

## The Russian Bogey

By Stephen Berry

**Jeff McMahan**, *British Nuclear Weapons*

*For and Against* (Junction Books Ltd)

**Field Marshal Lord Carver**, *A Policy For Peace* (Faber and Faber)

It may be that the result of the last general election has taken much of the wind out of the sails of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). This would be unfortunate because the question of British nuclear weapons was never fully debated before the electorate in June 1983. The Labour party, the only party to advocate unilateral nuclear disarmament, was badly split upon the issue and suffered when the press quite reasonably pointed out that some Labour politicians seemed to be contradicting the views of their comrades. An attempt to paper over the cracks by dodging discussion of the defence issue only tended to make matters worse, the result being that an issue which might have tended to be a vote winner for the socialists turned out to be a definite vote loser. The lack of political sophistication by the Labour party can only be regretted. The material for the nuclear debate at the election had been produced. Two fine examples are the books by Lord Carver, one time chief of defence staff, and Jeff McMahan, a researcher in moral philosophy at Cambridge.

Both authors review British defence policy within the context of the NATO alliance. In order to give some flavour of the two books I will discuss their approach to those matters which threatened to become - but only threatened to become - major issues at the last general election: The British independent deterrent; Existing American nuclear bases in Britain; The Cruise missiles.

### The British independent deterrent

Between them Carver and McMahan convincingly demolish the case for the independent British nuclear deterrent as a defence against the Russians. During the election campaign Mrs Thatcher maintained that *Polaris* (soon to become *Trident*) was

necessary for use as a 'last resort'. If the Americans were not to back up NATO in an emergency the British should then have the means to deter the Russians alone. In a recent debate in the House of Commons Enoch Powell described one example of the 'last resort'. "Let us take this country's situation in the summer of 1940, with a victorious enemy in undisputed possession of the adjacent continent, having apparently immense superiority in conventional weapons. In my imaginary scene, as in 1940, this country is not - at any rate not yet - supported by the alliance of the United States. Let us further suppose that, as in 1940, there is evident imminence of an invasion and an attempt to conquer these islands by force. I do not believe that any Hon. Member could dispute that, whatever other circumstances there might be that might call for the use of the ultimate deterrent, that would be a situation of last resort." Powell then pours scorn upon the idea that it would be sensible to use nuclear weapons in this situation, either in response to a threat by the Warsaw Pact to use the bomb if Britain didn't surrender or in response to an invasion which had already begun. Carver, McMahan and Powell all point out that in these circumstances Britain has far more to lose than she has to gain. On the scales are British weapons which are supposed to provide a minimal deterrent and Russian weapons which are hugely more destructive in power. Britain could cause considerable damage to Warsaw Pact centres of population, but she would herself be the victim of savage retaliation, particularly dangerous in Britain's case because of extreme concentrations of population. Only in the case where it could be shown that the Russians have a Genghis Khan-like desire to obliterate Britain would possession and use of the bomb against the Soviet Union make sense. It could just about be argued that if Israel's more extreme opponents possessed nuclear weapons then Israel should also have them to resist any attempts to repeat the 'Final Solution'. Even supporters of the British nuclear deterrent do not argue that the prime Soviet objective in foreign policy is to turn Britain into a radioactive desert. As McMahan puts it: though having an independent nuclear weapons system is a

credible deterrent against an all-out nuclear attack, the ability to deter such an attack is far from being an urgent defence requirement.

It further appears that there are a number of American strategists who by implication do not believe in the British nuclear deterrent. The evidence for this comes out in the discussion of the 'Minutemen vulnerability problem'. The Americans are worried that their land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles are vulnerable to a knock-out strike from the Soviet Union. If the Russians were to knock out a large number of American missiles in a first strike using only a few missiles themselves, they would then command considerably more striking power than the Americans. This, so the argument goes, would place the Americans in an unpleasant dilemma. They could launch an attack on Russian cities, but this course of action would leave the American population open to devastating retaliation. Alternatively, the Americans could use most of their remaining weapons to destroy as many Soviet weapons as possible. Further weapons could be held in reserve in order to deter a strike on American cities. McMahan points out that even this second course of action has its problems: "Anticipating the possibility of an American response aimed at destroying Soviet forces, the Russians would be prepared to launch some of their remaining forces as soon as they were alerted of an approaching American attack. This means that many of the American missiles would end up striking empty missile silos, while Russian missiles would be on their way towards certain military targets in the US and probably one or two American cities (21)".

The point is that an imbalance in forces between the Russians and the Americans means that in the case of a crisis one side - that with a sizeable nuclear superiority - would have the advantage when calculating future possibilities. Evidently one of the main strengths of the Americans at the time of the Cuban missile crisis was the knowledge that their nuclear superiority would resolve any escalation to their advantage.

It is important to note that the Americans would not be worried if they thought that the

Russians believed that the Americans would prefer annihilation to surrender. If the Russians believed this they would not launch the first strike. The Russians, however, cannot be expected to have this belief. They know that surrender would be the most reasonable prospect in the example cited above. In an article in the *Sunday Telegraph* Peregrine Worstborne bemoaned the fact that the will to make this ultimate sacrifice was not in evidence in today's Britain: "How can a pleasure-seeking, hedonistic, pagan society expect to be taken seriously when it threatens to risk total obliteration in defence of principle?" But the willingness to undergo total destruction has rarely existed in civilisations. It may be that a few religious or mystical groups would be prepared to suffer oblivion for their beliefs, but the triumph of the Kamikaze spirit would mean a revival of mysticism and collectivism in the United Kingdom, something which would no doubt be more palatable to Worstborne than the rest of us.

No, the moral of the *Minuteman* example is clear for the UK. If Britain has three or four submarines capable of striking at the Soviet Union, she would still be far weaker than America after the disarming first strike. If, as some American planners assume, the Russians could expect that the Americans would not retaliate after such a strike, how much weaker is the threat of deterrence by Britain which possesses 2½% of the Soviet nuclear arsenal. It is clear that the British independent deterrent relies upon far more optimistic beliefs about the intentions of the Russians than those accepted by American planners.

McMahan also throws doubt on some of the less important arguments for the British nuclear deterrent. The 'trigger argument' states that Britain might use her nuclear weapons independently in order that they might serve as a catalyst for engaging American nuclear forces. The Russians would therefore be deterred from invading Western Europe because they felt that this would be likely to lead to war with the United States. There is a problem, however. If, faced with war in Western Europe, the British decided to use a nuclear weapon when the USA were holding back, how would the Russians be expected to react? If

they thought that this British action had the purpose of serving as a signal to a reluctant America, would it not be in the interests of the Russians to respond as fiercely and decisively as possible against Britain, displaying to the Americans on a minor scale what could be the horrors of nuclear war for them? There is, moreover, the further question of whether a policy of dragging America into nuclear war against her will is the best basis for good relations between two countries who are supposed to be close allies.

### **American nuclear bases in Britain**

As both writers argue their case having accepted Britain's participation within the NATO alliance, they have to point out that on moral grounds it would be wrong to ask the Americans to pull out of Britain and thereby bear all the risks of nuclear attack. On mere practical grounds it is ridiculous to expect that any American administration would allow its country to be the only one within NATO to retain nuclear bases on its soil. After all, NATO is conceived as an organisation specifically designed to defend Western Europe, not America. It is also clear that NATO must have a nuclear component if it is to be a defence against the Soviet Union. A NATO which relied only on conventional weapons would have no reply if the Soviet Union so much as threatened to use nuclear weapons as an instrument of policy. McMahan does maintain that a commitment to American bases does not mean accepting all bases (he argues against having F-111 fighter bombers in Britain) but it remains true that a country as important as Britain in NATO must accept some of the nuclear risk. It is true that the bases will be targets for attack, that their presence could encourage the US belief that it could fight a limited nuclear war in Europe, but that is the price, admittedly unpleasant, which Britain must pay if it wishes that NATO should remain as a viable alliance.

### **Cruise Missiles**

The issue of *Cruise* missiles provided differing reactions from the major parties. The Conservatives were in favour of, the Labour party against their installation. The SDP/Liberal Alliance supported the instal-

lation but only with the so-called dual key system, a system which would require the agreement of both the British and American governments before *Cruise* could be launched. Supporters of *Cruise* stressed that the West must have an answer to the deployment of SS-20 medium range missiles by the Russians. The installation of *Pershing* and *Cruise* would be this answer and at the same time a proof of the vigour of NATO when faced by increased armaments from the Warsaw Pact.

McMahan on the contrary thinks the case for rejecting *Cruise* is overwhelming. *Cruise* weapons share with *Polaris* the 'attribute' that their use would in most cases be irrational. They do not share the same invulnerability as *Polaris*. Even if they are shunted around Britain in time of crisis they would not be entirely safe. A recent US government study admitted that the Russians might know from 'covert' intelligence the general location of the missiles or at least damage their navigational systems. This is a sobering thought for the residents of those areas through which the *Cruise* missiles will be trundled. It is not even clear that the slow-flying *Cruise* will be able to penetrate Russian defences which are designed for a large scale American attack. These defences, though unlikely to be effective against American intercontinental ballistic missiles, may well have a far higher chance of success against a smaller number of European missiles. One further point needs to be made. If the missiles are intended as a response to the SS-20, why was it necessary to deploy weapons of a comparable type? The decision could have been taken to increase the number of submarines allocated to NATO, thereby not presenting the Russians with further targets on these islands. It seems that the introduction of *Cruise* must be seen primarily as a political rather than a military measure, a signal to the Russians that the US will regard an attack on Western Europe and US bases there as an attack on the US. Unfortunately the closer links between Western Europe and the USA cannot be guaranteed to always work for the benefit of Europeans. In the event of a crisis or a war between America and the Soviet Union over the Caribbean the potential of American controlled weapons in Europe would be a factor making it more difficult for Europe to

remain neutral. The tendency of *Cruise* and *Pershing* deployment is to restrict still further the possibilities for European action independent of the USA.

At the end of his book McMahan draws up a balance sheet for British nuclear weapons. He examines four desirable aims and considers whether they could be better achieved under a nuclear or a non-nuclear policy. They are:

- (a) Under which of the two policies would the risk of nuclear war in Europe be less?
- (b) Under which policy would the risk of conventional war in Europe be less?
- (c) Under which policy would the risk of Britain being dominated or occupied by a foreign power be less?
- (d) Under which policy would the expected damage resulting from war in Europe be less?

He comes to the conclusion that nuclear war is less likely if Britain does not have nuclear weapons. There would be one less power capable of escalating to a nuclear level and military resources could be reallocated into conventional weapons. Conventional war would, however, be more likely. McMahan quotes Lawrence Freedman: "If the risks of the war turning nuclear have been reduced to a minimum, war might seem in some way 'safer'. This could be described as lowering the war threshold". A non-nuclear policy would not necessarily reduce the nuclear war threat to a minimum, but it might reduce the threat enough to make a conventional war uncomfortably attractive. On points (c) and (d) McMahan finds the advantages of a nuclear policy and a non-nuclear policy balanced. A nuclear policy would make the domination of Britain less likely than a non-nuclear one. The damage from war would be less under a non-nuclear policy. This last statement is not quite so attractive as it might seem if we remember that McMahan also believes that under a non-nuclear policy the chance of war occurring may well be increased. All in all a pretty depressing picture. The choice of a nuclear or a non-nuclear policy seems merely to be a choice of evils.

### **Are nuclear weapons the real problem?**

The problem is that CND have stressed the issue of nuclear weapons and not thought enough about the political relationship between Western Europe and the Eastern Block and how that should affect British foreign policy. Carver quotes a famous passage from the Prussian military thinker, Clausewitz:

"It is, of course, well known that the only source of war is politics - the intercourse of governments and peoples; but it is apt to be assumed that war suspends that intercourse and replaces it by a wholly different condition, ruled by no law but its own.

"We maintain, on the contrary, that war is simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means. We deliberately use the phrase 'with the addition of other means' because we also want to make it clear that war in itself does not suspend political intercourse or change it into something entirely different ... Do political relations between peoples and between their governments stop when diplomatic notes are no longer exchanged? Is war not just another expression of their thoughts, another form of speech or writing? Its grammar, indeed, may be its own, but not its logic.

"If that is so, then war cannot be divorced from political life; and whenever this occurs in our thinking about war, the many links that connect the two elements are destroyed and we are left with something pointless and devoid of sense (17)".

Politics is primary. No major analysis on war or armaments can be worked out without first having established the political context. Neither of the two books investigate in any great depth the question of Britain's position within NATO and whether or not it is the existence of NATO which makes British defence choices of the less or least pleasant order. Carver merely says in answer to the proposed demilitarisation of Europe (91), "... Europe west of the USSR's borders would then be overshadowed by her overwhelming military preponderance, no longer balanced by that of the United States beyond the Atlantic".

McMahan devotes a rather spotty section to 'the Soviet threat'. He spends time pointing out that increased armaments by the Soviet Union do not necessarily mean aggressive intentions. They could reflect a desire to maintain super-power status and not be caught out once again as the Russians were during the Cuban missile crisis. (CND supporters do not as a rule take such an indulgent view of the rearmament programme of the Reagan administration!) Nor does the offensive nature of Warsaw Pact strategy necessarily mean preparation for an offensive war. It could equally mean that in the event of war the Soviet Union intends that the war should be fought this time on the soil of its adversaries. McMahan also points out that the Soviet Union does not place great faith in its allies and has consequently concentrated its arms industry within Russia. Having built up a case that the Soviet threat is largely fictitious, McMahan is faced with the question as to why defences are required at all by Western Europe. He answers by indicating that no one can tell what might occur in the distant future. There might then be a Soviet threat. There might then also be a Turkish threat, but how potential threats are to be spotted in advance and the finance made available to combat them is something beyond the power of mere mortals. McMahan's example of Nazi Germany does not answer the question. "There was no apparent German threat before Hitler embarked on rearmament. In 1932, the German army was very small and had only a relatively tiny number of tanks. But Europe was to be faced with an enormous German threat". (89) McMahan makes the mistake of thinking that it was German rearmament which was the main source of the German threat. The threat was in fact Hitler's desire to overturn the European order set up by the Treaty of Versailles. Moreover, given the constellation of powers in Europe prior to 1932 such a policy was always an option to Germany. As a further reason justifying defences against the USSR, McMahan gives the fact that judgements about people's intentions are never incorrigible. This is especially true about the intentions of the Soviet government whose members have never been noted for their candour. Indeed - but the policy of the British government towards the Soviet Union must be based upon a

perception of likely British interests and capacities set against those of the Soviet Union. Individual personalities are of secondary importance. Britain fought against Germany in 1939 not because she thought that Hitler in particular commanding Germany would dominate continental Europe and thereby threaten Britain (if anything, the historical record now seems to show that Hitler favoured some sort of partnership with the British Empire). Rather, the British government declared war because Germany dominating Europe was a threat. Hitler's successor may have taken a less sympathetic attitude towards the UK and he would then have been in a position to express his lack of sympathy by effective action.

The question which McMahan and Carver only touch briefly is crucial and still remains to be answered. Is the security of people in Britain so jeopardised by the Soviet Union that effective defence requires membership in an alliance which makes Europe the number one interest and therefore potentially the number one danger area for the super powers? It is worthwhile examining this question against the background of traditional British foreign policy.

### **The choices which faced British policy**

Ever since the sixteenth century British foreign policy rested upon the assumption that it was 'free to choose'. The uniqueness of this freedom was sometimes forgotten. Most countries have had their foreign policy largely dictated to them by their geographical situation and the behaviour of their neighbours. Britain declared war upon Germany in 1914 and 1939 but this decision was not forced upon her. She could have kept out if she had wished. Russia did not have such an option in 1941. War was imposed upon her and would have been imposed upon her whatever Stalin had done. The basis for this freedom of choice helps to explain much British policy in the past and American policy in the present. For Britain the basis was the existence of the English Channel. "What shall we do to be saved in this world?" wrote Halifax the Trimmer in 1694, "There is no other answer but this: Look to your moat. The first article of an Englishman's political creed must be that he

believeth in the sea". And it was that moat which gave an extra level of protection. It also enabled Englishmen to feel morally superior because they rarely required a standing army. The moral superiority was never strengthened by the abolition of the standing navy.

What conclusions followed from the existence of the English channel have been much disputed. A minority have regarded sea-power as sufficient defence. Those in control of policy have maintained that sea-power was the beginning and not the end of British security. It has been the 'Left' in British history who have been traditionally isolationist - wanting solely to rely on the strength of the British navy. Charles James Fox opposed war with Napoleon, John Bright opposed any active foreign policy at all, and the radicals before 1914 opposed the ententes with France and Russia. The opponents of collective security and advocates of a détente with Germany at Munich 1938 were mostly radicals and pacifists. This strand of opinion was, however, the minority one.

The classical basis of British security was the 'Balance of Power'. The British prized possession of the seas because it enabled them to play their part in maintaining the balance. British statesmen did not believe that there was an automatic 'Balance of Power' whereby the great powers cancelled themselves out on the continent of Europe. They believed that the 'Balance of Power' had to be constantly adjusted by British policy. This meant an active foreign policy, a policy which would involve Britain in more wars than if she had done without it. Nevertheless this had to be the price paid by the British for security.

A further consequence of the protection afforded by the English Channel was the scope it gave for weighing moral claims. If you did things because you had to, as most continental nations have done, there is little room to bother about matters of right and wrong. The foreign policy of Great Britain has always had a moral element. First it was, the defence of the protestant religion; then it was the defence of kings and princes of Europe against the effects of the French Revolution; then in the nineteenth century it

became the encouragement of Liberalism and national independence movements. This moral feeling has generally been kept within bounds and has never influenced British policy as much as the anti-communist crusade has dominated American policy since World War Two. Gladstone's euphoria about the 'Concert of Europe' (the forerunner of the League of Nations and the United Nations) was taken with a pinch of salt. Not everyone believed that a harmony and not a conflict of interests were to be the determining characteristics of international affairs. Canning defended Spanish independence against Napoleon; he did not think it worthwhile defending Spanish Liberalism against the intervention of conservative Bourbon France. Palmerston welcomed the unification of Italy and helped to promote it. He would do nothing for Poland and Hungary. One was beyond his reach, the liberation of the other would have been against British interests.

The post-war Attlee government is famous for the most radical extension of state control in Britain's history. Equally noteworthy, though less commented on, was the revolution inaugurated in British foreign policy. Even the most ardent advocates of the interventionist tradition in foreign policy never intended that British troops should be stationed indefinitely in peace time on the soil of a continental European country. Even less did they imagine it was necessary that, for the first time in a thousand years, foreign troops should be permanently stationed in Britain. Nevertheless it has become accepted as a truism that Europe has remained at peace for the last 35 years because of the opposition of NATO and the Warsaw Pact backed by nuclear weapons. The reason why these dramatic changes have received so little criticism is fear of the Soviet Union.

### **The Russian Threat**

The idea that without NATO Gorbachov would be residing in Buckingham Palace tomorrow is widely held in Britain. It is not certain, however, if the Russians believe this option to be either prudent or plausible. It was just about possible in the 1930s and 1940s for the Soviet leaders to delude themselves that the workers in the capitalist West were yearning to throw away their

'chains'. Events in eastern Europe after 1945, however, must have made the Politburo question whether their political system will reach even the 21st century with any credibility intact. Even the anti-capitalist youth of the West looks to places other than the Soviet Union for its inspiration. But won't the Russians invade anyway? Don't Communists like controlling people just for the hell of it? The question as to whether capitalist or communist nation states have been more aggressive since 1945 has been much disputed. It seems sensible as a rule of thumb to assume that both capitalist and communist nation states will extend their power if they consider it is in their interest and they think they can get away with it. It would be absurdly easy for communist China to invade and take over Hong Kong and there is little that could or would be done about it. The communist Chinese do not do this because they perceive that it would be to their economic disadvantage. How much more significant than are the benefits to be gained by the Soviet Union through increased economic co-operation with Western Europe.

The other more subtle argument in favour of NATO is that Western Europe would fall under Soviet influence if the Americans left. It is not usually explained why this would be worse than the present militarisation of Europe and there are reasons to think that the Soviet influence would be neither so extensive nor so bad as feared. It is certain that events in Latin America are heavily influenced by what the US governments do or do not want. Would it be sensible for Latin American states to go all out to form an alliance with the Soviet Union in order to diminish US influence? At the moment Latin America is, on the whole, mercifully free from the great power confrontations which have dogged other areas of the world, but an alliance with the USSR would turn Latin America into the same sort of stand-off arena between the super powers which continental Europe has become. This analogy is almost certainly not flattering to Europe. It is doubtful if the Soviet Union could exert the same degree of pressure on a politically stable Europe as the US has upon Latin America. Ostensibly the post-war world has become more easily accessible to the super powers. There is nowhere which cannot be

reached in a short space of time. It would seem to be only a matter of a few years before outer space is divided into spheres of influence. In a more enduring sense, however, it is true that the world is less malleable to the will of great powers. The rise of nationalism across the planet has made peoples extremely conscious of interference by foreign powers. Examples of the difficulties and impotence of the super powers since 1945 are legion. In Vietnam and more recently in the Middle East the Americans have come a cropper, whilst the Russians require over 100,000 troops to control parts of Afghanistan. The British controlled with relative ease most of what is now India, Pakistan and Bangladesh - over 300 million people - with less than 50,000 men. The costs of great power status - always underestimated - are becoming ever more difficult to justify. In this context, the obvious direction which closer relations between Western Europe and the USSR would take has been clearly indicated by the increased economic co-operation between West Germany and the Soviet Union after the Brandt accords of the early 1970s. The gas pipeline is a symbol for what might be achieved in the future.

Going on past history, the omens for the development of saner relations with Soviet Russia are not auspicious. The West has been dominated by certain delusions about that country long before 1945. De Toqueville is famous for his observations of 19th century America. His compatriot the Marquis de Custine was equally revealing in a widely read book which he wrote about Russia in 1839. "This nation (Russia), essentially militant, greedy as a result of privation, expiates in advance by her own degrading submission the hope of exercising tyranny over others. The glory, the wealth which she expects distract her from the shame she endures, and in order to cleanse herself from the impious sacrifice of every liberty, public and personal, the prostrated slave dreams about conquering the world. Russia sees in Europe a prey which will sooner or later be handed over to her by our dissensions." Modernise the language and you bear the true cold war warrior speaking. Yet this was only 27 years after the French had sacked Moscow. Custine is the typical Westerner who quails before Russia

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forgetting that the Russians have just as much if not more reason to be afraid of the West. The other delusion concerns not the military power but the ideas from the East. Schelling, the German poet, was the 19th century equivalent of the communist fellow traveller: "Europeans sense the approach of the Russian mind like sleepwalkers feel the lure of a magnetic force from which they recoil when they are awake. Europeans see this approach in the clumsy shape of material conquest. There will be a Russian conquest of Europe, but it will be a spiritual one; for only Russia will be able to unite and give integrity to the chaos of European knowledge, to cast off the accumulated dust of every kind of dead authority which till now has stifled European intelligence . . ."

But Schelling, like the admirers of the Bolsheviks, was wrong. The Soviet Union is no longer held by any significant group in, the West as the model to follow. There will be no spiritual conquest of the West from that source. For those libertarians working for a safer world, there can be no more important task than the exorcising of the Soviet bogey.

**Free Life**