

Imagining the Third World War

Discussions about NATO's conventional defence in the 1970s

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During the 1970s, military planners east and west of the “Iron Curtain” continued to prepare for a potential “hot” conflict between the two opposing military alliances, the Warsaw Treaty Organization and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Then-divided Germany – called the Central Region by NATO – would have been the main battleground of such a conflict. But how would that Third World War, and especially its conventional side, be fought? In NATO's realm, this question not only occupied the thinking of military headquarters and national defence ministries, but also that of other military “experts.” The resulting often international textual discourse ranged from military doctrine to newspaper articles to future histories, that mirrored not only the change of strategy from “massive retaliation” to “flexible response” but also intra-alliance issues such as equitable sharing of the military burden and the influence of latest weapons technology on strategy and tactics. And while World War III between the Warsaw Pact and the Atlantic Alliance never materialized, both sides spent billions on materiel and stationed millions of soldiers in preparations for a war that never happened and that continues to stimulate imaginations of war up to this day.

It is a sunny and quiet morning somewhere along the border between the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic. All of a sudden, delta-winged MiG-21 fighter jets thunder overhead from east to west. Then, a platoon of Soviet T-62 tanks rumbles through an opening in the East German border defences and enters West German territory, followed by BMP-1 infantry fighting vehicles. A few hundred metres into the federal state of Hesse, Federal Republic of Germany, the armored column passes through a narrow point between two hills. This

is the chance for a dug-in Bundeswehr anti-tank team: from their camouflaged position, the soldiers fire a HOT anti-tank guided missile at the leading Soviet T-62. World War III has begun.¹

Third World War scenarios like this were common in 1970s western print media. But why? After all, the years between 1970 and 1979 are often seen as the period of *détente* or *Entspannungspolitik* between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact. This rapprochement between “East” and “West” was symbolized by high-level talks between Washington and Moscow, the Federal Republic of Germany’s *Ostpolitik*, and the final Helsinki Accords of the 1975 Conference on Security and Co-Operation in Europe.² But the Cold War in Europe was far from over.³ To the contrary, military planners on both sides of the “Iron Curtain” continued to prepare for a potential “hot” conflict between NATO and the Warsaw Treaty Organization.⁴ The main battleground, designated the Central Region in NATO parlance, would be (then-)divided Germany.⁵ How, though, would that Third World War be fought? In NATO’s realm, this question not only occupied military headquarters and national defence ministries, but also other experts, producing an international textual discourse that ranged from military doctrines to newspaper articles, to even future histories of World War III. These debates reflect a typical aspect of the Cold War, namely trying to

¹ War begins only with the defence of the attacked, Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege* (München: Ullstein, 2002).

² Robert D. Schulzinger, “Détente in the Nixon-Ford Years, 1969–1976,” *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Vol. II, *Crises and Détente*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 373–394; Jussi M. Hanhimäki, “Détente in Europe, 1962–1976,” *ibid.*, 198–218.

³ Dieter Krüger, *Am Abgrund? Das Zeitalter der Bündnisse: Nordatlantische Allianz und Warschauer Pakt 1947 bis 1991* (Fulda: Parzellers, 2013) for a recent history on the conflict between NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

⁴ Dieter Krüger (ed.), *Schlachtfeld Fulda Gap: Strategien und Operationspläne der Bündnisse im Kalten Krieg* (Fulda: Parzellers, 2015), with articles on the preparations for war on both sides.

⁵ The Central Region consisted of (West) Germany south of Schleswig-Holstein (which was part of the Northern Region) to the Bavarian–Austrian border. For recent contributions to the historiography of the NATO “flanks,” see Bernd Lemke (ed.), *Periphery or Contact Zone? The NATO Flanks 1961 to 2013* (Freiburg im Breisgau et al.: Rombach, 2015) and Bernd Lemke, *Die Allied Mobile Force 1961 bis 2002* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015).

guess the intentions of the potential adversary,⁶ and they also show how the then-current state of the NATO alliance and its military capabilities were seen at the time in its member states.

Among Western European visions of World War III in the 1970s, especially those of three NATO generals were very prominent: Robert Close of Belgium, Johannes Steinhoff of West Germany, and Sir John Hackett of the United Kingdom.⁷ They were the loudest voices in an international and public discourse about NATO's military capabilities in which outlooks on a potential war with the Warsaw Pact were informed by World War II, the peacetime experience of NATO as a defensive military alliance, and estimations on the future role and use of latest-generation weaponry.⁸ To further narrow down my focus, I will, for the most

⁶ E.g. Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, *Briefing "NATO-Warsaw Pact Balance,"* 24 September 1975, *Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/>, 20 September 2016, 1: "[...] the perceptions each has of the capabilities of its potential adversary and of the nature of the conflict that is envisaged."

⁷ E.g. C. L. Sulzberger, "No Farce the Second Time," *New York Times*, 5 June 1977, E17: "The 'Swiss Review of World Affairs' prints an analysis based on books published last year by two retired NATO generals [...] 'Europe Without Defense? 48 Hours That Could Change the Face of the World' [and] 'Where is NATO headed' [...]."; Drew Middleton, "NATO Forces: Criticism Gains New Urgency," *The New York Times*, 4 November 1979, 9: "[...] criticisms of [NATO's] military inadequacies, the present strategy or lack of it for defending Europe and the imbalance between the overall United States contribution and that of the European partners are growing in volume and severity. A sense of urgency has been introduced into the debate by Gen. Robert Close, a distinguished Belgian soldier, who on the basis of a mass of detailed information about both sides maintains that in 48 hours the Soviet Union and its allies could smash through the Rhine and seize the Ruhr industrial basin without recourse to nuclear arms." For West German visions of nuclear World War III in the 1950s, see Andy Hahnemann, "Keiner kommt davon. Der Dritte Weltkrieg in der deutschen Literatur der 50er Jahre," *Keiner Kommt davon. Zeitgeschichte in der Literatur nach 1945*, ed. Erhard Schütz and Wolfgang Hardtwig (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 151–165. For Warsaw Pact visions, see Central Intelligence Agency National Foreign Assessment Center, *Warsaw Pact Commentary on NATO Concepts for War in Central Europe*, October 1977, *Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/>, 20 September 2016, I. East German visions of World War III and the GDR press' point of view on NATO's state of defence are a desideratum of my research.

⁸ Siegfried Lautsch, "Die Entwicklung der militärischen Konzeption der Warschauer Vertragsorganisation in den letzten zwei Jahrzehnten des Ost-West-Konflikts," – *Schlachtfeld Fulda Gap*, 87–113, here 92f: "Beide Seiten stützten sich auf ihre Erfahrungen und Lehren des Zweiten Weltkrieges, auf Stellvertreterkriege der Nachkriegszeit und auf die Weiterentwicklung ihrer Streitkräfte entsprechend den operativ-strategischen Erkenntnissen im 20. Jahrhundert."

part, leave out nuclear warfare and concentrate on conventional defence, especially concerning land and air warfare in central Europe.⁹

The 1970s were a decade of profound changes in military affairs.¹⁰ Already in 1967, concurrently with the so-called “Harmel Report” calling for a twin-pillar strategy of deterrence/defence and détente, NATO decided on the strategy of flexible response.¹¹ The new strategy was set down in document MC 14/3.¹² Flexibility of response superseded MC 48 of 1954 and its strategy of a “devastating counter-attack employing atomic weapons.”¹³ Instead, from the late 1960s, NATO wanted “to provide for the security of the North Atlantic Treaty area primarily by a credible deterrence, effected by confronting any possible, threatened or actual aggression, ranging from covert operations to all-out nuclear war [...]”¹⁴ The main goal of the Atlantic Alliance was to credibly deter any enemy (read: the Warsaw Pact) and show him that no attack would be worth the outcome of his aggression. Deterrence, or eventually defence in the case of war (in German, called the *Ernstfall*, “case of emergency,” or *Verteidigungsfall*, “case of defence”), was based on the triad of conventional forces, tactical battlefield nuclear weapons, and strategic atomic arms. To achieve a credible deterrence or a successful defence along the lines of flexible response, it was especially NATO’s conventional forces that needed to be modernized. In the 1950s and 1960s, they had mostly served the function of a trip-wire for massive nuclear retaliation. Now, in the 1970s, renewed emphasis was put on conventional

⁹ For nuclear options, see e.g. Kurt J. Lauk, *Die nuklearen Optionen der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1979); Christian Tuschhoff, *Deutschland, Kernwaffen und die NATO 1949–1967* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2002).

¹⁰ E.g. Gordon S. Barrass, “The Renaissance in American Strategy and the Ending of the Great Cold War,” *Military Review* 1 (2010): 101–110, here 103.

¹¹ North Atlantic Council, *The Future Tasks of the Alliance*, 14 December 1967, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_26700.htm, March 14, 2017.

¹² North Atlantic Military Committee, *MC 14/3 (Final)*, 16 January 1968 – *NATO Strategy Documents 1949–1969*, ed. Dr. Gregory W. Pedlow, <http://www.nato.int/docu/stratdoc/eng/a680116a.pdf>, 18 September 2016.

¹³ North Atlantic Military Committee, *M.C. 48 (Final)*, 22 November 1954 – *NATO Strategy Documents 1949–1969*, ed. Dr. Gregory W. Pedlow, <http://www.nato.int/docu/stratdoc/eng/a541122a.pdf>, 18 September 2016.

¹⁴ *MC 14/3*.

warfare.¹⁵ NATO needed to field, or was already fielding, new generations of conventional military materiel to back up the strategy of flexible response or to replace outdated materiel, especially guided anti-tank, anti-aircraft, and air-to-ground munitions, as well as airplanes and main battle tanks.

For nuclear warfare, NATO relied especially and mostly on the United States of America's arsenal. The U.S. had enjoyed a lead in atomic arms in the early years of the Cold War after 1945. By 1970, though, the Soviet Union had almost reached nuclear parity with the USA. In this state of near equilibrium, actual atomic war certainly meant "mutually assured destruction." This was another reason why conventional warfare received renewed emphasis through flexible response – a war below the level of nuclear escalation seemed to become more likely again.¹⁶

In terms of conventional forces, the Warsaw Pact and especially the Soviet Union enjoyed numerical superiority throughout the Cold War, at least in terms of combat units.¹⁷ For example, according to some readings that included both active and reserve forces, about 43,000 Warsaw Pact tanks faced 14,000 NATO tanks in 1975, a ratio of 3 to 1; in terms of manpower, about 950,000 Warsaw Pact troops faced 790,000 NATO soldiers.¹⁸

Moreover, with American involvement in Southeast Asia in the 1960s and the early 1970s, U.S. soldiers were withdrawn from Western

¹⁵ Consult the various articles in *Schlachtfeld Fulda Gap*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ E.g. *NATO–Warsaw Pact Balance*, 1.

¹⁸ Michael Poppe, "Zum militärischen Kräfteverhältnis zwischen Nordatlantischer Allianz und Warschauer Pakt," – *Schlachtfeld Fulda Gap*, 254–284. A Central Intelligence Agency Directorate of Intelligence July 1975 research paper called *Flexibility in Soviet Offensive Forces: The Roles of Armor and Other Ground Forces*, 5f, puts the tank numbers at about 25,100 for the Warsaw Pact and 6,000 for NATO. The balance of forces between NATO and the Warsaw Pact was and still is a complicated topic, see *NATO–Warsaw Pact Balance*; Wallace J. Thies, *The Atlantic Alliance, Nuclear Weapons & European Attitudes: Reexamining the Conventional Wisdom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 15ff.; John S. Duffield, *Power Rules: The Evolution of NATO's Conventional Defense Posture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995); Frederick Zilian Jr., "The Shifting Military Balance in Central Europe," – *The United States and Germany in the Era of the Cold War, 1945–1990: A Handbook*, Vol. 2, 1968–1990, ed. Detlef Junker (New York: Cambridge UP, 2004), 155–162.

Europe, much to the chagrin of the European allies who felt that the USA neglected the “real” centre of the Cold War. And on the other side of the Atlantic, already during the Vietnam War and especially after the loss of South Vietnam, voices in the United States Congress grew louder and louder that wanted a partial or even complete withdrawal of GIs from Europe, arguing that “the” West Europeans felt safe under the American nuclear umbrella and were not doing enough themselves in terms of military materiel and manpower. The question of fair burden-sharing of the common defence in the Atlantic Alliance was once again raised.¹⁹

In addition, the Soviet Union was modernizing its forces at a fast rate in the 1960s and 1970s.²⁰ NATO, which had always tried to even out its numerical disadvantage through technological superiority, saw this military build-up as a threat.²¹ This added additional pressure on the alliance to modernise its non-nuclear war-fighting capabilities.

The contemporary conflict that seemed to predict the most how a potential Third World War would be fought was the October 1973 Middle East War. It pitted the latest generation of Soviet- and U.S.-produced weaponry against each other, such as S-75 “Dvina” (NATO designation SA-2 “Guideline”) surface-to-air missiles against F-4 Phantom II fighter-bomber jets or 9M14 “Malyutka” (NATO designation AT-3 “Sagger”) anti-tank guided missiles against M60 main battle tanks.²² From the

¹⁹ See especially Wallace J. Thies, *Friendly Rivals: Bargaining and Burden-Shifting in NATO* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2003).

²⁰ E.g. Sherwood S. Cordier, *Calculus of Power: The Current Soviet-American Conventional Military Balance in Central Europe, Third Edition* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1980); David R. Stone, “The Military,” – *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War*, ed. Richard H. Immermann and Petra Goedde (Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press, 2013), 352.

²¹ E.g. *NATO-Warsaw Pact Balance*, 1. For an overview of debates about the military balance, see David M. Walsh, *The Military Balance in the Cold War: U.S. Perceptions and Policy, 1976–85* (London & New York: Routledge, 2008).

²² Ulrich de Maizière, *Verteidigung in Europa-Mitte* (München: J. F. Lehmanns, 1975), 35. Lemke, *Allied Mobile Force*, 36 claims that the 1973 October War confirmed Western military planners’ ideas on the use of guided weapons. Consult also Saul Bronfeld, “Fighting Outnumbered: The Impact of the Yom Kippur War on the U.S. Army,” *The Journal of Military History* 71:2 (April 2007): 465–498; Ingo Trauschweizer, “Learning with an Ally: The U.S. Army and the Bundeswehr in the Cold War,” *The Journal of Military History* 72:2 (April 2008): 477–508, especially 498.

Vietnam War, military planners took the lessons of using helicopters for transportation and supporting ground troops as well as the need for close-air support by specialized jet planes.²³

But how could flexible response and the modernization of NATO's conventional arsenal be implemented? This was a question of money as well as of interpretation. Western Europe faced the end of the post-World War II boom years.²⁴ Defence spending had to cope with higher inflation rates and more national debts as well as higher manpower and equipment costs.²⁵ In addition, debates raged among NATO members about how flexible response was to be interpreted and especially when the nuclear threshold would be crossed, and therefore when the point of time would arrive at which atomic weapons were to be used. The United States wanted to delay a nuclear confrontation as long as possible and therefore fight a prolonged conventional conflict. But some Europeans wanted a lower nuclear threshold as a more credible deterrent; they feared that conventional warfare would make an attack more attractive to the Soviet Union because of its seeming advantages in this field.²⁶ And last but not least, Europeans still remembered the destruction of their countries in World War II.

These discussions did not only take place in military staff rooms and government ministries in Brussels, London, Bonn, or Washington²⁷; they were also hotly debated in publicly available print media. It is here that the names of the earlier mentioned Generals Robert Close, Johannes Steinhoff, and Sir John Hackett showed up. The three of them shared being long-serving career soldiers with military records spanning from World War II to high positions in NATO. All of them were weary of détente between East and West; all of them saw deficiencies in NATO that needed

²³ Cordier, *Soviet–American Conventional Military Balance*; Ingo Trauschweizer, “Back to the Cold War: The U.S. Army after Vietnam,” *U.S. Military History Review* 2:1 (December 2015): 18–37.

²⁴ *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective*, ed. Niall Ferguson, Charles S. Maier, Erez Manela and Daniel J. Sargent (Cambridge, MA et al.: Belknap, 2010).

²⁵ See especially Thies, *Friendly Rivals*.

²⁶ See especially Robert de Wijk, *Flexibility in Response? Attempts to Construct a Plausible Strategy for NATO 1959–1989* (dissertation, Rijksuniversitet Leiden, 1989).

²⁷ See e.g. Bundeswehr General Ulrich de Maizièrè's *Verteidigung in Europa-Mitte*.

to be overcome; and all of them wanted to convince the national publics of their home countries (and also the NATO public in general) to invest more in the common defense of the Atlantic Alliance.

Belgian General Robert Close had been commander of a Belgian unit stationed in West Germany and was, in the mid-1970s, director of NATO's Defence College in Rome. In 1975, he published *L'Europe sans défense?* ("Europe without Defence?"), later translated into other languages, including German.²⁸ In this book, Close described NATO as being unprepared for a conventional Warsaw Pact attack. He mistrusted the Soviets and feared that the USSR had secret plans running counter to détente. Especially the Soviet military buildup suggested more than just a defensive capability. Close thought that if the Soviets saw an opportunity for reaching certain political goals via limited military means, hawkish politicians and generals in Moscow would wage war against the Atlantic Alliance. In one chapter, he describes his vision of World War III: Warsaw Pact forces would be able to reach the Rhine in 48 hours while NATO's conventional forces were unprepared for repelling this attack. Close felt that especially the armed forces of the smaller allies, such as his native Belgium, were too weak, cutting both manpower numbers and defence spending. He blamed this on the false impression détente had allegedly created among Western European politicians and publics, making them believe that there would be no military conflict and therefore no need to prepare for a war with the Warsaw Pact anymore. Moreover, Robert Close had experienced Nazi Germany's Blitzkrieg in 1940 against his own country. He was haunted by the possibility of being caught off guard again. Close presented several improvements for NATO's conventional capabilities. One was a better dislocation of military forces: many NATO troops in the "layer cake" of forces from 7 countries were positioned too far away from the intra-German border.²⁹ Close also called for greater manpower reserves. Finally, he took a stand for more latest generation weapon technology as well as shared research, development, and procure-

²⁸ Robert Close, *Europa ohne Verteidigung? 48 Stunden, die das Gesicht der Welt verändern* (Bad Honnef et al.: Osang, 1977).

²⁹ Troops from the Federal Republic of Germany, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada, Belgium, the Netherlands, and France.

ment of weapons systems among the allies to save money and streamline military logistics. This latter topic of rationalization, standardization, and interoperability (RSI) to improve NATO's capabilities was also one of the very hotly debated topics among the Atlantic Alliance's members in the 1970s (and beyond).³⁰ Other high-ranking active duty NATO officers were quick to state that the situation was not as bleak and Close had misrepresented it.³¹

German General Johannes Steinhoff had been a World War II fighter ace and was scarred for life in a 1945 jet plane crash. Influential in building up the West German *Luftwaffe* after rearmament, he was the Bundeswehr air force's commander-in-chief (*Inspekteur der Luftwaffe*) from 1966 to 1970. From 1971 to 1974, Steinhoff headed the NATO Military Committee – the highest position a military officer can gain in the alliance. He commanded a very conspicuous presence in West German media, from interviews and articles in newspapers and magazines, to forewords in publications on international security issues.³² In 1976, two years after his resignation from the military, he published *Wohin treibt die NATO?* (“Where is NATO heading?”).³³ Steinhoff came to conclusions about the state of the Atlantic Alliance similar to Close, but the German ex-general went into more detail in some respects, such as the question of the nuclear threshold and how reliable the United States would be in the eventuality of a Warsaw Pact attack. Steinhoff put special emphasis on the fact that NATO needed a strong European pillar to keep the Americans in, as well as make burden-sharing of the common defense more equal. He argued

³⁰ See e.g. Benedict von Bremen, “Technology, Warfare, and Intra-Alliance Rivalry: The U.S.-West German Main Battle Tank Harmonization in the 1970s,” – *The Means to Kill: Essays on the Interdependence of War and Technology from Ancient Rome to the Age of Drones*, ed. Gerrit Dworok and Frank Jacob (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016), 210–227; Keith Hartley, *NATO Arms Co-Operation: A Study in Economics and Politics* (London et al.: George Allen & Unwin, 1983); Walsh, *The Military Balance*, 120; Lemke, *Allied Mobile Force*, 35.

³¹ See e.g. Drew Middleton, “US. Army in Germany Confident It Is in Fighting Form,” *The New York Times*, 15 May 1978, A2.

³² E.g. “Um Gottes willen, was für ein Kriegsbild! – General a.D. Johannes Steinhoff über den Zustand der Nato,” *Der Spiegel*, 8 March 1976, 39–42.

³³ Johannes Steinhoff, *Wohin treibt die NATO? Probleme der Verteidigung Westeuropas* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1976).

that Europeans should throw off the singlemindedness of national interests and work more closely together.³⁴ Both Robert Close and Johannes Steinhoff felt that NATO was in a state of crisis. In their eyes, the alliance needed stronger decision-making institutions, making it less like a club of “the fifteen” where members have common interests but do not have binding rules. Like Close, Steinhoff heavily stressed that NATO’s conventional arsenal needed improvement to either credibly deter or, should the need arise, successfully defend the Alliance against a possible Warsaw Pact attack. And like Close, Steinhoff did not completely trust the process of détente and questioned the sincerity of the Soviet Union’s intentions.³⁵

British General Sir John Hackett was also a World War II veteran, having fought in the failed 1944 Allied Operation Market Garden. He continued to serve Her Majesty in the post-World War II era and was commander of the British Army of the Rhine in West Germany in the mid-1960s. During this tenure, he won a NATO war game playing the military commander of the Warsaw Pact. This prompted Hackett to write an open letter to *The Times* London in which he criticized the state of the British armed forces.³⁶ After his retirement, Hackett was approached by a publisher and requested to write a fictional history of the Third World War. With the help of other military experts – some of them also recently retired and others remaining unknown due to their active service status – *The Third World War: August 1985. A Future History* was published in 1978 and subsequently translated into ten languages, selling three million copies worldwide, receiving an update with the 1982 *The Third World War: The Untold Story*, and allegedly being bedtime literature of U.S. presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan.³⁷ In Hackett’s

³⁴ A working example at the time was the Eurogroup, an informal meeting of the European NATO members (except for France, Iceland, and Portugal). The Eurogroup tried to show that the Europeans were actually doing more for the common defence by fostering intra-European defence cooperation and increased defence spending, see e.g. *The Eurogroup* (Brussels: NATO Information Service, 1976); Krüger, *Am Abgrund*, 135.

³⁵ For a summary of Steinhoff’s oft-reiterated points, Lemke, *Allied Mobile Force*, 34f.

³⁶ “Defining the True Purpose of NATO: What Should Be Understood, from General Sir John Hackett, Commander, Northern Army Group,” *The Times*, 6 February 1968, 9.

³⁷ Sir John Hackett and others, *The Third World War: August 1985. A Future History* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1978). One of the translations was in German: *Der Dritte Weltkrieg*.

1978 scenario, a conflict over the succession to Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito evolves into World War III, with the Warsaw Pact attacking NATO. After two weeks of heavy conventional fighting in the Central Region, the Atlantic Ocean, proxy wars elsewhere around the globe, and combat even in space, NATO barely manages to turn the tide against the massive armored onslaught from the East. The Soviet Union then destroys Birmingham with one nuclear weapon, which is followed by a retaliatory Anglo-American atomic attack on Smolensk, resulting in the sudden disintegration of the Soviet Union. The moral of Hackett's story was that NATO countries needed to invest more in defence now – that is, the late 1970s – before it would be too late – that is, when the Warsaw Pact would possibly attack in the future.³⁸ Like Close and Steinhoff, Hackett mistrusted détente and wanted more defence spending, especially by the United Kingdom but also by the other NATO members. He also shared the same view that the already fragile conventional military balance in Europe was in danger. In comparison with actual NATO estimates and war plans of the time, this future history of World War III seems very close to what could have turned into the “real deal.”³⁹ On the other hand,

Hauptschauplatz Deutschland (München: Bertelsmann, 1978). For sales numbers and the book's reception, see Tom Nicholson, “Souls and Salvos,” *Newsweek*, 12 March 1979, 23; Sir John Hackett, “Why the General Is Refighting World War III,” *The Times*, 19 June 1982, 10; Ronald Dugger, “The President's Favorite Book: ‘The Third World War,’” *The Nation*, 27 October 1984.

³⁸ See also a *National Security Information Memorandum* “Warning of War in Europe,” 27 June 1984, *Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/>, 20 September 2016, 6: “We believe it highly unlikely that the Pact would attack NATO under present circumstances. [...] We believe war in Europe would become likely only as a result of profound political, military, economic, or social changes—or a serious miscalculation—and would be preceded by a period of growing tension resulting in a crisis of great severity.” [Italics in original.]

³⁹ Except that the Warsaw Pact planned, should the need arise, to use tactical nuclear weapons from the outset, *Schlachtfeld Fulda Gap; The Roles of Armor and Other Ground Forces; Warsaw Pact Commentary on NATO Concepts*; Director of Central Intelligence, *Warsaw Pact Forces Opposite NATO, National Intelligence Estimate Volume I—Summary Estimate*, 31 January 1979, *Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/>, 20 September 2016; Michael Schmid, “Nukleares Skalpell oder Damoklesschwert? Strategiediskussionen und Militärkonzepte der NATO und der USA in Zeiten von ‘Flexible Response’, Doppelbeschluss und PD-59 (1968–1980)” http://opus.bibliothek.uni-augsburg.de/opus4/files/538/Schmid_Strategiediskussion_NATO_USA.pdf; Michael Schmid, “Transatlanti-

real world events in the years to follow quickly outdated some of Hackett's predictions (in *The Third World War*, Persia is one of the most important non-NATO allies – only months after the publication of the book, the Iranian Revolution took place and reversed that situation 180 degrees). Interestingly, West German weekly *Der Spiegel* listed *The Third World War* under non-fiction (and also published excerpts from the German translation⁴⁰) while *The New York Times* put it on its fiction bestseller list.

The manifold contributors to Hackett's work mirror the various experts from the military, defense and state departments, news media, and defence industry that participated in the debates on NATO's military capabilities in the 1970s.⁴¹ Their outlets ranged from newspapers to defence industry magazines.⁴² German weekly newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* printed a title story asking if the West was strong enough.⁴³ Better defence cooperation among the NATO allies was a recurrent topic in newspapers and magazines such as *The New York Times*, *The Times* London, as well as scholarly publications.⁴⁴ There even was a 1978 West German TV mockumentary on the Third World War.⁴⁵ Combined, these

sche und mittelöstliche Krisenbögen. Die US-Sicherheitspolitik im Zweiten Kalten Krieg zwischen NATO-Modernisierung und Carter-Doktrin – und ihre Einschätzung durch die östliche Spionage (1977–1985)“ http://opus.bibliothek.uni-augsburg.de/opus4/files/587/Schmid_Carter-Doktrin_und_NATO.pdf. A more pessimistic assessment is Lemke, *Allied Mobile Force*, e.g. 84.

⁴⁰ Serialized in the *Der Spiegel* issues 30 October 1978, 6 November 1978 and 13 November 1978.

⁴¹ See the blurb on the dustcover: “General Hackett has been assisted in writing this book by experts of the highest calibre (some anonymously), including top-ranking American and German generals. Contributors include: Air Chief Marshal [...] Brigadier [...] Vice-Admiral [...] deputy editor of *The Economist* [...] Major-General [...] Ambassador [...] and Permanent Representative on the NATO Council [...]”

⁴² For the former, see e.g. “‘Das muß uns besorgt machen’ – Nato-Oberbefehlshaber Haig über die sowjetische Militärmacht und die Stärke des Westens,” *Der Spiegel*, 16 August 1976, 79–87; “Soviet Bloc's Forces Are More Mobile,” *The Times*, 10 December 1974, 5; for the latter, e.g. Hans Rühle, “Mehr Sicherheit durch weniger Truppen?” *Wehr und Wirtschaft* 2 (1974): 79–80.

⁴³ “Ist der Westen stark genug?” *Der Spiegel*, 16 August 1976.

⁴⁴ See e.g. “Wüstes Durcheinander,” *Der Spiegel*, 9 June 1975, 36–38; C.L. Sulzberger, “A Smaller Bang for a Buck,” *The New York Times*, 21 November 1976, 179, quoting Steinhoff: “As an alliance of sovereign countries competing with each other economically, NATO reflects the economic, industrial and political situation in each member country, and this in turn has repercussions in the great variety of projects and weapons.”

⁴⁵ Martin Schulze, *Frieden ist der Ernstfall*, ARD, 6 June 1977, 9:45 p.m.

texts formed a discourse about how the next war in Europe would be fought – or at least how NATO should effectively prepare for it.⁴⁶

All these visions of World War III shared many similarities. Most experts expected the Soviet Union to take the opportunity to attack NATO during a time of political crisis, either in the Warsaw Pact or among NATO allies. Pact forces would either attack the Western Alliance from a “standing start,” that is, suddenly from military maneuvers, or give up the moment of surprise by a longer-term buildup of troops. The offensive would develop as follows: helicopters would deploy paratroopers in order to conquer important infrastructure such as military headquarters, radar installations, airports, and bridges in the hinterland; other infrastructure would be attacked by ground support aircraft in order to stifle NATO’s defence. Fighter jets would try to achieve air superiority. Under heavy artillery fire, armored and mechanized columns would drive deeply into Western German territory to reach the River Rhine – or even farther – as quickly as possible, most likely through the avenues of the Northern German Plain and the “Fulda Gap” in the state of Hesse in the heart of Germany. Soviet forces were depicted as a well-oiled but somewhat rigid war machine geared for fighting a reckless blitzkrieg.⁴⁷

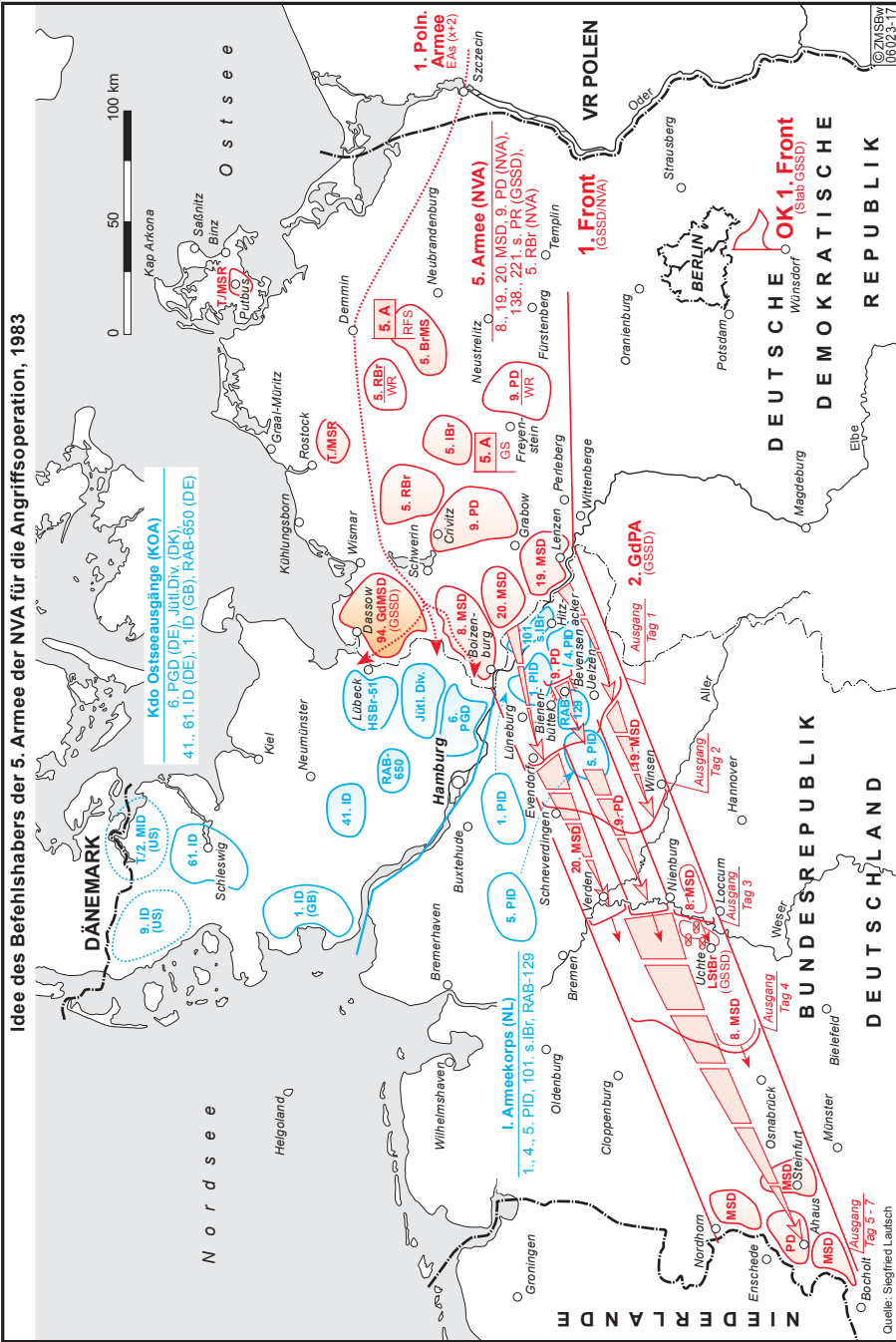
On the other side, NATO’s forces were usually seen as a mixed bag. Especially smaller allies with few troops in Western Germany, such as the Netherlands and Belgium, were considered weak parts in the Central Region’s “layer cake.” In contrast, the Bundeswehr, the U.S. Armed Forces, and, to a lesser extent, British troops were deemed well-trained and equipped (especially West German and American troops were undergoing extensive materiel modernization and troop reorganization at the time and well into the 1980s).⁴⁸ NATO forces were expected to

⁴⁶ There were also criticisms of Hackett, Steinhoff, Close, and other NATO officers as war-mongers, e.g. Gerhard Kade, *Die Bedrohungslüge: Zur Legende von der “Gefahr aus dem Osten”* (Köln: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1981); in Gerhard Kade, *Generale für den Frieden* (Köln: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1981), the interviewed former NATO generals doubted that war was imminent at the time and took an opposite position to Close et al.

⁴⁷ For a study of some actual plans from both sides, see *Schlachtfeld Fulda Gap*, and Lemke, *Allied Mobile Force*.

⁴⁸ See Walsh, *The Military Balance*, 122; Trauschweizer, “Learning with an Ally”; Trauschweizer, “Back to the Cold War.” For the Bundeswehr up to 1970, consult Helmut R. Hamme-

Idee des Befehlshabers der 5. Armee der NVA für die Angriffsoperation, 1983



Idea of the commander of the 5. Army of the People's Army of the German Democratic Republic (NVA) for defensive and offensive operations in 1983 as part of the 1st front along with the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany (GSSD). Courtesy: Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr

repel the Warsaw Pact attack by a forward defence close to the intra-German border, using highly mobile armored forces and well-prepared dug-in infantry anti-tank defences as well as close air support and keeping air superiority. Still, most experts concurred that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization would need to be better prepared to achieve success. In the worst case scenarios, the Atlantic Alliance is caught off guard, with the Warsaw Pact attacking during the summer holidays and on a Sunday morning when many Western soldiers would be on home leave. It was feared that NATO's forces were equipped with outdated weapons and not supplied with enough reserves, both manpower and war stocks. According to Generals Close, Steinhoff, and Hackett as well as other experts, only investing more now – that is, in the 1970s – in the common defence of NATO, would help in the event of a future Warsaw Pact attack. Especially the Atlantic Alliance's conventional forces should be modernized in terms of materiel. Troop levels should be at least kept at then-present levels or, even better, raised. The same went for defence spending: defence ministries' budgets should not be reduced, instead being more efficiently spent or increased. This all would, in the eyes of the experts, either deter a war or aid defence in a "hot" conflict. The means to achieve this were seen in better defence cooperation through improved communications, joint training, and multinational defence production, as well as training more reservists and building up war stocks.

The Third World War between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, though, never materialized. After the stationing of new Soviet medium-range ballistic missiles and the 1979 NATO "double-track decision," nuclear warfare took the spotlight again.⁴⁹ Despite this, NATO's conventional capabilities were strengthened throughout the 1980s, reflecting the debates of the previous decade with their called-for improvements which were often implemented, although not always perfectly:⁵⁰ new tanks such as

rich et al., *Das Heer 1950 bis 1970: Konzeption, Organisation, Aufstellung* (München: R. Oldenbourg, 2006).

⁴⁹ See e.g. Lemke, *Allied Mobile Force*, 110.

⁵⁰ Some short-lived initiatives were those like the 1977/78 NATO Long-Term Defense Program. See especially Thies, *The Atlantic Alliance*; Cordier, *Calculus of Power*; *Schlachtfeld Fulda Gap*; Walsh, *The Military Balance*, 123.

the West German Leopard II and the American M-1 Abrams, attack helicopters like the Bundeswehr's PAH-1 and the U.S. Army's AH-64 Apache, close air support aircraft such as the U.S. Air Force A-10 Warthog II, new jet fighters like the F-15 Eagle and the F-16 Fighting Falcon, ground attack air planes like the West German-British-Italian Multi-Role Combat Aircraft "Tornado," more widespread introduction of multiple-rocket missile artillery, and the NATO-wide employed E-3 AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System).⁵¹ In addition, more military stockpiles were gathered, more reservists enlisted, and more multinational training for increased interoperability conducted. Last but not least, continually adapted and modernized strategy and tactics like the United States 1982 AirLand Battle concept also helped to improve NATO's conventional capabilities⁵² – and cost a lot of Deutschmarks, Pounds Sterling, and U.S. Dollars, all for a war that never happened in reality.

But this is what the military does in peacetime: it prepares for war by equipping and training its forces. Like military exercises, one could see the visions of World War III in the 1970s as simulations. But the World War III visions of Close, Steinhoff, Hackett, and others were also especially meant as wake-up calls for more defence spending in order to strengthen NATO's conventional forces in order to make flexible response more credible in the face of a threatening Soviet military buildup. These visions of a Third World War thereby not only shed light on how modern (conventional) warfare was envisioned during the 1970s, but they also reflect upon the debates that raged over NATO's (conventional) state of military affairs – a state of affairs that was seen in dire need of being strengthened, despite (or even because) of *détente*. This was in tune with NATO's roadmap in the guise of the 1967 "Harmel Report:" here, deterrence/defence and *détente* were not seen as mutually exclusive but as

⁵¹ See e.g. Robert R. Tomes, *US Defense Strategy from Vietnam to Operation Iraqi Freedom: Military Innovation and the New American Way of War, 1973–2003* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), 73.

⁵² See especially Tomes, *US Defense Strategy* on the development of the AirLand Battle doctrine; Diego A. Ruiz Palmer, "The NATO–Warsaw Pact Competition in the 1970s and 1980s: A Revolution in Military Affairs in the Making or the End of a Strategic Age?" *Cold War History* vol. 14 no. 4 (2014): 533–573; Krüger, *Am Abgrund*, 167ff.

going hand in hand. With the oncoming of a “Second Cold War” in the late 1970s – Soviet Third World activity, the stationing of RSD-10 Pioneer (NATO designation SS-20 Saber) medium range ballistic missiles, and the year 1979 (Iranian Revolution, invasion of Afghanistan), the confrontation between NATO and the Warsaw Pact grew again, making scenarios like those of Close, Steinhoff, and Hackett more viable – and the need to prepare for them more urgent.⁵³

Of these visions, Hackett’s “what if” scenario perhaps had the most lasting effect. It spawned spin-offs, such as U.S. author Harold Doyle’s *Team Yankee*, a 1987 novel about an American tank platoon situated in Hackett’s vision of World War III.⁵⁴ Three years later, when the Cold War was already coming to an end, *Team Yankee* the video game was published; earlier years had seen both tabletop board games such as *Fulda Gap: The First Battle of the Next War* (1977) and other video games like the 1983 *Germany 1985*. And since the 2000s, several further computer games, such as the 2001 *Operation Flashpoint: Cold War Crisis* or the 2012 *Wargame: European Escalation* have used World War III as the background for their scenarios. The visions of World War III between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Warsaw Pact continue.

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⁵³ On the deterioration of détente, see Walter S. Poole, *The Decline of Détente: Elliot Richardson, James Schlesinger, and Donald Rumsfeld 1973–1977* (Historical Office: Office of the Secretary of Defense, September 2015).

⁵⁴ Harold Doyle, *Team Yankee: A Novel of World War III* (New York: Presidio, 1987).

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