

Discussing the plans of the Warsaw Pact and NATO

On 22 and 23 March 2007, military historians from Russia, the United States and Eastern and Western Europe convened to discuss the operation plans during the Cold War. Now that the archives are being opened, we are gaining ever more knowledge of how East and West were at loggerheads with one another during that period.

The conference was an initiative by the Netherlands Institute of Military History (NIMH) and was organised in cooperation with its German counterpart, the *Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt* (MGFA) in Potsdam. The conference took place in Münster and was supported by the *Zentrum für Niederlande-Studien* and the 1 (GE/NL) Corps Headquarters, which are located there. Lieutenant General J.A. van Diepenbrugge, the commander of the Corps, was present during both days of the conference.

The conference centered on the plans for the Central Sector in Europe in the fifties and sixties. The choice for this period is logical as the archives for this time-period are easily accessible. It was, at the same time, the period when both sides were armed to the hilt and facing each other along the Iron Curtain.

Prof. Lawrence S. Kaplan, the American ‘Grand Old Man’ of historical research into the Cold War alliances, opened the conference with the opening lecture. In his lecture, Prof. Kaplan provided an overview of the most important international developments during the period, in which it was very noticeable how strong the distrust between the two major powers (the United States and the Soviet Union) had been from the start. Each action was seen as yet more evidence of the other’s bad intentions, instigating a costly conventional and nuclear arms race.

It does not appear that the Soviet Union had offensive intentions. It did, however, have plans to attack immediately (strategic offensive) in the event of war breaking out and, from 1960, to use nuclear weapons, in the context of the Warsaw Pact. This became clear from, among other things, the presentations by Colonel Dr Victor A. Gavrilov (Chief, Division of Foreign Military History, Institute of Military History, Ministry of Defence, Moscow) and Dr Matthias Uhl (Deutsches Historisches Institut, Moscow). When it became clear that the Americans were not going to leave Europe, the Soviet Union concentrated on retaining its spheres of influence in Eastern Europe. Past events (for example, the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941) had made its political leadership very distrusting. If, according to Moscow, a war in the short-term became inevitable, then an offensive with all available resources was the best defence.

The most important military archives in Moscow are, incidentally, still kept tightly sealed. What we do know of the operational plans stems from analyses of various military exercises, which were dug up here and there from the archives of former member states of the Warsaw Pact. A prime example of this is the ‘Troika’ war game of the Nationale Volksarmee of the German Democratic Republic from 1967, which was subject of the analysis by Dr Torsten Diedrich of the MGFA.

The NIMH historian Prof. Jan Hoffenaar showed in his contribution concerning intelligence gathering in the Warsaw Pact that the leaders in the Kremlin and in East Berlin knew full well that NATO had no offensive intentions. They did, however, uphold the image of an offensive adversary. An aggressive NATO suited the Marxist-Leninist world view. And, as already mentioned, historical experiences also gave reason to maintain such an image of the enemy.

In addition, the Federal Republic of Germany's accession to NATO in 1955 was less than reassuring to the Eastern bloc. Last but not least, the Kremlin needed this negative view of the enemy in order to keep the Warsaw Pact intact.

Various contributions from historians from different NATO countries focused on the preparations for a potential military confrontation. Dr Bruno Thoß (MGFA) provided an overview of the development of NATO's strategic and operational planning. Lieutenant Colonel Dr Helmut Hammerich (MGFA), Dr Simon Marsh (Army Historical Branch, Ministry of Defence, London), Lieutenant Colonel Dr Jean-Michel Sterkendries (Royal Military School, Brussels) and Jan Hoffenaar discussed the operational preparations of the armed forces of the Federal Republic of Germany, the United Kingdom, Belgium and the Netherlands respectively. Each member state had its own specific interests, problems and solutions. The British intelligence specialist Prof. Richard J. Aldrich of the University of Nottingham gave the audience a glimpse of the operational intelligence work on NATO's side.

The contribution of Dr Donald C. Carter of the U.S. Army Center of Military History in Washington was also interesting. He explained how differently the military commanders of the fifties (veterans of the Second World War) and those of the sixties viewed nuclear weapons. The former found the use of these weapons, especially on the battlefield, to be self-explanatory while the latter, the generals of the sixties, saw the weapons first and foremost as a political deterrent.

The enormous increase in the number of tactical nuclear weapons among the armed forces of both sides led to far-reaching reorganisations within those same armed forces. Mobility, mechanisation, armouring and smaller independent units were key terms. The NIMH historian Herman Roozenbeek illustrated in his presentation how logistic development on the NATO side lagged behind this development in armament. The phased advance of the allied line of defence – from the Rhine-IJssel line via the Weser-Fulda line to the Elbe river – was, incidentally, at least as important a reason for the logistic arrears. Prof. Dimitrij Filippovych (Head, Department of Military History, Academy of Military Science, Ministry of Defence, Moscow) gave a presentation on the question of how operational logistics adapted to nuclear warfare over the years.

In closing the conference, Dr Gregory Pedlow (Chief Historical Office, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, Mons, Belgium) gave a well-balanced summary lecture. All in all, the conference was very informative and contributed to enhancing our knowledge of the military aspects of the Cold War. The contributions will be rewritten as articles and will be published collectively in book form next year.

Jan Hoffenaar