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OF SECRETCopy No. 25Final22nd May, 1945.

WAR CABINET

JOINT PLANNING STAFFOPERATION "UNTHINKABLE"Report by the Joint Planning Staff.

We have examined Operation UNTHINKABLE. As instructed, we have taken the following assumptions on which to base our examination:-

- (a) The undertaking has the full support of public opinion in both the British Empire and the United States and consequently, the morale of British and American troops continues high.
- (b) Great Britain and the United States have full assistance from the Polish armed forces and can count upon the use of German manpower and what remains of German industrial capacity.
- (c) No credit is taken for assistance from the forces of other Western Powers, although any bases in their territory, or other facilities which may be required, are made available.
- (d) Russia allies herself with Japan.
- (e) The date for the opening of hostilities is 1st July, 1945.
- (f) Redeployment and release schemes continue till 1st July and then stop.

Owing to the special need for secrecy, the normal staffs in Service Ministries have not been consulted.

OBJECT

2. The overall or political object is to impose upon Russia the will of the United States and British Empire.

Even though "the will" of these two countries may be defined as no more than a square deal for Poland, that does not necessarily limit the military commitment. A quick success might induce the Russians to submit to our will at least for the time being; but it might not. That is for the Russians to decide. If they want total war, they are in a position to have it.

3. The only way in which we can achieve our object with certainty and lasting results is by victory in a total war but in view of what we have said in paragraph 2 above, and the possibility of quick success, we have thought it right to consider the problem on two hypotheses:-

- (a) That a total war is necessary, and on this hypothesis we have examined our chances of success.
- (b) That the political appreciation is that a quick success would suffice to gain our political object and that the continuing commitment need not concern us.

TOTAL WAR

4. Apart from the chances of revolution in the U.S.S.R. and the political collapse of the present regime - on which we are not competent to express an opinion - the elimination of Russia could only be achieved as a result of:-

- (a) The occupation of such areas of metropolitan Russia that the war making capacity of the country would be reduced to a point at which further resistance became impossible.
- (b) Such a decisive defeat of the Russian forces in the field as to render it impossible for the U.S.S.R. to continue the war.

Occupation of Vital Areas of Russia

5. The situation might develop in such a way that the Russians succeeded in withdrawing without suffering a decisive defeat. They would then presumably adopt the tactics which they employed so successfully against the Germans and in previous wars of making use of the immense distances with which their territory provides them. In 1943, the Germans reached the Moscow area, the Volga and the Caucasus, but the technique of factory evacuation, combined with the development of new resources and Allied assistance, enabled the U.S.S.R. to continue fighting.

6. There is virtually no limit to the distance to which it would be necessary for the Allies to penetrate into Russia in order to render further resistance impossible. It is hardly conceivable that the Allies could penetrate even as far as, or as quickly as, the Germans in 1943 and this penetration produced no decisive result.

Decisive Defeat of the Russian Forces

7. Details of the present strengths and dispositions of the Russian and Allied forces are given in Annexes II and III and illustrated on Maps A and B. The existing balance of strength in Central Europe, where the Russians enjoy a superiority of approximately three to one, makes it most unlikely that the Allies could achieve a complete and decisive victory in that area in present circumstances. Although Allied organization is better, equipment slightly better and morale higher, the Russians have proved themselves formidable opponents of the Germans. They have competent commanders, adequate equipment and an organization which,

though possibly inferior by our standards, has stood the test. On the other hand, only about one third of their divisions are of a high standard, the others being considerably inferior and with overall mobility well below that of the Allies.

8. To achieve the decisive defeat of Russia in a total war would require, in particular, the mobilisation of manpower to counteract their present enormous manpower resources. This is a very long term project and would involve:-

- (a) The deployment in Europe of a large proportion of the vast resources of the United States.
- (b) The re-equipment and re-organisation of German manpower² and of all the Western European Allies.

Conclusions

9. We conclude that:-

- (a) If our political object is to be achieved with certainty and with lasting results, the defeat of Russia in a total war will be necessary.
- (b) The result of a total war with Russia is not possible to forecast, but the one thing certain is that to win it would take us a very long time.

CHICK SUCCESS

10. It might, however, be considered, as the result of a political appreciation, that a quick and limited military success would result in Russia accepting our terms.

11. Before a decision to open hostilities were made, full account would have to be taken of the following:-

- (a) If this appreciation is wrong and the attainment of whatever limited objective we may set ourselves does not cause Russia to submit to our terms, we may, in fact, be committed to a total war.
- (b) It will not be possible to limit hostilities to any particular area. While they are in progress, therefore, we must envisage a world-wide struggle.
- (c) Even if all goes according to plan, we shall not have achieved, from the military point of view, a lasting result. The military power of Russia will not be broken and it will be open to her to recommence the conflict at any time she sees fit.

12. Assuming, however, that it is decided to risk military action on a limited basis, accepting the dangers set out above, we have examined what action we could take in order to inflict such a blow upon the Russians as would cause them to accept our terms, even though they would not have been decisively defeated and, from the military point of view, would still be capable of continuing the struggle.

General Strategic Situation

13. Of the Russian armed forces opposing us, the Red Army is far the most formidable part. There will be no threat from Russian strategic bombers or submarines comparable to the German threat against our bases and shipping. It is, therefore, the strength and dispositions of the Red Army to which we must give principal attention.

14. Europe. The main strength of the Red Army is concentrated in Central Europe. Although the Russians might occupy Norway as far south as Trondheim, and Greece, this would not materially affect the overall strategic situation. They might well overrun Turkey in Europe, and profiting by their present predominant position in South East Europe, close the Straits and prevent any naval action we might wish to take in the Black Sea. This would not of itself produce any additional danger to us, but South East Europe, including Greece, would immediately become barred to our influence and commerce.

15. Middle East. In Persia and Iraq an extremely dangerous situation would arise. It appears almost certain that Russia would take the offensive in this area in view of the valuable oil resources to be gained and the extreme importance of these areas to us. It is estimated that there are some eleven Russian divisions available against an Allied force of three Indian brigade groups. It is, therefore, difficult to see how we could defend this area and the loss of this source of oil supply would be extremely serious.

Logistic difficulties and her commitments in Central Europe make it unlikely that Russia would advance towards Egypt in the early stages.

Russia would undoubtedly try to stir up trouble in all the Middle East countries.

16. India. Although Russia would undoubtedly try to stir up trouble in India, it seems doubtful whether she would undertake military action in this area.

17. Far East. In the Far East, any Russo-Japanese agreement would allow the Japanese to free forces to reinforce the Home Islands or to resume the offensive in China. They could hardly undertake amphibious operations to recover any of the areas they have lost. Since the main operations against Japan would clearly have to be postponed, the result would probably be stalemate in the Japanese war. Russian offensive action against the Allies in the Far East seems unlikely.

18. The above considerations and the present locations of the main forces lead us to conclude that the principal theatre would inevitably be Central Europe with subsidiary, but highly important, operations in the Persia-Iraq area.

19. We have examined in Annex Y a campaign in Europe. The salient points in our examination are summarized below.

Factors Affecting our Strategy in West Europe

20. Our main superiority over the Russians will be in the air and at sea. The latter will enable us to control the Baltic, but this by itself will not be an important factor in bringing about a quick success.
21. In the air our superiority will, to some extent, be offset by the fact that initially our strategic bomber force must be based in England, even if staging posts are used on the Continent. In view of the wasting effort of our air forces and the great distances involved, they cannot be expected to produce the same scale of effort as they did during the war against Germany.
22. Russian industry is so dispersed that it is unlikely to be a profitable air target. On the other hand, the great length of the Russian communications would appear to offer us far more favourable targets, especially at the important crossings of the water barriers. To achieve any worthwhile results, however, these attacks on communications must be co-ordinated with a land offensive.

Our only means, therefore, of obtaining a quick success is by means of a land campaign, making full use of our air superiority both tactically and in attacks on Russian L. of C.

23. Considerations of topography and the general run of communications indicate that the main effort of a land offensive would have to be in the North. This would have the further advantage of enabling us to make use of our naval superiority in the Baltic to protect our left flank and to harry the enemy's right flank.

24. We, therefore, conclude that the campaign must be fought primarily on land in North West Europe.

The Land Campaign in North West Europe (See Map C)

25. The Allied forces which can be made available for offensive operations will depend to a great extent upon the numbers which will be tied down by the necessity for re-establishing and securing communications in the devastated areas of Germany.
26. After allowing for such forces and those necessary to ensure the security of the front as far north as Breslau - Chemnitz, we estimate that a force of some 47 divisions, including 14 armoured, could be made available for offensive operations.
27. Against this we estimate that the Russians would be able to produce a force amounting to the equivalent in Allied formations of 170 divisions, of which 30 would be armoured. We should, therefore, be facing odds of the order of two to one in armour and four to one in infantry.
28. It is difficult to assess to what extent our tactical air superiority and the superior handling of our forces will redress the balance, but the above odds would clearly render the launching of an offensive a hazardous undertaking.

If this course is decided upon, however, it might take the form of two main thrusts:-

Northern - on the axis Stettin - Schneidemühl - Rydgoszcz.

Southern - on the axis Leipzig - Cottbus - Poznan and
Dreslau.

29. The main assumed fighting would probably develop east of the Oder - Weisse line and upon its outcome the result of the campaign would probably depend. If the result was favourable, we might reach the general line Danzig - Breslau. Any advance beyond this, however, would increase the length of the front to be held during the winter and increase the danger resulting from the salient formed by Bohemia and Moravia, from which the Russians would be under no necessity to withdraw. Unless, therefore, we have won the victory we require west of the line Danzig - Breslau, it appears likely that we shall, in fact, be committed to a total war.

30. The success of a land campaign, therefore, would depend upon the result of the fighting west of the above line before winter conditions set in. There is no inherent strength in our strategic position and, in fact, we should be staking everything upon one great battle, in which we should be facing very heavy odds.

CONCLUSIONS

31. We conclude that:-

- (a) If we are to embark on war with Russia, we must be prepared to be committed to a total war, which will be both long and costly.
- (b) Our numerical inferiority in land renders it extremely doubtful whether we could achieve a limited and quick success, even if the political appreciation considered that this would suffice to gain our political object.

(Signed) G. GRIMMEL
G.S. THOMPSON
W.L. DAWSON

offices of the War Cabinet,
S.W.I.
22ND MAY, 1945.

Attached are:-

Annex I - Appreciation of Campaign in Europe	Page 7
Annex II - Russian Strengths and Dispositions	Page 15
Annex III - Allied Strengths and Dispositions	Page 21
Annex IV - German Reactions	Page 27
Map A - Russian Strengths and Dispositions	
Map B - Allied Strengths and Dispositions	
Map C - Campaign in North East Europe	
Map D - Vulnerable Points on Russian L. of G.	

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/coldwar/archive/G2/images/Cab.120.691.a.jpg>