

'Military consequences of the Soviet atom bomb' from Il nuovo Corriere della Sera (4 October 1949)

Caption: On 4 October 1949, the Italian daily newspaper Il nuovo Corriere della Sera considers the implications for the West of the Soviet Union's acquisition of nuclear weapons and raises the spectre of possible nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Source: Il nuovo Corriere della Sera. dir. de publ. Guglielmo, Emanuel. 04.10.1949, n° 236; anno 74. Milano: Corriere della Sera. "Conseguenze militari dell'atomica sovietica", auteur:Guerriero, Augusto , p. 1.

Copyright: (c) Translation CVCE.EU by UNI.LU

All rights of reproduction, of public communication, of adaptation, of distribution or of dissemination via Internet, internal network or any other means are strictly reserved in all countries.

Consult the legal notice and the terms and conditions of use regarding this site.

URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/military_consequences_of_the_soviet_atom_bomb_from_il_nuovo_corriere_della_sera_4_october_1949-en-25e05c46-d214-440f-a363-2464d8570dcb.html



Last updated: 05/07/2016

Military consequences of the Soviet atom bomb

Until yesterday — and hence for as long as the United States has had the atom bomb and the Soviet Union has not — the superiority of American military power over the Soviet Union has been immense and indisputable. Now that the Russians also have the nuclear bomb, has this relationship changed? By how much? And in what way?

The problem is twofold. We can speculate on whether there might be a change now or in the immediate future, say in a few months' time. Or we can wonder whether any changes might occur in two or three years. Trying to make forecasts beyond this period would be absurd.

The answer to the first question is easy and obvious. There will be no change either now or in the immediate future. The United States has hundreds, perhaps thousands of bombs. The Soviet Union has probably detonated the only one it has ever succeeded in building. It might have a few more, but no more than that. It may well build a few more over the next months. But the difference in nuclear capability between the Americans and the Soviets will still be huge.

The second question is infinitely more complex and difficult. In order to answer it, we must first try to evaluate: (a) how many weapons each of the two adversaries will have within two or three years; (b) what the destructive potential of the bombs in each camp will be; (c) what means of transport both sides will have to take these bombs to their targets; (d) what active and passive defence systems both adversaries will have.

It is impossible to speculate on the first point. We do not know how many weapons the United States is building at the moment or how many it has already built. How could we therefore hope to estimate how many it will have built in two or three years' time? The same is true — and to an even greater extent — of the Soviet Union. There is nevertheless one forecast that we can make without the risk of error: if a nuclear armament race were launched now, the USA's nuclear arsenal would, within two or three years, be hugely superior to that of the Soviet Union. One side would probably have thousands of bombs, while the other would have several hundred at the most. The justifications for this forecast are so obvious that any further explanation is superfluous.

As for the weapons' destructive potential, those bombs that the USA will own within two or three years will undoubtedly be far more powerful than those of the Soviet Union, and this for the simple reason that the United States has a four-year lead over the Soviets. We nevertheless have to bear in mind that the existing bombs are already excessively powerful for small but important targets — such as factories — and are sufficiently powerful for average targets, such as a medium-sized city. The difference in explosive potential will therefore hardly be a decisive element.

A far more powerful weapon would be the radioactive poisons that could be spread over enemy territory. J. Robert Oppenheimer, in the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, wrote in December 1947 that the US squadrons could have exterminated more than 40 million individuals in the Soviet Union in a single attack.

The third element — the means of transporting the bomb — will in my opinion be truly decisive. It is not enough to build bombs: they will also have to be taken to their targets. And if one opponent has the means to transport them and the other does not, it is as if one of them had the nuclear bomb and the other did not. I base my interpretation on the conclusions of Professor Patrick Blackett, whose highly pro-Soviet attitude is well known. Professor Blackett rules out, for many years to come, the use of unmanned aircraft or rockets for attacks at distances over 1 500 km. Over the next ten years, the only vehicle capable of sending a nuclear bomb with adequate precision over a distance of more than 600 km, and probably also over a distance of more than 1 500 km, will be standard piloted aircraft. But the manned bombers with ranges of, say, more than 2 400 km, which will be in use in the next five years, will be so inferior in speed and manoeuvrability to the fighter-bombers used at the same time that they will be extremely vulnerable. Consequently, entering a strongly defended territory would in all probability be a costly undertaking.

If Professor Blackett's claims are true, we can deduce that the United States will have an enormous

advantage over the Soviet Union. The US bombers will take off from bases in the United Kingdom, Turkey and the Middle East, while the Soviet bombers will have to cross the Atlantic. This means that the US will succeed in striking the Soviet Union whenever and wherever it wants, while the Soviet Union will be unable to strike America. The fate of those countries caught geographically in the middle between the two big adversaries will probably be unfortunate. But the position of the two opponents will certainly be as described.

The Soviet Union's active defence will almost certainly try to hit the adversary's bases in order to eliminate or at least reduce its impressive advantage. The Americans, on the other hand, will defend their bases by every means in their power. But any speculation on the outcome of such a battle for the bases would be rash.

If the situation is such that the United States is still and will probably always be more powerful than the Soviet Union in the field of nuclear armament, will it have any reason to be afraid over the next years? No reason at all, except in the event of a surprise attack: a kind of nuclear Pearl Harbour. The Compton Report of 1947 gave the following warning: 'The eventuality of a surprise attack, similar to Pearl Harbour, is becoming increasingly probable because of the progress made in the field of aviation and because of the enormous destructive potential of nuclear weapons. We can be safe from such attacks for a period of time, estimated by scientific experts to be between four and ten years, because we are the only country to own the nuclear bomb. (This period has now been reduced to two years.) After this time, we have to expect a large-scale incursion with the launching of nuclear explosives on our principal residential and production centres.' The Finletter Report of 1948 (*Survival in the Air Age*) follows the same line of thought. In this light, Professor Blackett's criticism on the issue appears somewhat trifling.

Conclusion: except in the event of a surprise attack, the United States is and will be invincible.

Augusto Guerriero