

the defense of west germany and the baltic

By Capt B. H. Liddell Hart

ANY examination of the Western defense problem must start with the Berlin situation. For here is much the most likely spot in Europe where the "cold war" could turn into "hot war." It is the "Achilles' heel" of the Atlantic Alliance, where this alliance is even more awkwardly situated, and vulnerable, than the Communist alliance was in its rash attempt to establish a forward base in Cuba. While Cuba was a pledge in pawn to American seapower, West Berlin is a pledge in pawn to Soviet landpower. Both places lie in easily isolatable positions.

The new most precarious place—and a sector rather than a spot—in the Western defense problem is formed by the Hamburg-Copenhagen area. Here lies the key, all too accessible, to the Baltic gate. Its defense is the most intricate problem in the whole NATO situation, so I propose to reserve examination and discussion of it until after surveying the other sectors of the NATO front.

The West Berlin problem is in one sense simpler, but in another sense even more difficult. For although the Allied statesmen commonly talk of "defending" that position, it could in reality only be maintained by *attacking*, under the heaviest handicaps, if the routes of access were closed. The Russians, and their East German satellite, enjoy such a strategically advantageous situation that they would have only to sit tight, and passively obstruct, in order to create a stranglehold that would make the position of the Allied garrison and the population impossible to maintain.

In any attempt to advance to the rescue of the beleaguered city and the Allied garrison there, the NATO forces would have to force their way across a hundred-mile stretch of enemy-held territory. This long stretch is intersected with rivers and numerous streams, while the roads run through several expanses of forest. If an Allied



A distinguished writer and military authority analyzes the West's defensive posture on NATO's critical northern flank

column crossed the border the bridges could be blown up in turn as it approached. Trees could be felled beforehand and quickly laid across the road when needed. Sections of the road could be blown up and made unusable. That would be all the easier because the *autobahn* often runs along high embankments. Where the route is flatter, concrete blocks and other obstacles could be placed beforehand along the edges to hinder any attempt to move off the road and by-pass the blocked sections.

For a relieving thrust, NATO has 25 standing divisions from which it could draw, but of these only the five American divisions are maintained at full readiness for action. Moreover they are stationed in the southern zone, mainly in Bavaria, so that it would be a complicated logistical problem to switch them to the northern zone facing Berlin. The British are stationed in that zone, and are also rather nearer to being ready for action than the other Allied contingents, but they comprise only the equivalent of three divisions. The *Bundeswehr* now has 10 divisions available, but they are not fully ready for action, and their short service is a handicap, while there are obvious political drawbacks in employing them in a spearhead force. The French, Belgians, and Dutch provide two divisions apiece, and these fall considerably short of a state of readiness.

By contrast, the Russians have 20 divisions in East Germany, all of armored or mechanized type, and ready for action, with more than 6,000 tanks—probably three times as many as the Western forces could deploy. They are also better strategically placed. The East German forces comprise at least six divisions, of which three are mechanized, and have close on a thousand tanks. The air strength available to support the Soviet ground forces is, also, much larger than the total of some 3,500 in the Allies' tactical air forces, so that Allied counter-moves on the ground are likely to

suffer from the cramping effect of operating under the handicap of an opposing air superiority.

It is thus all too probable that an Allied thrust to relieve Berlin would be heavily thrown back, and very quickly. The Russians might be content with such a demonstration of their repelling power, but it would be more difficult for the Western Allies to swallow such a humiliating defeat. Yet if they tried to renew their thrust the handful of extra divisions they could mobilize for the purpose would be far outweighed by what the Russians could bring up—at least 20 more within 10 days, and double or treble the total within a month.

Indeed the Russians could probably mobilize a total of about 300 divisions in such a period, but logistical factors—especially road capacity and supply requirements—tend to limit the number that could operate effectively, at such a distance from their home bases, to between 60 and 80. Such a limit is imposed, more emphatically, by the ever-present risk of nuclear intervention. But that strength would be more than ample to frustrate any Allied attempts to relieve or recover West Berlin. For the Western total could hardly be more than 40 divisions, if that, and nearly half of them would be second-line formations of lower quality and equipment whereas the Russians would be likely to employ only first-line divisions—of which they have more than 150 in their standing army.

If the Western Allies unleashed tactical atomic weapons in an attempt to clear the way, the Russians would naturally reply in kind—and the NATO forces, having to advance in the open to fulfill their relieving task, would be likely to suffer the heavier losses, besides devastating the towns and countryside of their West Berlin friends.

If they took the further decision to check the Soviet build-up by nuclear interdiction, the bom-

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bardment would probably be concentrated on the main river-lines, back to the Vistula and Bug, which the Soviet routes of reinforcement cross. But in that case the Russians would be likely to put down their nuclear interdiction on similar river-lines—such as the Rhine, the Meuse, the Seine—while also wiping out the American seaport bases in the west of France and the British base at Antwerp.

So the effect, both physical and strategic, would tend to be worse on the side of the Western countries. Their only alternative to losing round after round, each time they raised the stakes in this way, would be to unleash all-out nuclear war—which would be tantamount to committing suicide, and also genocide.

A survey of what is involved in "fighting for Berlin" would not be complete, however, without examining what might happen if the Russians themselves were not content with throwing back the Allied advance, but decided to exploit the combined excuse and opportunity to follow up the Western Allies' initial repulse, and to press their advantage so far as possible without precipitating nuclear war.

Once the Allied forces were off balance and shaken by the repulse, the Russians would almost certainly be able to reach the Rhine on a wide front. Having got across this river-line there would be few Allied troops to stop them from pressing their pursuit to the Channel coast, or the Atlantic coast.

The Soviet command, however, might well consider that signs of such deep and widespread advance would swamp Western hesitation to use nuclear weapons, and touch off the great "blow up." Although SHAPE has modified its earlier idea of unleashing nuclear weapons at the outset, and now aims to impose a pause by "conventional" means, it is unlikely that any such pause would continue more than 48 hours in face of a large-scale offensive. So it seems more likely that the Russian aim in exploitation would be localized and limited—both in depth and time.

The southern or Bavarian zone offers no objectives of great value from the Russians' point of view, while allowing the defenders plenty of room for a maneuvering withdrawal.

More important and more quickly attainable as an objective is the industrial area around Frankfurt-on-Main, which is only 70 miles distant from the Russians' advanced position in the Thuringian "bulge." It lies near a joint in the Allied front, and on the left flank of the American Seventh Army. It might be reached all the more quickly if a large part of the opposing forces had been drawn north to fight for Berlin.

Another possible objective, in the adjoining sector, is the still more important industrial area of the Ruhr. This lies barely a hundred miles from the Russians' forward positions close to Kassel—not a great distance for a mechanized force to traverse quickly if the opposing forces are caught off balance.

But the easiest objective of all to reach in a quick exploiting pounce would be the short coastal stretch of West Germany, with the great seaports of Hamburg and Bremen. Hamburg is only 25 miles from the Russian front, Bremen only 75 and the NATO force covering this sector is scantier than further south.

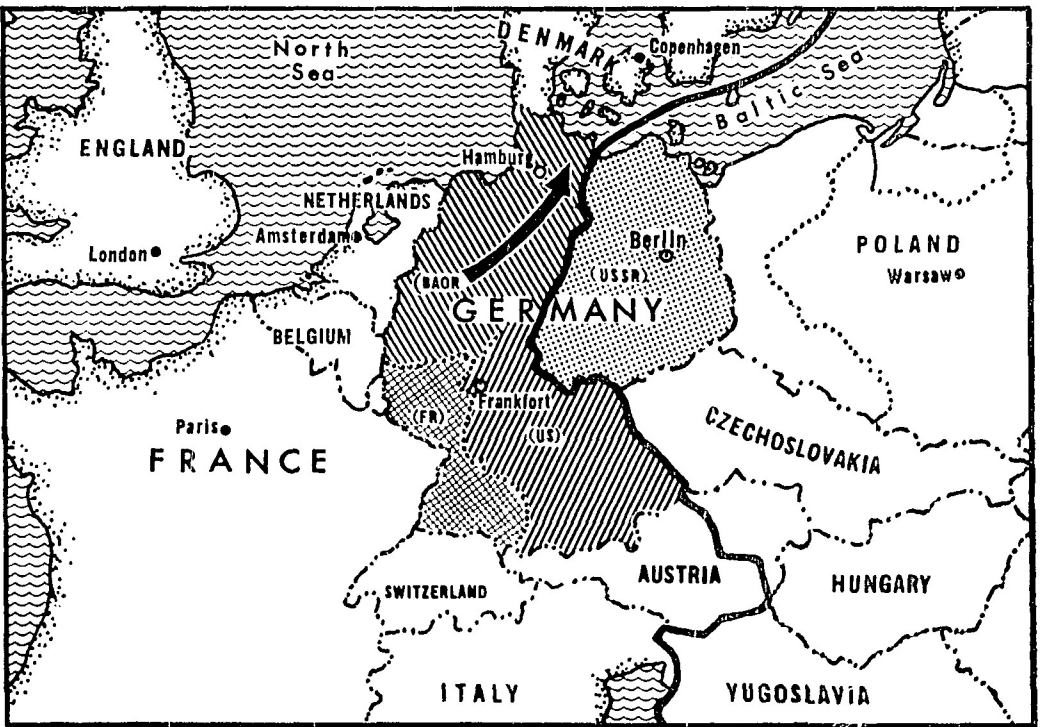
If these forces were over-run or drawn away, it would require little strength and little more time to complete the gain by an exploiting flank drive through Schleswig-Helstein into the Jutland peninsula of Denmark. That might be accompanied or preceded by an airborne descent on Denmark's main island of Zealand and the country's capital, Copenhagen, as well as on the northern part of Jutland. The Russians are estimated to have 10 airborne divisions, and sufficient air transport to lift two of them simultaneously. Such a coup would give Russia the keys to the Baltic. This area is the weakest of all, in forces and situation, along the whole NATO front.

These objectives might be gained by a swift and almost bloodless coup, completed within a day. The Russians might then announce their willingness to withdraw on such moderate conditions as the demilitarization of the area and the straits—saying to the Western powers: "it lies with you to choose between discussing the matter round a conference table or blowing up the world."

There is a prevalent idea in some quarters that a European nuclear force composed of medium-range missiles would be a good deterrent to any such surprise "pounce," as well as an effective counter to any larger-scale Russian offensive with conventional forces. Such an idea is an illusion, arising from fallacious reasoning and shortsighted views. It overlooks three basic objections.

The first is that to use nuclear bombs or missiles at so-called medium-ranges (up to 1,000 miles) would almost certainly produce an immediate escalation into all-out nuclear war. It is hardly imaginable that the Russians would wait to see whether bombers or missiles crossed the line of the Bug, into Russia itself, before launching their own nuclear weapons.

The second is that if the Russians decide to launch a strong offensive with conventional forces against Western Europe, they are likely to have taken due account of such attempted interdiction on their lines of communication through Poland and Eastern Germany, and would probably have developed means of bringing forward supplies and



A remedy for weakly defended "Baltic Gateway," suggests the author, would be to move the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) to the Hamburg sector (note arrow). An even better reinforcement, he said in a letter which accompanied his article, would be an amphibious force—"American Marines would be the most effective kind of reinforcement that I could visualize."

reinforcements *without* passing through bridge-bottlenecks which offer an effective target for nuclear weapons. We must reckon on the Russians developing methods of maintaining dispersed movement and the means of crossing rivers on a broad front and well away from such bottlenecks.

The third is that once nuclear weapons were launched for interdiction in depth, the communications of the NATO forces, and their ports, would be likely to suffer much worse chaos than the Russians—taking account of the Russians' preparedness for such interdiction in planning their offensive, and their less complicated organization.

Moreover, the Russians have a large numerical advantage in such medium-range nuclear weapons, as a counterbalance to the Americans' advantage in those of intercontinental range. According to recent estimates, the Russians have about 700

medium-range nuclear missiles compared with the West's 250, while they also have more than 1,000 medium-range nuclear bombers, a total considerably larger than the West has in aircraft of similar range available on this side of the Atlantic.

In thinking over these problems my conclusion has long been that even if the NATO forces were driven to *use* nuclear weapons, they should be confined to the "battle zone"—in the proper technical sense of the term. It is doubtful whether they could be used at a depth of more than 20 miles without causing prompt escalation of an illimitable kind, and still more dubious if they were used at a depth beyond 60 miles (100 kilometers).

Even so, such a kind of "defense" should be a last resort, because of the terrible devastation it would inflict on the country that was being

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defended in this way. The Chief Scientific Adviser to the British Ministry of Defense, Sir Solly Zuckerman, publicly revealed in an article in the American magazine *Foreign Affairs* early in 1962 the horrifying lessons of a recent NATO "war game." Only three corps were engaged on the Allied side in this "battle," which lasted only a few days, and the use of nuclear weapons was confined to the "actual battle area"—apparently in a part of Germany where there were no large towns. Yet it "turned out that 3.5 million people would have had their homes destroyed if the weapons were air burst, and 1.5 million if ground burst. In the former case, at least half the people concerned would have been fatally or seriously injured. In the case of ground burst weapons, all 1.5 million would have been exposed to a lethal radiological hazard and a further five million to serious danger from radiation."

The airy unrealism which still prevails in many quarters, especially in Paris, was shown in an article which appeared in *Interavia*, expounding a French authority's view of the best kind of defense that the NATO forces should adopt to give full play to their "tactical missiles in defense," and avoid engaging their main ground forces at an early stage against a Russian advance. It argued that, for mobility and fluidity, the bulk of the NATO forces should be positioned in a far rearward zone, 150-200 miles in depth. Such a theory blandly overlooks the fact that this would mean abandoning most of the key centers in Western Germany. Indeed, a depth of 200 miles would take the "defense" back into an area embracing a number of the important cities of Eastern France, as well as the Low Countries. To fight a nuclear battle in such a way would entail the nuclear devastation of much of the area that NATO was created to protect.

Moreover, in the plan visualized by such French theorists, and the conditions likely to result from it, it is inconceivable that any "mobility and fluidity," or any effective control, could be maintained. The *conduct* of operations is impossible in a state of chaos—which would be very far-reaching in a nuclear battle waged over such a vast area.

A better way of deterrence, and much better way of defense if deterrence fails, lies in strengthening NATO's conventional forces and their capacity for non-nuclear defense. Indeed, that offers the only good hope of defense, against Russian "pounces" or a larger-scale offensive by the Russian army, that could avoid being fatal for Western Germany.

The most vulnerable sector of the whole NATO front is on its left flank, between Hamburg and Copenhagen—the "Baltic Gateway." It is also the most weakly defended sector covered only by one

weak Danish division, and one German division positioned near the Baltic coast. The best way to strengthen this sector, as I have been urging during the last two years and more, would be the transfer of the B. A. O. R. (British Army of the Rhine) to the Baltic sector, with its right wing covering Hamburg and the approach through Schleswig-Holstein to Jutland, while its left wing reinforced the scanty Danish garrison of Zealand and the adjoining islands. Then there would be a much more adequate defense of this key sector.

The natural complement to such a switch of the B. A. O. R. to NATO's left flank would be to shift the American Seventh Army northward from the right flank in Bavaria to strengthen the defense of the Russian lines of approach to the Ruhr, as well as to Frankfurt, where there is greater need of such a powerful force than in Bavaria. Unfortunately, I gather that recent discussions of this possibility have led to a negative "stay-put" conclusion, since the expense of moving the elaborate installations and supply system of the American forces is regarded as too large to be faced, despite its strategic benefits.

In these circumstances, the obvious alternative means of filling the gap effectively is a further development of the *Bundeswehr*—not merely its expansion in numbers but a great improvement in its readiness for action. That requires a longer period of military service, or a much larger proportion of professional soldiers than at present. The cost will be high either way, but it could give Western Germany a much better defense insurance than it has at present—and some real assurance that a Russian advance could be repelled without recourse to nuclear weapons, entailing the country's atomic devastation in trying to defend it.

The cost could be diminished if the burden were more fairly shared between the chief Continental members of NATO. In 1949, when the Western defense plan was originally drawn up as a result of the Russian threat arising from the first Berlin crisis, the French contribution was to be 20 divisions. Two years later, after the fresh crisis produced by the Communist invasion of South Korea, German rearmament was accepted as necessary, and the German contribution to Western defense was fixed at 12 divisions. At that time the French Government promised to provide 14 divisions. Yet, under President de Gaulle's regime, France is contributing only two divisions to the NATO shield force, despite the liquidation of her overseas commitments in Africa and Indo-China—an absurdly small contribution compared with her population and national resources.

Willingness—or unwillingness—to take a fair share of the burden has become the crux of the Western defense problem.

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