Origins of CIA's Analysis of the Soviet Union, 1947-1991

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Berlin, the political flashpoint of the early Cold War, was a catalyst for the development of a strategic analysis capability in CIA. The end of World War II found the Allies in an increasingly tenuous quadripartite occupation of the city, which was complicated by its position deep inside the Russian occupation zone. As the wartime alliance fragmented, the continued Western presence in Berlin assumed a growing importance to the stability of the Western alliance: first, as a concrete symbol of the American commitment to defend Western Europe; and, second, as a vital strategic intelligence base from which to monitor the growing Soviet military presence in Germany and Eastern Europe.

The continued division of the city offered no such advantage to the Soviet Bloc. Inevitably, the Kremlin came to regard the Western garrisons in Berlin as a more-or-less permanent challenge to the legitimacy of Soviet rule in Germany and Eastern Europe. Consequently, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin initiated a series of provocations and military demonstrations early in 1948 in an apparent effort to force the Western Allies out of Berlin. By March, the US Military Governor in Germany, General Lucius D. Clay, was sufficiently alarmed to warn Washington of "a subtle change in Soviet attitude which…gives me a feeling that (war) may come with dramatic suddenness."[1]

Clay apparently had intended only to warn the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) of the need for caution in Central Europe, but the telegram caused considerable alarm in Washington. At the behest of JCS Chairman General Omar N. Bradley, the supervisory Intelligence Advisory Committee ordered CIA to chair an ad hoc committee to examine the likelihood of war.[2] The result was a series of three estimates (documents 1, 2, and 3) that examined and dismissed the possibility of a planned Soviet assault on Western Europe in 1948-1949, despite the escalating Soviet saber-rattling over Berlin. Although the estimates were brief, each reflected a relatively sophisticated and broadly-based understanding of Soviet national power. The analysis contained therein went beyond the military dimensions of the problem to analyze the political and economic implications of the issue. Together, the documents indicated a need for an independent analytical capability in Washington.

A fourth estimate, ORE 58-48 (document 4) provided a comprehensive assessment of the Soviet Union's potential to wage war. A highly controversial estimate at the time, this document nonetheless further validated ORE's role as a source of overarching analyses.

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[1] William R. Harris, "The March Crisis of 1948, Act I," *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 10, No. 4, Fall 1966, p.7 (National Archives and Record Administration [NARA] Records Group 263).
[2] *Ibid.*, p.10.

The Berlin crisis sharply demonstrated the need for regular review of Moscow's war potential. With the reorganization of CIA in 1950-1951, this responsibility was formally given to the newly created Board of National Estimates (see SE-16, document 5).

Throughout much of the 1950s, CIA's analysis of the Soviet Union continued to be hampered by the lack of solid intelligence on Soviet military developments. Until the first remote sensors (such as the U-2 and the CORONA reconnaissance satellites) were deployed, CIA's analysis often was based on fragmentary sources at best. An essential component of the reorganization of CIA's analysis was the comprehensive review of the available intelligence on the Soviet Union completed in 1953 (document 6).