with immediate occupation and security requirements, and it is doubtful if further large-scale reductions in total armed forces are contemplated during the first occupation years."[4] In fact, further large-scale reductions were carried out, as later U.S. estimates from 1948 acknowledged. Now, however, Soviet military forces were described not as a defensively oriented occupation army, but as "a higly mobile and armored spearhead for an offensive in Western Europe."[5]

What changed in the intervening period? Karber and Combs argue that new intelligence information convinced analysts that the Soviets "were converting an occupation command to a military force." Following George Kennan at the time and since, and many subsequent historians, I argued that Soviet political behavior began to color estimates of Soviet military capability and that Western politicians who feared Communist political influence in Western Europe seized upon the notion of a Soviet military threat as a unifying theme.[6] Thus, "Soviet-supported political actions, such as the communist coup in Czechoslovakia, were described as if they were no different from outright military aggression and indicative of Soviet military intentions."[7]

Only by neglecting this overall political context could Karber and Combs seem shocked that "historians have even charged that Western military leaders purposely exaggerated Soviet conventional capabilities to frighten the West into an unnecessary military buildup." Although I devoted only a paragraph in my 1983 article to the subject, subsequent research has turned up extensive and persuasive evidence of a deliberate war scare engineered by the U.S. aircraft industry, military officials, and government leaders in the spring and summer of 1948.[8] Karber and Combs appear unwilling to acknowledge what most observers recognized at the time: that military intelligence was being

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4. Joint War Plans Committee Report, 18 June 1946, quoted in Evangelista, "Stalin's Postwar Army," 113–14. Gibson cites several other contemporaneous reports to the same effect in "Patterns of Demobilization," 214.

5. Joint Intelligence Committee report, 2 December 1948, 22, quoted in Evangelista, "Stalin's Postwar Army," 115.

6. As I wrote in 1983, "it seems clear that most American proponents of NATO actually valued it primarily as a way of solidifying America's political commitment to Western Europe, but felt that NATO could be better sold by emphasizing its military necessity, with constant reference to the Soviet conventional threat." Evangelista, "Stalin's Postwar Army," 135–36.

7. Ibid., 135.

8. See Frank Kofsky, *Harry S. Truman and the War Scare of 1948* (New York, 1993).

manipulated for political effect. As early as the autumn of 1947, for example, the *Wall Street Journal* predicted that a "Russian scare will be used to prod more Army-Navy money out of Congress," in part by revealing to the legislators "confidential intelligence reports on Red Army troop movements."[9] The prediction came true within a matter of months.

Josef Stalin undoubtedly deserves much of the blame for the war scare of 1948. He made the task of Western politicians easier in almost every respect, especially when he impeded allied travel to Berlin, resulting in a virtual blockade by June 1948. Combs and Karber write that, despite Stalin's provocations, Western leaders "rightly concluded that the blockade was not a prelude to an immediate invasion." They fail to point out, however, that U.S. political and military officials intentionally sought to convey the opposite impression – that war was imminent.

The most famous example of deliberate exaggeration of the Soviet military threat came with the March 1948 cable from General Lucius Clay, the U.S. military commander in Berlin, claiming that war could come with "dramatic suddenness." We now know that Clay's cable, solicited by Lt. General Stephen J. Chamberlain, director of intelligence for the Army General Staff, was part of a plan to convince Congress to approve increased military funding.[10] Some scholars have argued that the exaggeration of the Soviet threat was a sensible policy carried out by prescient and well-meaning political leaders to prepare for an inevitable competition with a dangerous Soviet Union over the long haul.[11] Although this argument neglects the extent to which U.S. behavior might have created a self-fulfilling prophecy, it is far superior to the unfounded assertion by Karber and Combs that there was no deliberate exaggeration at all.

Karber and Combs are keen to defend U.S. intelligence analysts against charges that they purposely inflated the Soviet threat. One cannot, they argue, fail to be "impressed by the seriousness of the analysts and their willingness to correct their errors." I have also been impressed by the high quality of some of the analysis of Soviet military capabilities – indeed, much of the information for my discussion of the subject came from those declassified intelligence reports. Many of the intelligence analysts were serious professionals who deserve respect for their work.

But many do not deserve respect. As Karber and Combs describe, General Reinhard Gehlen, Nazi Germany's head of military intelligence for the eastern front, provided much of the information that allowed U.S. analysts to understand the system of Soviet military mobilization. Much of that information, in

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9. "Russian Scare," *Wall Street Journal*, 12 September 1947, quoted in Kofsky, *Harry S. Truman and the War Scare of 1948*, 88.

10. Clay's biographer writes that the cable's "primary purpose was to assist the military chiefs in their congressional testimony; it was not in Clay's opinion, related to any change in Soviet strategy." Jean Edward Smith, ed., *The Papers of General Lucius D. Clay* (Bloomington, 1974), 2:568–69.

11. Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958* (Princeton, 1996).

turn, came from Soviet prisoners of war, millions of whom perished in Nazi concentration camps, after being tortured and interrogated to provide information to Gehlen's agents. When Gehlen surrendered to U.S. forces in May 1945, he offered his information in return for protection from prosecution as a war criminal. The United States eventually spent some $200 million and employed four thousand people to rebuild Gehlen's network of spies. Gehlen's organization included several Nazi officials who had committed mass murder of Jews; some were granted clemency after serving short sentences, whereas others avoided conviction altogether by cooperating with U.S. intelligence agencies.[12]

One cannot say for sure whether such tainted sources discredit the information on which much of the Karber/Combs analysis is based. But certainly one should entertain the possibility that Gehlen and his agents played up the Soviet threat in order to make themselves appear useful to the United States and avoid the war crimes trials they so deserved. This seems to have been the case, for example, with the war scare of 1948, when Gehlen reportedly held several secret meetings with General Clay to argue that Soviet forces were mobilizing for war.[13]

For all the evidence that Gehlen's agents provided to U.S. intelligence on Soviet military forces, they missed – or neglected to report – one major piece of information: in the period from 1946 to 1948, the Soviet army planned to react to the outbreak of war in Europe by going on the *defensive*.[14] Karber and Combs are aware of the declassified Soviet war plans and acknowledge, in a footnote, that the Soviet documents "appear to be genuine and a real contribution to Soviet Cold War history."[15] Unfortunately, however, they fail to recognize the

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12. These issues are discussed in Christopher Simpson, *Blowback: America's Recruitment of Nazis and Its Effects on the Cold War* (New York, 1988), chaps. 4–5. See also James M. Erdmann, "The Wringer in Postwar Germany: Its Impact on United States-German Relations and Defense Policy," in *Essays in Twentieth Century American Diplomatic History Dedicated to Professor Daniel M. Smith*, ed. Clifford L. Egan and Alexander W. Knott (Washington, 1982), 159–91.

13. Heinz Hoehne and Hermann Zolling, *The General Was a Spy: The Truth about General Gehlen and His Spy Ring* (New York, 1972), 100, 106–7, cited in Simpson, *Blowback,* 60. In note 62, Karber and Combs quote from a June 1948 intelligence analysis criticizing "exaggerated reports" of Soviet "preparations for an offensive against the Western Powers," but such criticism does not undermine their own confidence in the sources of U.S. estimates of Soviet military capabilities and intentions.

14. "Operativnyi plan deistvii gruppy Sovetskikh okkupatsionnykh voisk v Germanii, 5 noiabria 1946 goda" [Operational plan of action of the group of Soviet occupation troops in Germany, 5 November 1946], *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal* [Military-historical journal] 2 (February 1989): 26–31; "Plan komandirskikh zaniatii po operativno-takticheskoi podgotovke v polevom upravlenii gruppy Sovetskikh okkupatsionnykh voisk v Germanii na 1948 god" [Commanders' work plan for operational-tactical preparation in field exercises of the group of Soviet occupation troops in Germany for 1948], *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal* 8 (August 1989): 24–26. For an excellent discussion of these materials see Gilberto Villahermosa, "Stalin's Postwar Army Reappraised: Déjà Vu All Over Again," *Soviet Observer* [Columbia University] 2 (September 1990): 1–5; see also "Commentary: Matthew Evangelista's Response to Villahermosa," ibid. (December 1990): 7–8.

15. Karber and Combs are right to be suspicious of the political motives behind the publication of those documents in 1989. The Soviet high command at the time was under pressure from Mikhail Gorbachev to carry out a unilateral reduction of five hundred thousand troops and a defensive

significance of the documents for their own argument and seem to have a shaky grasp of Russian sources in general.[16]

The revelations from the Russian archives are important. I do not know of any Western analysts of Soviet military policy, including those such as myself who have criticized the exaggeration of Soviet capabilities during this period, who argued that the Soviet armed forces adopted a defensive military strategy after World War II. The general assumption was that the experience of that war – especially the brutal Nazi occupation of Soviet territories and the scorched-earth policies that followed – committed Soviet leaders to fight the next war, no matter how it started, on someone else's land. But the declassified documents reveal that in the immediate postwar period, the Soviet army in Germany was configured for defensive operations, rather than the quick march to the English Channel that formed the basis for U.S. military planning. The Soviet army's Operational Plan No. 52 of November 1946, originally classified "top secret – of special importance," envisioned deployment of forces in three defensive belts, 50, 100, and 150 kilometers from the inter-German border. As late as 1948, Soviet training emphasized strategic defensive operations, followed, if possible, by counteroffensives.[17]

While neglecting the actual Soviet war plans, Karber and Combs rely instead on U.S. intelligence estimates of the time. They agree with a 1946 U.S. War Department estimate that "the Soviets were capable of implementing their full mobilization plan to get the active army ready within five days of mobilization (M+5) and reserve units within thirty days, something they had actually done in World War I [*sic*: there was no Soviet army in World War I]." By adopting the U.S. terminology as well as estimates, Karber and Combs make it difficult to compare the U.S. intelligence projections to the actual Soviet war plans.[18] In Soviet terms, Operational Plan No. 52 provided that the initial defense of the

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restructuring of the Soviet army, limiting its capability to launch an invasion. By publishing the postwar plans, the Soviet military sought disingenuously to suggest that Soviet strategy for war in Europe had always been defensively oriented. In fact, in the wake of the formation of NATO and the deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe, Soviet strategy became highly offensive, in a chimeric attempt to prepare to disrupt a NATO nuclear attack by preemptively destroying NATO nuclear targets. See Richard Ned Lebow, "The Soviet Offensive in Europe: The Schlieffen Plan Revisited?" *International Security* 9 (Spring 1985): 44–78.

16. For example, the authors "thank posthumously two Soviet generals," but give incorrect first and last names of each of them. "Petrov Grigenko, former Lt. General of the Soviet Army" presumably is Major General Petro Grigorenko, a Soviet human-rights activist who was forced into exile in the United States in 1977. "Andrei Volkoganov" evidently refers to Major General Dmitrii Volkogonov, who came to prominence under Mikhail Gorbachev as a biographer of Stalin, Trotsky, and Lenin and later became an adviser to Boris Yeltsin on matters concerning the Russian archives.

17. See documents cited in footnote 14.

18. The Russian sources do not, for example, write of 175 "active line divisions" – this was Gehlen's formulation, adopted by U.S. intelligence analysts. Karber and Combs write of "reserves," in the American sense as troops that need to be mobilized and trained. The 1946 Soviet war plan refers to the troops of the "reserve of the High Command" as combat-ready forces intended to aid in the initial defense of the border, and, if possible, mount a counteroffensive. What we might call reserves, the Soviet sources refer to as second-line troops (*vtoroocherednye voiska*).

Soviet occupation zone in Germany would be carried out by two combined-arms armies, each consisting of five rifle divisions, four mechanized divisions, and a tank division – 20 divisions altogether. These were to be joined by two armies from the reserve of the Soviet High Command, with seven divisions each (five tank and two mechanized), for a total of 34 divisions. The remaining second-line divisions would be mobilized within seven days of the outbreak of hostilities and sent to the front between the tenth and twentieth days.[19] Although the declassified, published version of the Soviet plan does not specify the number of second-line divisions to be mobilized, the overall mobilization schedule – with an initial engagement of 34 divisions – seems less ambitious than the U.S. estimates of over three hundred divisions by M-30 that Karber and Combs endorse. The main point is that the Soviet forces were planning to defend against, rather than initiate, an attack.

In the period from 1948, the Soviet armed forces began building up in response to the deployment of U.S. B-29 bombers to Britain and Germany during the Berlin crisis and to the overall deterioration in East-West relations that led to the formation of NATO in 1949. Karber and Combs correctly argue that U.S. intelligence analysts underestimated the growth in Soviet strength during this period and on into the 1950s. They fail to recognize, however, that worst-case assumptions about Soviet *intentions* – namely, that Soviet leaders sought to take over the world by force of arms – led intelligence analysts to exaggerate the *capabilities* of these ostensibly underestimated military forces. In October 1951, for example, a CIA Special Estimate accorded the Soviet Union vast military capabilities as well as aggressive intentions. The report declared that the USSR "has sufficient armed forces to undertake" military campaigns against Western Europe, the Balkans, the Near and Middle East, Japan, and Korea, bombing campaigns against Britain, submarine and air offensives against Western sea lines of communication, and "aerial attack (conventional and atomic) against Canada and most of the United States." The USSR would launch all of these campaigns "simultaneously," with 180–200 divisions, more than 11,000 tactical aircraft, and 850 light and medium bombers, and "still retain an adequate reserve."[20]

Most scholars have long since recognized that the depiction of Soviet forces in such intelligence analyses represented a considerable exaggeration, particularly in the sphere of air and atomic forces. Recent evidence from Russian sources reinforces the point.[21] Moreover, despite the fact that the Russian

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19. *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal* 2 (February 1989): 24–25; Villahermosa, "Stalin's Postwar Army," 1–2.

20. CIA, Special Estimate, "The Strength and Capabilities of Soviet Bloc Forces to Conduct Military Operations against NATO," SE-16, 12 October 1951, in Papers of Harry S. Truman, President's Secretary's Files, Intelligence File, box 258, folder: SE Special Estimate Reports, No. 10–18, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri.

21. David Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb: The Soviet Union and Atomic Energy, 1939–1956* (New Haven, 1994). For an insider's account of the state of Soviet aircraft and missile development see

archives have yielded ample evidence of Soviet perfidy and egregious behavior in many other spheres, nothing has turned up to support the idea that the Soviet leadership at any time actually planned to start World War III and send the "Russian hordes" westward. Nor have any memoir accounts supported the notion that the USSR had a plan for worldwide military aggression – and we now have "memoirs" of sorts even from members of Stalin's inner circle.[22]

   Not everyone shared the views of Soviet capabilities and intentions that Karber and Combs describe. The British, for example, were skeptical of the "alarmist view of the situation" often found in U.S. reports.[23] Among Americans, in addition to George Kennan, a notable dissenter was Rear Admiral Leslie Stevens, who had served in Moscow as a naval attaché from 1947 through 1950. Stevens, in a January 1951 speech to the National War College, directly quotes from a key CIA National Intelligence Estimate of the previous November, without identifying it as such. He then goes on to compare the CIA's estimates of Soviet capabilities with his own, drawing on personal observation and common sense: "The sum total of our estimates is not consistent with what I have experienced in Russia, and I believe that it comes from piling incorrect assumptions and inferences one on another."[24] In Stevens' view, the USSR was "still an unbelievably primitive country, 15 to 50 years behind us in nearly every respect." He doubted that it had the "capability of bursting out simultaneously in all directions against the resistance that the West, militarily weak as it is, is capable of showing, and I believe the Soviets are realistically aware of it."[25] Stevens argued that Western political and economic strength and unity served

Sergei Khrushchev, *Nikita Khrushchev: Krizisy i rakety* [Nikita Khrushchev: Crises and rockets], 2 vols. (Moscow, 1994); and his "Nikita Khrushchev i voennoe stroitel'stvo v 1953–64 godakh" [Nikita Khrushchev and military construction in 1953–64], paper prepared for a conference on the centenary of Nikita Khrushchev's birth held at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, 1–3 December 1994.

   22. In compilations of reminiscences prompted by questions from a sympathetic interviewer, neither Viacheslav Molotov nor Lazar' Kaganovich – two of Stalin's most ruthless henchmen and evident foreign policy hardliners – indicated any Soviet intention to engage in large-scale attacks. Feliks Chuev, *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym* [One hundred forty conversations with Molotov] (Moscow, 1991); idem., *Tak govoril Kaganovich* [As Kaganovich said] (Moscow, 1992). Kaganovich, who died in 1991, also wrote a memoir: Lazar' Kaganovich, *Pamiatnye zapiski* [Notes for a memoir] (Moscow, 1996).

   23. The quotation is from "Russian Military Activity in Poland," report from British embassy in Warsaw, 1 April 1949, FO371 1949, 77650, N3161/G; see also N1242/G, "Estimated Strength of Red Army outside Soviet Union." Both documents are in the Public Record Office, Kew Gardens, London.

   24. Rear Admiral L. C. Stevens, "A National Strategy for the Soviet Union," text of an address delivered to the National War College on 25 January 1951, Truman Papers, President's Secretary's Files, Records of the NSC, box 19, folder: Speech – Adm. L. C. Stevens. The CIA report, NIE-3, "Soviet Capabilities and Intentions," 15 November 1950, is excerpted in Scott A. Koch, ed., *Selected Estimates on the Soviet Union, 1950–1959* (Washington, 1993), 169.

   25. Stevens, "A National Strategy for the Soviet Union," 16. For a discussion of Stevens and other CIA critics see Matthew Evangelista, "Second-Guessing the Experts: Citizens' Group Criticism of the Central Intelligence Agency's Estimates of Soviet Military Policy," *International History Review* 19 (August 1997): 563–93.

as a strong deterrent to Soviet expansion and he decried the exaggeration of the Soviet military threat.

Justifying worst-case assumptions and ignoring the broader political and economic context, Karber and Combs dismiss such balanced assessments as those of Admiral Stevens. Indeed, the authors take some intelligence estimates more seriously than the people who compiled them did at the time. They call attention, for example, to the "increasing threat to Western Europe" posed by "the buildup of the satellite armies as well as Soviet forces." They credit U.S. analysts who in 1952 "thought the satellite divisions constituted a substantial and growing addition to Soviet military strength in Europe." It is interesting to contrast this view with the recollections of Brig. Gen. Robert C. Richardson III, a U.S. air force officer who served at NATO headquarters in the early 1950s. In a 1976 interview with a German military historian, Richardson discussed what he remembered as a deliberate exaggeration of the military capabilities of the Soviet Union and its East European allies: "there was no question about it, that threat that we were planning against was way overrated and intentionally overrated, because there was the problem of reorienting the [U.S.] demobilization." As General Richardson recalled, he and his fellow NATO planners "counted Bulgarians, and Rumanians, and Russians and made this nine-foot-tall threat out there. And for years and years, that stuck – I mean, it was almost immovable."[26]

In discussing the military capabilities of Soviet "satellite" armies, Karber and Combs neglect the central political context, expressed best in the old Cold War aphorism: "The Soviet Union is the only country in the world completely surrounded by hostile allies." Much of the Soviet military presence in Eastern Europe for forty years after the end of the war was oriented toward keeping those potentially hostile allies under control, rather than preparing for an invasion of the West.

Space constraints do not permit a full discussion of the authors' analysis of the post-Stalin period. As with the earlier period, however, Karber and Combs make a number of errors owing to their neglect of Russian-language sources. A considerable amount of archival material has become available on the troop reductions that Nikita Khrushchev carried out, for example. These documents include some surprises. Declassified Soviet military records indicate, for example, that the reductions did not correspond precisely to the official Soviet

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26. Once, for fun, Richardson and his colleagues "took the threat paper and went into the back room . . . and rewrote it in reverse, using the exact same wording, but [as] if the Russians wrote it, you see, and it would read like this: The allies have—and this was in the 40ies [*sic*]—260 divisions. They have 40 Brasilian [*sic*] divisions, 20 Argentine divisions, and plenty of freighters to move these people, you know, it was ridiculous, you see? Because we were doing the same things with the Bulgarians, and these people, who couldn't have fought their way out of a paper bag at that time." Brig. Gen. Robert C. Richardson III, USAF, interviewed in Washington, DC, 14 September 1976, by Lt. Col. Foerster of the Militärgeschichtlicher Forschungsamt der Bundeswehr, the Federal German Army's Office of Military History Research. I am grateful to Professor Charles Naef for calling this interview to my attention. I would be happy to send a copy to anyone interested.

announcements at the time, which had formed the basis for all previous Western analyses, including that of Karber and Combs. Most observers, for example, accepted Khrushchev's retrospective figure of 5.763 million troops, announced in January 1960, as an accurate description of the size of the Soviet armed forces in 1955.[27] In fact, the documents reveal that the authorized strength of the armed forces in that year was about 4.8 million, with the actual strength somewhat less.[28] The high point of postwar Soviet troop strength evidently came in 1953, when the authorized forces numbered about 5.4 million. Thus, the first major reductions were not the ones that Khrushchev announced with much fanfare in August 1955, but were ones that took place unannounced following Stalin's death in March 1953. The authorized strength of the armed forces was reduced by about six hundred thousand troops between then and Khrushchev's August announcement.[29]

Once Khrushchev did make public his decision to reduce Soviet forces, he linked it to proposals for further disarmament. Moreover, in internal discussions with his top political and military leadership, Khrushchev advocated transition to a militia-based system of territorial defense.[30] If Western reactions to his disarmament initiatives had been more forthcoming, we might have seen the possibility for the adoption of some of the policies that Karber and Combs find implausible – such as reduced reliance on nuclear weapons in NATO strategy.

Karber and Combs could be right that more accurate assessments of Soviet military capabilities in the early postwar period would have made little difference to Western military strategy. Even before the end of World War II, and

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27. Thomas W. Wolfe, *Soviet Power and Europe, 1945–1970* (Baltimore, 1970), 164–66; Raymond L. Garthoff, "Estimating Soviet Military Force Levels: Some Light from the Past," *International Security* 14 (Spring 1990): 93–109.

28. "Spravka-doklad [G.K. Zhukova o sokrashchenii Vooruzhennykh Sil, 12 avgusta 1955 g.]," originally classified as "strictly secret, of special importance," reprinted in the collection titled "Sokrashchenie Vooruzhennykh Sil SSSR v seredine 50-kh godov" [Reduction of the USSR Armed Forces in the mid-1950s], *Voennye arkhivy Rossii* [Military archives of Russia] 1 (1993): 271–309, at 280.

29. "Zapiska G. Zhukova i V. Sokolovskogo v TsK KPSS o khode vypolneniia postanovleniia Soveta Ministrov SSSR ot 12 avgusta 1956 g. o sokrashchenii chislennosti Sovetskoi Armii i s predlozheniiami po dalneishemu sokrashcheniiu Vooruzhennykh Sil SSSR, 9 fevralia 1956 g." [Note from G. Zhukov and V. Sokolovskii to the Central Committee of the CPSU on the course of fulfillment of the directive of the USSR Council of Ministers of 12 August 1956 on reduction of the strength of the Soviet Army and with proposals for further reduction of the USSR Armed Forces, 9 February 1956] *Voennye arkhivy Rossii* 1 (1993): 271–309. That announcement promised a reduction of 640,000 troops to be completed by mid-December 1955. The declassified documents indicate that only 340,000 troops were actually demobilized, producing a force of 4.4 million by January 1956, some 300,000 more than would have resulted from the full, announced reduction. Those "missing" 300,000 troops were not demobilized, but rather assigned to inactive, low-strength units (*nekomplekt*). "O Sokrashchenii chislennosti Vooruzhennykh Sil" [On the reduction of the strength of the armed forces], resolution of the Council of Ministers, No. 1481-825ss, 12 August 1955, *Voennye arkhivy rossii* 1 (1993): 273. For further discussion see Matthew Evangelista, " 'Why Keep Such An Army?' Khrushchev's Troop Reductions," occasional paper number 19 of the Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington, DC, December 1997.

30. See Evangelista, "Why Keep Such an Army?"; and Vladislav M. Zubok, "Khrushchev's 1960 Troop Cut: New Russian Evidence," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 8–9 (Winter 1996/97): 416–20.

before the Soviet Union was designated as an enemy, U.S. military planners anticipated retaining a worldwide system of air bases and an emphasis on long-range strategic bombing.[31] By 1948, U.S. political and military leaders were committed to a strategy that emphasized nuclear weapons, well before the Soviet Union had tested or deployed any of its own.[32] By the time the USSR had developed a nuclear capability in the 1950s, altering U.S. strategy to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons would have been extremely difficult. Even today, despite the demise of the Soviet threat, nuclear weapons continue to play a major role in U.S. military strategy; the NATO alliance plans to expand into Eastern Europe; and its leaders refuse to forswear deployment of nuclear weapons there. There are many explanations for the military policies that countries adopt: rational response to a genuine threat is only one of them. In the case of postwar NATO strategy toward the Soviet Union, it is not the most persuasive one.

31. Melvyn P. Leffler, "The American Conception of National Security and the Beginnings of the Cold War, 1945–1948," *American Historical Review* 89 (April 1984): 346–81.
32. On this point see Matthew Evangelista, *Innovation and the Arms Race: How the United States and the Soviet Union Develop New Military Technologies* (Ithaca, 1988), 92–94.