CHAPTER 5

The Soviet Union versus the United States

On June 24, 1948, the Soviet Union severed all land connections between Berlin and the Western-occupied regions of Germany. The Soviet action constituted the first direct confrontation with the United States involving the two superpowers' military forces in the nascent Cold War. Soviet behavior is puzzling because the Soviet atomic program was rapidly progressing. While an exact date for completion was uncertain, the Soviets could have waited until they acquired their own nuclear capability to offset the US atomic monopoly. According to the basic deterrence logic, the Soviets should have waited to directly challenge the United States until they could retaliate in kind. Why did the American nuclear monopoly fail to block Soviet action? Were American nuclear weapons simply irrelevant? Finally, why did this case not escalate to war?

I argue that the Soviet Union proceeded cautiously throughout the period of American atomic monopoly. That restraint continued during the Berlin crisis and is attributable in part to US nuclear monopoly. The Soviets avoided a direct challenge to the United States outside their immediate sphere of influence prior to 1948. From the Soviet perspective, the worsening security situation in Germany in 1948 necessitated action. The subsequent Berlin blockade was designed to exert considerable pressure on the Americans. As a conventionally capable nonnuclear power, though, the Soviets imposed tight constraints on their actions for fear of fighting a war with the United States that would turn nuclear. As a result, no war occurred despite the Soviet ability to inflict a rapid military defeat on the United States in a key area of the world for both countries. This case is thus important to examine alongside the other cases in this book because it provides an example of a conflict not escalating to war. Consistent with the framework developed in chapter 1, Soviet leaders took steps to reduce the benefits of nuclear use for the Americans by reducing the danger to the United States during the crisis and taking steps to hedge against an American nuclear attack. For example, the Soviets first probed

the US position and pressed the United States in a geographically isolated area. They also undertook few major military preparations for a broader conflict. When the Americans succeeded in circumventing the blockade, the Soviet Union accepted defeat rather than escalate the conflict. The Soviets explicitly took the US nuclear arsenal into consideration throughout this period. Publicly, Soviet leaders worked to downplay the danger of nuclear weapons to demonstrate resolve in an effort to discourage American policies. Privately, though, the Soviet leadership feared a US nuclear strike if war occurred.

While Soviet behavior was largely consistent with my argument, the case has several limitations. First and foremost, Soviet leaders clearly took the US nuclear arsenal into account during this period, but there is little direct evidence that they explicitly factored in a potential US nuclear response during their decision making for the Berlin Crisis itself. This case therefore relies on general Soviet views of the US nuclear arsenal and the congruence of Soviet behavior with my argument's basic expectations. Second, and related, there are limited primary sources available from the Soviet side for this case. In this chapter, I therefore rely on declassified American documents and secondary sources that draw on Russian sources. Declassified private conversations between Soviet and American leaders help provide insight into Soviet motives and interests. These sources must be carefully interrogated, because Soviet leaders may have had incentives to convey specific messages to their American counterparts. Nevertheless, other scholars have usefully employed this method to assess a state's decision making when direct documents from that state were absent.[1]

The rest of this chapter proceeds in three sections and a summary. First, I review the military balance between the United States and the Soviet Union. I show that the United States had a modest nuclear arsenal and that the Soviet Union had sizeable conventional military capabilities relative to the United States. Next, I provide a basic overview for the Soviet-American dispute. In the third section I demonstrate that Soviet behavior during the Berlin Crisis was congruent with my argument and that the Soviet leadership feared the American nuclear monopoly.

The Military Balance

This section reviews the military balance between the United States and Soviet Union during the period of American atomic monopoly, from July 1945 to August 1949. Though the focus in this book is on nonnuclear weapon state views, I include a discussion of the nuclear aspects of US military planning for two reasons. First, this reinforces the argument that the conventional military balance did not favor the United States. Second,

Soviet espionage almost certainly made their leaders aware of the general contours of these plans.

THE NUCLEAR BALANCE

The American nuclear arsenal and delivery capabilities were limited from 1945 to 1949. Table 5.1 lists the total number of American nuclear weapons and yield in megatonnage. The yields during this period were low relative to what would come after the United States tested a thermonuclear, or hydrogen, bomb, on November 1, 1952.

The United States faced difficulties delivering nuclear weapons against Soviet targets as well. The B-29 Superfortress was the only platform that could deliver nuclear weapons from 1945 into 1948. Not all B-29s were configured to carry nuclear weapons, though. From 1946 until mid-1948 the United States had only approximately thirty to thirty-five bombers that could deliver nuclear weapons, in the 509th Bomb Group based in Roswell, New Mexico. Range limitations meant that the aircraft had to be stationed abroad in order to hit targets in the Soviet Union. In 1948 it took a thirty-nine-person Air Force crew nearly two days to assemble a single weapon. In mid-1948 these assembly teams could make only two bombs ready per day.[2] Upon taking command of Strategic Air Command in late 1948, General Curtis LeMay ordered a simulated attack. Edward Kaplan notes that no crew managed to hit the target successfully, and that "of 303 runs . . . the circular error probable was 10,100 feet, outside the effective radius of a Hiroshima-sized weapon."[3] B-50 and B-36 bombers began entering service in June 1948. The B-36 had a range of seventy-two hundred miles, allowing for it to "fly an Arctic route to reach the Soviet Union from bases in the United States without in-flight refueling."[4] The effect of the new arrivals was limited by lack of operational experience and small numbers, though. Compounding these problems was the lack of detailed targeting information and US fighter escorts for the bombers.[5]

Table 5.1 US nuclear weapons, 1945–1949

Year	*Total nuclear warheads*	*Strategic nuclear warheads*	*Total yield (megatons)*
1945	2	2	0.04
1946	9	9	0.18
1947	13	13	0.26
1948	50	50	1.25
1949	170	170	4.19

Source: "Estimated U.S. and Soviet/Russian Nuclear Stockpiles, 1945–94," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 50, no. 6 (1994): 59.

THE CONVENTIONAL BALANCE

The conventional balance between the United States and the Soviet Union was roughly even during this period. The American advantage was largest in economic capabilities. Initially, the Americans enjoyed a large 5:1 advantage in per capita gross domestic product (GDP). The ratio rapidly decreased as the Soviet Union recovered from World War II's devastation (figure 5.1). A similar story is apparent when examining the overall economies. By 1949, the US advantage was less than 3:1. The Soviet potential for growth was not lost on US observers. For example, in 1944 Admiral William Leahy commented on the "recent phenomenal development of heretofore latent Russian military and economic strength . . . which has yet to reach the full scope attainable with Russian resources." In April 1945, the Office of Strategic Services, forerunner to the Central Intelligence Agency, concluded that "Russia's natural resources and manpower are so great that within a relatively few years she can be much more powerful than either Germany or Japan has ever been."[6] The comparison to Germany was telling, as it had taken Soviet power combined with American power to defeat Germany in World War II. In other words, the United States could expect an even greater struggle if conflict with the Soviet Union occurred.

Soviet and American military forces were comparable, using rough indicators for troops and military spending. Figure 5.2 shows that the Soviet

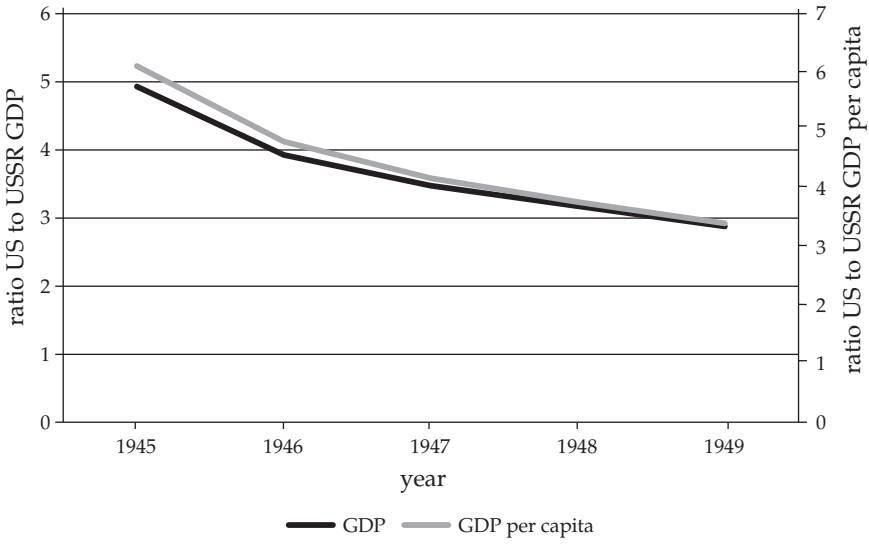

Figure 5.1 Economic ratios, 1945–1949

Source: Angus Maddison Project 2010 database, https://www.rug.nl/ggdc/historicaldevelopment/maddison/releases/maddison-database-2010.

Note: Data for Soviet GDP per capita for 1945 estimated using 1946 population.

Union enjoyed a consistent advantage in total military personnel. In 1948, the Soviets had a 2:1 superiority against the United States. The Red Army consisted of an estimated 175 divisions that could rapidly expand to 320 divisions thirty days after mobilization.[7] The United States spent slightly more per soldier than the Soviet Union, but by 1947 that ratio had dropped considerably. In short, the Soviets had a large military, and its soldiers received funding similar to that of US forces on a person for person basis. To be sure, the forces were not fully comparable. The Soviets lacked a strategic air force and blue-water navy, while the Americans were deficient in ground troops. The similarity in spending is actually more surprising as a result, because naval and air forces are more capital intensive than land forces.[8]

In Europe the Soviets enjoyed a decisive military advantage. The British prime minister Winston Churchill worried that the American troop drawdown following World War II left the Soviets in a preponderant position on the Continent. As he pointed out in 1945, "Anyone can see that in a very short space of time our [Allied] armed power on the Continent will have vanished except for moderate forces to hold down Germany. . . . What will be the position in a year or two, when the British and American Armies have melted and the French have a handful of divisions . . . and when Russia may choose to keep two or three hundred [divisions] on active service."[9] By 1948 the United States had only 114,550 army and air force

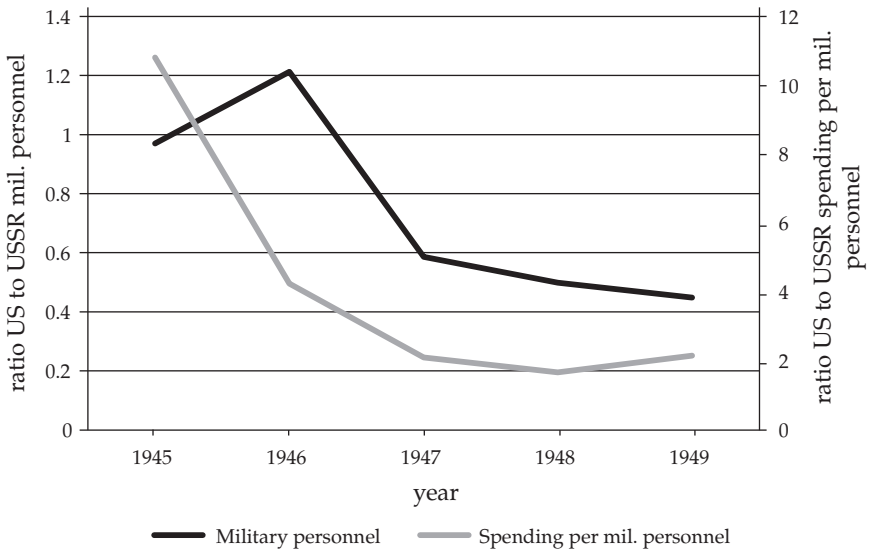

Figure 5.2 Military ratios, 1945–1949

Source: Correlates of War, National Material Capabilities, version 5.0, http://www.correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/national-material-capabilities.

personnel in Germany, with the main combat formations consisting of just two division equivalents engaged in occupation duty.[10] To supplement this in an emergency the Americans could call on ten divisions spread around the globe. The British estimated that in March 1949 Western forces, including American troops, could muster only ten divisions, plus some assorted brigades, to counter any Soviet attack. The Soviets had approximately 30–35 divisions in Eastern Europe outside the Soviet Union, with another 135–140 inside the Soviet Union itself. To that total the Soviets could add 90–100 less capable divisions from their East European satellites.[11]

Soviet ground forces were of comparable or superior quality to their American counterparts, though Soviet naval and air forces were qualitatively inferior. The Soviet military had defeated the vaunted Wehrmacht only a few years earlier in some of the toughest fighting of the war. In August 1945 Soviet troops swept aside Japanese troops located on the Eurasian continent. During the course of World War II, the Red Army had mastered operational and tactical practices for modern warfare.[12] The experience gained during the war left the Soviets a capable military force.

Soviet divisions also became better equipped after the war. As Karber and Combs write, "The peacetime Soviet military structure of 175 divisions kept and made use of much of the armament that had formerly supplied a 500-division wartime force."[13] In 1948, US intelligence estimated that Soviet mechanized and rifle divisions possessed two-thirds and one-half the combat power of American armored and infantry divisions, respectively.[14] Peacetime strength for most Soviet divisions was short of 100 percent, but that could be quickly expanded, potentially in as little as five days.[15] "Even a brief comparison of these opposing strengths leads to the conclusion that Soviet conventional forces in Germany, and in Europe as a whole, were considerably superior in terms of overall strength, firepower, combat potential, and combat capabilities to opposing Western forces stationed in the region during the Berlin blockade," writes Victor Gobarev.[16]

The quantitative and qualitative realities in Europe led American military planners to estimate that the Red Army could quickly conquer much of Western Europe. National Security Council document 20/4, approved by President Truman in November 1948 and the key document outlining general American policy at the time, argued that "present intelligence estimates attribute to Soviet armed forces the capability of over-running in about six months all of Continental Europe and the Near East as far as Cairo. . . . Meanwhile, Great Britain could be subjected to severe air and missile bombardment."[17] Other analyses put the timeframe for Soviet conquest in as little as two months.[18] To be sure, some estimates exaggerated Soviet capabilities and downplayed difficulties that the Red Army would face in any offensive operation. Yet even if American intelligence did overestimate Soviet capabilities prior to 1948, it was not by enough to change the

underlying dynamic that Western conventional military forces were insufficient to defend Europe.[19] Few senior American officials thought the Soviets would deliberately begin a war. Rather, they worried that war might occur through accident or miscalculation by one side or the other.[20] If war came, however, US leaders recognized they faced a formidable adversary.

American planners assumed that in any war American forces would initially retreat prior to launching a counteroffensive. It was taken for granted and then made explicit that any counterattack would include a nuclear component. That is, given the conventional military balance—the existing Soviet capabilities, and the ability of the Soviet Union to sustain an industrialized war, particularly if it could incorporate the industrial production potential of Western Europe—the United States war plans necessarily relied on nuclear use. As Steven Ross argues, "The JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff] felt they had no choice but to rely heavily on atomic weapons."[21] Allied troops would withdraw from the Continent to Great Britain and the Cairo-Suez areas, possibly holding the Italian and Iberian peninsulas.[22] By the summer of 1946, planners assumed that "the principal initial effort against the USSR had to consist of an air offensive effort, probably deploying atomic weapons," notes Ross.[23] Thereafter it was generally supposed that following the initial Anglo-American withdrawal, the United States would engage in an atomic campaign to degrade Soviet military and industrial capabilities. Given the state of US nuclear forces, the campaign would be slow, despite the desire of some officials for a rapid air offensive. The United States would in essence be replaying World War II, with nuclear weapons substituting for conventional ordnance delivered by fleets of bombers. The atomic campaign by itself would not be enough to defeat the Soviet Union. As the air atomic campaign progressed, the United States would rely on its vast industrial and manpower reserves to mobilize a ground force capable of either threatening Russia directly or retaking Europe and occupying key points.

Presidential policy came to endorse nuclear use. Harry Truman held out hope in the early postwar period that some form of international control of nuclear weapons might emerge and remained cautious about using nuclear weapons again. Truman kept the nuclear arsenal outside military control in peacetime. Indeed, few in government or the military knew the total number of nuclear weapons the United States possessed.[24] Despite the lack of guidance, when Secretary of the Army Kenneth Royall noted that there was doubt atomic weapons might be available in a conflict, the State Department replied that "we know of no opinion in the Government which would warrant the Defense Establishment in ceasing to plan on the use of the bomb."[25] Truman provided more formal guidance when he approved NSC 30 on September 16, 1948. In the oft-quoted conclusion, the decision was made that the United States "must be ready to utilize promptly and

effectively all appropriate means available, including atomic weapons."[26] Defense Secretary James Forrestal recalled that "the President said he prayed that he would never have to make such a decision [to use nuclear weapons again], but that if it became necessary, no one need have a misgiving but that he would do so."[27]

One might object to assessing the US-Soviet conventional military balance as even, because several rough indicators place the US decisively ahead, and the Soviet Union could not significantly threaten the US homeland during this period. This objection ignores the ability of the Soviet Union to seize vital regions that could seriously threaten US security in the long term. The United States had, after all, recently fought a massive war in large part to keep totalitarian regimes from attaining hegemony in Europe and Asia.[28] American officials in the postwar world identified Western Europe, Japan, and the Middle East as critical regions because of their industrial potential and/or resource endowments.[29] US planners were not particularly worried that the Soviet Union could seize Japan, but were greatly alarmed at the Soviet ability to seize all of Europe as well as key parts of Asia and the Middle East. NSC 20/4 argued that "Russian seizure of these areas would ultimately enhance the Soviet war potential," resulting in "an eventual concentration of hostile power which would pose an unacceptable threat to the security of the United States."[30] Most alarming was the prospect of Soviet direct or indirect control of Germany. Secretary of State George Marshall argued that the United States could not "permit [the] reestablishment of German economic and political unity under conditions which are likely to bring about effective domination of all of Germany by [the] Soviets. It would regard such an eventuality as the greatest threat to [the] security of all Western Nations, including [the] US."[31] The nature of economic production at the time was conducive to occupying powers exploiting industrial production and resources for gain.[32] Soviet control of Europe would thus force the United States to massively increase defense spending, harm the US economy, and put the Soviets in a position to defeat the United States. Even short of actual defeat, many feared that in such a world the United States would be forced to become a garrison state, its free institutions under strain. In sum, the Soviet Union was a major conventional threat, against which military and civilian leaders believed nuclear weapons offered significant military benefits.

Dispute Overview

Initial postwar Soviet policy centered on expanding its influence and consolidating its World War II gains. Yet the Soviets continually avoided direct confrontation with the United States. At various points the Soviets

pushed for a role in administering Italy and its former colonies. The Americans refused, but the Soviets did little, accepting the American position and signing a peace treaty with Italy in February 1947.[33] The Soviet Union also briefly sought an occupation zone in Japan. "Russian public opinion would be gravely offended if the Russian troops had no occupation area in any part of the territory of Japan proper," Stalin wrote to Truman on August 16.[34] Truman, willing to risk offending Russian public opinion, refused. On August 27 the Soviet military determined that in "order to avoid creating conflicts and misunderstandings with the allies, it is categorically forbidden to send any kind of ship or plane whatever in the direction of [the northernmost Japanese island of] Hokkaido."[35] The United States rejected Soviet requests for a governing role in Japan, and the Soviet leadership let the matter rest. From 1945 to 1947 Stalin kept a tight lid on French and Italian Communists. "Stalin chose not to encourage revolution in Europe or Asia," explains David Holloway. "To have done so would have created a risk of war with the Western allies."[36] Rather, the Soviet dictator encouraged local Communists to work within coalition governments.[37]

Arguably the first set of crises pitting the Soviet Union against the United States occurred in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East. In each case, though, Soviet probes were limited and quickly reversed. Soviet troops initially remained in Iran after the agreed-upon withdrawal date of March 2, 1946. The Iranians sought US support and took the issue to the new United Nations. The Soviets removed all their troops by May. Later, when the Iranian regime reneged on an oil agreement the Soviets did not reintroduce troops.[38] The Soviets pressed Turkey for control of the Turkish Straits at several points in 1945 and 1946. On August 7, 1946, the Soviet Union issued a diplomatic note requesting revision of the treaty governing the straits and moved modest military forces in the region. The Turkish government, with US and British support, rejected the Soviet proposal.[39] Following a brief back-and-forth, the Soviets did not press the matter, and the issue died. Stalin limited support to Greek Communists because he recognized a predominant Western role there. The Soviets counseled the Greek Communists against conflict with the monarch in 1945, did not permit Greek Communists to meet with Stalin and Vyacheslav Molotov during a Moscow visit in 1946, and did not recognize the Greek Communist provisional government in 1947.[40] The March 1947 Truman doctrine extending support to Turkey and Greece therefore caused little alarm in the Soviet Union.[41] For Soviet leaders this merely replaced British with American power in an area in which they had already decided not to overtly challenge the West.

Events involving Germany were of much greater concern. Soviet leaders had long directed their attention toward Germany. While the war was still being fought, Stalin informed Winston Churchill that he "thought that

Germany had every possibility of recovering from this war and might start on a new war within a comparatively short time. He was afraid of German nationalism."[42] As Geoffrey Roberts concludes, it "cannot be overemphasized that for Stalin the resolution of the German question—the problem of how to contain or tame German power and aggression in Europe—was the key to Soviet postwar security."[43] Soviet policy evolved over time, but the core focus on creating either a weak Germany or one amenable to Soviet influence remained constant. In June 1945 Stalin instructed the East German Communist Party (KPD) to work for a united Germany "via a united KPD [and] united central committee . . . a united workers party in the centre."[44] In 1946 he pushed for the merger of the East German Communist and Socialist parties to increase Communist, and with it Soviet, influence. Stalin might have been willing to give up the Soviet position in the eastern zone of Germany, but only in exchange for a Germany completely detached from the West. That would leave an isolated Germany vulnerable to Soviet influence in the future.[45]

Stalin's views were widely shared. Maxim Litvinov, often recognized as a pro-Western voice in Soviet affairs, argued for dismembering Germany into seven units.[46] Ivan Maiskii made the case to Molotov in a memorandum that Germany should be militarily weakened.[47] The German issue remained critical to the Soviet Union throughout the rest of the Cold War, figuring prominently even in US-Soviet negotiations in 1989–1991.[48] The consistency of Soviet concern was not lost on the Americans, who recognized that the Soviet Union had an intense interest in Eastern Europe and Germany. For instance, George Kennan argued in PPS/13 in 1947 that the Russians would oppose a united, independent Germany because it would "exercise a highly disruptive influence on communist power in Eastern Europe. Rather than risk that, the Russians would probably prefer a continuance of the present status, under which they are at least sure of being able to neutralize the political potential of eastern Germany."[49]

The Soviets therefore paid close attention to American policy that might harm Soviet interests in Germany. Though American policies were largely defensive to counter growing Soviet power, those policies nevertheless constituted a problem for the Soviets.[50] The first major challenge was the European Recovery Program (ERP), or Marshall Plan, that threatened to pull Germany to the West. The US secretary of state George Marshall announced the policy to revive and bind Western European countries to undercut Soviet influence in June 1947.[51] US leaders recognized that for the Marshall Plan to succeed it must include German participation. Germany remained the economic engine for Europe. To attain German participation, it was necessary to provide the Germans with some political autonomy to govern their own affairs. Some form of German state had to be created. Toward this end, the Americans and British sought to merge their (previously merged) occupation zones with the French zone. Beginning in February 1948 the

three countries met in London to establish what would become a West German government. The meeting culminated in the agreement on June 1, 1948, of the London Conference recommendations.[52] The Western powers would create a German state with modest external controls directly integrated with Western Europe economically, and perhaps eventually politically and militarily, in order to restrain West German freedom of maneuver. On June 18, 1948, the American military governor in Germany, General Lucius Clay, informed the Soviet Union that a new currency would soon be introduced into the Western zones.[53]

For Soviet leaders these policies were a step too far. The Soviet position would only grow worse as Germany recovered and integrated itself into a West European bloc. The Soviets initially considered allowing their East European satellites to participate in the Marshall Plan. They quickly reversed themselves, judging participation as a threat to Soviet influence. For instance, in June 1947 Nikolai Novikov, the Soviet ambassador to the United States, cabled the Kremlin that "the outlines of a Western European bloc directed against us [the USSR] are patently visible. The State Department is now working furiously on this plan."[54] More ominously, the plan threatened to pull a large part of Germany away from the Soviet Union. "This is a matter not of propaganda or political blackmail but a real threat of the political and economic division of Germany and the inclusion of western Germany with all its resources in a western bloc created by the United States," warned Soviet Foreign Ministry official Andrei Smirnov on October 3, 1947.[55] Molotov explained the Soviet about-face on allowing their East European satellites to participate on July 8, arguing that "under the guise of formulating a plan for the reconstruction of Europe, the initiators of the conference in fact desire to establish a Western bloc with the participation of Western Germany."[56] The alarm increased throughout 1948 as the Marshall Plan became law and German statehood progressed. Smirnov warned on March 6, 1948, just days before the Senate voted to pass the ERP, that the "Western Powers are transforming Germany into their stronghold and will include it in the formation of a politico-military bloc directed against the Soviet Union and the countries of the new democracy."[57]

As the situation in Germany deteriorated from Moscow's point of view, Soviet behavior became more confrontational. In the fall of 1947 Stalin instructed Communist parties in France and Italy to end their cooperative policies and work to frustrate the Marshall Plan.[58] In March 1948 US diplomat Robert Murphy noted that the "Soviet delegation now seizes upon every question on the agenda and every statement by any other delegation no matter how simple, how friendly or how innocent, to launch violent propaganda attacks on the other three delegations."[59] Later that month the Soviet Union's Marshal Vasily Sokolovsky "walked out of the allied control council, with the result that it ceased to function."[60]

Soviet intransigence went beyond diplomatic wrangling and Communist subterfuge, though, distinguishing it from earlier behavior. Following the failure of the four-party London Council of Foreign Ministers meeting in the fall of 1947, the Soviets began harassing Western land and air transports to and from Berlin. In March 1948, Soviet authorities reduced the number of passenger and troop trains moving between Berlin and the Western zones in what was later termed a "baby blockade." Murphy cabled that the Soviets "undoubtedly will continue with [the] series of strictures and annoyances which it has inaugurated affecting our continued presence in Berlin."[61] The Soviets believed their harassment was effective. "Our control and restrictive measures have dealt a strong blow at the prestige of the Americans and British in Germany," the Soviet Military Administration in Germany informed Moscow. "The German population believes that the Anglo-Americans have retreated before the Russians and that this testifies to the Russians' strength."[62]

The currency reform provided the catalyst for the blockade. After learning of it on June 18, Marshal Sokolovsky replied two days later that the American-led initiative was illegal, constituted the division of Germany, and would necessitate a Soviet response.[63] On June 19, the Soviet Union suspended road traffic between the Western occupied zones and Berlin. Five days later, the Soviets severed all rail and river transportation. Berlin was effectively blockaded by land, reachable from the West only by air.[64]

Soviet officials made clear that their concerns went beyond the new currency to the broader issue of a West German state. In private conversations they highlighted the "danger of war" and asked "whether [the] US did not consider that it was skating on very thin ice in respect of its recent actions in Germany."[65] At a meeting of the four military governors on July 3, Sokolovsky "made no special reference to the currency situation." Rather, he highlighted the relation of "the Berlin situation to the London Conference as a whole. He made it quite clear that he was not prepared to answer any question on the resumption of traffic unless the results of the London Conference were also to be discussed."[66] Stalin reiterated the basic Soviet position during a meeting with the US, British, and French ambassadors on August 3. The Soviet leader rebuffed overtures to end the blockade in exchange for negotiations over the currency issue. The whole German problem was urgent, he insisted. Stalin "understood that a sort of parliamentary council was to be formed soon, and that this would set up a German government." He added ominously that if "this went ahead, the Soviet government would be faced with a *fait accompli* and there would be nothing left to discuss."[67] Though Stalin hinted at negotiating space on the London decisions, the Americans remained skeptical.[68] Molotov vindicated that skepticism three days later, opening a meeting with the Western ambassadors by critiquing the failure to postpone the formation of a West

German government. The Soviet foreign minister insisted postponement was necessary for a satisfactory solution.[69]

The Soviet goal, then, was to pressure the United States to attain a favorable political outcome on an issue they believed deeply affected their security. If the United States sought to stay in Berlin, the Soviets hoped the Americans would be forced to negotiate on the German problem as a whole in order to maintain their position. If instead the US refused to negotiate, the blockade could make the American position in Berlin untenable. In that event, the US would have to abandon Berlin, allowing the Soviets to consolidate their position in Eastern Germany and stabilize their empire. A Western withdrawal might also discredit the United States, frustrating US efforts in Western Europe.[70]

Inaction was simply not an option. As early as March 12, Smirnov wrote that the Soviets needed "to take measures which would not merely restrict separate actions by the USA, Britain and France in Germany but would actively disrupt their plans to put together a Western bloc including Germany."[71] On the eve of the blockade Molotov bluntly explained that "if we were to lose in Germany we would have lost the [last] war."[72] Nikita Khrushchev later wrote that the Western initiatives in Germany "represented a direct threat to our national security, a challenge to the impregnability of our borders. . . . Stalin imposed the blockade as an act of survival."[73] In their detailed analysis, Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov conclude that "under these circumstances, a division of Germany into East and West would constitute for Stalin a major geopolitical defeat that would be particularly damaging in view of the continued American atomic monopoly. For Stalin, accepting this defeat would be worse than risking a confrontation with the only country to possess the Bomb."[74]

The Role of Nuclear Weapons

The American nuclear monopoly did not prevent the Soviet Union from confronting the United States in June 1948. The Soviet Union was careful throughout the crisis, though. In this section I first demonstrate that Soviet behavior was congruent with my argument. Specifically, Soviet leaders limited their aims and means throughout the crisis, which reduced the danger to the Americans. As a conventionally powerful NNWS, the Soviet Union ultimately accepted a political defeat rather than escalate to war. The Soviet Union also took some steps to hedge against nuclear use. There were limited options for the Soviet Union to raise the costs to the United States because there was no third party that the Soviets could turn to that could constrain the Americans. The Soviets did, though, seek to appeal to public opinion to delegitimize nuclear weapons. The second section examines Soviet decision making. I show that Soviet leaders consistently took the

American nuclear arsenal into account. At times they explicitly linked their behavior to fear of American nuclear strikes.

Soviet Behavior

The Soviets reduced the danger to the United States, and with it the military benefits of nuclear use, in several ways before and during the Berlin Crisis. First, the Soviets did not immediately institute a full blockade. Throughout the spring of 1948 they engaged in low-level harassment of Western access to Berlin. This allowed Soviet leaders to gauge American reactions to interference.

Second, the Soviet Union pressed the United States over a discrete issue. Berlin's isolation deep inside the Soviet occupation zone provided an opportunity to exert limited pressure against the United States. Berlin provided a logical stopping point. If the Soviets absorbed Berlin, it did not directly threaten any of the other Western occupation zones in Germany or the rest of Western Europe. Soviet assertions that they did not seek a broader confrontation therefore had an inherent credibility. The Soviets could take action to frustrate US policy without having to cross Western territory. It would be the Americans that would have to make the first move. As Zubok notes, Stalin "felt confident in his ability to adjust his use of force around West Berlin to avoid provoking a war and to make the Western powers look responsible for the crisis."[75]

Third, there was no preparation for an immediate military campaign. True, the Soviets deployed some military forces at the outset of the crisis and steadily increased troop strength in Eastern Europe in the next several years. However, there was an "absence of any evidence of Soviet preparations for a military emergency."[76] After reviewing Russian archives, Victor Gobarev concludes that the Soviet military force in Germany was "not ready to attack Western Allied forces on short notice because it had not been assigned such a task."[77] US intelligence and political officials, for their part, took note of the lack of preparation and adopted a restrained view of Soviet force deployments and capabilities.[78]

Fourth, the Soviet blockade was far less aggressive than it could have been, given Soviet capabilities. To begin with, the Soviets avoided seriously interfering with the airlift. The decision to keep the air corridors open reflected the Soviet desire, as Vojtech Mastny puts it, "to avoid a possible military clash there—which it would have itself had to initiate if it had wanted to use its fighters to make the blockade fully effective."[79] Trachtenberg adds that throughout the crisis "Soviet policy was not nearly as confrontational as many western officials had feared. The airlift, for example, was successful because the Soviets chose not to interfere with it. Even nonviolent measures, especially the jamming of radars, would have gone a

long way toward compromising its effectiveness. But the Soviets continued to work with western officials at the Berlin Air Safety Center, managing the air routes into the city, and thus bizarrely 'doing something to help the airlift which was undermining their blockade.'"[80]

Occasional Soviet threats failed to materialize. For instance, the commander of the American airlift, General William Tunner, recalled the Soviets announced on one occasion that they would fly in formation over Berlin and East Germany, including the air corridor. "The threatened formation never developed." Indeed, Tunner characterized most Soviet actions as "silly and childish stunts."[81] Though there was a collision between a Soviet and British transport prior to the blockade on April 5, 1948, Daniel Altman notes that it "was the sole collision of this sort during the crisis."[82] Few instances of Soviet target practice with live ammunition occurred close to Western aircraft. "Frequent Soviet warnings of aerial gunnery practice and formation flying in the air corridors did not materialize in threatening form," General Clay later wrote.[83] The Soviets did sometimes use searchlights to interfere with Western pilots' vision at night, but the tactic was easily overcome and never caused a crash.[84]

In addition, the Soviets imposed only a partial blockade. They restricted Western access to the city but did not close off the Western sectors of Berlin from supplies coming in from the Soviet occupation zone. Legitimate and black market trade flourished as a result. Even after a crackdown on such trade in late 1948, the Soviet Union continued to permit the legal trade of food, coal, and other goods.[85] The Office of the Director of Intelligence noted in October 1948 that "the vast majority of the needs of the population and industry in the Western sectors are still met through East-West trade, which is only slightly less necessary to the Soviet sector than to the western parts of the city."[86] William Stivers notes that "if Moscow were at last to seal the city off, the airlift would fail; and should America still insist on holding Berlin, more forceful means would be required, heightening the risk of war."[87] True, the Soviet decision to allow trade stemmed from a number of factors that included economic considerations and an inability to completely seal off the zone. Yet the Soviets could have done much more. They chose not to.

Finally, the Soviets ultimately accepted a political defeat rather than escalate. At the outset of the crisis, time seemed to be on the Soviet side. Officials on both sides doubted the ability of an airlift to supply the city.[88] As early as August 1948, when the future of the airlift was still very much in doubt, though, it was clear the Soviets sought to manage tensions. "Stalin and Molotov were undoubtedly anxious for [a] settlement," Smith reported after one meeting with the two Soviet leaders. "Both [were] literally dripping with sweet reasonableness and [a] desire not to embarrass."[89] As time wore on and the airlift continued, Stalin elected to end rather than escalate the confrontation. In exchange for lifting the blockade, the Western powers

agreed to attend a new Council of Foreign Ministers meeting to discuss various German issues.[90] The ministerial meeting reaffirmed the end of the blockade, and the Soviets recognized an "obligation to take measures necessary to ensure the normal functioning and utilisation of rail, water and road transport for such movement of persons and goods, and such communications by post, telephone and telegraph" between the occupation zones.[91] This was a major political victory for the United States. Prior to the blockade, the United States and its allies had struggled to find a justification for their right to access the city.[92] The ministers' meeting resulted in the Soviets confirming the Western transit and communication rights. The Soviets also failed to alter US policy on the formation of a new West German state.

Both before and during the Berlin Crisis the Soviets took additional steps to reduce the benefits or raise the costs of nuclear strikes. These include various civil defense measures put in place by the Soviet Union, as well as the intense Soviet effort to develop their own nuclear device. In terms of raising costs, the Soviet Union undertook various diplomatic initiatives during this period to ban nuclear weapons and organize public opinion against nuclear use. As I discuss in the next section, these were done explicitly to counter the American nuclear monopoly.[93]

SOVIET NUCLEAR VIEWS

Soviet leaders understood the destructive potential of nuclear weapons. They worried that the United States would use nuclear weapons in any war with the Soviet Union. Soviet leaders downplayed the significance of nuclear weapons at the time to demonstrate resolve, not because they discounted the danger. This is not to claim that Soviet decision making was solely the product of the US nuclear arsenal. Moreover, Soviet leaders, like their American counterparts, did not expect their opponent to deliberately launch a war anytime soon. Yet there is good evidence that the US nuclear capability contributed to the Soviet desire to restrain its behavior and avoid even a limited war with the United States.

Soviet leaders quickly grasped the importance of nuclear weapons and the danger the American atomic monopoly posed. Despite Stalin's publicly dismissive attitude, discussed in more detail below, he asserted that the atomic bomb was a "powerful thing, pow-er-ful."[94] As early as October 1942 Stalin is said to have berated scientists who suggested asking President Franklin Roosevelt about the American atomic program for being "politically naïve if you think that they would share information about the weapons that will dominate the world in the future."[95] During the war, the Soviets created an impressive intelligence apparatus to gain information on Anglo-American nuclear efforts.[96] The pressure of total war with Germany and high costs of a long-shot program prevented the Soviet Union

from devoting many resources to the nuclear program during the war. Yet Stalin quickly ordered a crash program to develop a nuclear weapon as soon as the fighting stopped. To attest to the intensity of Soviet leaders' interest, the state poured resources into the program despite the struggling Soviet economy. "Hiroshima has shaken the whole world. The balance has been broken," Stalin told his scientists. "Build the bomb—it will remove the great danger from us."[97] After the Soviet atomic test in August 1949, Stalin remarked that if "we had been late with the atomic bomb by a year or year and a half, then we perhaps would have gotten it 'tested' against ourselves."[98]

Stalin was not alone in his assessments. "Soviet nuclear scientists agreed with Stalin that the American atomic monopoly was a terrible danger for Soviet security," concludes Vladislav Zubok. Stalin "was firmly convinced—along with most of his ministers and scientists—that only a similar force could deter the United States from using its atomic weapons again."[99] Alexander Werth, the *Sunday Times* correspondent in Moscow at the time, wrote that news of Hiroshima "had an acutely depressing effect on everybody. It was clearly realized that this was a New Fact in the world's power politics, that the bomb constituted a threat to Russia, and some Russian pessimists I talked to that day dismally remarked that Russia's desperately hard victory over Germany was now 'as good as wasted.'"[100] In 1946 Major General G. I. Pokrovskii outlined the benefits nuclear weapons conveyed: "Atomic aviation bombs will be effective in destroying deep underground installations, large dams and hydroelectric plants, heavy naval vessels . . . and the most important transport junctions."[101]

Soviet intelligence determined that the United States would likely use nuclear weapons in the event of war. While it is unclear the extent to which Stalin and other top officials knew the precise details of American war plans, Raymond Garthoff notes that "Soviet intelligence also obtained highly sensitive secret US and UK assessments of possible military measures to meet a potential Soviet threat, including contingency war plans involving employment of atomic weapons."[102] Official histories of Russian intelligence contain references to September 1945 US plans "in which the USSR was already seen not as an ally but as enemy number one, against which war should be conducted with the employment of atomic weapons."[103] In Novikov's September 1946 telegram to Moscow, heavily influenced by Molotov and often seen as a parallel to George Kennan's "Long Telegram," the Soviets warned that within the United States there were discussions about "a war against the Soviet Union, even a direct call for this war with a threat to use the atomic bomb."[104] Mastny concludes that American war plans "were unlikely to remain hidden from the Russian enemy, whose intelligence supplied accurate enough information about America's fighting potential, including the number of atomic bombs in its arsenal."[105] In any event, US officials at times spoke quite openly about

intentions to strike Soviet cities with nuclear weapons. One such incident in 1948 elicited a formal protest from the Soviet embassy. Referencing remarks by the commander of the Strategic Air Command, General George Kenney, published in *Newsweek*, the Soviets complained on June 9 (prior to the Berlin blockade) that the article "set forth a plan to use American air forces, air bases and atomic bombs against the Soviet Union, particularly for the destruction of Soviet cities such as Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Kharkov, Odessa, and others."[106]

The Soviet Union pursued plans to defend against and minimize dangers of a nuclear attack. At the beginning of the Berlin Crisis on June 30, 1948, the Soviet Politburo approved new antiaircraft defense forces, focusing on Moscow in particular. Gobarev concludes that the discussion and decision was likely "prompted by Soviet misgivings regarding a possible US Air Force nuclear attack in the event the ongoing Berlin crisis escalated further."[107] This occurred, it should be noted, before American B-29s arrived in Great Britain.[108] More generally, Holloway argues that "defense against atomic attack was a central focus of Stalin's military policy."[109] Soviet military plans in late 1946 and early 1947 included missions to "repel an enemy air attack, including one with the possible use of atomic weapons."[110] The Soviet military upgraded its interceptor aircraft, early warning radars, increased the quantity and quality of antiaircraft guns, and began research and development in antiair missiles all in an effort to deny American airpower access.[111] To be sure, some of these initiatives would have occurred regardless. They were given added urgency by the US nuclear threat. The Soviet Union also explored options to attack American air bases in Eurasia that could be used to deliver nuclear ordnance.

Soviet concerns existed despite the limited nature of the American nuclear arsenal. The US arsenal was small, difficult to deliver, and fission weapons had limited (relative to what would come) destructive power. This did not lead Stalin and other Soviet leaders to dismiss the American nuclear monopoly. True, the limited American nuclear arsenal contributed to Stalin's confidence that the United States would not suddenly attack the Soviet Union, because nuclear weapons alone could not win the war.[112] As Stalin explained in 1949, "America is less ready to attack than the USSR [is] to repulse an attack."[113] This is different from, and should not be conflated with, claiming that Stalin did not carefully consider the American nuclear arsenal when pursuing policies that might lead to war. In other words, there was reason for optimism that the Americans would not launch a sudden attack. That did not cause the Soviet leadership to believe they had little to fear if war broke out for other reasons. Stalin's personal representative to China from May 1948 to January 1950 recalled that "Stalin assessed the correlation of forces in the world soberly enough and strove to avoid any complications that might lead to a new world war."[114] The fact that an American atomic blitz prior to 1949 would not be more destructive than the

1941 German invasion was not particularly good news. The Soviets had no desire to experience that level of destruction again.

There is evidence that even a few atomic bombs created a large amount of concern among Soviet leaders. The American nuclear monopoly, combined with the vast US mobilization potential and the difficulty the Soviets would have in striking the United States, generated a formidable challenge. For example, Andrei Gromyko recalls that upon learning of the atomic bomb, "our General Staff had their heads in their hands. . . . [They] seriously considered that the USA, as soon as it had to its credit 10–15 atomic bombs, could in a possible war with the USSR deploy them against the major cities and industrial centers. The Kremlin and General Staff were nervous."[115] In 1950 Stalin expressed concern that even "a few" atomic bombs could destroy Moscow.[116] With no way for the Soviets to interrupt American production, moreover, the United States could continuously replenish its nuclear arsenal during the course of a conflict.

Soviet concerns thus centered on the basic American ability and apparent willingness to deliver nuclear weapons if war occurred. The general nature of the problem helps to explain the Soviet nonresponse to the one, admittedly weak, US attempt at nuclear signaling during the Berlin Crisis. On July 15 the United States announced it would deploy sixty B-29s to Britain. Two groups were subsequently deployed and arrived by the end of the month.[117] The B-29s dispatched were not nuclear capable, no nuclear weapons were deployed, and there was little American effort, overt or otherwise, to use the deployment to pressure the Soviets. The Soviets were likely aware of the emptiness of the American gesture, which partially accounts for Soviet indifference.[118] Beyond that, though, the Soviets had already considered US nuclear strikes. They believed that in a war the United States would likely use nuclear weapons. The B-29 deployment provided no new information. The Americans were still unlikely to launch a nuclear strike unless the situation deteriorated, and they were still likely to use nuclear weapons if the crisis did escalate to war. In that event, the Soviets could probably not prevent American aircraft from reaching Great Britain. Soviet behavior also posed no threat to the American bombers. There was no real change in the military situation. Throughout the crisis, even before the B-29 deployment, the Soviets carefully managed their behavior. Soviet leaders had set their own red lines and adhered to them before and after the arrival of the American aircraft.

Soviet leaders publicly downplayed the importance of the bomb throughout the period of American nuclear monopoly. Outwardly, the Soviets maintained that nuclear weapons had little influence on the balance of power. For instance, in a widely publicized interview in September 1946, Stalin, in language similar to Mao's, claimed that "atomic bombs are meant to frighten those with weak nerves, but they cannot decide the outcome of

a war, since atomic bombs are quite insufficient for that."[119] The next month, at a speech before the UN General Assembly, Molotov belittled attempts to rely on an atomic monopoly.[120]

The Soviet Union took this hard line to demonstrate resolve in an effort to deter American attempts at nuclear compellence. It was not the case that Soviet leaders sought to downplay the nuclear threat in public because they dismissed the US nuclear arsenal in private. Rather, they sought to weaken American confidence in the utility of nuclear weapons. The Soviet leadership feared American efforts at atomic blackmail. Immediately after Truman informed Stalin of the successful nuclear test, the Soviet dictator told Lavrentiy Beria that "Truman is trying to exert pressure, to dominate. His attitude is particularly aggressive toward the Soviet Union. Of course, the factor of the atomic bomb [is] working for Truman."[121] Molotov recalled that the "bombs dropped on Japan were not aimed at Japan but rather at the Soviet Union. They said, bear in mind you don't have an atomic bomb and we do, and this is what the consequences will be like if you make a wrong move!"[122] Soviet intelligence and veterans of the atomic program recalled that "the Soviet government interpreted [the atomic bombing of Japan] as atomic blackmail against the USSR, as a threat to unleash a new, even more terrible and devastating war."[123] The Soviets thus explicitly linked their firm stance to the American nuclear monopoly. "A policy of blackmail and intimidation is unacceptable to us," Stalin argued. "We therefore gave no grounds for thinking that anything could intimidate us."[124] And at the September 1945 Council of Foreign Ministers meeting in London, Molotov deliberately took a hard line to show that the Soviet Union would not be intimidated by nuclear weapons. He argued that his 1946 UN address was motivated by a desire to "set a tone, to reply in a way that would make our people feel more or less confident."[125]

Soviet efforts to delegitimize nuclear weapons aimed to further undercut the American nuclear arsenal. "Beginning in 1946," writes Michael Gordin, "Andre Zhdanov, Stalin's second in command, orchestrated a public-relations campaign with a dual function: to embarrass the United States so they would not use their atomic advantage, and to assure their own client states that the absence of a Soviet deterrent was not a liability."[126] These instrumental efforts to delegitimize the bomb, it was hoped, could cause US leaders to be more cautious in using nuclear weapons for fear of domestic and international public backlash. In other words, these initiatives would raise the costs of nuclear use for the Americans.

The US atomic monopoly subtly influenced Soviet behavior. This argument is at odds with claims that the American nuclear monopoly encouraged Stalin to run risks.[127] This conflates obstinacy with a willingness to escalate confrontations. True, the Soviets probed the American position and directly

confronted the Americans in Berlin. The Soviets were certainly ruthless in their occupation zone, and their intransigence during negotiations was a major contributor to the outbreak of the Cold War. But the Soviets avoided escalating their disputes. The Soviets had a number of reasons for behaving cautiously beyond the atomic bomb. Yet it is not the case that the bomb played little, if any, role in Soviet decision making (aside from their decision to acquire one of their own) during the period.[128] Rather, Soviet behavior was most consistent with David Holloway's conclusion that the American atomic monopoly "probably made the Soviet Union more restrained in its use of force, for fear of precipitating war. It also made the Soviet Union less cooperative and willing to compromise, for fear of seeming weak."[129]

Soviet actions were largely consistent with my argument. As a conventionally powerful NNWS relative to its opponent, the Soviet Union behaved with restraint during the Berlin Crisis. While there is not "smoking gun" evidence that the American nuclear arsenal led to specific Soviet policies during the crisis, there is good process evidence that the Soviet leadership considered nuclear weapons an important element of state power and believed the United States would use nuclear weapons during a war. During the Berlin Crisis the Soviets took steps to minimize the danger to the United States. This would reduce the benefits of using nuclear weapons, diminishing the likelihood of nuclear strikes. The Soviets also sought to take advantage of public opinion to raise the costs of nuclear use for the United States. The specific US force posture does not appear to have encouraged Soviet belligerence. The United States had a paltry arsenal that was not at that time deeply integrated with its military.[130] Nevertheless, Soviet leaders were concerned with the American nuclear arsenal. During their most direct confrontation from June 1948 to May 1949, the Soviet Union posed a much smaller danger than they could have to the United States, ultimately conceding rather than escalating.