

Dissertation Review

Jiří Pondělíček: From Planning the Unimaginable to Imagining the Impossible: The Evolution of Civil Defense in the United States, 1945–1957, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, Prague 2021, 160 pages.

The conflict between the two superpowers – the United States of America and the Soviet Union – greatly influenced the history of international relations after the Second World War. The fact that their mutual rivalry did not result in a direct military confrontation was also due to the reality that both countries had, since the late 1950s, possessed a quantity of nuclear weapons which, if used in a military struggle, could have caused the annihilation of mankind. The issue of the possession of nuclear weapons, the threat of their use, nuclear disarmament, but also defence against a possible nuclear attack became important aspects that characterised the Cold War.

The United States of America was the first country to develop and possess the nuclear bomb. Its use took place towards the end of the Second World War, and the US attacks on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki demonstrated the devastation and subsequent consequences of this weapon. The United States enjoyed a monopoly on the possession of nuclear weapons for only four years before its main rival in the emerging Cold War – the Soviet Union – also included such weapons in its military arsenal. In the emerging nuclear age, the United States could no longer rely on geographic location and distance from the Eurasian continent. Jiří Pondělíček choose the issue of US civil defence and protection against a possible nuclear attack as the topic of his dissertation thesis.

In the introduction of his dissertation, Jiří Pondělíček confronts his researched topic with existing works that has largely focused on the cultural and psychological aspects of American civilian defence programs but has neglected how civilian defence has related to or influenced US military planning during the early Cold War. To answer this aspect of the US civil defence became the core of his dissertation. Using a wide range of primary and secondary sources, the author argues that civilian defence seems to be essential for enabling the United States to continue to wage a war, if their territory would be under nuclear attack. Jiří Pondělíček analyses the issue of civilian defence using evolutionary approach to military history and places it in the context of more general US military plans in the first phase of the Cold War. The author agrees that the civil defence program was initially intended primarily to serve the purpose of enabling

the United States to mobilize for the long conventional conflict that was to follow the first nuclear strikes, but he also rejects the notion that it was a program with only psychological objectives. Although civil defence programs in the period that Jiří Pondělíček surveys were always outdated before they were put into practice, author argues that they need to be given for consideration, not only in psychological and cultural terms, but also in the larger context of American military planning during the Cold War. His dissertation refines the argument about the aims of the civil defence and how it influenced lives of US citizens between 1945 and 1957.

It must be said that Jiří Pondělíček has succeeded in his analyses. Based on extensive archival research of US primary sources, he has sufficiently demonstrated that military planners fundamentally interfered with the design of civil defence programs and that ultimately civil defence as a war winning strategy was defeated by the deterrent forces build-up in the late 1950s. The chosen theoretical framework and structure can be considered adequate in relation to the set objectives, hypothesis, and questions. However, some questions raised in the introduction were not fully answered. In particular, the issue of the perception of the threat of nuclear attack by the Truman administration and how debate on nuclear threat influenced the consensus on US foreign policy in the 1940s and 1950s. What is missing from the dissertation is an introductory chapter in which the author would have presented in more detail the importance of atomic weapons in the Cold War, how they influenced the development of this conflict and in which way they were viewed (from both a military and psychological point of view) by the American politicians, military officers and public. These issues provide an important starting point for understanding the aims and conclusions of Jiří Pondělíček's dissertation. Moreover, some chapters shrink to a kind of discursive analysis on the shape and nature of civilian defence among American (mainly military) planners, but what is missing is the broader context of domestic and foreign policy circumstances in which these discussions took place (origins of the Cold War, US presidential campaigns, bipartisan discussion on budget questions, context of Truman's and Eisenhower's domestic and foreign policy etc.). In the dissertation, a complex assessment of the evolution of national security paradigm, especially during the Truman administration, is absent (surprisingly, the author did not draw at all on Melvyn P. Leffler's book *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* as well as other authors dealing with this topic – E. May, J. L. Gaddis, D. Holloway, R. McMahon). At least NSC-68 as a key strategic document with the enormous impact on US military planning would deserve the whole subchapter and not just a few mentions without further context how this document was created, and which way

influenced US domestic and foreign policy as well as civil defence programs. More details on costs of US civil defence and related debates in Congress and within American public would be also welcomed. The chapters in which Jiří Pondělíček discusses the impact of civil defence plans on the American public could also have been developed in more detail using a diverse range of primary and secondary sources.

Jiří Pondělíček's dissertation provides a new perspective on US civil defence in 1945–1957, and the author has sufficiently demonstrated his ability to critically analyse primary and secondary sources and answer his research questions and defend his hypothesis. On the other hand, the dissertation covers just one of the partial aspects of the US civil defence programs. It is debatable to what extent it is possible to separate the military aspect of civil defence from the psychological and cultural effects on American society at the time. Thus, I would welcome if this topic were researched comprehensively at both psychological/cultural and military levels.

Some parts of the work are difficult for readers to understand when the broader context is not provided, and sometimes the text (especially in passages on the structure of civil defence institutions) slips into the descriptive. From the stylistic point of view, the dissertation is well written, but some partial typos can be found in the footnotes. Despite the above-mentioned critical comments, **I recommend Jiří Pondělíček's dissertation for defence.**

Questions: Why did the previous authors focus mainly on the psychological aspect of American civil defence and military angle was omitted?

What the evolution of US civil defence tells us about the influence of military on US society?

How did the Soviet civil defence differ from American? Was there any cooperation of US planners with Canada or other NATO countries on civil defence?

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PhDr. Jan Koura, Ph.D.