

*Defense at the Forward Edge of the Battle
or rather in the Depth?
Different approaches to implement NATO's operation plans by
the alliance partners, 1955-1988*

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Military historians love studying battles. For this purpose, they evaluate operation plans and analyze how these plans were executed on the battlefield. The battle history of the Cold War focuses first and foremost on the planning for the nuclear clash between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Although between 1945 and 1989-90 the world saw countless hot wars on the periphery of the Cold War, the "Cold World War," as the German historian Jost Dülffer termed it, is best examined through the operational plans of the military alliances for what would have been World War Three. To conduct such an analysis we must consider Total War under nuclear conditions.

Analyzing the war planning, however, is far from easy. The main difficulty lies in access to the files. The records of both the Warsaw Pact and NATO are still largely classified and therefore relatively inaccessible. Nor is access to the archives in Moscow two decades after glasnost and perestroika at all encouraging. At the request of historians, NATO has begun to declassify some of its key documents. Nonetheless, the specific details of the nuclear operational planning will continue to remain inaccessible to historians for the foreseeable future. As an alternative, historians then are forced to rely on collateral documents in the various national archives or on the compilations of

diverse oral history projects. The initial results of such an approach are quite encouraging, although we must caution repeatedly that the scenarios of specific war plans or military exercises are not necessarily identical to the actual operational plans developed by the general staffs of the military alliances. The impact of those war plans, in turn, is reflected in the political controversies of the 1970s and 1980s over the practicality of waging a nuclear war. Many people who lived through that era still remember the slogan, “better red than dead.” The impact of NATO’s Dual Track Decision on the domestic policy of the Federal Republic of Germany is described in many volumes of the literature and has been the topic of several interesting exhibitions.

NATO’s Operational Planning for the Central Region in the 1960s and 1970s

During the Cold War, the North German Plain and the Fulda Gap were considered the most probable axes of advance for the Warsaw Pact forces to thrust into Western Europe. The region from Kassel in the south to Hamburg in the north of Germany was, therefore, of particular importance for the generals and staff officers in the Supreme Headquarters of Allied Powers in Europe (SHAPE). Although the strategy evolved over the period, the operational planning in the 1960s for the defense of the Central Sector against a massive Warsaw Pact attack rested squarely on the early use of nuclear weapons. There were, however, increasing doubts, particularly among the German military, that the conduct of a combined arms battle would be at all possible under nuclear conditions. Even the selective use of nuclear weapons on German soil could not be in the interest of the Federal Republic of Germany. But until far into the 1970s NATO lacked the conventional ground and air forces necessary to conduct an effective forward defense without the early use of nuclear weapons.

Confronted with this dilemma, German commanders had to plan the defense of their German homeland and translate those concepts into the daily training of their soldiers. The compromise in the 1960s was the development of the Emergency Defense Plans (EDP) with as little reliance as possible on nuclear fire on German soil. Accordingly, the German generals and staff officers at NATO headquarters influenced NATO’s nuclear target planning process along those lines.

A first overview of the NATO operation plans for the Central Region should find an answer to the question of how the national corps of the two army groups, NORTHAG and CENTAG, intended to implement the forward defense strategy that had been stipulated since 1963. Is it possible to distinguish between the plans of the German corps and those of the corps of other alliance partners? Or can we even talk about a special role West German operational planning played at corps level within the Central Region?

In 2008, the British army conducted the exercise UNITED SHIELD. During this exercise, the British Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Richard Dannatt, trained his future division commanders in leading a corps. This training was based on the General Defense Plan (GDP) of the 1st British Corps from 1988. For five days, they simulated the (NORTHAG) army group scenario, from Berlin through the former British corps combat sector to Paderborn. The tactical terrain conferences revealed that, in the late 1980s, the then Commanding General, Lieutenant General Sir Peter Inge, did not see the forward edge of the battle area as the center of the defense battle but rather planned a mobile defense, using the entire depth of the corps combat sector. General Hans Henning von Sandrart, former CINCENT and high-ranking contemporary witness, confirmed that, up to the mid-1980s, the corps were regarded as “national boxes” within NATO and that they translated their defense mission into operational planning more or less independently of each other. Although all of them were following the principle of forward defense, every corps defined different defense lines. The superior army group, which did not have directing authority in peacetime, stipulated only few coordination lines and vital zones.

Prior to the exercise, the German Ministry of Defense provided access to the previously top secret GDP 88 of the 1st German Corps. The British armed forces made GDP 88 of the 1st British Corps available and NATO granted access to CINCENT GDP 88. Apart from that, documents were available from the 1960s and 1970s stored at SHAPE in Mons, at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. and Kew and at the Military Division of the Federal Archive in Freiburg.

Historians who are interested in NATO operational planning will know that the “live operation plans”, the Emergency Defense Plans, and, from 1969/1970 on, the General Defense Plans (GDP) describe a “worst-case scenario”. On the one hand, the

plans were part of the strategy of deterrence; on the other hand, they would also have been used as the basis of warfare throughout the first couple of days, or perhaps even for weeks.

During the period of time in question, the governments of the alliance partners and the North Atlantic Alliance assumed that Moscow would not start a large-scale war against the West. The military, on the contrary, assumed that if the Soviet Union should wage a large-scale war against NATO, it would be an all-out attack by means of mechanized forces using tactical nuclear weapons. Within the Central Region, it was not least due to German urging that NATO wanted to build up its defense lines as far in the east as possible.

Changes in the Forward Defense Strategy, 1957-1969

The three maps show the development of forward defense up to 1969. Until 1957, the Rhine-Ijssel line was the main defense line. The delaying zone extended to the Ems-Neckar line, and beyond this line, the Weser-Lech line was intended as an initial line of resistance. NATO assumed, however, that enemy forces would cross the Ems-Neckar line within a few days. This was hardly acceptable for the German military leaders as it would have meant giving up large areas of West Germany without any combat action. But due to the lack of conventional forces, the only alternative left was a greater influence of German officers on NATO planning and, eventually, falling back on nuclear weapons.

In the Emergency Defense Plan from 1958 (EDP 2-58, July 1958), the Rhine-Ijssel line was given up as the main defense line in favor of the Ems-Neckar line. The enemy was to be delayed from the Weser-Lech line onwards. In the summer of 1958, CENTAG defined four lines of defense further in the east. In the south, the French forces would now no longer establish initial contact with the enemy at the Iller river but at the Lech river already. With only nine weak divisions, NORTHAG would have had to cover a front of 380 kilometers, which means 42 kilometers per division. According to regulations in force at that time, a combat-effective division was to defend a combat sector of some 25 kilometers in width in favorable terrain. The British NATO

commander-in-chief therefore opposed plans to advance the defense eastward of the Weser .

Despite those different opinions at army group level, SACEUR General Lauris Norstad determined in April 1962 that a mobile defense should start directly at the Iron Curtain. However, a NATO exercise in the spring of 1962 showed that, in view of the lack of divisions, a reinforcement of the terrain in the delaying zone and the use of atomic demolition munitions (ADM) as well as the early use of other tactical nuclear weapons would be necessary for a successful forward defense.

In EDP 1-63 from September 1963, the Ems-Neckar line was given up as the main defense line in favor of the Weser-Lech line. In contrast to earlier EDPs, approximately 90 percent of the Federal territory would now have been defended instead of only 50 percent in case of war. The price, however, was high as the planned war of the 1960s was a war under nuclear conditions. Nuclear target points and nuclear fire zones were integral parts of operational planning. In January 1963, COMLANDCENT General Dr. Speidel established in this regard:

“In view of the current strength ratio, our fight can be successful only if nuclear weapons are used. Their early release is of vital importance (...)” .

Warsaw Pact intentions in the Central Region

NATO's assessments of the enemy's intentions indicated that their first operational objective was the Rhine. The Warsaw Pact forces intended to seize rapidly the critical terrain areas in order to facilitate freedom of operations for their armored units to achieve a breakthrough in the depth. In the NORTHAG sector the main thrust was expected to come from the area of Wittenberge-Stendal via the Weser crossings between Bremen and Verden, proceeding in the direction of the Rhine between Nijmegen and Wesel. Two supporting offensive wedges were anticipated. One would come from the area of Letzlinger Heath-Magdeburg on both sides of the autobahn in the direction of the Weser crossings on both sides of Minden and proceeding further in the direction of the Ruhr area. The second could come from the area of Nordhausen in the direction of the Weser crossings near Hannoversch-Münden and Höxter, proceeding in

the direction of Paderborn. The first assault echelon was expected to have fourteen divisions, the second eleven divisions. Another complicating factor was the Warsaw Pact's 4-to-1 superiority in conventional combat aircraft. In the late 1960s NATO assessments predicted 2,500 to 4,000 conventional sorties and a total of some 800 nuclear sorties with strike aircraft and missiles per day against targets in the Allied Forces Central Europe sector. An attack in the 1st German Corps sector by the Third Shock Army was expected to have four tank divisions and a motorized rifle division in the first echelon, carried out by some 1,600 T-54 and T-62 main battle tanks, 1,400 armored infantry fighting vehicles, and supported by heavy artillery forces. The spearheads of the enemy attack could reach the Weser-Line after 9 to 14 hours if launched after only a short preparation phase, and after 15 to 25 hours after a more deliberate preparation. Elements of the Second Guards Tank Army or of the Twentieth Guards Army with a total of 11 divisions were projected as the second echelon. Until the early 1960s NATO intelligence assessments did not expect the commitment at the beginning of the attack of Polish forces or units of the East German National People's Army (NVA), but the enemy use of nuclear and chemical weapons was anticipated at any time.

NORTHAG intended to conduct the defense with four corps abreast, the center of the main effort being in the south of its sector. 1st Belgian Corps, operating on the left flank of CENTAG, along with 1st British Corps and 1st Netherlands Corps had the mission of delaying the enemy advance east of the Weser and transitioning to the defense along the course of the river Weser. The Second Allied Tactical Air Force was to support ground operations initially with conventional weapons and aerial reconnaissance, and, if necessary, execute the NORTHAG nuclear strike plan.

I (GE) Corps: Concept of Operations 1965

In response to a surprise attack, 1st German Corps had the mission to block the enemy attack as far as possible to the east while simultaneously preparing to repel the enemy with a counterattack to prevent the breakthrough to the Rhine and Ruhr. To accomplish this mission 1st German Corps had two mechanized infantry divisions and an armored division, totaling some 600 main battle tanks and 700 armored infantry

fighting vehicles. The reinforced 7th Panzer Grenadier Division with four brigades--including the attached 33rd Panzer Brigade of the 11th Panzer Grenadier Division--constituted along with a British infantry division, the NORTHAG reserve 1st.

The German Corps planned to conduct its defense with the 3rd Panzer Division on the left, the 11th Panzer Grenadier Division in the center, and the 1st Panzer Grenadier Division on the right. The corps itself did not have a major reserve. Instead the respective divisional reserves were earmarked for the operational command of the corps.

With eight mechanized or armored brigades in the line, the 1st German Corps commander had some capability to counter the enemy's mobile and armored attack forces. Nevertheless, the conduct of a fully effective mobile defense was hardly possible with the forces available, the lack of territory, and the enemy's air superiority. The German divisions had to engage the enemy far forward. Generally, each division put forward one brigade plus its armored reconnaissance battalion to operate in a small delaying zone, while the two other brigades prepared for the main defense. As the partially expended delaying force drew back behind its division's own lines, it would become the divisional reserve for counterattacks or other missions. Thus, the corps commander's freedom of action was very limited. A contemporary witness quoted the commanding general of 1st German Corps, Lieutenant General Wilhelm Meyer-Detring as saying: "If the corps commits its reserves it will hardly be able to disengage them because of the force ratio. Consequently, there will hardly be much for me to do." As a limited and temporary response to this situation, Army Structure 3 of 1970 established an armored regiment for each corps and also attached an airborne brigade.

War, as planned for in the 1960s, was a war under nuclear conditions. Mainly the product of a lack of conventional armed forces, it would have been necessary to ensure forward defense with the early use of nuclear weapons. The operational plans at that time, therefore, focused on that early use. That was the only way to establish early contact with the enemy at the demarcation line and to conduct delay and defense operations in the sector of 1st German Corps. A 1964 report by a corps artillery commander about a nuclear targeting conference conducted by adjacent CENTAG notes:

So far the operations of the corps in the defense are firmly focused on the use of available nuclear devices. Nuclear target points and nuclear fire zones are an integral part of the combat in the defensive sector.

In his estimation, any new concept for a modern conventional fire fight could only be feasible if the necessary forces were available.

The concerns of many German generals and staff officers that the massive use of nuclear weapons would make the control and direction of battle impossible were more than justified. But it was not easy to influence the nuclear target planning of NATO. Colonel Helmuth Groscurth describes in his memoirs how as a young major in 1966 when he became the NORTHAG G-2 staff officer for nuclear target selection he was not given any national guidance concerning his influence on the nuclear target planning process. In numerous letters to various higher headquarters for years he criticized that nuclear operational planning had been to a large degree determined by a British major. In addition, Groscurth indicated that many NATO exercises committed a disproportionately high number of nuclear warheads with high KT yields. Groscurth's superiors did not feel able to help him but tried to appease him by assuring that as long as there were no objections from Bonn, everything was fine. The first change in the nuclear targeting situation came in July 1966 when German Army chief of staff Lieutenant General Ulrich de Maizière issued the national command and control directives for the use of nuclear weapons. That document, which de Maizière developed in consultation with COMLANDCENT General Adolf Graf von Kielmansegg, was designed to obligate the senior German commanders to a responsible and restrictive application of nuclear weapons. De Maizière continued to acknowledge the necessity for an early use of nuclear weapons to accomplish the EDP mission during any large-scale attack by the enemy. But he also recognized that the failure of a credible and complete deterrence would result in inconceivable destruction on German territory. He therefore made the following demands on his subordinate commanders:

During the use of nuclear weapons particular attention must be to be paid to the effects on the population and the survival of our country. ... By choosing the right place, type, and time for employment, it is possible to accomplish both the military requirements and to show the appropriate consideration.

According to statements by former Bundeswehr general officers, EDP 1-68 did not designate any nuclear fire zones or preplanned ADM detonations.

III (GE) Corps EDP 63 (Extract)

To illustrate this scenario, it is worth to have a closer look on the EDP of the 3rd German Corps from 1963 . The mission of this corps was to delay enemy advance for round about 48 hours with two mechanized brigades and to defend the sector south of Kassel with the 2nd Mechanized Division and the 5th Armoured Division. The nuclear fire zones are marked in red. The green stars indicate the number of preplanned ADM points. The enemy was to be brought to a halt through the interaction of barriers, fire and counterattacks. The preplanned and prepared barrier operations were of great importance in particular in the terrain of the North German Plain which favored the use of tanks. In case of hostile armored units breaking through, minefields would also have been laid using helicopters. Furthermore, for the conduct of defense operations, the divisions had ADM at their disposal. The main targets were roads and crossroads. ADM were used upon the request of the divisions on order of the corps. According to Lieutenant General (retired) Dr. Franz Uhle-Wettler, he in his capacity as G3 Op of the 1st German Corps and the Commanding General as well as the chief of staff had to cooperate to establish ADM points in the terrain every four to five kilometers. The coordinating ADM points to the adjacent corps had been provided. General Uhle-Wettler believes to remember the course of that ADM belt west of the Weser. With the width of the combat sector being some 120 kilometers, it can be assumed that there were 30 ADM planned. Unfortunately, the documents available to the author do not indicate the exact course of the planned ADM points. With the EDP of 3rd German Corps of 1963 an echeloned operation with a total of 77 ADM-targets between the inner German border and the defensive sector was planned. However, at the beginning of the combat operations 3rd German Corps had only 12 ADM ready for operation at its disposal. The Commanding General, Lieutenant General Meyer-Detring, expressed his skepticism still on the battlefield: "If this happens, then this will be the end of Germany and probably of most Germans as well."

For the German side, waging war under nuclear conditions was ultimately just as unacceptable as giving up large parts of their terrain without fighting as planned in the 1950s. Changing strategies towards a flexible response in the year 1967 meant a transition on paper. It was now planned to counter a large-scale attack of the Warsaw Pact with conventional forces and to employ nuclear weapons only if defeat could not be avoided by other means. In terms of operational implementation, this meant that nuclear weapons were to be employed if pre-determined key terrain could not be held any longer .

Given the mission-ready units, however, NATO commanders-in-chief harbored no illusions. It was still expected that those units would be employed within only a few days. In 1968, COMNORTHAG even assumed that, in the worst case, the enemy could reach the defense sector at the Weser already within 30 hours. Therefore, no major depots or tank farms were to be established east of the Weser, an important indication that NORTHAG did not plan the defense to take place east of the Weser in the 1960s. At least, however, it was no longer necessary to fall back on the pre-planned nuclear fire zones in the late 1960s. Still, as General Ulrich de Maizière had to learn in a talk with COMNORTHAG in January 1969, the NORTHAG operation plan nevertheless continued to be geared to a canalization of the enemy force until they reached the defense sector near the Weser; there it was intended to decide the defense battle of NATO through the selective use of at least 50 nuclear weapons. The Chief of Staff of the German Air Force, Lieutenant General Johannes Steinhoff, exclaimed:

The Federal Republic of Germany cannot agree to a conduct of operations which inevitably turns its territory in the depth into a battlefield and exposes it to nuclear devastation. The use of tactical nuclear battlefield weapons (50 pieces as a nuclear strike) is unacceptable as part of a conventional defense.

In the 1970s, operational planning of NATO for the defense of the Central Sector against a massive attack of the Warsaw Pact continued to focus on an early use of nuclear weapons despite the change in strategy. This approach hardly corresponded with the interests of the Federal Republic of Germany. Numerous German generals were convinced that command and control ended exactly where nuclear weapons were employed. At that time, the public's critical awareness grew in the affected regions due

to a board game from the USA. In early March 1982, the German newspapers “Taunus-Kurier” and “Fuldaer Zeitung” reported on the “Fulda Gap” and expressed great dismay in the face of the possible destructions in Hesse presented in this game. The regional TV news program “Hessen-Schau” also broadcast reports on the apparently well-researched and realistic scenarios. The critical presentation attracted the public’s attention and brought the peace movement on to the scene which had already become aware of the Western war planning and its local angle in the year before .

Until far into the 1970s, NATO lacked the conventional land and air forces necessary for forward defense that would have made it possible to abandon the option of an early use of nuclear weapons. Due to the economic crises in the 1970s, it would also have been difficult to force up defense expenditures of the alliance partners. The politicians calmed their guilty conscience resulting from the failure to quickly implement the new strategy by hinting at deterrence, the Harmel Report, and disarmament efforts .

For the military, the 1970s were rather a “lost decade.” In 1984, Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) General Bernard W. Rogers stated that he would have to ask Washington for authorization to employ nuclear weapons within only a few days after the outbreak of a war with the Soviet Union. Also in 1984, his deputy, General Hans-Joachim Mack, confirmed this assessment in an interview with the German news magazine “Der Spiegel.” Given the number of available conventional forces, he too assumed that, by conventional means, it would only be possible to withstand for a couple of days, not weeks, in the event of war. Despite or maybe even because of these much-quoted warnings, NATO forces encountered a push of modernization in the 1980s, which again brought the possibility of doing without tactical nuclear weapons back into sight. From an army point of view, specific mention should be made of the new artillery and mine laying systems as well as of the enhanced anti-armor capability provided by modern helicopters and guided rockets. In the late 1980s, it seemed possible to implement strategy paper MC 14/3 .

NATO’s Operational Planning for the Central Region in the 1980s

The mission of CINCENT was to defend the territory of NATO nations within Central Region. For this purpose, General von Sandrart listed ten key requirements for the successful implementation of his CINCENT GDP 88. First of all he called for a high state of readiness of the in-place land and air forces and timely political decisions for their transition to an effective defense posture and for the mobilization of augmentations and reserves. Besides other problems identified in the areas of alerting and mobilization, the expected casualty-intensive delaying operations and the lack of reserves, there was one particularly pressing problem: the coherent conduct of combat operations with eight corps from five different nations. The Commander-in-Chief, Allied Forces Central Europe planned to defend the Central Sector as close as possible to the inner German border and the Czech border in order to maintain or restore the integrity of NATO territory. Moreover, the first operational echelon of the Western Group of Forces was to be destroyed conventionally with air superiority of own forces in order to enable the CINCENT reserves to fight against the second operational echelon afterwards. If necessary and authorized, nuclear weapons were to be employed in order to rapidly end the conflict and to restore deterrence. The Ruhr district and the Rhine access areas between Wesel and Bonn and between Wiesbaden and Karlsruhe, were so-called "vital zones" which were not to be abandoned. CINCENT's key terrain east of Paderborn.

NORTHAG corps with CINCENT's key terrain east of Paderborn.

In peacetime, the corps level was the highest NATO level for implementing the operation plans of the CINCENT and his two army groups. Depending on the allocated combat sector, the commanding generals of the national corps could fight different battles. This meant five nations with different traditions regarding military thinking, major units with different equipment, different command and control systems, etc. What they had in common was the opinion that the initial battle against the first operational echelon of the Warsaw Pact was to be fought at corps level. The following battle was to be fought under the responsibility of the two army groups.

Naturally, the commanding generals of the German corps were interested in having a main defense line far in the east. But what were the British, Belgian or Dutch

neighbors' plans? The mistrust of German staffs was reflected in examples such as the 3rd German Corps' operation plan from 1965:

Maintaining contact with the adjacent corps is of particular importance. Having different nationalities, there is the danger that, in the event of a crisis, everyone just thinks of themselves first. Continued reconnaissance into these adjacent combat sectors is vital for the divisions of the III German Corps. This is the only way we can take all necessary measures in time should the risk of a threat to the flanks arise.

Defense with two German Divisions according to HDv 100/100

In the German Army Regulation on Command and Control of the Armed Forces (HDv 100/100) from 1973, the focus of defense was on the forward deployed combat units. Although depth was considered necessary, the forward deployed units were to be the strongest. Lieutenant General Horst Hildebrandt, the Chief of Staff of the German Army from 1973 to 1979, referred to the planned counter attacks as "many short hooks" as neither space nor forces were available for "long haymakers". Lieutenant General Gerd Niepold, who was the Commanding General of the III German Corps from 1968 to 1972, was hence convinced that there was not enough room for conducting operations and that the only option left was to apply mobile defense tactics and persistently hold the border areas. The operational concept of forward defense had the effect of a stay and caused these tactics to be over-emphasized. In numerous exercises, training focused on the phases of delay over a limited depth, followed by the main defense with strong forces, and thereafter, counter attacks with units that had already been through delaying actions or had been withdrawn from defense. The exercise usually came to an end at the latest when all of these three elements had been completed or when the commanders called for authorization to employ nuclear weapons.

Until the mid-1980s, the mantra of "holding out at the forward edge of the battle area" shaped the way of thinking of military leaders within the German army. It can still be found in the 1st German Corps' operation plans from 1988. This map shows the employment options for the 3rd Armored Division acting as a corps reserve.

I (GE) Corps GDP 88 and Employment of the 3rd Armored Division (Corps Reserve)

The British armed forces, however, preferred a different approach as General Sir John Hackett already explained in his bestseller “The Third World War” from 1978. Instead of defending the forward edge of the battle area (FEBA), they intended to defend certain key terrain. They wanted the enemy to enter deeply into the corps combat sector in order to defeat them by means of mobile defense. In the early 1980s, General Sir Nigel Bagnall (COMNORTHAG) called for mobility to be reintroduced into the operational planning of NATO. He criticized that there was no common operational concept at army group level, which was responsible for the four corps having established four different operation plans in the NORTHAG area, all independently of each other. He further criticized that some commanding generals took the principle of forward defense too literal. In his eyes, this passive and linear defense along the inner German border was the wrong way.

NORTHAG’s Concept of Operations 1988 (without the 1st Belgian Corps)

For German army generals, however, this approach meant a threat to forward defense. There would be open flanks, as can be seen on the fictitious map in Hackett’s book, which shows a possible course of war after the ninth day of battle. Taking a glance into GDP 88 of the 1st British Corps, however, proves that this implementation of the concept of mobile defense was rather a compromise solution as the GDP also comprised static elements. The Weser river was seen as the “final back stop” by NORTHAG, and the so-called “Minden Gap” (Porta Westfalica) was the army group’s “vital ground”. On the map, this is indicated by a green circle. The yellow circles are the vital grounds of the corps.

The Warsaw Pact’s assets at that time comprised modern main battle tanks and armored infantry fighting vehicles as well as operational maneuver groups (OMG) introduced in the 1980s which enabled them to wage a “Blitzkrieg” (key word: blitzing NATO). According to plans, this capability was to be opposed by means of NATO’s follow-on forces attack concept and by recourse to operational thinking.

In cooperation with generals from various alliance partners, a “New Operational School” was developed. In this context, General von Sandrart issued his “CINCENT’s Operational Principles” in 1988. In his eyes, the corps needed to break away from the GDPs quickly in order to gain the initiative and be able to successfully fight the initial conventional battle with a mobile defense. Three years before, the follow-on forces attack (FOFA) concept had been adopted within the Alliance. Thus, the missing depth was gained in potential enemy territory and the dangerous second operational echelon of the Warsaw Pact was threatened by combat aircraft and missiles. General von Sandrart, however, recently emphasized in an interview, that, as far as he knows, SHAPE did not have any operational plans for FOFA. It was only a paper doctrine.

The Central Army Group (CENTAG) also planned to start the battle with covering or delaying forces at the inner German border. The main defense forces of the four corps were to hold the wood area of the Kaufunger Wald and the Knüllgebirge hills north of Fulda and to prevent the enemy from breaking through to the Rhine. During his time as the Commanding General of the V (US) Corps in the mid-1970s, General Donn Starry tried to loosen the rather static defense plans. The lessons learned from the Yom Kippur War in 1973 pointed towards using all available corps reserves in order to enable a mobile or active defense in the depth. According to his exercise evaluations, however, the covering forces hardly would have been able to withstand a massive attack of the Warsaw Pact for longer than one combat day. He expected the main battle to last less than ten days. After that, every single main battle tank and armored infantry fighting vehicle would have been destroyed at the latest. But how were the forces to fight against the second attack echelon under these circumstances? Starry saw only one solution that would not include an early use of nuclear weapons: fighting the follow-on attack formations of the Warsaw Pact in East Germany, Poland and former Czechoslovakia even before their arrival on the battlefield. This idea was implemented many years later in the US armed forces’ air-land battle concept and in the aforementioned NATO FOFA concept. For the time being, however, the framework conditions remained unchanged.

V (US) Corps GDP 81

Among the files at the Stasi Records Authority in Berlin there was an operation plan of the V (US) Corps from 1981 which had been evaluated by the Main

Administration for Intelligence (HV A). The V (US) Corps planned to defend the Fulda Gap area, the so called wasp-waist of Western Germany, with two divisions positioned next to each other, the 3rd Armored Division in the north, and the 8th Mechanized Infantry Division in the south. The key terrain comprised the Knüllgebirge hills (indicated by the blue circle) in the defense strip of the 3rd Armored Division.

There was an important pre-planned blocking position east of Wetzlar in the depth of the defense sector of the 3rd (US) Armored Division. This blocking position was to be held by a maneuver brigade by any means. In the area east of the Vogelsberg the attack forces of the first tactical echelon were to be defeated within a depth of approximately 50 kilometers.

Coordination lines spaced at intervals of 10 to 15 kilometers were to ensure coherent defense within the corps. The weak reserve forces of the corps were to be augmented by further American troops. Given the expected tremendous impetus of the attack of the 8th Guards Army, it was still conceivable in the 1980s that NATO would employ tactical nuclear weapons at an early stage. After all, about 6000 tactical nuclear warheads were stored in Western Europe in the mid-1980s. When Colin Powell took over office as the Commanding General of the V (US) Corps in the summer of 1986, a lot had changed compared to the time when he was a platoon leader in the Fulda Gap area in 1958. It was particularly the new American air-land battle doctrine and the technological development of arms and reconnaissance systems that shaped the new face of war. The mechanized formations were equipped with M1 main battle tanks and Bradley armored infantry fighting vehicles. Modern attack helicopters completed the major units' anti-armor capability. Long-range weapons were to be employed in order to defeat the second operational attack echelon of the Warsaw Pact in enemy territory during their approach already. However, the highly mobile units of the first echelon alone were a big challenge, and it was to be expected that at least parts of the second echelon would remain. The American general was convinced that his forces would manage to accomplish the mission of holding one of the key areas to NATO defense in Central Europe – but in the worst case, this would come at a high price. During an exercise, his Chief of Staff made the following remark on this situation: “(...) our last defensible position is the Vogelsberg range, and at that time it may be necessary to ask for release of nukes (...)”.

In his memoirs, Colin Powell wrote that it had been this exercise in particular that had brought home to him how fast they would have reached the point of considering the use of nuclear weapons. For German military leaders, it was hard to foresee when the American allies would actually employ nuclear weapons in the Fulda Gap.

The evaluation of numerous operation plans of several NATO corps showed that the approaches to implementing the NATO defense plans were anything but homogeneous. In their live operation plans, the national corps at least determined how the so-called “initial battle” would have started in case of a war. The army groups of the Central Region would have fought the “second battle” with operational and strategic reserves and, if necessary, with tactical nuclear weapons – most probably in the middle of West Germany.

The German corps actually did play a special role in all of this as they clearly concentrated on the forward edge of the battle until the end of the Cold War. The other alliance partners, in contrast, rather saw the forward edge of the battle area as a first defense line for the position area.

What Dieter Krüger said about the 1960s actually held true for the whole period until the end of the Cold War:

The Federal Republic of Germany and other exposed states did not have too much of an objective interest in wearing out in a conventional war while not being able to prevent the loss of large parts of their own territory, just to be “liberated” again afterwards through the use of nuclear weapons.

To sum it up, the entire territory of the Federal Republic of Germany was planned as the battlefield for a hot war and thus as the glacis of the Western nuclear powers throughout the Cold War.