

“Operation Unthinkable”: In the Immediate Wake of World War II, US Planned to Wipe Out the Soviet Union with A Massive Nuclear Strike

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Was the US deterrence military doctrine aimed against the Soviet Union during the Cold War era really “defensive” and who actually started the nuclear arms race paranoia?

Just weeks after the Second World War was over and Nazi Germany defeated Soviet Russia's allies, the United States and Great Britain hastened to develop military plans aimed at dismantling the USSR and wiping out its cities with a massive nuclear strike.

Interestingly enough, then British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had ordered the British Armed Forces' Joint Planning Staff to develop a strategy targeting the USSR months before the end of the Second World War. The first edition of the plan was prepared on May 22, 1945. In accordance with the plan the invasion of Russia-held Europe by the Allied forces was scheduled on July 1, 1945.

Winston Churchill's Operation Unthinkable

The plan, dubbed Operation Unthinkable, stated that its primary goal was “to impose upon Russia the will of the United States and the British Empire. Even though ‘the will’ of these two countries may be defined as no more than a square deal for Poland, that does not necessarily limit the military commitment.”

The British Armed Forces' Joint Planning Staff underscored that the Allied Forces would win in the event of 1) the occupation of such metropolitan areas of Russia so that the war making capacity of the country would be reduced to a point to which further resistance would become impossible”; 2) “such a decisive defeat of the Russian forces in the field as to render it impossible for the USSR to continue the war.”

British generals warned Churchill that the “total war” would be hazardous to the Allied armed forces.

However, after the United States “tested” its nuclear arsenal in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, Churchill and right-wing American policy makers started to persuade the White House to bomb the USSR. A nuclear strike against Soviet Russia, exhausted by the war with Germany, would have led to the defeat of the Kremlin at the same time allowing the Allied Forces to avoid US and British military casualties, Churchill insisted. Needless to say, the former British Prime Minister did not care about the death of tens of thousands

of Russian peaceful civilians which were already hit severely by the four-year war nightmare.

“He [Churchill] pointed out that if an atomic bomb could be dropped on the Kremlin, wiping it out, it would be a very easy problem to handle the balance of Russia, which would be without direction,” an unclassified note from the FBI archive read.



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An atomic cloud billows above Hiroshima city following the explosion of the first atomic bomb to be used in warfare in Hiroshima, in this handout photo taken by the U.S. Army on August 6, 1945, and distributed by the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. The words written on the photo are from the source

Following in Churchill's Footsteps: Operation Dropshot

Unthinkable as it may seem, Churchill's plan literally won the hearts and minds of US policy makers and military officials. Between 1945 and the USSR's first detonation of a nuclear device in 1949, the Pentagon developed at least nine nuclear war plans targeting Soviet Russia, according to US researchers Dr. Michio Kaku and Daniel Axelrod. In their book “To Win a Nuclear War: the Pentagon's Secret War Plans,” based on declassified top secret documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, the researchers exposed the US military's strategies to initiate a nuclear war with Russia.

The names given to these plans graphically portray their offensive purpose: Bushwhacker, Broiler, Sizzle, Shakedown, Offtackle, Dropshot, Trojan, Pincher, and Frolic. The US military knew the offensive nature of the job President Truman had ordered them to prepare for and had named their war plans accordingly,” remarked American scholar J.W. Smith (“The World's Wasted Wealth 2”).

These “first-strike” plans developed by the Pentagon were aimed at destroying the USSR without any damage to the United States.

The 1949 Dropshot plan envisaged that the US would attack Soviet Russia and drop at least 300 nuclear bombs and 20,000 tons of conventional bombs on 200 targets in 100 urban areas, including Moscow and Leningrad (St. Petersburg). In addition, the planners offered to kick off a major land campaign against the USSR to win a “complete victory” over the Soviet Union together with the European allies. According to the plan Washington would start the war on January 1, 1957.

For a long period of time the only obstacle in the way of the US' massive nuclear offensive was that the Pentagon did not possess enough atomic bombs (by 1948 Washington boasted an arsenal of 50 atomic bombs) as well as planes to carry them in. For instance, in 1948 the US Air Force had only thirty-two B-29 bombers modified to deliver nuclear bombs.

In September 1948 US president Truman approved a National Security Council paper (NSC 30) on “Policy on Atomic Warfare,” which stated that the United States must be ready to “utilize promptly and effectively all appropriate means available, including atomic weapons, in the interest of national security and must therefore plan accordingly.

At this time, the US generals desperately needed information about the location of Soviet military and industrial sites. So far, the US launched thousands of photographing overflights to the Soviet territory triggering concerns about a potential Western invasion of the USSR among the Kremlin officials. While the Soviets hastened to beef up their defensive capabilities, the military and political decision makers of the West used their rival's military buildup as justification for building more weapons.

Meanwhile, in order to back its offensive plans Washington dispatched its B-29 bombers to Europe during the first Berlin crisis in 1948. In 1949 the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization was formed, six years before the USSR and its Eastern European allies responded defensively by establishing the Warsaw Pact — the Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation, and Mutual Assistance.



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The mushroom cloud of the first atomic explosion at Trinity Test Site, New Mexico. July 16, 1945

Soviet Nuclear Bomb Test Undermined US Plan

Just before the USSR tested its first atomic bomb, the US' nuclear arsenal had reached 250 bombs and the Pentagon came to the conclusion that a victory over the Soviet Union was now "possible." Alas, the detonation of the first nuclear bomb by the Soviet Union dealt a heavy blow to US militarists' plans.

"The Soviet atomic bomb test on August 29, 1949 shook Americans who had believed that their atomic monopoly would last much longer, but did not immediately alter the pattern of war planning. The key issue remained just what level of damage would force a Soviet surrender," Professor Donald Angus MacKenzie of the University of Edinburgh remarked in his essay "Nuclear War Planning and Strategies of Nuclear Coercion."

Although Washington's war planners knew that it would take years before the Soviet Union would obtain a significant atomic arsenal, the point was that the Soviet bomb could not be ignored.

The Scottish researcher highlighted that the US was mainly focused not on "deterrence" but on "offensive" preemptive strike. "There was unanimity in 'insider circles' that the United States ought to plan to win a nuclear war. The logic that to do so implied to strike first was inescapable," he emphasized, adding that "first strike plans" were even represented in the official nuclear policy of the US.

Remarkably, the official doctrine, first announced by then US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in 1954, assumed America's possible nuclear retaliation to "any" aggression from the USSR.

US' Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP)

Eventually, in 1960 the US' nuclear war plans were formalized in the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP).

At first, the SIOP envisaged a massive simultaneous nuclear strike against the USSR's nuclear forces, military targets, cities, as well as against China and Eastern Europe. It was planned that the US' strategic forces would use almost 3,500 atomic warheads to bomb their targets. According to US generals' estimates, the attack could have resulted in the death of about 285 to 425 million people. Some of the USSR's European allies were meant to be completely "wiped out."

"We're just going to have to wipe it [Albania] out," US General Thomas Power remarked at the 1960 SIOP planning conference, as quoted by MacKenzie.

However, the Kennedy administration introduced significant changes to the plan, insisting that the US military should avoid targeting Soviet cities and had to focus on the rival's nuclear forces alone. In 1962 the SIOP was modified but still it was acknowledged that the nuclear strike could lead to the death of millions of peaceful civilians.



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John Fitzgerald Kennedy (May 29, 1917 – November 22, 1963), 35th President of the United States, serving from 1961 until his assassination in 1963

The dangerous competition instigated by the US prompted the Soviet Russia to beef up its nuclear capabilities and dragged both countries into the vicious circle of the nuclear arms race. Unfortunately, it seems that the lessons of the past have not been learnt by the West and the question of the "nuclearization" of Europe is being raised again.

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