

# Reassessing the Cold War alliances

*Petr Lunak considers how documents discovered in Warsaw Pact archives are influencing and challenging conventional interpretations of the Cold War alliances.*

The period since the end of the Cold War has been especially stimulating for historians of that era. Whereas, under normal circumstances, researchers are obliged to wait several decades before classified documents are made public, the demise of the Eastern bloc has been followed by the opening of some former Warsaw Pact countries' archives, which have, in turn, provided hitherto unimagined possibilities for study. In 1999, an international project entitled *Parallel History of NATO and the Warsaw Pact* was established bringing together scholars from both East and West to assess the record of the two alliances during the Cold War. In the process, key controversies – such as the nature of the threat from the Warsaw Pact, the relative importance of nuclear deterrence and the reasons for the collapse of the Eastern bloc – are being re-examined, with new evidence challenging the conventional wisdom.

Traditionally, the danger of the Cold War turning hot was considered to have been greatest in the early 1950s in the aftermath of North Korea's invasion of South Korea. As Konrad Adenauer put it in his memoirs: "Stalin was planning the same procedure for West Germany as had been used in Korea." Indeed, the notion of an imminent Soviet march into Western Europe in the 1950s was advanced by many historians, including the then Czech émigré Karel Kaplan in *Dans les Archives du Comité Central: Trente ans de secrets du Bloc Soviétique* (Michel, 1978). Basing his thesis on an interview with former Czechoslovak Defence Minister Alexej Cepicka, Kaplan claimed that Stalin called upon Eastern Europe's Communist leaders to prepare an invasion of Western Europe at a meeting in Moscow in January 1951.

This interpretation of events has since been challenged by many researchers. Convinced that the Soviet Union was never such a formidable enemy, Czech-born American historian Vojtech Mastny, for example, concluded in *The Cold*



Cold War warriors: The *Parallel History of NATO and the Warsaw Pact* project has brought together scholars from both East and West

*War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years* (Cambridge University Press, 1996) that Stalin feared imminent Western attack in Europe, which he believed would come in the wake of a series of Western defeats in Korea. As a result, Mastny argued that what others viewed as a call to prepare for attack against the West should, in fact, be interpreted as a call to pre-

pare for defence of the East.

New evidence, uncovered in the archives of the former Eastern bloc, appears to add weight to Mastny's arguments. In particular, the transcript of the January 1951 Moscow meeting, drafted by Romanian Armed Forces Minister Emil Bodnaras and recently uncovered in Bucharest, seems to confirm the defensive character of Stalin's intentions, an interpretation that is further supported by the fact that no preparation for an invasion of Western Europe was made at the time. Indeed, well into the 1950s, all Europe's Communist armies concentrated on territorial defence. From the Czechoslovak archives, for example, we know that although military exercises did occasionally include offensive operations, they almost never took place outside Czechoslovakia. In the few cases when forays into foreign territory were envisioned, it was only in the framework of a successful counter-attack.

If evidence from the Czechoslovak archives is circumstantial, documents recently found in Poland offer more conclusive proof of the defensive thinking of the Eastern bloc at the time. Drafted when Poland's defence minister was the Soviet Marshall Konstantin Rokossovskij, the Polish Army's 1951 war plan was clearly based on the assumption that Western military invasion was inevitable and therefore focuses on defensive actions to be taken on Polish territory. Haunted by the memory of Nazi Germany's surprise invasion in 1941, Eastern military strategists could not envisage the next war in any terms other than one beginning with a Western attack. Paradoxically, therefore, at a time when Western decision-makers were obsessed with the Soviet threat, Eastern military planners sought nothing more than to contain what they saw as imminent Western invasion.

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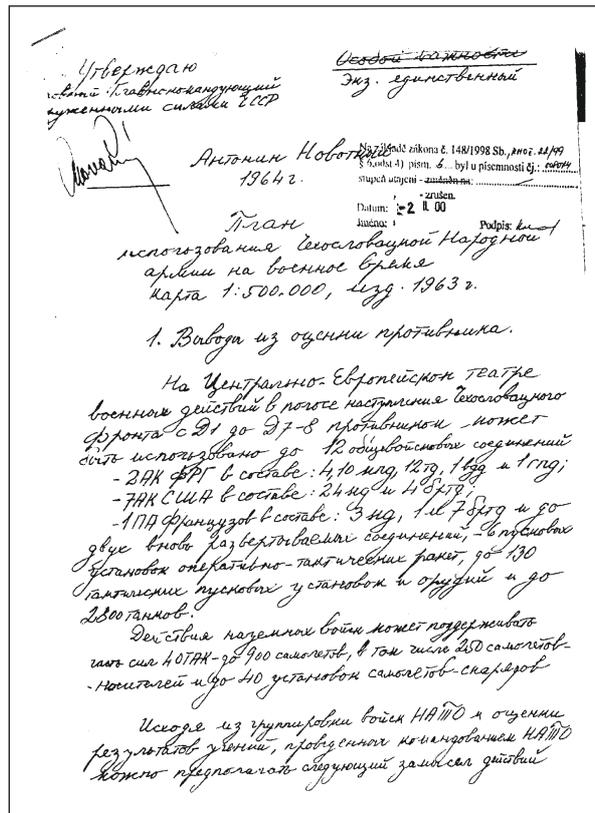
If Soviet intentions in the early 1950s now seem less ambitious than once believed, does this vindicate those who questioned the need for Western efforts through NATO to prevent what was thought to be an imminent Soviet attack? To make such a judgement, it is important to take several additional factors into consideration. Firstly, what we know today is not what Western leaders knew at the time. Secondly, although we now know that Stalin did not wish to repeat the Korean experience in Europe, it is not clear whether his attitude would have been the same had NATO not existed. In fact, his decision to give the go-ahead for the attack on South Korea in the summer of 1950 was probably based on a misreading of the likely US reaction, after then US Secretary of State Dean Acheson had publicly excluded the Korean peninsula from the US security sphere. When the United States intervened in Korea, Stalin could be almost sure that it would also honour its obligations under the Washington Treaty in Europe. If, therefore, NATO's existence failed to deter a communist attack on Korea, it was, nevertheless, indispensable as an insurance policy for the West in its aftermath.

The shift from defensive to offensive thinking in the Warsaw Pact seems, ironically, to have taken place in the period that has traditionally been viewed as a time of improving East-West relations after of Stalin's death. This transformation was closely connected with a reassessment of the role of nuclear arms. Although Stalin was eager to acquire nuclear weapons, he did not consider them a critical, strategic factor because of, among other reasons, their small number. In the wake of Stalin's death, Soviet strategists began to discuss the implications of nuclear war, at a time when nuclear weapons already formed the cornerstone of NATO's doctrine of massive retaliation. In this way, nuclear weapons were belatedly included in the strategic plans of Eastern European armies in the mid-1950s. This discussion and its results are brilliantly described by Herbert Dinerstein in *War and the Soviet Union: Nuclear Weapons and the Revolution in Soviet Military and Political Thinking* (Praeger, 1959) and Raymond Garthoff in *Soviet Strategy in the Nuclear Age* (Praeger, 1958).

As these and other authors have pointed out, there were fundamental differences in the understanding of nuclear

conflict and its potential consequences in East and West. According to Soviet military planners of the time, nuclear weapons would determine the speed of war, but not its entire character. Since nuclear arms considerably shortened the stages of war, Soviet strategists argued, it would be necessary to try to gain the initiative with a powerful, preemptive nuclear and conventional strike. Whereas Western planners never envisaged actions beyond the initial, massive nuclear clash — as can be seen in Gregory Pedlow's edited *NATO Strategy Documents: 1949-1969* (NATO, 1997) — Soviet strategists assumed that their massive strike would prepare the way for a ground offensive. Persuaded of the possibility of winning a nuclear war, Eastern-bloc operational plans viewed such a conflict as a realistic scenario, thereby downgrading any Western deterrent and making war perilously more realistic as a prospect.

This crude military thinking can also be seen in a plan which I uncovered in the military archives in Prague, whose details can be found on the *Parallel History of NATO and the Warsaw Pact* web site and will be analysed in a forthcoming issue of *International Cold War History Bulletin*. According to this document, which dates from 1964, the then Czechoslovak and Soviet military planners anticipated advancing into France within a few days of the outbreak of a war, capturing Lyon on the ninth day and turning Western Europe into a nuclear inferno.



The 1964 Czechoslovak war plan

The 1964 Czechoslovak war plan ignored the possibility of a non-nuclear war in Europe and assumed that the war would start with a massive nuclear strike by the West. Drawn up in the period of détente after the conclusion of the first arms-control agreement, the 1963 Test-Ban Treaty, it shows that the Soviet leaders at this time remained wedded to Leninist notions of an aggressive Western bloc, views that were harboured by Soviet leaders and their Eastern European allies well into the 1980s. The plan is something of a revelation, since it appears that NATO's doctrine of flexible response, which sought to enhance the credibility of deterrence by limiting conflict to a supposedly manageable level, failed to discourage the Soviets from harbouring notions of winning a nuclear war. Moreover, it indicates that the Soviets had no illusions about the possibility of fighting either a conventional or a limited nuclear war.

Although US nuclear superiority failed to discourage Soviet leaders from indulging in nuclear brinkmanship during the two major crises of the Cold war – over Berlin in 1961 and Cuba in 1962 – the deterrent effect of Western nuclear weapons has generally been taken for granted. However, as John Mueller suggests in *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (Basic Books, 1989), Western reliance on nuclear deterrence seems to have been neither the only conceivable, nor even the most reliable way of preventing the outbreak of a Third World War. Indeed, according to documents uncovered through the *Parallel History* project, it even seems that, in the last decade of the Cold War, the Soviets were less concerned about the precise numbers of nuclear weapons on both sides and increasingly worried that they were falling behind in conventional weaponry – especially in the field of high-tech, high-precision weapons – where they had once held an undisputed advantage. Although the debate on the effect of Western deterrence on the Soviets remains inconclusive, the West's conventional weapons and a clear willingness to use them appear to have been at least as effective a deterrent as the threat of nuclear Armageddon.

Is it fair to say that the Eastern bloc collapsed under the weight of its own failures and that the West only played a marginal role in its demise? Or was the West, and more specifically NATO, critical to this event? The answer may be rather subtle. As Mastny argues in his superbly researched *Learning from the Enemy: NATO as a Model for the Warsaw Pact* (Zürcher Beiträge zur Sicherheitspolitik und Konfliktforschung, Nr. 58, 2001), NATO was not only an adversary but, in many ways, a model of how to address the perennial crisis of the Warsaw Pact. However, as Mastny illustrates, the various attempts to emulate NATO in the end deepened that crisis.

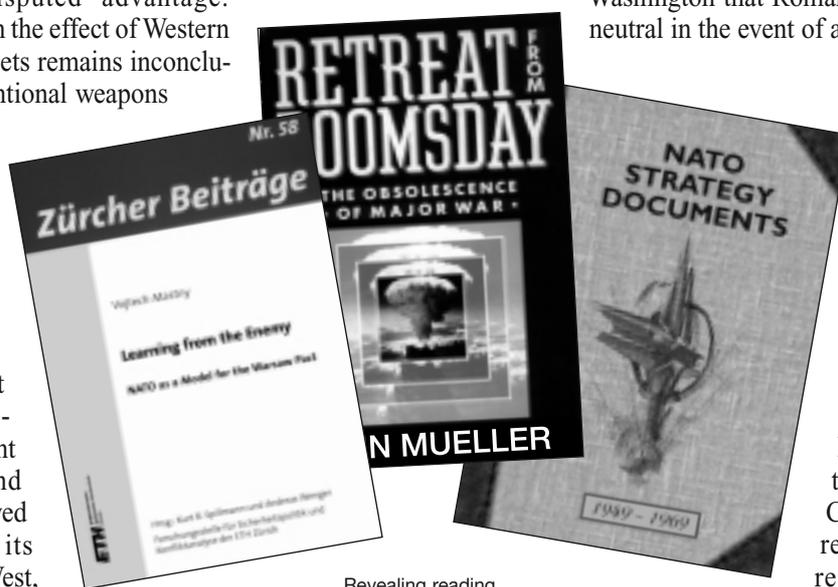
The difference between NATO and the Warsaw Pact was as obvious as it was crucial. NATO was created at the request of Western European governments and, in spite of the undisputed leadership of the United States, it was a community of equals. By contrast, the Warsaw Pact was a creation of the Soviet Union in which the other members initially had minimal influence. Indeed, when Nikita Khrushchev created the Warsaw Pact in 1955, allegedly in response to the entry of the Federal Republic of Germany into NATO, the decision to do so was above all a tactical ploy. By proposing the simultaneous disbanding of both

alliances, Khrushchev believed that he could get rid of NATO, while maintaining a system of bilateral defence agreements with Eastern European nations.

Nevertheless, once the Warsaw Pact came into existence, Soviet leaders found it increasingly difficult to resist attempts by Eastern European allies to turn it into a genuine alliance, not unlike NATO. When initial reform efforts failed to generate any tangible results, the inability of the Soviets to accord their allies a more equal status undermined enthusiasm among some Eastern European allies for the newly created alliance. Increasingly, the Soviet Union's Eastern European allies found themselves in a situation in which they were obliged to share the risks involved in Soviet ventures without having a say in managing them. In this way, in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, we now know that Bucharest secretly let it be known to Washington that Romania intended to remain neutral in the event of a nuclear conflict.

While reluctant to give the Eastern European allies more say than necessary, Mastny writes, the Soviets realised the necessity of giving the allies a sense of belonging in the wake of growing Romanian dissent and the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia. The results of this ongoing reform were, however, mixed. While trying to

satisfy the allies' desire for a more equal alliance, it rapidly became apparent that the Soviets would not be able to give them what they really wanted, namely similar consultation to that which the Western European nations secured through NATO. On the other hand, the Soviets did succeed in educating a Moscow-loyal officer corps by forging a more equal relationship with military establishments in various Eastern European countries. This saved them, for example, from having to invade Poland in the early 1980s, where the immediate crisis was temporarily resolved by the military coup of General Wojciech Jaruzelski. When, however, the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, tried to breathe new life into the Eastern bloc, his hope of marrying a Western-style alliance of equals with a revamped Soviet system only exacerbated the crisis of the Warsaw Pact and hastened its demise.



Revealing reading

 Details of the *Parallel History of NATO and the Warsaw Pact* project, all key documents and results of historical research are available on the internet at: [www.isn.ethz.ch/php](http://www.isn.ethz.ch/php)