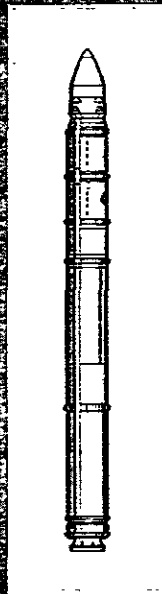


PART IV

AFTERWORD



**Part IV:  
Afterword**

*Estimating is what you do when you do not know.<sup>1</sup>*

*Sherman Kent*

The establishment and evolution of the CIA occurred almost concurrently with the creation and subsequent development of intelligence analysis as a profession. Begun in World War II, this process antedated the first Soviet strategic forces Estimates by a few years, but it was still under way when the first of these documents was written and it continued for some years afterward. The same can be said for the strategic weaponry that these Estimates assessed. Missiles and bombers with intercontinental capability were the product of the Cold War and had no precedent in the prewar world. The effort to understand these new technologies and explain their significance was key to US participation and ultimate victory in the arms race. Once ancillary to military planning, intelligence was now woven directly into the fabric of strategic thought.

The process by which estimative intelligence contributed to Western knowledge of Soviet capabilities and forecast their intentions certainly was never perfect and was always evolving. Neither could the Estimates' judgments ever rise above the strengths and limitations of the people who made them. Although seemingly isolated—because of security considerations—from the world outside the US intelligence community, they nonetheless mirrored and focused its preoccupations.

In evaluating the Estimates of Soviet strategic forces, we must remember how little was known of the Soviet Union in the period after World War II, how much we have learned since, and yet how narrow our understanding of the Soviet system remains to this day. The information and breadth of knowledge acquired through the study of Soviet intentions, strategic capabilities, and force structure broadened our understanding of the Soviet people and system. This, in turn, increased our confidence in our own nuclear deterrent, and helped to stabilize the strategic relationship between the two superpowers in ways that may not be immediately apparent when the Estimates are viewed in isolation.

<sup>1</sup> Sherman Kent, "Estimates and Influence," in Donald P. Steury, ed., *Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimates* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1994), p. 35.

It is clear, moreover, that the process of estimative intelligence production was beneficial in and of itself. The Estimates were at the heart of the debates that surrounded Soviet strategic forces. They not only served as fora for discussion, they defined the issues and provided the basic, intellectual framework for the analysis of Soviet strategic developments. The confidence that this enduring process engendered, not necessarily in the answers provided in the Estimates, but in the ability of the intelligence community to understand a problem of such immense complexity, was of incalculable importance to the development of American strategic culture and had far-reaching consequences for American foreign policy. It is doubtful, for example, that any phase of the strategic arms control and reduction process would have been possible without the Estimates, which not only provided analyses of the structure and capabilities of Soviet strategic forces, but stood as credible evidence of the intelligence community's ability to monitor Soviet compliance.

On a more empirical level, the concentration of intellectual effort that went into the Estimates actually worked to bring about the great intelligence breakthroughs of the Cold War—not least in the development of photoreconnaissance satellites and other forms of remote sensing apparatus. These vastly expensive, long-term programs could be justified only because the information they provided could be understood in an overall strategic context, because the questions they addressed endured from year to year, and because national-level policymakers vouched for the importance of the answers they provided. Although exploitation of the information provided by reconnaissance satellites occurred on a multiplicity of levels, once again it was the estimative process that provided a cohesive intellectual framework in which it all could be understood.

At the same time, one must exercise both caution and understanding when considering the information and judgments conveyed in the Estimates. Estimative intelligence is essentially an attempt to know the unknowable. Except in its most basic, reportorial form, all intelligence analysis consists at least partly of speculation about intentions and future actions—however well informed that speculation might be. It is thus virtually inevitable that all intelligence analysis is, at least in some portion, wrong. Estimative intelligence, which is always highly predictive in format, is seldom able to paint a picture that more than approximates the situation. Under these circumstances, success is achieved, not by being highly accurate (although one always strives for accuracy), but by identifying and isolating, or “bounding,” the uncertainties the analysis contains.

The Estimates written on Soviet strategic forces and programs were efforts to understand a highly complex topic with what in any other discipline

would be considered a bare minimum of verifiable information. Moreover, the increasingly lengthy leadtimes associated with the development of strategic weapons systems over time demanded that the estimators look further and further into the future in making their forecasts. The accuracy of their speculation thus depended largely on the accuracy of Soviet planning, and the capability of the Soviet military economy to produce the required results. The value of the strategic forces Estimates hence lay less in the ability of the estimators to describe a weapon system in detail or to project a deployment rate than in the degree that they succeeded in conveying a general understanding of Soviet capabilities, of Soviet goals and intentions, and of what might be expected in future developments.

By these standards, the Estimates prepared on Soviet strategic nuclear forces were remarkable, not for whatever errors they might contain, but for their consistency in identifying uncertainties, in laying out alternatives, and in establishing the factors that could be expected to govern Soviet strategic forces development. The strength of the Estimates lay in their continuity. In any given year, no single Estimate could be said to completely describe the full panoply of Soviet strategic forces or the intricacies of Soviet strategic thought. It was over time, in the march of annual Estimates, that the process as a whole succeeded. As generations of weapons succeeded each other, as understanding of each successive stage of Soviet force development matured, so did each yearly Estimate fill in the gaps left by its predecessors, alter the details of the picture, and leave it just that much more complete. By the end of the Cold War the Estimates process had achieved a kind of sustained growth, fueled by the estimators' ability continually to refine their own understanding of Soviet strategic weapons development and secure in the continued existence of the arms race. It might have gone on forever, had the Soviet Union done so.

By the middle of the 1980s, however, the strain of nearly four decades of military competition with the United States was bringing the Soviet system to a crisis. With the economy in a state of stagnation and near-permanent decline, discontent, long prevalent in the populace as a whole, became manifest within the Communist Party itself. In 1982 the feeble, aging Leonid Brezhnev died. He was replaced, briefly, by Yuri Andropov, the former head of the KGB. But Andropov, too, died, early in 1984. His replacement, the ailing Konstantin Chernenko, did not last out the year. His death brought an end to the grasp of the Stalin-era gerontocracy on the leadership of the Soviet Union. Chernenko's successor, the moderate Mikhail Gorbachev, promised reform, but proved unable or unwilling to ease the burden of military spending or to rejuvenate the economy, which continued and accelerated its decline. Gorbachev's failure brought the failed August 1991 coup d'état, the dissolution of the Soviet state, and the end of the Cold War.

Although the demise of the Soviet Union did not mean an end to the writing of estimative intelligence, by bringing an end to the continuity of the arms race it forever altered the kind of intelligence analysis that was produced. The prevailing arms control agreements, which imposed a kind of minimal order on the strategic environment, helped the Estimates process adjust to the new situation. Remarkably enough, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), negotiated by the Reagan and Bush administrations in the waning years of the Soviet state, remained in force. Russia excepted, the Soviet successor states had neither the means to maintain sizable strategic nuclear forces nor, for the most part, the interest in so doing. Russia helped matters somewhat by renouncing the first use of nuclear weapons. Ukraine, the second-largest holder of former Soviet nuclear weapons, declared its intention to adhere to START, and indeed to rid itself of nuclear weapons altogether. The foundations were thus laid for a general standdown of nuclear forces.

Now called upon to watch over the destruction of Soviet nuclear weapons, strategic forces analysts found themselves looking at familiar systems, but in a totally different way. Although START provided for the destruction of many weapons and delivery platforms, the nuclear material that made them such a potent destructive force could not be destroyed. Accounting for and monitoring all the stockpiles of weapons and weapons-grade fissionable material in Asia and Eastern Europe became a security problem of growing concern, as was the question of the stability and security of Soviet nuclear forces in a disintegrating social system. The process of arms reduction may prove to be more dangerous than the arms buildup ever was. Like Rasputin's ghost, the specter of Soviet nuclear forces remains distressingly present long after it was supposed to be gone.

Plotting the growth and development of Soviet intercontinental-range strategic forces was one of the most important, difficult, and controversial intelligence problems faced by US Intelligence throughout the Cold War. National Intelligence Estimates on Soviet strategic forces drove the entire strategic analytical process within the American Intelligence Community and played a major role in the great strategic debates affecting US behavior. Drawn from some of the most sensitive intelligence sources available to the United States, these important documents were highly classified and strictly controlled by the Intelligence Community. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, it became possible to declassify and release these Estimates to the general public for the first time. Excerpts from 41 of the most important Estimates are included in this volume, a sampling of the much greater volume of material that has been released to the National Archives.

The CIA History Staff is publishing these excerpts from declassified Estimates as the fifth volume in its Cold War Records Series. The declassified Estimates were released in their entirety in conjunction with the conference, "Estimating Soviet Military Power, 1950-1984," cosponsored in December 1994 by the CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

Since 1992 this volume's editor, Dr. Donald P. Steury, has been a member of the CIA History Staff, where his research and writing have focused on the CIA's strategic and military-economic analysis of the Soviet Union. An Oregon native, Dr. Steury received B.A. and M.A. degrees at the University of Oregon and a Ph.D. in European International History from the University of California, Irvine. He joined the Central Intelligence Agency in 1981 and served until 1992 in the Office of Soviet Analysis and its successor, the Office of Slavic and Eurasian Analysis.