

0507Z FEB 98

BENBECULA

VE

**BISHOPS
COURT**

DIVERSION AIRFIELDS				
AN	1	2	3	CX
	D427	0P90	YZ 8	PQF
	N051	FG 4	N0 3	GH 7
LOUR	NE 70	RT 4	PO 67	OR 7
S	N0 3	ZYB	AP 9	EH 5
ARKS	LD 50	LD 30	LD 50	LD 30

COMMITMENTS				
	PLAN	TYPE	No A/C	TIME
G	12	I/CPT	334	Z0700
S	57	I/CPT	670	Z2200
Y	001	I/CPT	334	Z2300
M	15	NUK	—	CLAS

WAR REAL	HELICOPTER STATE	TANGO HOTEL
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APPROACH MINIMA					
	PAR	ILS	AZ	SRA	DF
RW 25	300	310	550	570	1590
MAPt	0.5nm	0.5nm	1nm	1nm	FACIL
AC CAT	A/B	C	D	E	/
CAM	710	750	750	870	/
RW 07	230	/	350	380	1590
MAPt	0.5nm	0.5nm	1nm	1nm	FACIL

SITREP # Z 2257
SOVIET MISSILE 50+
NORAD REP/TS - 30MT STRIKE
EAST OF PARIS
NO COMMS SOUTH OF SECTOR
PZ EST 12M DEAD
US AIRCRAFT IN RM

- UKADGE (RADAR)
- ▲ AIR DEFENCE (AIRFIELDS)
- ✚ EARLY WARNING





MATTHEW EVANGELISTA

Dr Strangelove Lives On

ABSTRACT

David Holloway's *Nuclear Weapons: An International History* expertly examines the Cold War's nuclear technologies, strategies, crises, and treaties. This critical assessment highlights the dangerous legacy of nuclear arms and the urgency of activist efforts to confront the renewed threat of nuclear war to the environment and human survival.

Review of *Nuclear Weapons: An International History* by David Holloway (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2026)

IN THE LATE 1970S in the United States, veterans of movements for civil rights and against the US war in Vietnam joined with older activists who had been involved in “Ban the Bomb” efforts since the 1950s and more recent critics of nuclear power to oppose the acceleration of the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union. Events during the last stretch of President Jimmy Carter’s administration marked a turning point, including the decision by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in December 1979 to deploy new Pershing II and cruise missiles to Europe; the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan later that month; Carter’s resumption of registration for the military draft (for men); the announcement that the United States would deploy armed force to prevent any threats to the oil fields of the Persian Gulf (the “Carter Doctrine”); and leaked news of a presidential directive, PD-59, with plans for “limited,” regional, and protracted nuclear warfare.¹

A new peace movement arose even before Ronald Reagan’s electoral victory in 1980. The heightened nuclear anxiety that followed — with Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger’s plans to fight and win a nuclear war and the official in charge of civil defense against a nuclear attack telling the journalist Robert Scheer that “if there are enough shovels to go around, everybody’s going to make it” — brought in new recruits.² By 1981, Europeans had joined the European Nuclear Disarmament (END) movement and were protesting in the hundreds of thousands against the new “Euromissiles,” and US activists promoted the Nuclear Freeze, a campaign to secure an agreement to halt the production and testing of nuclear weapons. These movements echoed the critique of Swedish diplomat Alva Myrdal that years of the superpower

¹ Christopher Paine, “On the Beach: The Rapid Deployment Force and the Nuclear Arms Race,” *MERIP Reports*, no. 111 (1983).

² Robert Scheer, *With Enough Shovels: Reagan, Bush, and Nuclear War* (New York: Random House, 1982).

Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) had amounted to a “game of disarmament” by essentially codifying an ongoing arms race.³ The first step to stop it would be to cease production, testing, and deployment of new weapons and then begin reductions. This was the message of the *Call to Halt the Nuclear Arms Race*, drafted by scholar-activist Randall Forsberg in 1979.⁴ The Freeze caught fire in the early 1980s and spread well beyond the traditional community of peace activists. Its appeal was reflected in ballot referenda starting in western Massachusetts in November 1980, where it won in 59 of 62 towns. In the next four years, Freeze resolutions were endorsed in hundreds of counties and municipalities and more than a score of state legislatures.

The early 1980s also witnessed the growth of a movement against US military intervention, particularly in Central America, where the Reagan administration propped up dictatorships in Guatemala and El Salvador and sought to destroy Nicaragua’s Sandinista Revolution by supporting an armed insurgency by the so-called Contras. In the 1970s, as a founder of the Boston Study Group along with nuclear physicist Philip Morrison, Randy Forsberg had argued that stopping the nuclear arms race and preventing superpower military interventions were two sides of the same coin — what activists came to call the “deadly connection.”⁵ Nuclear disarmament was not possible, she argued, unless the prospects for conventional military conflict were diminished. Forsberg argued for confining the military to territorial defense and for eliminating capabilities for foreign intervention and “power projection” as a path to ending the nuclear arms race. She promoted, with European colleagues, notions of nonoffensive or nonprovocative conventional military defense as an alternative to nuclear deterrence in Europe.⁶ The ideas caught on in the Soviet Union once

3 Alva Myrdal, *The Game of Disarmament: How the United States and Russia Run the Arms Race* (New York: Pantheon, 1976).

4 Randall Forsberg, *Call to Halt the Nuclear Arms Race* (1979), Institute for Defense and Disarmament Studies Records, Cornell University Digital Collections.

5 The Boston Study Group, *The Price of Defense* (New York: Times Books, 1979); Joseph Gerson, ed., *The Deadly Connection: Nuclear War and U.S. Intervention* (Philadelphia: New Society Publications, 1986).

6 Randall Forsberg, “Building a Social Movement for Disarmament,” text of a presentation at the Institute for World Order and World Order Models Project Conference, New York, June 6, 1979, digital.library.cornell.edu/catalog/

the reformist leader Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985 and contributed much to the demilitarization of Europe and the end of the Cold War.

The publication of David Holloway's *Nuclear Weapons: An International History* offers a timely opportunity to revisit this history. Why should we do so now? First, the danger of nuclear war in Europe that many thought had vanished with the end of the Cold War and the demise of the USSR has returned in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the reflexive response of European governments to embrace nuclear weapons and remilitarization as the means to deter further aggression. Second, the deadly connection between nuclear weapons and military intervention has heightened the risk of nuclear conflagration in the Middle East, with the attacks of two nuclear-armed states, Israel and the United States, against Iran, and the involvement of another aspiring nuclear power, Saudi Arabia. From Europe and the Middle East to East Asia, the world finds itself on the brink of a new nuclear arms race, this one exacerbated by the introduction of advanced military technologies, such as drones, and the incorporation of artificial intelligence. Third, as some scholars and activists shifted their attention from one existential threat to another — from the risk of nuclear war to the danger of climate catastrophe — others insisted that the two were tightly linked. The climate crisis cannot be resolved without addressing the impact of the production, deployment, and use of military forces and the consequences of the use of nuclear weapons.⁷ Socialists and environmentalists have long opposed militarization and nuclearization. Understanding the lessons of the Cold War's nuclear history prepares them to confront the current challenges.

ss:29655783; Randall Forsberg, "Confining the Military to Defense as a Route to Disarmament," *World Policy Journal* 1, no. 2 (1984).

⁷ Rens van Munster, "The Nuclear Origins of the Anthropocene," in *International Relations in the Anthropocene: New Agendas, New Agencies and New Approaches*, ed. David Chandler, Franziska Müller, and Delf Rothe (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer Nature, 2021); Sterre van Buuren, Thomas Fraise, and Benoît Pelopidas, "Existential silos: The compartmentalization of the futures of environmental change and the nuclear threat," *Futures* 173 (2025); Alan Robock, Lili Xia, and Zia Mian, "Willful ignorance of the global impact of nuclear war," *Physics Today*, July 13, 2026; Neta C. Crawford, "The contribution of armed forces and war to climate change," *One Earth* 8, no. 12 (2025).

A Peace That Is No Peace

The introduction of Holloway's study opens with a summary of a "remarkable short essay" published by George Orwell in October 1945, just over two months after the US atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Imagine, Orwell speculated, if the few countries that prove capable of producing nuclear weapons "make a tacit agreement never to use the atomic bomb against one another? Suppose they only use it, or the threat of it, against people who are unable to retaliate?" Those countries — the United States, the Soviet Union, and later China — would become empires, each of which would be "unconquerable and in a permanent state of 'cold war' with its neighbors." The bomb was likely "to put an end to large-scale wars at the cost of prolonging indefinitely 'a peace that is no peace.'" Orwell — the first, according to Holloway, to put the notions of cold war and atomic weapons together in this fashion — in effect anticipated the deadly connection between nuclear weapons and interventionist superpowers that preoccupied Forsberg and her fellow activists from the 1970s onward. Unlike observers who tout the "long peace" between the countries of the industrialized North as a benefit of a world bristling with tens of thousands of nuclear weapons, Orwell understood that it would be no peace at all.

David Holloway's name might be familiar to some peace activists of the early 1980s. Irish-born and Cambridge-educated, he was teaching at the University of Edinburgh when he was invited to publish his essay, "War, Militarism and the Soviet State," in a collection edited by the founders of the European Nuclear Disarmament movement E. P. Thompson and Dan Smith, with contributions by other prominent antinuclear activists such as Mary Kaldor and Ken Coates. The US edition of *Protest and Survive*, published by Monthly Review Press in 1981 with an introduction by Daniel Ellsberg, like the British original, became a valued resource for the activist community. Holloway was a highly respected scholar and teacher — he eventually became a professor at Stanford University in both the history and political science departments — whose work also appealed to a public readership concerned about the nuclear danger. His collection of essays, *The Soviet Union and the Arms Race*, published by Yale University Press in two editions with multiple printings in the early 1980s, was something of a bestseller

for an academic press. His next book, *Stalin and the Bomb: The Soviet Union and Atomic Energy, 1939–1956*, also published by Yale, benefited from the opening of Soviet-era archives and the possibility of interviewing veterans of the Soviet nuclear program and retired political and military figures. Holloway demonstrated extraordinary skill and perseverance in mining these sources to produce an award-winning masterpiece that has been translated into a half-dozen languages.

Stalin and the Bomb was a hard act to follow, and this time Holloway set his sights on a more ambitious goal, “an international — and transnational — history of nuclear weapons during the Cold War.” It is international in both its research base and its scope, treating all of the states that developed nuclear weapons during that period, with particular focus on the United States and the Soviet Union. Holloway draws on archival, memoir, and secondary sources in English, French, German, Russian, and Serbo-Croatian (among the languages he reads) as well as documents that his research assistants translated from Chinese. For Holloway, “the focus of international history is the relationships among states and their interactions with one another.” Unlike many scholars of international relations who treat states as “billiard balls,” Holloway, as a historian, also pays attention to individuals — particularly political and military leaders who represented states. Moreover, he devotes attention to nuclear strategists such as Thomas Schelling (thirteen entries in the index), Bernard Brodie (six entries), and Herman Kahn (seventeen mentions in the text and notes) and the degree to which their ideas influenced national policies. Forsberg and Myrdal merit a mention each, but this is not a book about peace activists. Much of the history of antinuclear movements has been well covered in outstanding international histories on the Nuclear Freeze and END, and Holloway cites these most recent books as well as standard references such as Lawrence Wittner’s comprehensive trilogy.⁸

⁸ Holloway cites Susan Colbourn, *Euromissiles: The Nuclear Weapons That Nearly Destroyed NATO* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022); Stephanie L. Freeman, *Dreams for a Decade: International Nuclear Abolitionism and the End of the Cold War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023); and Lawrence S. Wittner, *The Struggle Against the Bomb* trilogy: *One World or None* (1993), *Resisting the Bomb* (1997), and *Toward Nuclear Abolition* (2003) (Stanford University Press). Other important recent work includes: Ray Acheson, *Banning the Bomb, Smashing the Patriarchy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021); David

Holloway sets out to ask a number of questions:

What role has technology transfer played in national atomic projects, whether through assistance programs or espionage? How did states adjust their strategies to the strategies of adversaries? Did thinking about nuclear weapons and nuclear war differ fundamentally from one country to another? Does deterrence work in the same way in different settings? Why did negotiations in the 1940s on the international control of atomic energy fail, while arms control agreements could be negotiated from the 1960s on? Can we talk of nuclear learning on an international scale? How effective was the “nuclear order”?

One of his goals is “to look critically at different concepts — deterrence, brinkmanship, proliferation, and escalation, for example — in the context in which they have arisen, and to ask how much light they shed on the historical evidence and what light the evidence throws on them.” Rather than engage in what some have called the gladiatorial approach to international relations, pitting explanations focused on power against those emphasizing norms and law or ideas, Holloway attempts to encompass all three approaches: “the destructive power of nuclear weapons, obviously; cooperation among states in the form of alliances, treaties, norms, and practices relating to nuclear weapons; and the role of ideas and concepts — about nuclear weapons and military strategy, for example, or about strategic stability.”

Holloway acknowledges and regrets “gaps — the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa.” But even a study limited to states cannot address them all, not even in a book of 708 pages, with notes and index. Perhaps the biggest challenge — aside, one assumes, from keeping to the publisher’s word limit — was organization. In covering the development of nuclear weapons in several countries, strategies for their use, efforts to bring them under

Cortright, *Protest and Policy in the Iraq, Nuclear Freeze and Vietnam Peace Movements* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2025); Vincent J. Intondi, *African Americans Against the Bomb: Nuclear Weapons, Colonialism, and the Black Freedom Movement* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016); Vincent J. Intondi, *Saving the World from Nuclear War: The June 12, 1982, Disarmament Rally and Beyond* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023); Henry Richard Maar III, *Freeze! The Grassroots Movement to Halt the Arms Race and End the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022).

control, and crises where they brought the world to the brink of disaster, the author adopts an approach that is both “chronological and thematic” with remarkable success. There is little repetition, and the few slipups can easily be fixed in a subsequent edition.⁹ Still, leaving out discussion of Latin America and Africa, in particular, means less attention to hopeful initiatives that rejected nuclear weapons, on the one hand, and less consideration of the grave humanitarian harm inflicted by the nuclear arms race, on the other. In the first category, the 1968 Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean (the Treaty of Tlatelolco) does get a mention, but not the step-by-step denuclearization of regional rivals Argentina and Brazil during the last years of the Cold War.¹⁰ There is brief discussion of nuclear collaboration between South Africa and Israel, but no detailed account of how the former came to give up the several nuclear bombs it had built in the 1980s. In the second category, Africa is also relevant to an international history of nuclear weapons: the earliest source of uranium for US atomic bombs was the Shinkolobwe mine in the Belgian Congo, and access to uranium evidently played a role in the CIA-linked murder of Patrice Lumumba in 1961.¹¹ Fortunately other scholars have devoted sustained attention to the effects of the nuclear industry on Africa and the humanitarian consequences of French nuclear testing in Algeria and the Pacific.¹²

⁹ For example, “Tube Alloys,” the British code name for its wartime nuclear program, is never defined as such; “Schlesinger’s limited strategic options” are mentioned many pages before the reader meets him or learns what they were.

¹⁰ José Goldemberg, “Looking Back: Lessons From the Denuclearization of Brazil and Argentina,” *Arms Control Today*, April 2006.

¹¹ Susan Williams, “Congolese uranium and the Cold War,” *New Africa Magazine*, January 13, 2017.

¹² Gabrielle Hecht, *Being Nuclear: Africans and the Global Uranium Trade* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012); Samia Henni, *Toxicité coloniale: Documenter le paysage radioactif dans le Sahara* (Montreuil: Éditions B42, 2026); Sébastien Philippe, Sonya Schoenberger, and Nabil Ahmed, “Radiation Exposures and Compensation of Victims of French Atmospheric Nuclear Tests in Polynesia,” in *Nuclear France: New Questions, New Sources, New Findings*, ed. Benoît Pelopidas (London: Routledge, 2023); Sébastien Philippe and Tomas Statius, *Toxique: Enquête sur les essais nucléaires français en Polynésie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2021).

Common Knowledge and Nuclear Crises

For students of the history of nuclear weapons during the Cold War, Holloway's book covers familiar territory but also introduces fascinating new details, and for many episodes (especially regarding the USSR) it will likely remain the definitive account. A major theme of the book is the development of "common knowledge" among the leaders of nuclear-armed states about the disastrous, potentially planet-destroying effects of nuclear war. Holloway borrows the concept of common knowledge from a 1969 book by David Lewis, *Convention: A Philosophical Study*, and uses it to suggest that, despite apparently inconsistent statements and behavior, the leaders of the states possessing nuclear weapons in the 1950s — the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom — "came independently to the view that a general nuclear war was unacceptable."

Other leaders did not recognize that knowledge. Fidel Castro urged Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to launch a nuclear attack against the United States during the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962. "We were completely aghast," Khrushchev recalled. "Castro clearly has no idea what thermonuclear war is." Mao Zedong was another such leader who did not share the common knowledge. Holloway reports on private conversations between Jawaharlal Nehru and Mao in 1954, when the Indian prime minister sought unsuccessfully to persuade his Chinese counterpart of the danger of nuclear war. Three years later, at a conference in Moscow, Mao recalled the conversation and the possibility that nine hundred million people could die in a future world war, a third of the earth's population at the time. Mao wasn't worried: "If half of the human kind is destroyed, the other half will still remain, but imperialism will be destroyed completely, and there will just be socialism in the entire world, and in half-a-century or a whole century the population will grow again, even by more than a half."

The leaders who did share common knowledge about the consequences of a nuclear war did so mainly because of the invention of the hydrogen bomb, the weapon based on thermonuclear reactions — fusion rather than the fission that powered the original atomic bombs. Holloway is particularly adept at explaining for nonspecialists the technical characteristics of the weapons and the developments that influenced each country's progress toward

creating thermonuclear arsenals. As he explains, “the explosive yield of a fusion bomb could be made indefinitely large, depending only on the amount of thermonuclear fuel it contained.” A 1952 test of an early US model (not yet a deliverable bomb) called the “Ivy Mike shot, produced an explosive yield equivalent to 10 megatons of TNT — about 500 times more powerful than the bomb that destroyed Nagasaki.” The explosion completely obliterated Enewetak Atoll in the South Pacific, where the US conducted its tests in an area inhabited by human beings (who were evacuated prior) that it administered as a “trust territory” on behalf of the United Nations from 1947 to 1986. On March 1, 1954, the US Castle Bravo test detonated a bomb on Bikini Atoll with an “explosive yield of 15 megatons — more than 1,000 times greater than that of the Hiroshima bomb.” Radioactive debris from the explosion contaminated the crew of a Japanese fishing boat, the *Lucky Dragon*, about 130 kilometers away and touched off a worldwide campaign to end nuclear testing and abolish nuclear weapons, a campaign in which India’s Nehru played a prominent role.

Holloway calls attention to the testimony of scientists involved in the nuclear weapons programs of the United States and the Soviet Union who persuaded their countries’ leaders of the devastating consequences of a nuclear war. Some of them, such as Enrico Fermi and Hans Bethe, had denounced the hydrogen bomb, before it was developed, as a weapon of genocide, and then went on to help build it. Others evinced no qualms about their roles, such as Andrei Sakharov in the USSR, who helped create the Soviet hydrogen bomb but then became alarmed about the consequences of atmospheric nuclear testing. In February 1954, Sterling Cole, chair of the US Congressional Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, described the destruction wrought by the Ivy Mike test more than a year earlier. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was evidently shaken by Cole’s description when he read the report about it in *The Manchester Guardian*. In March 1954, following the Castle Bravo test, a group of four Soviet nuclear scientists, led by Igor Kurchatov, the head of the bomb program, sent a report to the Soviet leadership warning that a war using the existing stockpiles of weapons would create “on a significant part of the surface of the earth doses of radiation and concentrations of radioactive materials that are biologically harmful for the life of people and plants,” and that in a few years use of the more powerful and numerous

weapons under development would “create on the whole globe conditions impossible for life.”

Despite the scientists’ efforts to convey the destructiveness of thermonuclear explosions, many continued to work on the weapons, believing that the threat of nuclear devastation would serve as a deterrent to war. As Richard Garwin, a central figure in the US hydrogen bomb program, once put it, “one of the key and general tools for preserving a society is to threaten unacceptable damage to the forces or even to the survival of another society.”¹³ Holloway cites the more familiar and elegant formulation of Bernard Brodie from *The Absolute Weapon*, published in 1946: “Thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have almost no other useful purpose.”

One could imagine that averting war should be the responsibility not only of the military establishment but, let’s say, of diplomats and political leaders, who might, for example, try to avoid crises that could escalate into war. The Cold War was rife with crises, and US and Soviet leaders saw nuclear weapons not only as tools to deter the other side from behavior they feared but also to compel it to behave in ways they desired (thus the neologism “compellence” to accompany deterrence). Thomas Schelling, Brodie’s colleague at the RAND Corporation, the think tank established by the US Air Force, developed some of the key ideas associated with nuclear coercion, including the “threats that leave something to chance,” and he offered guidance for how leaders should deploy those threats to achieve geopolitical advantage.

Holloway contrasts Schelling’s views with those of John Foster Dulles, US secretary of state under President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Dulles coined another neologism, “brinkmanship,” to describe the coercive diplomacy he pursued against the USSR and China during the 1950s. But Schelling used the term differently, according to Holloway.

The brink, in his view, is not “the sharp edge of a cliff where one can stand firmly, look down, and decide whether or not to plunge.” The brink is a curved slope that one can

13 Richard L. Garwin, “Enrico Fermi and Ethical Problems in Scientific Research,” text of lecture for Centennial Celebration, “Enrico Fermi and Modern Physics,” Pisa, Italy, October 19, 2001.

stand on, but with some chance of slipping. “Brinkmanship involves getting onto the slope where one may fall in spite of his own best efforts to save himself, dragging his adversary with him. Brinkmanship is thus the deliberate creation of a recognizable risk of war, a risk that one does not completely control.” This is more nuanced than Dulles’s definition, which implies that the brink has a sharp edge. It is also different in an important respect: for Dulles the “necessary art” was “the ability to get to the verge *without getting into war*.”

A substantial portion of Holloway’s book details crises that many previous scholars have studied as involving implicit or direct threats of the use of nuclear weapons: Berlin (1948); Taiwan (1954–55); Suez (1956); Hungary and Poland (1956); Taiwan again (1958); Berlin again (1958–63); Cuba (1962); a Sino-Soviet border conflict that coincided with Richard Nixon’s attempt to embody his “madman theory” of using a nuclear alert to convince the USSR and North Vietnam to agree to a peace settlement on US terms (1969); the India-Pakistan war over East Pakistan–Bangladesh (1971); and the Yom Kippur War (1973).

Whereas other scholars have claimed that nuclear deterrence or brinkmanship succeeded or failed in one or another of these crises, Holloway is able to determine better than his predecessors the validity of such claims. How? Mainly through his access to the archival materials documenting the decisions — often from Soviet archives but sometimes through triangulating, for example, Soviet reports of Chinese decision-making combined with US intelligence analyses and memoir accounts.

In these crises nuclear threats were used in ways that did not conform to a simple model of deterrence in which State A plans to attack, State B threatens to retaliate, and State A desists. There were implicit threats and explicit threats, and bluffs; there were clear threats and ambiguous ones; there was deterrence and self-deterrence; there were threats the adversary welcomed for domestic reasons; there were nuclear threats against non-nuclear states as well as against nuclear states; there were crises in which one side made nuclear deterrent threats, and crises in which both did. Nuclear threats were various rather than uniform.

Often Holloway does not find that nuclear weapons provided much leverage in these crises. For example: "Dulles's 1956 claim that nuclear deterrence 'stopped the Chinese in Formosa' was overstated for, notwithstanding the 'liberate Taiwan' slogan, Mao did not plan to attack Taiwan in 1954–5." He does, however, argue that "nuclear weapons could exercise a deterrent effect even when there was no explicit nuclear threat," because leaders who accepted the common knowledge recognized the danger of escalation. Moreover, contrary to Schelling's prescriptions, in the first Taiwan Strait crisis, "nobody deliberately created a 'recognizable risk of war' that they did not control."

Whether there is such a thing as reliable "control" in the nuclear bargaining scenarios Schelling imagined or Dulles enacted has come under question over the years. In a pathbreaking 1987 essay, Carol Cohn examined the effects she experienced as an antinuclear activist and scholar in learning the arcane and often gendered language of "defense intellectuals." The more expert she became at deploying the jargon, the more distanced she felt from her original motives of fear and anger about the nuclear arms race. She also offered insights on the question of control. "A more subtle, but perhaps more important, element of learning the language," she explained,

is that, when you speak it, you feel in control....

... Much of the reduced anxiety about nuclear war commonly experienced by both new speakers of the language and long-time experts comes from characteristics of the language itself: the distance afforded by its abstraction; the sense of control afforded by mastering it; and the fact that its content and concerns are that of the users rather than the victims of nuclear weapons.¹⁴

Holloway quotes Sakharov, who took part in discussions of Soviet nuclear war planning, to similar effect: "The 'unthinkable and monstrous' was transformed into a 'subject for detailed examination and calculation,' he wrote. 'It became a *part of daily existence* — still imagined but already seen as something possible.'"

Holloway himself resists the tendency to treat nuclear war as normal, even though the book contains many pages of detailed

¹⁴ Carol Cohn, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals," *Signs* 12, no. 4 (Summer 1987): 687–718, 740, 706–7.

treatment of how the superpowers planned to fight one. Perhaps reflecting on the process of writing his book, he suggests that “planning for thermonuclear war is more disturbing to think about than the development of nuclear weapons, which can be seen as scientific and technical achievements, or even past nuclear crises, since we know how those ended.”

Holloway’s understanding of common knowledge as a source of restraint during those crises relies on leaders to maintain the sort of anxiety that Khrushchev reported he felt when he first learned about the effects of nuclear weapons: “‘I couldn’t sleep for several days,’ he remembered. ‘Then I became convinced that we could never possibly use these weapons, and when I realized that I was able to sleep again.’” But it takes a certain kind of magical thinking or religious faith to assume that the weapons wouldn’t be used just because you don’t intend to use them. Meanwhile, as Holloway recounts, Khrushchev brought crises to the brink in the confident expectation that his adversaries shared his knowledge of nuclear war’s horrible consequences and could maintain control over the situation to prevent the worst.

If common knowledge played an important role in keeping nuclear-armed states from hurtling over the brink, as Holloway maintains, luck clearly played one too.¹⁵ The author documents many close calls caused by misunderstandings, principal-agent miscommunications, and pressures of domestic politics, especially during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Yet by and large, his story of the development of the nuclear order is a rather optimistic one. “Nuclear weapons have not been used in war since August 1945,” he writes toward the end of the study. “That is the most important thing to say about them.”

¹⁵ Richard Ned Lebow, “Reason Divorced from Reality: Thomas Schelling and Strategic Bargaining,” chapter 6 in *Richard Ned Lebow: Essential Texts on Classics, History, Ethics, and International Relations* (Springer, 2016); Benoît Pelopidas, “The Unbearable Lightness of Luck: Three Sources of Overconfidence in the Controllability of Nuclear Crises,” *European Journal of International Security* 2, no. 2 (2017): 240–62; Richard Ned Lebow and Benoît Pelopidas, “Facing Nuclear War: Luck, Learning, and the Cuban Missile Crisis,” in *The Oxford Handbook of History and International Relations*, ed. Mlada Bukovansky et al. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023); Peter J. Katzenstein, *Entanglements in World Politics: The Power of Uncertainty* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2026), chapter 5; and Martin J. Sherwin, *Gambling with Armageddon: Nuclear Roulette from Hiroshima to the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1945–1962* (New York: Knopf, 2020), whom Holloway cites on another point.

Daniel Ellsberg was fond of saying that nuclear weapons have not been used the way a cocked pistol pointed at a forehead is not being used. Holloway implicitly acknowledges the point by paying so much attention to nuclear crises. And he anticipates criticism, writing in his introduction: “If there is a nuclear war in the next ten years, the nuclear history of the Cold War (and the style in which I have written this book) may look like irresponsible folly in the face of the nuclear danger — rearranging the deckchairs on the *Titanic*, to repeat the metaphor Jonathan Schell used in his classic book on nuclear war, *The Fate of the Earth*.” Yet his book ends long before the unraveling of the nuclear order he recounts, with most of the US-Soviet arms control treaties in shambles, wars between nuclear-armed states and suspected nuclear aspirants in the Middle East, and a renewal of interest in nuclear deterrence in Europe and Asia. In his conclusions, Holloway cautions that “it would be a mistake to idealize the nuclear order as it existed during the Cold War,” and perhaps the best that can be said about predictions of proponents of nuclear deterrence — “that there would be peace (in the sense of no war) between the superpowers — has held so far, even if it seems to be Orwell’s ‘peace that is no peace.’” A further consideration, to which other scholars have devoted attention, would be congenial to Orwell: the tension or outright contradiction between democratic governance and the authority to order the use of nuclear weapons as well as the corrosive effects of nuclear secrecy on democratic norms.¹⁶

Sources of Fear, Anger, and Inspiration

Holloway’s book is not likely to inspire antinuclear activists the way Schell’s book did. Or to put it another way, its tone differs

¹⁶ Elaine Scarry, *Thermonuclear Monarchy: Choosing Between Democracy and Doom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014); Thomas Fraise, *Restricted democracies: nuclear weapons programs, secrecy, and democracy in the United Kingdom, France, and Sweden (1939–1974)*, PhD dissertation, Sciences Po, Paris, 2023; Thomas Fraise, “Nuclearization and De-Democratization: Security, Secrecy, and the French Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons (1945–1974),” *European Journal of International Relations* 31, no. 1 (2025); Alex Wellerstein, *Restricted Data: The History of Nuclear Secrecy in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021); and the work of Steven Aftergood, editor of *Secrecy News* at the Federation of American Scientists.

from what a nuclear abolitionist might adopt. Consider the first paragraph of Ray Acheson's book on the origins of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (aka the Nuclear Weapon Ban Treaty), which entered into force in January 2021:

Nuclear weapons have a history and a legacy of anguish, pain, and suffering. From the horror experienced by people in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, to the torment of Indigenous populations whose lands and waters nuclear weapons were tested upon in the ensuing decades, to the fear of the entire world held in the grip of possible nuclear annihilation, nuclear weapons have scarred our global community.¹⁷

The events Acheson recounts include the founding of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, inspired by the successful efforts to produce treaties banning land mines and cluster munitions. The fear and anger about the humanitarian consequences of the production, testing, and potential use of nuclear weapons served as further inspiration for the campaign.

Despite its measured tone, Holloway's book amasses plenty of evidence to show why people were frightened enough of the bomb and angry enough at their leaders to turn out in the hundreds of thousands to protest, even if he grants the protests themselves rather less attention. Holloway describes the extraordinary accumulation of tens of thousands of nuclear weapons — a process initiated by the United States, which enjoyed a nuclear monopoly until 1949 and “nuclear superiority” into the 1960s.

In 1952 it had in its stockpile 841 nuclear warheads capable of delivering 50 megatons of TNT equivalent; by 1960 those numbers had grown to 18,638 warheads capable of delivering 20,491 megatons — a staggering increase in destructive power. In 1952 the Soviet Union had 75 warheads and in 1960 an estimated 1,605. The Soviet stockpile was less than 10 percent the size of the US stockpile into the early 1960s.

Holloway also documents the toll that a nuclear war would exact in human death and destruction by citing the relevant US government studies. A 1949 report had concluded that an air

17 Acheson, *Banning the Bomb*, 1.

offensive against the Soviet Union with fission bombs of the sort dropped on Japan

would result in 2.7 million Soviet deaths. In 1955 the estimate was 60 million deaths in the Soviet Union and its allied countries. Full execution of the first US Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP), which was completed in December 1960, was judged likely to result in 285 million prompt deaths in the Soviet Union and China. Six months later, it was judged, that number would reach 325 million, as a result of deaths from initial injuries and radioactive fallout. Another 300 million might die from fallout in Europe and in countries close to the Soviet Union.

He quotes from the memoirs of Daniel Ellsberg about his time as a Pentagon nuclear war planner and his characterization of these numbers: "Roughly 600 million dead. A hundred Holocausts." He cites Lynn Eden's work that reveals how much the government estimates ignored

the fire effects of nuclear explosions — both thermal damage and firestorm phenomena — as well as electromagnetic pulse effects. Since those effects are among the most serious, the planners underestimated to a significant degree the damage and destruction their planned nuclear strikes would inflict on the Soviet Union, thereby driving up their own requirements for bombs.¹⁸

Holloway then returns to his theme of common knowledge:

These figures confirm, in a brutally clear fashion, the judgment that the political leaders of the three nuclear powers had come to in the mid-1950s, that all-out nuclear war was unacceptable. But do they also make a mockery of that judgment? After all, the United States and the Soviet Union continued to accumulate nuclear weapons and gave serious thought to the ways in which those weapons could be used in war.

Not only did the United States and Soviet Union produce nuclear weapons by the tens of thousands, far in excess of what

¹⁸ His source is Lynn Eden, *Whole World on Fire: Organizations, Knowledge, and Nuclear Weapons Devastation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

one might consider necessary to deter an attack from the other side; they engaged in reckless behavior during crises, issuing statements that suggested their willingness to escalate conflicts to the point of nuclear catastrophe. This is the potentially deadly part of the “deadly connection” peace activists drew between military intervention and nuclear war.

The United States deployed so-called tactical nuclear weapons to Europe starting in the first half of the 1950s in support of a policy that came to be called “extended nuclear deterrence.” The idea was to create a tripwire that would pose the risk of escalation to all-out nuclear war if the USSR invaded, but also to use the weapons militarily in the event of war. It was necessary to “bring the battle back to the battlefield,” as J. Robert Oppenheimer, one of the key promoters of tactical nuclear weapons, put it. In 1955, NATO carried out an exercise called *Carte Blanche* that entailed simulated use of the weapons. *The New York Times* reported at the time that the five-day exercise included 12,347 sorties and dropped 335 simulated atomic bombs.¹⁹ It did not report estimates of 1.7 million Germans killed in the Western and Soviet sectors and 3.5 million wounded, but *Der Spiegel*, the German weekly magazine, did. “Of the total 335 atomic bombs dropped, 268 fell on German soil,” the article reported, as it described how an actual war would have “reduced the Federal Republic to rubble.”²⁰ US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe numbered 7,300 at their peak. The Soviet Union responded some years later with an arsenal that reached about 10,000.

While Europeans feared that the weapons would be used, Dulles and Eisenhower worried that an emerging taboo might prevent them from ever being deployed. Dulles insisted “that we urgently educate our own and world opinion as to the necessity for the tactical use of atomic weapons,” echoing Oppenheimer’s position. Asked by reporters about Dulles’s assertions that tactical nuclear weapons could be used in a war in the Far East, Eisenhower agreed: “I see no reason why they shouldn’t be used just exactly as you would use a bullet or anything else.” The policy carried over into the next administration, when Robert McNamara,

¹⁹ Thomas F. Brady, “Atomic Attacker Is Held Favored; NATO Air Games Commander Says Aggressor Would Win Over Defense Forces,” *New York Times*, June 29, 1955.

²⁰ “Überholt wie Pfeil und Bogen,” *Der Spiegel*, July 13, 1955.

John F. Kennedy's secretary of defense, was asked in a September 1961 press conference whether he was suggesting that the United States would "perhaps use nuclear weapons in connection with the Berlin situation." His response: "Yes, I definitely do. We will use nuclear weapons wherever we feel it necessary to protect our vital interests. Our nuclear stockpile is several times that of the Soviet Union, and we will use either tactical weapons or strategic weapons in whatever quantities, wherever, whenever it's necessary to protect this nation and its interests."²¹

Holloway devotes a chapter to the conflict over West Berlin — a western enclave located deep within the territory of the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR) and surrounded by hundreds of thousands of Soviet troops. Khrushchev threatened to resolve the anomalous situation of a divided Germany and NATO's refusal to recognize the borders established after the victory over Adolf Hitler by signing a separate peace treaty with the GDR and giving the East Germans full control of access to the city they claimed as their capital. He was under pressure from Walter Ulbricht, the East German leader, who faced brain drain in the exodus of his citizens to West Berlin, not yet blocked by the wall that would be built in August 1961. Even then, it was not clear that the wall would exert a stabilizing effect. General Lucius Clay, Kennedy's representative in Berlin, dispatched ten tanks to the East Berlin border in October to assert the right of a US diplomat to cross over without showing identification, and the Soviet side had matched the deployment. Both Khrushchev and Kennedy were under pressure not to back down. "Ulbricht persisted in trying to persuade Khrushchev to sign the peace treaty," writes Holloway, and "Clay planned to use tanks with bulldozer mounts to break down parts of the wall." Kennedy ordered Clay to remove the US tanks, and the Soviet side reciprocated, defusing the crisis. Holloway concludes his chapter on the period of 1958 to 1963 by citing Schelling's advice that to bolster the credibility of a deterrent threat one might burn the bridges needed to escape. "In the Berlin crisis," Holloway writes, "neither side burned its bridges. Neither side cut off the possibility of its own retreat. Neither side showed itself oblivious of the risk of nuclear war or unmindful of its possible consequences."

21 US Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, *Meet the Press*, NBC, September 25, 1961.

Other accounts are less sanguine. NATO's plan for defending West Berlin, originally designated "cosmic top secret" but declassified some years ago, called for "selective" use of nuclear weapons in the event that its armed forces, on the verge of defeat, were unable to break an anticipated blockade by East German and Soviet troops. Nuclear weapons would be used as a political signal of the sort Schelling recommended at the time to Kennedy.²² The problem is that, as Holloway reports in an earlier chapter, Soviet strategy at the time envisaged a massive preemptive nuclear attack on NATO's nuclear forces just before they were launched. It made no provision for tit-for-tat "communication" of the sort Schelling fantasized.²³

Selective nuclear use was not the only US strategy under consideration. Pentagon official Paul Nitze criticized the proposal for a selective nuclear attack and advocated instead for what was known in the jargon as a disarming first strike. He described how, "at our meeting with the President, I suggested that since demonstrative or tactical use of nuclear weapons would greatly increase the temptation to the Soviets to initiate a strategic strike, it would be best for us, in moving toward the use of nuclear weapons, to consider most seriously the option of an initial strategic strike of our own." A US first strike, Nitze claimed, "could assure us victory in at least a military sense in a series of nuclear exchanges, while we might well lose if we allowed the Soviets to strike first." Kennedy declined his advice, which by Nitze's own account would have produced nine to ten million US casualties in a Soviet retaliation, but ten times that many Soviet ones in a first strike, and therefore a "victory."²⁴

Khrushchev highlighted the nuclear dimension of the Berlin conflict when, on August 31, 1961, he "announced an end to the

²² "NATO marks 50 years since the 1961 Berlin Crisis," August 13, 2011, nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_77213.htm; Thomas C. Schelling, "Nuclear Strategy in the Berlin Crisis," July 5, 1961, document 56 in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIV, Berlin Crisis, 1961-1962* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1993).

²³ Vojtech Mastny, "Imagining War in Europe: Soviet Strategic Planning," in *War Plans and Alliances in the Cold War: Threat Perceptions in the East and West*, ed. Vojtech Mastny, Sven S. Holtsmark, Andreas Wenger (London: Routledge, 2006).

²⁴ Paul Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost: At the Center of Decision - A Memoir* (New York: Grove, 1989), 204.

nuclear test moratorium that had lasted almost three years. Over the next four months the Soviet Union conducted fifty-nine tests, including, on October 30, the detonation of the most powerful nuclear device ever tested, with a yield of 50 megatons.” Anti-nuclear activists considered Khrushchev’s decision to break the moratorium a cruel betrayal. Back in the USSR, Andrei Sakharov despaired of the test’s impact on the environment and public health. As he later wrote in his memoirs, “I had come to regard testing in the atmosphere as a crime against humanity, no different than secretly pouring disease-producing microbes into a city’s water supply.”²⁵ Holloway suggests, “perhaps the preoccupation with nuclear weapons was a salutary reminder of the death and destruction that could follow a failure to resolve the Berlin crisis by peaceful means.” Common knowledge of nuclear destruction, in his view, ultimately led to restraint. Holloway quotes Valentin Falin, a Soviet diplomat who was directly involved in the crisis as Soviet and US tanks faced off across Checkpoint Charlie: “Only 200 meters and strong nerves stood between Europe and World War III.” It seems likely that luck also played an outsize role. In future crises, can we assume leaders won’t follow the advice of a Schelling or an Ulbricht or a Clay or a Nitze?

How Much Nuclear History Is Enough?

It may seem an unusual criticism for such a long and wide-ranging study — and perhaps more directed at publisher than author — but the book might have been strengthened by extending its coverage chronologically, in both directions. The notion of deterrence, threatening mass murder of civilians to discourage war, was not invented along with nuclear weapons in 1945. Nor were notions of retaliation against civilians for the sins of their leaders. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki marked the culmination of a systematic destruction of Japan’s population centers by incendiary weapons that created firestorms. The “strategic” bombing of Germany and its European allies led to the deaths of some six hundred thousand people; the aerial bombardment of Japan killed

25 Andrei Sakharov, *Memoirs*, trans. Richard Lourie (New York: Knopf, 1990), 225.

around five hundred thousand, including one hundred thousand residents of Tokyo over the course of a single night's fire-bombing on March 9–10, 1945. It was ordered by General Curtis LeMay, who later became head of the US Strategic Air Command responsible for waging nuclear war.

The mass killing of civilians by aerial bombardment during World War II could not be characterized as deterrence but rather as punishment or revenge against the Germans, Japanese, and Italians for their governments' aggressive wars. One of the earliest proponents of using the threat of mass civilian casualties as a deterrent predates the war. Italian General Giulio Douhet published his book, *Il dominio dell'aria* (*The Command of the Air*), in 1921. He explicitly argued for attacking population centers at the outset of a war. Douhet considered such attacks an efficient way to end wars quickly, or even, as the language of the nuclear age would later put it, to deter them by offering the prospect of vast civilian destruction. In the event of war, he preferred to see civilians die suddenly than to sacrifice the country's best — young male soldiers, in his view — in years of relentless trench warfare such as characterized the Great War. The preference for saving young male soldiers at the expense of civilians defies our gendered expectations of protecting innocent women and children, but Douhet was not the only one to express it. During World War II, the British pacifist Vera Brittain produced an impressively researched study of the impact of Anglo-American bombing on civilians and cities in Germany. George Orwell, of all people, took her to task for excessive emphasis on such "catchwords" as "killing civilians," "massacre of women and children," and "destruction of our cultural heritage." Why, he asked, "is it worse to kill civilians than soldiers? Obviously one must not kill children if it is in any way avoidable, but it is only in propaganda pamphlets that every bomb drops on a school or an orphanage."²⁶ A fundamental difference between civilians and soldiers is that the latter bear arms and can defend themselves, whereas the former are literally defenseless.

Following the outbreak of World War II, the British had pursued a bombing strategy against Germany and the industrial cities of Genoa, Milan, and Turin in Italy that they called "dehousing." It

²⁶ Vera Brittain, "Massacre by Bombing: The Facts behind the British-American Attack on Germany," *Fellowship* 10, no. 3 (March 1944); George Orwell, "As I Please," *Tribune*, May 19, 1944.

deliberately harmed ordinary working-class families while claiming to pursue military objectives (e.g., destroying munitions factories near the workers' houses). The strategy was championed by Churchill and his science advisers Solly Zuckerman and F. A. Lindemann.²⁷ Dehousing resembles the recommendation that a non-civilian, military target be used for the first atomic bombing of Japan, as Holloway quotes the minutes of the meeting in which it was proposed: "A vital war plant employing a large number of workers and closely surrounded by workers' houses." He dryly adds: "it implied a very narrow definition of 'civilian,' if workers' houses could be described as a non-civilian target."

Punitive bombing of civilians, a practice that US President Franklin D. Roosevelt had denounced as "inhuman barbarism" when Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy did it, became the regular practice of the Allied war effort. Remarkably, it also played a role in the president's vision of a postwar security order. Roosevelt's plan for "four policemen" (the US, UK, USSR, and China) to maintain international security envisioned punishment of aggressors. "Violators first would be quarantined," he explained to the journalist Arthur Sweetser, "and then, if they persisted in their disruptive activities, bombed at the rate of a city a day until they agreed to behave."²⁸ Roosevelt's proposal predated the successful test of an atomic bomb, which occurred after his death. When Churchill learned about the Alamogordo test at the Potsdam conference in July 1945, he waxed enthusiastic about the atomic bomb's use against his wartime ally and anticipated enemy, the USSR. "We now had something in our hands which would redress the balance with the Russians!" as Holloway quotes him. "Now we could say ... if you insist on doing this or that, well we can just blot out Moscow, then Stalingrad, then Kiev, then Kuibyshev, Kharkov, Stalingrad [*sic*], Sebastopol etc. etc. And now where are the Russians!!!"

The impulse to punish civilians for the transgressions of their leaders, evident in the strategic bombing campaigns of World War II, became a staple of the nuclear era. Holloway quotes McNamara from 1963 on the requirements of "assured destruction" as a deterrent to a Soviet attack: the "ability to destroy, after a well planned

27 Solly Zuckerman, *From Apes to Warlords* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 113, 132, 137–40.

28 Quoted in Martin J. Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: The Atomic Bomb and the Grand Alliance* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 88.

and executed Soviet surprise attack on our Strategic Nuclear Forces, the Soviet government and military controls, plus a large percentage of the population and economy (e.g. 30% of their population, 50% of their industrial capacity, and 150 of their cities).” In other words, the United States would destroy 150 Soviet cities and nearly a third of their inhabitants in response to an attack ordered — or perhaps even launched inadvertently — by Soviet leaders or their subordinates. Harming civilians for the misfortune of living under bellicose leaders has continued long past the Cold War, with the 1999 NATO air war against Serbia, Russia’s invasions of Chechnya, Israel’s destruction of Gaza and Lebanon, and Donald Trump’s genocidal threats against Iran.

When Trump vowed, “A whole civilization will die tonight, never to be brought back again,” some Republican politicians located their backbones and retorted, “That’s not who we are.” But it is. Even though Holloway recounts in excruciating detail Soviet and US plans for using tens of thousands of nuclear weapons against ostensibly military targets, the power of nuclear deterrence, to the extent it is real, lies in the threat of mass civilian casualties. “If we regard nuclear weapons as deterrents, we plan their use in order not to have to use them. It is a troubling moral problem,” he writes. Others have been more unequivocal in their condemnation of nuclear deterrence. Bernard Lown, the cofounder of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, once characterized nuclear retaliation as a “sick Hitlerite policy” and analogized it to the total destruction of the Bohemian village of Lidice, Czechoslovakia, and massacre of its inhabitants, ordered by Hitler in June 1942 in reprisal for the assassination of Nazi official Reinhard Heydrich.²⁹ Lown’s point is that once deterrence fails, nuclear retaliation means wholesale slaughter of civilians as revenge. That is why well-meaning proposals that the nuclear-armed states adopt policies of no first use of nuclear weapons, while potentially stabilizing in the sorts of nuclear crises Holloway recounts, are still morally reprehensible in what retaliatory second use would entail.

One of the reasons threats of mass killing of civilians became an acceptable way to try to deter war is because the states that used that method of warfare during World War II emerged victorious.

29 Author’s interview with Bernard Lown, April 9, 1994, Brookline, MA.

A lesson that Churchill took from the Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals, relayed to a close military adviser at the time, was "it shows that if you get into a war, it is supremely important to win it. You and I would be in a pretty pickle if we had lost."³⁰ Military leaders from LeMay to McNamara reportedly drew similar conclusions. So did Leo Szilard, the physicist who drafted Albert Einstein's letter to President Roosevelt warning about the possibility that Nazi Germany might build an atomic bomb. After it became clear that Germany, now defeated, had not given priority to building such weapons anyhow, the Manhattan Project scientists continued working on the bombs that would destroy Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Szilard wrote a fictionalized account of a future war, won by the USSR, after which the nuclear scientists were put on trial for inventing and supporting the use of weapons of mass destruction.³¹ In fact only one scientist, Joseph Rotblat, had left Los Alamos on grounds of conscience when he learned in late 1944 that there would be no Nazi atomic bomb.

What is perhaps most important to know about the danger and immorality of pursuing nuclear deterrence after World War II is that it was unnecessary. Holloway quotes with apparent approval veteran diplomat and historian George Kennan's doubt "that the Soviet Union wanted world war at any time since 1945, or that it would have been inclined, for any rational political reason, to inaugurate such a war, even had the atomic bomb never been invented." Yet Holloway does not pose the question of whether nuclear deterrence was even needed, if the main adversary had no intention to launch a war. What political scientist Robert Jervis wrote a quarter century ago remains true today: "The Soviet archives have yet to reveal any serious plans for unprovoked aggression against Western Europe, not to mention a first strike against the United States."³² Holloway's research confirms the point. Although he explains that Soviet leaders assumed a future war would begin with an invasion from the West, he does not discuss the war plans

30 Peggy McGuinness, "Churchill on War Crimes Trials," *OpinioJuris*, January 23, 2006.

31 Leo Szilard, "My Trial as a War Criminal," *University of Chicago Law Review* 17, no. 1 (1949).

32 Robert Jervis, "Was the Cold War a Security Dilemma?," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 59.

that were declassified as part of Gorbachev's policy of glasnost in the 1980s. They showed that following the defeat of Nazi Germany, the Soviet army planned to undertake a strictly defensive strategy in the event of war in Europe, defending in three bands — 50, 100, and 150 kilometers — from the border of its occupation zone before seeking to recapture territory. Until the plans were revealed, most observers, even if they assumed Soviet status quo intentions, expected that the Soviet Union, if attacked, would seek to avoid another war fought on its territory by immediately going on the offensive. On the contrary, well into the 1950s, as Joseph Stalin began rebuilding the armies of the satellite states under Soviet occupation, their strategies "remained unequivocally defensive."³³

Meanwhile, in May 1945, Churchill had ordered the British military's Joint Planning Staff to conduct a study of the feasibility of a surprise attack against Soviet occupation forces in Germany at a time when the USSR was still an ally. Operation Unthinkable concluded that the prospects for success were poor, but in the meantime, as Holloway reports, Soviet intelligence, through its sources in London, briefed Stalin and his foreign minister Viacheslav Molotov on the plan even before its final results were conveyed to Churchill. US war plans during the period of nuclear monopoly envisaged attacking Soviet cities with atomic bombs. One approved in December 1948 envisaged 133 bombs launched against seventy cities.³⁴ Holloway reports on such plans and the threat they were intended to counter, along with a table that shows the United States moving from a position of nuclear monopoly until 1949 to a vast superiority in nuclear weapons by 1961: the US had 170 nuclear weapons in 1949, when the USSR tested its first, and the US arsenal grew to a mind-numbing 22,229, compared

33 "Operativnyi plan deistvii gruppy Sovetskikh okkupatsionnykh voisk v Germanii, 5 noiabria 1946 goda [Operational plan of action of the group of Soviet occupational forces in Germany, November 5, 1946]," *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal* 2 (February 1989): 26–31; "Plan komandirskikh zaniatii po operativno-takticheskoi podgotovke v polevom upravlenii gruppy Sovetskikh okkupatsionnykh voisk v Germanii na 1948 god [Plan of command exercises for operational-tactical training in the field command of the group of Soviet occupation forces in Germany for 1948]," *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal* 8 (August 1989): 24–26. For an excellent overview that draws on additional archival materials, see Mastny, "Imagining War." The quotation is from Petr Luňák, "War Plans from Stalin to Brezhnev: The Czechoslovak Pivot," in *War Plans and Alliances*, ed. Mastny, Holtsmark, and Wenger, 74.

34 David Alan Rosenberg, "The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945–1960," *International Security* 7, no. 4 (Spring 1983): 16.

to the Soviet side's 2,471 in 1961, at the height of the Berlin Crisis. Holloway might have devoted more attention to the exaggeration of the Soviet military threat dating from these early years, particularly the war scare of 1947–48 that was intended, as *The Wall Street Journal* put it, “to prod more Army-Navy money out of Congress” — the origins of the US military-industrial complex.³⁵

Moving beyond the Cold War, one might argue against repeating its mistakes by treating post-Soviet Russia as a serious military threat. Unfortunately, however, today's situation is different. Neither NATO nor Vladimir Putin's Russia is a status quo power, and Putin has already unleashed a war against neighboring Ukraine, intended to extinguish it as an independent country. Even if one judges NATO's eastern expansion as a provocative error, that does not justify Putin's war, whether or not he feared that Ukraine would one day join the alliance and serve as a launching pad for an invasion. Preventive war is plainly illegal, and in Russia's case something like committing suicide for fear of death.

Although it is doubtful that Putin would undertake an outright invasion of NATO countries, he has made threatening gestures against Estonia and has specifically named Narva, an outpost on the Russian border closer to Putin's hometown of St Petersburg than to the capital, Tallinn, as a traditional Russian city. With a population of 88 percent Russians, many without Estonian citizenship, Narva could be vulnerable to infiltration of “little green men” along the model of Ukraine's Donbas region in 2014, promotion of a secessionist movement, or capture. Here the nuclear crises of the Cold War that Holloway describes could provide relevant lessons. Narva, like West Berlin, would be difficult or impossible to defend against Russian encroachment, and NATO's policy of extended nuclear deterrence is effectively the same as back then: “If you try anything, we'll blow up the world.” Putin would face some risk of provoking a nuclear response in making a move against Narva, but the potential payoff if NATO did not respond would be high — demonstrating the hollowness of the alliance's commitment to defend indefensible enclaves, like West Berlin during the Cold War.

³⁵ “Russian Scare,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 12, 1947, quoted in Frank Kofsky, *Harry S. Truman and the War Scare of 1948* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).

Might there also be a similar and dangerous misunderstanding of the conditions under which each side would resort to nuclear use, as in the Berlin crises? According to David Holloway, yes. Analyzing Russia's nuclear strategy of "escalate to de-escalate" a month after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, he warned in an article that, "in a period of high tension, a miscalculation could have catastrophic consequences."³⁶ Holloway recommended a strong political response to any Russian use of tactical nuclear weapons rather than nuclear retaliation. Other observers have offered less sensible counsel. A recent report of the self-styled European Nuclear Study Group considered alternatives to the United States' shaky commitment to threaten nuclear holocaust to defend European territory — a prospect even less plausible under Donald Trump than under his predecessors, given the administration's anti-Europe animus. The report's main worry was that a European jointly controlled nuclear arsenal might lack the credibility, will, and "political institutions and processes that signal a 'readiness to push the button' across the range of plausible scenarios for which deterrence is designed."³⁷ The authors might profit from studying the Cold War nuclear crises in Holloway's book and reconsider whether readiness to push the nuclear button is the best path to security.

In July 2017, meeting at United Nations' headquarters in New York, 122 countries answered that question with a resounding no. They voted in favor of a legally binding treaty to ban nuclear weapons. The Nuclear Ban Treaty came into force in January 2021, after fifty countries ratified it — the story that Acheson tells in *Banning the Bomb*. Unless the effort continues to stigmatize the possession as well as the use of nuclear weapons, we are unlikely to see a reduction in the danger of nuclear war.

Writing about the minority of countries that still stake their security on nuclear deterrence, Holloway concludes his study with a question:

³⁶ David Holloway, "Read the fine print: Russia's nuclear weapon use policy," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March 22, 2022.

³⁷ Tobias Bunde et al., "Mind the Deterrence Gap: Assessing Europe's Nuclear Options. Report of the European Nuclear Study Group," Munich/Berlin/St. Gallen: Munich Security Conference, Centre for International Security at the Hertie School, Institute of Political Science at the University of St. Gallen, February 2026, doi.org/10.47342/SNSE5421.

What does it say about us, about our societies, and about the world we live in, that in the interest of national security, we have felt the need to build immensely destructive weapons, to create missiles to deliver them to targets around the world, to select targets, to train troops to handle the weapons and launch them, and finally to convince our adversaries (and ourselves) that we are prepared to implement strategies that could wreak death and destruction on a massive scale?

He doesn't provide an answer but acknowledges that "it is a troubling moral problem."

In his final remarks, Holloway returns to Schelling to evaluate his claim, mainly associated with the scholarly work of Nina Tannenwald, that a "nuclear taboo" has prevented the use of nuclear weapons in war since 1945. Holloway seems skeptical, and the history he recounts of hair-raising nuclear crises shows that skepticism is warranted. "A taboo implies that a person who engages in prohibited behavior will be sanctioned by a group, because the behavior is regarded as dangerous for the group," he writes. But despite the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Nuclear Ban Treaty, there has been no sanctioning of countries that have built tens of thousands of nuclear weapons, trained their troops to use them with detailed military manuals and simulated (and real) nuclear exercises, threatened nuclear and nonnuclear states alike with massive destruction, and despoiled the territories and poisoned the environment of indigenous peoples in Algeria, Kazakhstan, Nevada, and the Pacific islands in the interest of testing their nuclear explosives. To say there is a taboo against nuclear use under these circumstances is akin to saying there is a taboo against cannibalism while preparing recipes, cookbooks, and utensils to cook and serve human flesh.

Forsberg wrote a fascinating doctoral dissertation, published years after her untimely death, that studied the conditions for abolishing what she called socially sanctioned (as in accepted) violence. Drawing on psychology, anthropology, archeology, sociology, and history, she studied the cases of human sacrifice, cannibalism, and slavery, all once accepted, but — through a combination of moral argument and political activism — eventually

rendered unthinkable.³⁸ Although best known for the Nuclear Freeze campaign, Forsberg considered her life's work the theorizing and mobilizing of popular action to achieve the abolition of war. She thought war might go the way of those other inhumane practices, if enough effort were put to exposing its evil nature and mobilizing against it. We were lucky to survive the period David Holloway describes in *Nuclear Weapons: An International History*, but we will need more than luck to eliminate the scourge of nuclear weapons and war. ☪

³⁸ Randall Caroline Watson Forsberg, *Toward a Theory of Peace: The Role of Moral Beliefs* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).