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Commentary on Phillip A. Karber and Jerald A. Combs, "The United States, NATO, and the Soviet Threat to Western Europe: Military Estimates and Policy Options, 1945-1963"

John S. Duffield*

Introduction

Thanks to a wealth of new documents made possible by the end of the Cold War, many historians are reconsidering the origins, evolution, consequences, and meaning of that historic conflict.¹

Deserving particular attention in this process of reassessment is

* I wish to thank to Phillip Karber and Jerald Combs for providing me with copies of several of the documents cited in their article that are located in the Karber Collection.

the East-West political-military confrontation in the heart of Europe, which did so much to define the Cold War. How did that confrontation come about? Could it have been avoided, or at least mitigated in intensity, and possibly brought to a peaceful conclusion at an earlier date? How appropriate was Western policy in the region? The search for ever better-informed answers to such questions must rank high among scholarly priorities.

Consequently, the article by Phillip Karber and Jerald Combs represents a potentially valuable contribution to current historical debates. Its primary goal is to shed new light on Western intelligence estimates of the Soviet military threat to Western Europe during the early Cold War. In particular, the article seeks to appraise the validity of those assessments, and thus the appropriateness of the Western military plans that flowed from them, in view of what we now know about actual Soviet conventional capabilities at the time. A second and derivative objective is to evaluate the existing scholarship on Western threat assessments. How accurately have historians and others portrayed them?

This commentary assesses the article in terms of both of these goals. What do Karber and Combs add to our existing knowledge of Western threat assessments? And do they cause us to call into question the judgments of previous scholarship? In order to keep my comments to a reasonable length, I will

concentrate on those parts of the article that concern the 1950s and, to a lesser extent, the early 1960s. My principal rationale for this choice of focus is that, prior to the outbreak of the Korean War in mid-1950, the impact of Western estimates of Soviet capabilities on Western planning was attenuated by relatively benign assessments of Soviet intentions. In addition, I am less familiar with the details of Western threat assessments conducted before the establishment of NATO in 1949.

I find that Karber and Combs add somewhat to our understanding of Western military estimates and confirm a number of previous findings. They do not, however, present as much new information as they suggest, and their critique of the existing literature is largely unfounded. This commentary concludes with a brief discussion of some of the important questions that remain for historians to answer.²

New Information?

Perhaps the most valuable contribution of the article lies in its evaluation of the accuracy of Western assessments. To this end, Karber and Combs have juxtaposed much of the information that is now available on actual Soviet military capabilities during the period in question with Western estimates of those capabilities at the time. In this way, they are able to show (pp. 15-16)³ that Western military analysts first

overestimated and then underestimated overall Soviet capabilities. In the late 1940s, the Soviet army may have contained as few as 1.8 million men, although Western intelligence put the total at 2.5 million. In the 1950s, in contrast, Western analysts continued to peg the size of the Red Army at 2.5 million even as the actual figure climbed to as high as 3.6 million. At the same time, Karber and Combs argue (p. 4) that those analysts were nevertheless able to construct accurate estimates of the Soviet military threat to Western Europe, which constituted a subset of overall Soviet capabilities.

A second noteworthy aspect of the article is the considerable detail that it provides on the methods by which Western analysts arrived at these estimates. Particularly interesting is the description of how analysts used the Field Post Numbers of Soviet units to determine their existence, location, and activities (pp. 7-8, esp. note 22). Of related interest are the discussions of why Western analysts adhered to the estimate of 2.5 million men in Soviet army despite the receipt of information suggesting that this figure was either too low (p. 21) or too high (pp. 33-34).

Third, Karber and Combs perform a useful scholarly service by presenting additional evidence that confirms previous scholarly characterizations of U.S. estimates of Soviet military capabilities in the 1950s, including the size of the active Soviet army (2.5 million men), the number of Soviet divisions,

both active (175) and reserve (140), and their manning levels in peacetime (60-80 percent).⁴ Nevertheless, although their comparison of what analysts then thought and what we now know is original, much of the detail that Karber and Combs provide about the content of Western estimates in the 1950s and early 1960s is not. Likewise, they offer little information on NATO strategy, force requirements, and actual military capabilities that has not been described elsewhere, often on the basis of the same primary sources that they cite.⁵

Not only do Karber and Combs offer no fundamental challenge to the picture that other scholars have drawn of Western estimates and NATO planning, moreover, but they oversimplify the documentary record by overlooking important evidence and critical distinctions. To be sure, space constraints typically preclude the inclusion of all possibly relevant data. But it is striking that Karber and Combs dwell much more on the indicators of Soviet strength that appear in the assessments than they do on the available evidence of Soviet weaknesses. Similarly, wherever a range of estimates is to be found in the archives, they have tended to note only the highest of those available. Any of the qualifications of Soviet capabilities contained in the documents that they do present are typically confined to the notes. This consistent pattern of selective reporting raises questions about the accuracy of their portrayal of Western estimates.

With regard to overall Soviet capabilities, for example, Karber and Combs argue (pp. 13-14) that the Soviet Union had enough tanks to equip all 175 active divisions, and possibly 140 or so reserve divisions as well. In so doing, they play down the fact that many Soviet divisions had little organic armor (note 47) and that, on average, Soviet divisions contained perhaps as few as 100 armored fighting vehicles each.⁶

With regard to Soviet mobilization schedules, Karber and Combs mention (pp. 10-11 and 14) only those estimates stating that the active army divisions could be ready by M+5 and the reserve divisions by M+30. They fail to note the longer estimates, of up to M+30 and M+180, respectively, that can be found in the archives.⁷ In fact, at least one of the documents that they cite (JCS 2073/7) clearly describes the M+5/M+30 estimates as "maximum" Soviet ground force mobilization capabilities.

With regard to Soviet forces in Eastern Europe, Karber and Combs mention numbers of divisions and the increase in manning levels that took place in Germany in the late 1940s and early 1950s (pp. 19-20). They do not acknowledge, however, the relatively small size of the Soviet division slice, even when fully manned, in comparison with its NATO counterparts or the expectation of at least some U.S. analysts that the Soviet Union would need to maintain substantial forces in the satellite countries.⁸ In addition, they fail to differentiate (pp. 21-23)

between those satellite divisions likely to participate in an attack on the Central Region, which is the geographical focus of their study, and those located in Bulgaria, Rumania, and Albania that would have been employed elsewhere.

Perhaps most problematic of all are the figures that Karber and Combs offer (pp. 20 and 24-25) for the estimated size (100 or more divisions) of a reinforced Soviet attack against Western Europe, which was a critical Western planning factor. Once again, they fail to distinguish between the magnitude of the total threat to the region and the smaller number of divisions that would likely have been brought to bear on the central front.⁹ And they again cite only the highest available figures for Western estimates, overlooking the range of estimates that actually appear in U.S. documents.¹⁰ Finally, the provenance of some of the numbers in the tables for Soviet divisions is unclear, since they do not appear in the given citations.

New Analysis?

In the process of describing Western intelligence estimates, Karber and Combs seek to set their work apart from the existing literature on the subject, their assessment of which is highly critical. Most importantly, they take previous studies to task for wrongly charging that Western analysts intentionally exaggerated Soviet military capabilities (pp. 2, 23, and 38).

They argue, in contrast, that U.S. and NATO intelligence estimates of the threat to Western Europe were generally accurate and that, in any case, no deliberate overestimation took place (p. 4).

There are at least two problems with these claims. First, the principal historical work with which they take issue, a 1982 article by Matthew Evangelista, focuses explicitly on the late 1940s, a period during which Karber and Combs agree (pp, 15-16 and 38) that Western estimates probably overstated Soviet strength.¹¹ Evangelista's suggestion that many in the West may have intentionally exaggerated the threat during that period is not a central part of his argument, being confined to two pages at the end of the article. In any case, this suggestion does not seem unreasonable in view of the extensive evidence concerning actual Soviet capabilities that he presents, evidence that Karber and Combs do not refute.

Second, and more fundamentally, Karber and Combs blur an important set of distinctions. In order to understand this failing, it is necessary to recognize that three separate questions are at issue. The first concerns what Soviet military capabilities actually were. The second concerns what Western analysts thought they were. The third concerns what Western political leaders said they were.

Karber and Combs deal primarily with the accuracy of Western estimates; that is, the correspondence between actual Soviet

capabilities and Western intelligence estimates of them. In contrast, the work of mine that they cite addresses the correspondence between Western military estimates and public characterizations of the threat by Western leaders.¹² In fact, that article pointedly argues that Western assessments in the 1950s were far more nuanced than was suggested by public pronouncements, which typically portrayed the threat in unqualified terms. It nowhere claims that the intelligence estimates themselves were exaggerated.

Thus, given the multiplicity of issues involved, there is not necessarily a conflict between their position and the premise of my article. To the contrary, it is possible -- indeed, the record suggests -- both that military analysts offered honest, if not always accurate, estimates of Soviet capabilities and that Western political leaders often portrayed the threat in exaggerated terms. Karber and Combs either miss or gloss over this fundamental point.

Unanswered Questions

In closing, it is worth noting some of the important questions raised by Karber and Combs that remain unanswered and that might serve as a useful focus for future scholarly inquiry. Their article is not the last word on the subject of Soviet

military capabilities and the validity of Western threat assessments, something that they explicitly acknowledge (p. 3).

One multifaceted question is who knew what and when? Karber and Combs frequently imply that estimates from the mid- and late 1940s informed Western planning in the early 1950s. Nevertheless, we still do not know with any certainty whether and to what degree Western analysts continued to base their assessments on information that was acquired before the formation of NATO. Perhaps we have simply not yet found the relevant contemporary documents in which this intelligence was updated. A related matter concerns the familiarity of political leaders with the details of military estimates when they spoke publicly about the threat. Which documents had they seen? What was the content of the briefings that they had received?

A second set of issues regards the assessment process itself, especially within the United States. What role did each of the various extant intelligence units play in the process? What information did they share with one another? Much of the information that Karber and Combs present come from documents prepared within the U.S. Army. Can we be sure that this information was always made available to and considered at higher levels? Related to this are uncertainties about the reasons for the persistence in U.S. estimates of overall Soviet capabilities despite the receipt of potentially inconsistent information. Although Karber and Combs offer some plausible explanations (pp.

17, 21, and 33-34), their discussion is highly speculative, suggesting the need for further research.

A further set of unanswered questions concerns the details of NATO military planning. On which threat assessments were the alliance's defense plans actually based? In particular, can we safely assume that NATO planners had access to and were free to use all of the information to be found in classified U.S. documents? And given a particular estimate of Soviet capabilities, how did NATO planners determine alliance force requirements? Again, Karber and Combs offer some interesting speculation on the subject (pp. 28-29) but few hard facts. Finally, what were the details of NATO war plans at various times?

Of course, answering questions of this nature is not likely to be easy. Inquiry into these topics is likely to be burdened by the traditionally cautious attitude of the intelligence community toward the revelation of sources and methods, no matter how dated they may be. At the same time, a better understanding of NATO planning will probably require access to the internal records of the alliance, which may be extremely difficult to come by, even assuming that relevant documents exist. Consequently, these are areas in which the organized efforts of historians to achieve the opening of early Cold War archival materials may be highly worthwhile.

Notes

11. See, for example, John Lewis Gaddis, We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History (Oxford, Eng., and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Melvyn P. Leffler, "The Struggle for Germany and the Origins of the Cold War," Occasional Paper No. 16 (Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute, 1996); and the recent secondary works that they cite.

22. Before proceeding, I would like to make clear that I have written on many of the subjects addressed by Karber and Combs. Consequently, the following analysis may be vulnerable to the criticism that I have sought merely to defend my position rather than to advance a scholarly debate. In order to guard against any potential tendencies of that nature, I have attempted wherever possible to base my remarks directly on the available documentary evidence.

33. All page and note references are to the July 1997 version of their manuscript.

44. Compare, for example, Karber and Combs, pp. 8-11, 16-17 (note 56), and 21, with John S. Duffield, "The Soviet Military Threat to Western Europe: US Estimates in the 1950s and 1960s," The Journal of Strategic Studies 15, no. 2 (June 1992), 213-14.

55. NATO's October 1950 military requirements (DC 28) (p. 27) are

presented in John S. Duffield, Power Rules: The Evolution of NATO's Conventional Force Posture (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford

University Press, 1995), 48; the revised requirements (MC 26/1)

and war plans developed by Eisenhower as SACEUR in 1951 (pp. 29-

30) are noted in Duffield, Power Rules, 52; NATO's actual

conventional capabilities in 1953 and 1954 (pp. 30-31) are

discussed at length in Duffield, Power Rules, 90-100; MC 48 and

its related force requirements (p. 31) are reviewed in Duffield,

Power Rules, 85-90, and Robert A. Wampler, "NATO Strategic

Planning and Nuclear Weapons, 1950-1957," Nuclear History Program

Occasional Paper 6 (Baltimore: Center for International Security

Studies, School of Public Affairs, University of Maryland, 1990),

15-19; the MC 70 force requirements and the revised strategic

concept on which they were based (p. 32) are considered in

Duffield, Power Rules, 125-31, and Wampler, "NATO Strategic

Planning," 40-42; and the Soviet threat to Western Europe, the

buildup of NATO conventional forces, and the resulting military balance in the 1960s (pp. 35-36) are the subject of extensive attention in Duffield, "Soviet Military Threat," 211-12, Duffield, Power Rules, chap. 5, and Richard L. Kugler, Commitment to Purpose: How Alliance Partnership Won the Cold War (Santa Monica, Cal.: RAND, 1993), chaps. 6-9.

Karber and Combs were undoubtedly familiar with most, if not all, of the works cited above. Karber and Wampler were both participants in the Nuclear History Project, and the author corresponded with Combs prior to the completion of Power Rules. 66. See JCS 2073/7, "Intelligence Guidance for the US

Representatives on the Regional Planning Groups of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)," 27 Feb. 1950, National Archives and Records Administration [hereafter NARA], Record Group 218, Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff [hereafter RG 218], 092 Western Europe (3-12-48), Sec. 42, and Statement of General Alfred M. Gruenther, 26 Mar. 1952, in U.S. Congress, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Selected Executive Session Hearings of the Committee, 1951-56, Vol. 9 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1980), 228.

Karber and Combs may also exaggerate the total number of Soviet tanks, since the principal document that they cite (JIC 530/3) refers not to tanks but to armored fighting vehicles, which was presumably a more inclusive category.

77. JIC 435/52, "Estimate of the Scale and Nature of a Soviet Attack on the United Kingdom Between Now and Mid-1952," 7 Feb. 1951, NARA, RG 218, 092 USSR (3-27-45), Sect. 55.

88. JCS 2073/7, op. cit.; JIC 558/148, "Comparison of Firepower -- Soviet and Allied Divisions," 22 Aug. 1952, Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Part II: 1946-1953, Europe and NATO (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1980), Reel VII, Frames 1165-69, and Statement by General Matthew B. Ridgway, SACEUR, 18 May 1953, in U.S. Congress, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Selected Executive Session Hearings of the Committee, 1951-56, Vol. 10 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1980), 64.

99. The figure of 103 divisions that appears on p. 20 is not an explicit Western estimate of the likely size of an invading force

but, judging by the content of the cited document, merely the sum of the number of divisions listed as being stationed in all of the countries of Eastern Europe and in military districts in the Soviet Union as far afield as the White Sea and the Volga river. 1010. The one exception is the estimate of only 75-90 divisions that Karber and Combs report in note 84. In fact, U.S. estimates of the number of Soviet divisions likely to be used in an attack on Western Europe varied from a high of 75-90 to a low of 52-72. See JIC 530/3, "Most Likely Period for Initiation of Hostilities Between the USSR and the Western Powers," 22 Aug. 1950, NARA, RG 218, 092 USSR (3-27-45), Sec. 49, and JCS 1924/49, "Estimate of the Scale and Nature of the Immediate Communist Threat to Security of the United States," 5 Feb. 1951, NARA, RG 218, 092 USSR (3-27-45), Sec. 55.

NATO estimates were not necessarily higher. While alliance military planners in 1951 anticipated that the Soviet Union would be able to deploy 70 to 120 divisions, including satellite forces, against the Central Region after 30 days of preparation, a 1953 SHAPE study assumed that NATO would face a Soviet force of only 55 divisions after the same period of mobilization. See "The United States Delegation at the Eighth Session of the North Atlantic Council to the Acting Secretary of State," 27 Nov. 1951, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951, Vol. 3 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1981), p. 731; MC 33, "Estimate of the Relative Strength and Capabilities of NATO and Soviet Bloc Forces at Present and in the Immediate Future," 10 Nov. 1951, PREM 11/369, British Public Records Office [hereafter PRO]; and COS(53)490, "SACEUR's Estimate of the Situation and Force Requirements for 1956," 2 Oct. 1953, DEFE 5/49, PRO. 1111. Matthew A. Evangelista, "Stalin's Postwar Army Reappraised," International Security 7, no. 3 (Winter 1982/1983): 110-38.

In reference to the initial Western Union and NATO defense plans, Karber and Combs also state (p. 27), once again citing Evangelista, that critics have falsely claimed that Western planners did not count Western divisions as superior to their Soviet counterparts. Yet Evangelista was clearly referring to pre-NATO U.S. military planning, while Alain C. Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith, How Much Is Enough? Shaping the Defense Program, 1961-1969 (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), which Karber and Combs also cite in this connection, describes the situation as it existed in the early 1960s and, in any case, offers an unabashedly

partisan defense of the policies of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations that should not be confused with balanced historical scholarship.

1212.Duffield, "Soviet Military Threat."