

Revisiting General Sir John Hackett's *The Third World War*

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ABSTRACT

*General Sir John Hackett's *The Third World War* set the benchmark by which other future war scenarios continue to be judged. Despite widespread familiarity with the published version, little is known about the drafting of the book or the early iterations of the scenario. This article has the twofold purpose of providing a history of the book based on the correspondence and early drafts found in Hackett's private papers, as well as scrutinizing some key assumptions embedded in the published scenario, demonstrating how these evolved considerably during the book's drafting, and comparing them with other works in the genre.*

Introduction

Throughout the course of the Cold War images of how a Third World War might start and how it might be fought were a regular feature of the military thinking of NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

¹ These images were reflected in the wargaming and planning assumptions of both sides, they shaped the development of military equipment, doctrine, exercises, training and

¹ This article focuses on Third World War scenarios that begin with a conventional confrontation in Europe and has deliberately avoided other scenarios that, amongst other possibilities, begin with a Soviet invasion of the Middle East or the Far East. For instance, around the same time Hackett's book was published, several other books had been published in which a Third World War involves a Soviet invasion of Japan. These included *The Third World War in Japan: The Russians Have Landed!*, ostensibly written by a group of anonymous Japanese officers, Minoru Sase's *Eleven Day Battle in Hokkaido* and his *The Third World War in Asia*, Iwano Masataka's *Hokkaido Occupied* and *The US*

REVISITING THE THIRD WORLD WAR

education, and were also a contributing factor in reforms of organization and force posture. Unlike the images that European militaries held prior to the First and Second World Wars about the future battlefield, ideas about a Third World War were fundamentally influenced by nuclear weapons, not for least of reasons that the traditional function of conventional forces was now called into question. Did they exist to attack and defend as they had in previous wars? Were the defending forces actually meant to defend, or were they merely to act as a tripwire? Were the attacking forces actually meant to attack, or were they merely to occupy territory that consisted of radioactive rubble? Connected to questions about the purpose of conventional forces in the nuclear age was the broader issue of deterrence and how this might best be achieved.

Among NATO's most important dilemmas of the Cold War was whether it was safer or more dangerous to have stronger conventional forces that could actually have a realistic chance to defend Western Europe from a Warsaw Pact conventional assault. For those who believed building up conventional forces was a bad idea, the argument went that this conveyed an image of reluctance to use nuclear weapons, which in turn might make an attack more likely. For those who believed it was a good idea to build up a conventional defence, the argument was that this would lower the risk of an immediate resort to nuclear use, which might provide an opportunity to avoid further escalation to a full-scale theatre-wide, and potentially, intercontinental, nuclear conflict. Both sides could make plausible theoretical arguments, as well as devise scenarios, typically less plausible, to support their positions. But given the enormous number of variables to be considered, the scenarios also varied widely with respect to fundamental assumptions about how NATO and the Warsaw Pact would behave in the event of a Third World War. To the extent there was any consistency, this was limited to NATO scenarios casting the Warsaw Pact as the aggressor and vice versa. However, apart from this, there was very little consistency at all.

The purpose of this article is to examine the images and assumptions about major power war in the nuclear age that are embedded in the scenario developed by General Sir John Hackett and a number of other collaborators and published in their 1978 book

and USSR Clash! Recapture Kunashiri Island! and Izaki Hitoshi's *The Day Hokkaido becomes a People's Republic*. For a discussion of these works see: Henry Scott-Stokes, 'Japanese Devouring Novels about Invasion by Russians', *The New York Times*, 2 May 1979 and Tomoyuki Sasaki, *Japan's Postwar Military and Civil Society: Contesting a Better Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp.142-143.

The Third World War.² There are several reasons for the choice of this book. In the first instance, it is probably one of the most well-known and respected works dealing with the subject, having sold over 3,000,000 copies and been translated into ten languages.³ In addition, the book is often referred to in terms of the benchmark by which other works dealing with a similar theme have been compared and critiqued, both during the late Cold War period and more recently. Finally, the original manuscripts and authors' correspondence are publicly available for examination, thereby allowing a more in-depth study of the authors' assumptions and how these evolved from the early drafts to the final publication.⁴ As will be shown there was a considerable evolution in the authors' thinking on many key issues.

To address this topic, this article will be divided into two sections. It will begin with an overview of the history of the book itself, from conception to publication, and will highlight its impact. It will then provide a brief description of the book's scenario for a Third World War followed by a more detailed examination of a number of assumptions underpinning different key aspects of the scenario. As part of this examination, each of the assumptions will not only be discussed in relation to the way they appear in the final publication, but also how they evolved over the course of drafting the book. Moreover, where appropriate, they will be compared and contrasted with two other scenarios of a Third World War: General Robert Close's *Europe Without Defence: 48 Hours That Could Change the Face of the World* and Tom Clancy's *Red Storm Rising*.⁵

The Third World War

The origins of the book can be traced to William Armstrong, managing director of the London publishing house Sidgwick and Jackson, who had an idea to publish a book speculating about a Warsaw Pact invasion of Western Europe. In early 1977, whilst attending a lecture at the British Army's Staff College, Camberley, Armstrong made the acquaintance of General Sir John Hackett, the retired former head of NATO's

² General Sir John Hackett and others, *The Third World War: August 1985* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1978).

³ Edwin McDowell, 'Novel on World War III Now has a Sequel', *The New York Times*, September 1, 1982, p.C22

⁴ The relevant materials, consisting of 9 boxes of papers dealing with the book, can be found in the collection of Hackett papers at the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (LHCMA), King's College London.

⁵ General Robert Close, *Europe Without Defence? 48 Hours That Could Change the Face of the World* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1979), originally published in French in 1976; Tom Clancy, *Red Storm Rising* (Hammersmith, London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1987).

REVISITING THE THIRD WORLD WAR

Northern Army Group (NORTHAG) and former Principal of King's College London. Armstrong invited Hackett to lunch at the Garrick Club along with the chairman of the publishing firm, Lord Longford. At this meeting, which according to Hackett involved a great deal of alcohol, an initially sceptical Hackett eventually agreed to conduct a six-month study to see if such a book was feasible.⁶

Hackett envisaged the book as one that would be a 'cautionary tale' promoting the agenda of strengthening NATO's conventional forces. Over the course of the rest of 1977 and early 1978, Hackett assembled a group of recently retired military officers, a former Joint Intelligence Committee chairman, and a deputy editor of *The Economist* to assist with developing the general scenario and to draft specific chapters.⁷ This group held two coordinating conferences in the spring and autumn 1977. Other recently retired and still serving military officers from the UK, the US and West Germany, also contributed to the writing of individual chapters, provided up-to-date technical details, and reviewed the drafts. Most notably, the chapter describing the impact of a one-megaton nuclear explosion on Birmingham, which is perhaps the most well-known chapter of the book, was actually written by David W. Williams, a lieutenant colonel in the Royal Engineers then serving as the Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Warfare Directing Staff at the Royal Military College of Science, Shrivenham.⁸ Interestingly, the description of the nuclear attack on Birmingham is nearly identical to, and may have been appropriated from, a then still-classified 1961 study commissioned by the British Ministry of Defence's Chief Scientific Advisor, Solly Zuckerman, which also dealt with the effects of a one-megaton nuclear explosion on Birmingham.⁹ Throughout the

⁶ Roy Fullick, *Shan Hackett: The Pursuit of Exactitude* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Books Ltd., 2009), p.208.

⁷ The retired military officers were: Air Chief Marshal Sir John Barraclough, Brigadier Kenneth Hunt, Vice Admiral Sir Ian McGeoch and Major General John Strawson. The other two cited authors were Sir Bernard Burrows and Norman Macrae.

⁸ Strawson to Hackett, 10 January 1978; Williams to Hackett, 4 February 1978; Hackett to Major General R.F. Vincent, 31 July 1981; in 'Hackett WWII Draft Nuclear Developments Folder', LHCMA.

⁹ A brief description of this study can be found in: Richard Maguire, 'Scientific Dissent amid the United Kingdom Government's Nuclear Weapons Programme', *History Workshop Journal*, Issue 63, 2007, p.124. See also the reference linking this study to Hackett's book in: David Owen, *Nuclear Papers* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), pp.259-260. Although Hackett's correspondence with Williams contains no direct reference to the 1961 study, nor whose idea it was to include a scenario of a one-megaton attack on Birmingham, it seems highly unlikely that either Hackett or

drafting of the book Hackett was able to use his privileged position and extensive contacts in the British defence community and NATO to consult with officials and receive briefings about new weapons systems as well as the current military balance.¹⁰

In the course of drafting the book, Hackett devised two general scenarios. In his first scenario a Warsaw Pact invasion leads to an initial NATO defeat and the occupation of West Germany, although an eventual NATO counterattack two years later leads to a Warsaw Pact military defeat followed by a collapse of the Soviet Union. In this scenario, neither side uses nuclear weapons.¹¹ Hackett not only drew on his own extensive military experience when writing this scenario but he also used the scenario to express several long-held ideas about how a NATO-Warsaw Pact confrontation might play out.¹² In 1967, as head of NORTHAG, he participated in a 'tactical exercise without troops' in which he played the part of the Warsaw Pact commander. In this simulated role, the Warsaw Pact was able to cross the Rhine within three days.¹³ A year later he published a highly controversial letter to *The Times* warning against any reduction in the strength of NATO despite the emerging détente. In the letter he refers to a scenario whereby the Soviets could swiftly advance to the Rhine, similar to the Israeli advance to the Suez Canal during the Six Day War, at which point it would be difficult if not impossible to dislodge them.¹⁴

It was these ideas that shaped Hackett's 30,000-word first draft of the scenario. In this early draft, Hackett has the Soviets launching a quick and crippling blow on NATO leading to the withdrawal of US and British forces across the Rhine. Depending on the version of the draft, this defeat occurs in four-to-eight days. At this point, Hackett begins to depart from the more familiar scenarios and begins to speculate. Thus, after

Williams randomly selected the same number of megatons being used on the same target city.

¹⁰ See for instance: Hackett to General William E. DePuy, 24 July 1977; Hackett to General M. S. Davison, 12 August 1977; in 'Hackett US Correspondence re: Third World War 1977-1978' folder, LHCMA. Also see: Hackett, Draft Apologia, Undated; R. Natkiel to Brigadier H.S.L. Dalzell-Payne, 13 February 1978; in 'Hackett WWII Drafts and related correspondence' folder, LHCMA.

¹¹ See papers in 'Hackett WWII Old Drafts of an Alternative Ending' folder, LHCMA.

¹² Judy Klemesrud, 'Behind the Best Sellers: General Sir John Hackett', *The New York Times*, May 27, 1979.

¹³ Fullick, *Shan Hackett*, p.191.

¹⁴ General Sir John Hackett, 'Defining the True Purpose of NATO: What Should be Understood', *The Times*, 6 February 1968, p.9.

REVISITING THE THIRD WORLD WAR

NATO's initial defeat and the occupation of West Germany, the war does not end, but continues for a further two years. Similar to the period post-1940 German *blitzkrieg*, Hackett envisioned a conflict mainly confined to the sea and peripheral theatres until such time as a 1944 D-Day style offensive has the Warsaw Pact forces defeated in West Germany followed by a Soviet collapse.

After circulating a draft of this scenario to two former US generals, William E. DePuy and Michael S. Davison, and the former West German general in charge of Allied Forces Central Europe, Jürgen Bennecke, Hackett was advised that publication in its current form would undermine rather than strengthen public confidence in NATO.¹⁵ In response to this criticism, in late summer 1977, Hackett devised a completely new scenario in which a NATO that had been considerably strengthened in the years prior to the Warsaw Pact invasion is able to halt, albeit barely, and then reverse the attack, *without* recourse to nuclear escalation. As in the previous scenario, the Warsaw Pact subsequently crumbles and the Soviet Union collapses. It was only towards the end of 1977 that this scenario was amended to include a limited nuclear exchange – a Soviet nuclear attack on Birmingham followed by a British and American retaliatory attack on Minsk – that serves as the trigger for the Soviet collapse. As will be further discussed, apart from the late addition of the nuclear exchange, the earlier drafts included numerous versions of the size, scale and duration of the conventional conflict. Whereas in the final publication the conflict lasts from 4-22 August, earlier drafts included a highly detailed scenario of a 47-day conventional war, as well as scenarios in which the war ends in 1986 or 1987.¹⁶ Moreover, in his early conception of a possible nuclear dimension to the book, Hackett thought any nuclear weapons would be used at sea, in space, or against minor allies.¹⁷

In terms of genre *The Third World War* can be classed in several. In the tradition of 'military prophesying' in two important respects it mimics Sir George Chesney's 1871

¹⁵ See for instance, Hackett to General DePuy, 24 July 1977, in 'Hackett US Correspondence re Third World War 1977-1978' folder, LHCMA; Hackett to Strawson, 17 March 1977; Hackett to McGeoch, 16 April 1977 in 'Hackett WWII Drafts and related correspondence' folder, LHCMA. See also: Hackett to Macrae, 5 September 1977, in 'Hackett WWII Drafts and related correspondence' folder, LHCMA.

¹⁶ See for instance the attachment to Hackett's letter to DePuy, 24 July 1977 in 'Hackett US Correspondence re: Third World War 1977-1978' folder, LHCMA.

¹⁷ Hackett to Strawson, 17 March 1977 in 'Hackett WWII Drafts and related correspondence' folder, LHCMA.

Battle of Dorking.¹⁸ Both works were intended to stimulate public interest in strengthening Britain's military might and in Hackett's book that of NATO more generally. Also, similar to Chesney's work, Hackett's book was written as a 'future history' in which the author, writing in 1987, recounts the war that occurred in August 1985, including the events leading up to it, and the events that occurred afterwards. Due to the book's inclusion of a limited nuclear exchange, it has also been discussed in relation to other books in the genre of 'nuclear fiction'. Whereas the majority of books in this genre presuppose some form of 'nuclear Armageddon', *The Third World War* represents a minority of books, such as *Fail Safe*, in which nuclear use is also limited to the destruction of two cities.¹⁹ On the other hand, Hackett's work has also been compared with other books dealing with a purely conventional NATO-Warsaw Pact clash, particularly Clancy's *Red Storm Rising*, and it served as the model for Harold Coyle's *Team Yankee*.²⁰ Publication of Hackett's book was also held responsible, in part, for the failure of another book dealing with a conventional war in Europe that was prepared by a team of former British military officers headed by Shelford Bidwell and was published several months later.²¹ Critics have also cited *The Third World War* in their reviews of recent books such as General Sir Richard Shirreff's *2017: War with Russia* and P.W. Singer and August Cole's *Ghost Fleet: A Novel of the Next World War*.²² Despite the comparisons to other works published subsequently, the key text that seems to have influenced Hackett the most when writing *The Third World War* was

¹⁸ For a discussion of Chesney's work, see: I. F. Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War 1763-1984* (London: Panther Books, 1970).

¹⁹ Paul Briens, *Nuclear Holocausts: Atomic War in Fiction 1895-1984* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1987); Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler, *Fail-Safe* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962).

²⁰ Harold Coyle, *Team Yankee: A Novel of World War III* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1987).

²¹ Shelford Bidwell, *World War 3: A Military Projection Founded on Today's Facts* (London: Roxby Press Ltd., 1978).

²² See for instance: Andrew Monaghan, 'Book Review: 2017: War with Russia. An Urgent Warning from Senior Military Command', 10 June 2016, <http://www.ccw.ox.ac.uk/news/2016/6/10/book-review-2017-war-with-russia-an-urgent-warning-from-senior-military-command-by-andrew-monaghan>. [Accessed 21 July 2016]. Also, former SACEUR Admiral James Stavridis' review of *Ghost Fleet* says that it is the 'best source of high-tech geopolitical visioning since Tom Clancy's *Red Storm Rising* and Sir John Hackett's *The Third World War*'. Article available at <http://www.ghostfleetbook.com/reviews/>. [Accessed 21 July 2016].

REVISITING THE THIRD WORLD WAR

Belgian Brigadier General Robert Close's 1976 book *Europe Without Defence*.²³ Though principally a non-fiction work, Close's book includes a detailed scenario in which Soviet forces launch a 'bolt from the blue' conventional attack that leaves NATO's forces in West Germany defeated within 48 hours. It was during his visit to Hackett's Gloucester home to discuss the initial scenario for the book that General Bennecke cited Close's work as having had a negative impact on public opinion. He therefore urged Hackett to replace it with a more positive scenario.²⁴

When attempting to assess the book's impact it is important to distinguish between the intended impact and the actual impact. Hackett's motive for writing the book was to influence the defence debate within NATO, but particularly in Britain, in favour of strengthening NATO's conventional defence. However, there is little evidence that it had any direct impact on British defence policy. In contrast to Hackett's hopes, which he expresses in the book with a disguised Margaret Thatcher (Mrs. Plumber) character becoming British prime minister who then strengthens UK defence, when the real Thatcher came to power, there was no significant increase in the strength of the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR), nor did any of the other military reforms suggested in the book ever become official UK policy. On the other hand, this is not to say the book had no influence. When describing the book's success, numerous commentators have cited the large number of copies that were sold worldwide. It was reported that British Prime Minister James Callaghan provided a copy to President Jimmy Carter at the 1979 summit meeting at Guadeloupe. The book was also listed by President Ronald Reagan in 1983 as one of the top three books he had read that year.²⁵ The fact that it was

²³ See Hackett's reference to Close's book in: Hackett to Macrae, 5 September 1977, in 'Hackett WWII Drafts and related correspondence' folder, LHCMA.

²⁴ Ibid; See also: Correspondence with Patrick Wall entitled 'Third World War: An Appreciation', 16 September 1978 in 'Hackett WWII Drafts and related correspondence' folder, LHCMA.

²⁵ Ronnie Dugger, 'The President's Favorite Book; The Third World War', *The Nation*, October 27, 1984. Whatever impact on Reagan the book had in 1983, it is now generally accepted that the screening that Autumn of the ABC television movie *The Day After* had a much more significant impact on his views of nuclear war. See: James Mann, *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan: A History of the End of the Cold War* (New York: Viking, 2009). On the other hand, it has also recently emerged that Reagan was greatly impressed by Clancy's *Red Storm Rising*, and recommended the book to Thatcher, see: Valerie Edwards, 'How Ronald Reagan based his foreign policy on Tom Clancy's books: President told Margaret Thatcher to read *Red Storm Rising* thriller to understand Russia', *Daily Mail*, 30 December 2015.

widely reviewed by top authorities and cited by other authors would also indicate that it was probably considered the most important text describing a NATO-Warsaw Pact clash, more so than any other fiction book that had come out up to that point and for many years afterwards, until Clancy's *Red Storm Rising* provided a competitor.²⁶

When the book was published in 1978, it generated considerable comment and criticism. At the extreme end, a Soviet review published in *Izvestiya* stated:

The book 'The Third World War' by the British General John Hackett is not just a piece of militarist raving. Its publication is a carefully planned political action, hostile to the cause of peace, on the part of the Atlantic circles who are trying to poison the atmosphere in Europe by creating fear, mistrust and hysteria, and to complicate the process of international detente ... the book 'The Third World War' is a major propaganda operation, planned and carried out by the leaders of the Atlantic bloc. Its purpose is not merely to denigrate once again the Soviet Union's peace-loving policy, but to ascribe to it aggressive schemes and even the intention to be the first to use nuclear weapons and chemical warfare devices.²⁷

A less partisan critique was authored by the eminent historian, Sir Michael Howard. Though providing a generally positive review, he complained that:

Even if the West strengthens its defences to a quite improbable extent, he (referring to Hackett) suggests, this will not deter the Russians from attacking us, or do more than postpone the use of nuclear weapons by a couple of weeks. This can hardly be the lesson we are supposed to draw from this serious and stimulating book.²⁸

²⁶ Some years later, John Keegan offered a harsh condemnation in his review of Tom Clancy's *Red Storm Rising*: 'Those who have read an earlier essay in the genre, General Sir John Hackett's *Third World War*, which President Carter is said to have kept on his bedside table, will wonder why that effort won the plaudits it did. It bears the same resemblance to Tom Clancy's flights of imagination as a high school essay does to a PhD dissertation'. See: John Keegan, 'Review of *Red Storm Rising*', *Book World*, July 27, 1986, p.2.

²⁷ 'Sir John Hackett's book on Third World War: NATO Propaganda' – Text of report of 'Izvestiya' article provided by TASS news agency, in Russian, for abroad, 2 December 1978. This review was found among Hackett's private papers.

²⁸ Michael Howard, 'Review', *The Sunday Times*, 16 July 1978.

REVISITING THE THIRD WORLD WAR

Ken Booth described the book as a 'coming-together of war and make-believe'. According to Booth, 'The fairy story told by the General does not promote the message that a Third World War might be an uncontrollable nightmare, but instead argues that if NATO takes remedial action the coming war with Soviet Russia can be *controlled* and *won*, if not actually deterred'.²⁹ Stanley Hoffmann criticized the idea that Soviet nuclear use would be limited to an attack on one city, and that the destruction of Minsk would bring about the collapse of the Soviet empire.³⁰ Similar to the criticisms of Howard, Booth, and Hoffmann, many other reviewers focused on NATO's failure to deter a conventional attack in the fictional scenario, even with the improved defence measures advocated by Hackett, the unwillingness of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe to approve the use of tactical nuclear weapons, as well as the failure to deter the Soviets from launching a nuclear attack against Birmingham.

Assumptions Underpinning the Scenario

If there was one message Hackett hoped to convey in the book it was that a nuclear peace could only be achieved by preparing for conventional war. A key theme Hackett often reiterated was that Britain's defences had been crippled as a result of the 1957 White Paper. For Hackett, the White Paper was predicated on the idea that the purpose of NATO forces in West Germany was merely to act as a trip-wire with the US providing the threat of 'massive retaliation' as a means of deterring the Soviet army from its presumed goal of driving to the Channel ports and the 'liberation' of Western Europe. It was this idea that Hackett felt still drove British thinking in the 1970s, despite the earlier changes in NATO's official doctrine to one of 'flexible response'.³¹ Largely due to economic pressures on its defence budget, Hackett felt that Britain had underfunded its military forces, especially BAOR, to such an extent that they would not be able to wage a successful defence against a Warsaw Pact attack. Instead, British policymakers had adopted an unspoken policy of 'deliberate insufficiency'. In this sense, British forces were maintained in a deliberately weak state so that the US would be forced into an early release of strategic nuclear weapons. As a result, Soviet leaders would also recognize this and be deterred from attacking. As Hackett observed however, US leaders might not be willing to escalate to a strategic nuclear exchange as a result of a breakthrough in the NORTHAG sector. Indeed, recognizing the risks of

²⁹ Ken Booth and John Baylis, *Britain, NATO and Nuclear Weapons: Alternative Defence versus Alliance Reform* (Houndmills, Hampshire: The Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1989), p.80.

³⁰ Stanley Hoffman, 'Weapons to the End', *The New York Times*, November 28, 1982.

³¹ General Sir John Hackett, 'A Third World War', Third Jubilee Lecture, Imperial College of Science and Technology, University of London, 13 March 1979, p.4.

this the US had decided in the mid-1970s to station its own troops in the rear of the NORTHAG sector, with a US-based three-division sized corps assigned to this area to be able to fight a defence-in-depth battle.³²

Hackett complained that Britain needed to 'accept its own responsibilities in this regard' and strengthen BAOR.³³ It is noteworthy that in Hackett's revised scenario for the book, Britain augments its forces in West Germany with an additional corps-level formation. In the revised scenario, it is this force that allows NORTHAG to barely survive the Warsaw Pact attack. Hackett hoped that his addition of a second British corps to the scenario might help motivate the British Government to significantly increase the size of BAOR, though in reality this never occurred. More generally, *The Third World War* includes a veritable shopping list of military equipment purchases and organizational reforms that he and his co-authors believed NATO needed if it were to stop the Warsaw Pact. In addition to the aforementioned augmentation of BAOR, the list included a rebuilding of the UK's air defence capability, significant naval procurement, improved civil defence, as well as the purchase of other advanced weapons systems.

Unlike in the earlier drafts, the scenario that appears in *The Third World War* describes a relatively short war lasting from 4-22 August 1985. It begins with a Warsaw Pact attack on NATO utilizing both conventional and chemical weapons, but not nuclear weapons. For the first week of the war the Warsaw Pact forces gradually drive back the NATO forces, making their greatest advances in the NORTHAG sector. In contrast to earlier scenarios in which France sits out the war in the final version France takes an active part in NATO's defence. By the second week of the war, as more US reinforcements become available, NATO is able to launch a successful counterattack. At this point, with the Soviet forces in retreat, the Soviets launch a nuclear attack on Birmingham and this is followed by a US-UK nuclear attack on Minsk. Before further escalation occurs the Soviet 'empire' begins to crumble and there is a coup in the Kremlin followed by negotiations to end the war. It is important to note that although the main military action takes place in Western Europe the war is global in scope, with various activities occurring around the world both on the ground as well as in the sea, in the sky, and in space.

³² Drew Middleton, 'General Haig is Altering NATO Deployment', *The New York Times*, August 6, 1975, p.12.

³³ Hackett, 'A Third World War', Third Jubilee Lecture, p.9.

REVISITING THE THIRD WORLD WAR

There are six aspects of this scenario that warrant closer inspection as they reveal a great deal about key underpinning assumptions about what a Third World War might look like, especially when compared to earlier versions of the scenario, as well as with the scenarios of Clancy and Close. The first aspect has to do with the rationality and cost-benefit calculus of the Soviet aggressor's leadership which is presumably aware of the risks of a nuclear escalation. What is it that makes them choose to go to war? The second has to do with the geographic scope of the aggressor's military objectives – are these limited to a discrete capture of territory, or are they more expansive? The third is about the timing of the conflict – a 'bolt from the blue' or a steadily escalating crisis that provides sufficient early warning for mobilization? The fourth deals with the trigger to order the use of nuclear weapons. The fifth relates to how many nuclear weapons would be employed, and on what targets. Lastly, how does a Third World War end?

In most future war scenarios the political trigger is treated superficially, not for the least of reasons that authors of these scenarios almost certainly view the military aspects of the war to be more important than dwelling on the political context of the war's origins. The result is that there is usually very little discussion about the rationality and cost-benefit calculus of the Soviet leadership, the purpose and goals of military action, how far they are willing to go to achieve these goals, and the limits they place on military operations to avoid unnecessary risks of escalation. In Hackett's scenario, the Kremlin's decision to attack NATO is set against the general backdrop of a leadership fearful that the future 'correlation of forces' does not favour the Soviet Union, with internal disaffection rising, although the more immediate reason is the convergence of several international crises, most notably a crisis in post-Tito Yugoslavia in which there is a limited US-Soviet military clash that leaves the Soviet reputation tarnished. The Soviet leaders do not seek world conquest. Rather, they seek to promote the collapse of NATO as a prelude to forcing the US to accept a new global status quo, thereby allowing the Soviets a free hand to reassert Moscow's authority in Eastern Europe and at home. A less detailed scenario appears in Clancy's *Red Storm Rising*. In this scenario, Soviet leaders need to secure energy supplies from the Middle East to keep their economy afloat, yet this requires them to first neutralize NATO. Clancy's description of the Soviet leadership has them appear as irrational actors, believing in optimistic scenarios of the Soviet military's ability to successfully wage war on NATO, and seemingly not concerned about the escalation risks involved, though they do eventually place a ban on the use of chemical weapons. In *Europe Without Defence*, Close provides a more extensive treatment of Soviet goals and the inter-relationship between Soviet military action and diplomacy. For Close, the Soviet's ultimate aim of offensive military action was the dissolution of NATO, or at least a significant weakening of the Alliance, by forcing it to accept a demilitarized zone in Central Europe. The military capture of West German territory to the east of the Rhine would be used to negotiate a peace settlement, with the Soviets offering to

withdraw from the captured territory in exchange for an agreement on demilitarization. Once accepted, and with NATO in disarray, the Soviets would then have the longer-term political aim of making satellites of the Western European states. Whilst Close provides a more detailed discussion of Soviet aims, his scenario fails to describe the circumstances that would provide the trigger for this action.

The political context of the war's origins is directly tied to the timing of the war's initiation. Hackett chose to begin his war on 4 August because, as in 1914, a Balkans crisis that escalates into a wider war allows for a period of pre-war mobilization. As the crisis escalates and war appears imminent, NATO forces have sufficient lead time to alert the covering forces along the inner German border, disperse aircraft, and mobilize their reserves to be able to mount an adequate defence. In this regard it is important to note that a key assumption of NATO defence planning from the period was that 48 hours of early warning constituted the minimum period necessary for NATO forces to mobilize and take up defensive positions. In Clancy's scenario, there is a four-month gap between the decision of the Soviet leadership to wage a war on NATO and the actual initiation of hostilities. The Soviets need this period to prepare their forces for combat as well as to politically undermine NATO's ability to respond to the forthcoming attack. NATO does receive some early warning of the impending Soviet attack after a Soviet sabotage team is uncovered, thereby providing a brief period to alert its forces and begin mobilization. By contrast, in Close's scenario, the Soviets achieve complete surprise, launching an invasion of West Germany from a standing start.³⁴ The Soviets recognize that the success of any attack is dependent on surprise and therefore minimize the risks that their intentions will be discovered. Instead of 48 hours early warning, Close has the Soviets already reaching the Rhine in 48 hours.

Another crucial issue that relates to the war's political context are the stop-lines for military action. Hackett's Third World War scenario encompasses attacks not only in West Germany and the Low Countries, but also on NATO's northern and southern flanks, as well as air attacks on Britain. Curiously, though Hackett has the Soviets invade neutral Austria to be able to attack Italy, they choose to respect Swiss neutrality. It was also intended that the Warsaw Pact forces stop at the French border to avoid French intervention. Hackett was not alone in his belief that the Soviets greatly feared the prospect of French intervention. According to this school of thought, the Soviets

³⁴ It is worth noting that Close's scenario excludes participation of the non-Soviet Warsaw Pact members, with the possible exception of East Germany. In this scenario, in which achieving complete surprise is the key element of the Soviet plan, it is assumed the Soviets would not risk including their allies due to secrecy concerns.

REVISITING THE THIRD WORLD WAR

would make diplomatic overtures, as well as avoid attacks on French troops based in West Germany, to ensure France did not intervene. In Clancy's scenario, the Warsaw Pact forces are to advance into West Germany and the Low Countries, whereas in Close's scenario, the advance is limited to West Germany. In each of these scenarios, there is no Soviet desire to occupy France. Not only is the stop-line of the invading forces a crucial consideration, but so too is the stop-line for the counter-attacking NATO forces. In Hackett's scenario, following its successful counterattack, NATO policymakers take a deliberate decision not to cross into Warsaw Pact territory to reunite Germany and liberate Eastern Europe as they fear this would risk further escalation.

The use of nuclear weapons is arguably the most important consideration in any Third World War scenario. Until the 1970s there was an assumption that any Soviet offensive would include a mix of conventional and nuclear attacks. As the quality of Soviet conventional forces reached a level of parity with those of NATO, thinking shifted to a Soviet offensive that would begin with a prolonged non-nuclear phase, though it might escalate later in reaction to NATO use of tactical nuclear weapons.³⁵ *The Third World War* consists of several decision points when nuclear use is considered. In the scenario, NATO commanders on the brink of military defeat request authorization to use nuclear weapons against Soviet ground and naval forces. Fearing Soviet escalation, this request is refused by SACEUR and SACLANC. Hackett was adamant that US leaders would only employ nuclear weapons if America's very existence were threatened and would not use them in defence of European allies in a war in which the Soviets had limited aims. On the Soviet side, the decision to drop a one-megaton nuclear warhead on Birmingham is taken only after Soviet forces begin to lose the conventional battle. Among the reasons why the Soviets 'go nuclear' is that they miscalculate the probability of nuclear retaliation. Contrary to their expectations of no retaliation in response to the Birmingham attack, the US and UK decide on an instant 'limited' nuclear attack on Minsk (in earlier drafts Ukraine and the city of Tomsk are listed as the US-UK target). Coinciding with both nuclear attacks are US-Soviet 'hot line' discussions to tell the other side of the limited nature of the nuclear attack combined with an offer to negotiate terms to end the war. Following the Minsk attack, Hackett has the Soviet leadership considering further escalation, but this is pre-empted by a coup in Moscow that prevents further nuclear use. Even when nuclear weapons are not employed, they still shape military action. One of the main reasons why Close's scenario has the Soviets advance to the Rhine in 48 hours is to be able to present NATO leaders with a fait

³⁵ For further discussion of this point, see: Philip A.G. Sabin, *The Third World War Scare in Britain* (Houndmills, Hampshire: The Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1986), pp.28-29.

accomplish before they have a chance to agree on tactical nuclear use. As for Clancy's scenario, the NATO nuclear option does not arise, though similar to *The Third World War*, Soviet leaders consider using nuclear weapons after their military offensive has ground to a halt. Unlike Hackett's scenario, however, a coup occurs in Moscow before nuclear escalation occurs.

Hackett was originally quite reluctant to include nuclear use as part of his scenario. At best, any nuclear use would have been limited to naval targets or for use in space. For reasons that remain unclear, more than half-way through the book's drafting – sometime in the autumn 1977 – Hackett chose to include the scenario of a one-megaton warhead attack on Birmingham.³⁶ In Hackett's description of Soviet decision-making, there is no serious consideration given to Soviet use against NATO battlefield targets, and the Soviets quite deliberately choose not to attack London, much less any US targets, fearing much greater retaliation. Although Hackett's choice of Birmingham probably had more to do with the relative ease of preparing a chapter based on the model of the 1961 Zuckerman study, in the scenario the city is chosen because a Western summit meeting is taking place in London at the same time. By attacking Birmingham the Soviets hope to demonstrate their resolve to the Western leaders they intend to negotiate a peace deal with. The other case of nuclear use that occurs in the book is the US-UK retaliatory strike on Minsk. In the 1978 publication, no reason is provided for why this city was targeted, although a short description is given in the 1982 *The Third World War: The Untold Story*.³⁷ Although not included in the final publication, the author of the relevant chapter, Sir Bernard Burrows, provided Hackett with a rather unusual description – albeit clearly unpublishable – of the target selection process.

To bomb Moscow or Leningrad would have been a significant step up the escalation ladder. An important provincial city was required, far enough from the capital so that no direct physical effects would be felt there, but near enough for immediate political repercussions on the seat of government. Minsk answered the bill, but had a deeper significance, of which those in the allied

³⁶ Neither a review of the Hackett papers, nor any of the interviews of Hackett after the book's publication, reveal the reason for this shift. It was only in the autumn that references to a nuclear attack on Birmingham appear in the draft outlines of the book. Prior to this period, Hackett's scenario depicted a NATO victory and Soviet collapse without either side resorting to nuclear use.

³⁷ General Sir John Hackett, *The Third World War: The Untold Story* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1982).

REVISITING THE THIRD WORLD WAR

targeting section may or may not have been aware. (A study might be of interest, hopefully rather ephemeral, on the secret motivation of those who select nuclear targets. Was the choice of Nagasaki for the second American bomb in World War II influenced by atavistic memories that this was the home of Cho-Cho-San in *Madame Butterfly*, and by the unconscious desire to wipe from the map a monument to the shameful behaviour of Lieutenant Pinkerton, USN? Did anyone remember about Minsk that it was where ex-US Marine Oswald – or his look-a-like – received his Soviet training and married his Russian bride, two years before he assassinated President Kennedy?).³⁸

The limited and controlled nuclear exchange in *The Third World War* placed the book in a unique category of the nuclear fiction genre. Compared with most other books in the genre, the war's end does not come in the form of a full-scale nuclear exchange leading to global Armageddon. Instead, the war ends with a coup in the Kremlin and the collapse of the Soviet 'empire'. The war's relatively short duration is also notable. Whilst admittedly not as short of a war as in Close's 48-hour scenario, both *The Third World War* and *Red Storm Rising* portray conflicts that last for two-to-three weeks. On the other hand, in the earlier drafts NATO's initial defeat does not lead to surrender or acceptance of the status quo, but rather hostilities continue until such time as the initial lost territory is recovered two years later. Nevertheless, each of the scenarios highlight the importance of the diplomatic activities that parallel the military action. Even though this activity is given scant attention relative to the military aspects of the conflict, ultimately the war ends with some sort of negotiated settlement. In a potentially nuclear Third World War, 'unconditional surrender' is simply not an option to end the conflict.

Conclusion

As is often the case, future war scenarios are rarely neutral and the end-state is often determined by the script's author in advance rather than reflecting the logical ending that emerges only after the scenario plays itself out. In Hackett's *The Third World War*, the Soviet 'empire' was going to collapse regardless of whether the war lasted three weeks or two years, or whether nuclear weapons were used or not used. The choice of a scenario's end-state is based on the author's agenda. In Hackett's case, he made no secret of this agenda. His intention was to raise awareness of NATO's military weaknesses with the hope that a remedy would emerge. The problem Hackett and his associates wrestled with was what sort of scenario would best serve this purpose.

³⁸ 'Draft Link chapter – From Bomb to Collapse' by Bernard Burrows in 'Hackett WWII Draft A Devastating Response' folder, LHCMA.

From the beginning there was no notion that the Soviets would emerge victorious in the long term, even if they were successful in the short term.³⁹ But even a scenario about a short-term Soviet success was deemed too controversial and likely to cause problems for NATO's image. It was at this point that a new challenge emerged, namely how to write a scenario in which NATO succeeds in both the short-term and the long-term, but still making a public case for the need to strengthen the Alliance. NATO had to be strong enough to defeat a Soviet attack, yet weak enough not to deter a war from starting.

Though admittedly a classic of the Cold War-era, Hackett's *The Third World War* remains relevant today for the writing and critiquing of similar scenarios.⁴⁰ Yet to be relevant is one thing, to be a useful guide is another. By revisiting Hackett's book, this article has sought to demonstrate the importance of 'the story behind the story'. Understanding how an author's agenda leads to compromises in key assumptions, and the recognition of the importance of those assumptions to the unfolding scenario, is crucial to appreciating the strengths and weaknesses of the images of future war that a scenario conveys. Hackett's scenario reflected a compromise between his pro-NATO agenda on the one hand, and the need to avoid the perceived real consequences of undermining that agenda by fictional scare-mongering. As this article has attempted to demonstrate, quite significant compromises were required to adjust the scenario from one of gloom to one of optimism. By examining the evolution of the scenario, from its first draft to eventual publication, it has been possible to identify the author's alternative images of a Third World War, which almost certainly reflected Hackett's actual views of how such a war would begin, unfold, and conclude. Moreover, by comparing *The Third World War* with other texts from the same genre, it is possible to place Hackett's scenario into a broader context, and thereby ascertain similarities and differences in the assumptions about key aspects of a future major power conflict. Perhaps most important of all, identifying what are the key aspects to look for in the first place can lead to more effective critiques of contemporary scenarios of major power war.

³⁹ Although a Soviet victory scenario is included as an 'alternative ending' chapter in the 1982 sequel, it was not considered in the original version.

⁴⁰ This is particularly true of NATO-Russia scenarios that deal with conflict over the Baltic States such as: General Sir Richard Shirreff, *2017: War with Russia: An Urgent Warning from Senior Military Command* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 2016) and David A. Shlapak and Michael Johnson. *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016).