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Evaluation of Dissertation Thesis

“From Planning the Unimaginable to Imagining the Impossible:  
The Evolution of Civil Defense in the United States, 1945-1957”, by Jiří Pondělíček

In his dissertation, Jiří Pondělíček focuses on the civil defense preparations in the United States during the period between 1945 and 1957 when military and civil planners had to realize that World War II had not been a war to end all wars, to use a phrase Woodrow Wilson had coined in his attempt to legitimize the toll Americans had to bear entering World War I. Even before the end of the second world war, tension between the United States and its Western allies on the one and the Soviet Union on the other side had erupted. Any hope that the handshake between American and Soviet soldiers at Torgau would herald a new era of world peace and harmony, was finally shattered during the confrontational atmosphere at the Potsdam Conference in July 1945. At that time, preparations for the use of atomic bombs in the Pacific theater of war had been well under way. President Harry S. Truman thus hinted at a new powerful weapon to push the Soviet delegation to agree to satisfactory terms, a prompt Stalin understood all too well, being informed about the secret activities in the desert of New Mexico. This, the advent of the atomic threat of mutual destruction, Pondělíček argues, ultimately changed post-war civil defense planning in the United States.

His research challenges existing understanding and scholarship mainly focusing on the cultural aspects of the nuclear threat, neglecting the earnestness and focus of civil and military preparations for an all-out nuclear war. While military analysts had initially estimated that the Soviet Union, while clearly pursuing nuclear weapons research, would need probably decades to achieve their aim to build a bomb, this changes rapidly in view of advances made. Even in the advent of the first successful nuclear explosion in the USSR, that shook the American nation, Pondělíček argues, civil defense programs were meant to prepare for nuclear war, despite assuming that the United States would be hit first, suffering massive casualties.

In his dissertation, Pondělíček is trying to prove that civil defense thinking and planning was intimately linked to war planning, entailing preparations for military and economic mobilization, while adhering to changing perceptions of Soviet capabilities. He is using an evolutionary game theory approach to military history advanced by Xavier Rubio-Campillo and Francesc Xavier Hernández Cardona in a 2014 paper that analyses the decision-making processes of a field commander who has to take into account possible enemy actions. At first glance this seems to lend itself to an analysis of almost all organizational structures that are being challenged in their initial understanding of problems to be solved. That the author, nonetheless, analyses different organizations with differing agendas and institutional backing, would seem to make it challenging to use this theoretical approach originally proposed on a smaller scale. The organizations researched seemed to have a common goal in their approach to civil defense, but worked on the basis of differing assumptions, particularly, when the threat potential changed after 1949.

Pondělíček uses an exemplary wide range of primary sources he found in a large number of archives, a solid selection of secondary literature, newspapers and movies as well as public opinion surveys. He is able to utilize these different sources to shape his argument to come to valuable conclusions about the differing and contradictory aims of different civil defense activities and their changes over time, and how they shaped public opinion. That he was able to find this many relevant sources at these many archives in the United States, including valuable relevant documents on intelligence assessments, is highly commendable. – Sources on intelligence for a long time have not been widely used in historical re-

search, even in military history, and intelligence has often been referred to as a missing dimension in history. Pondělíček has proved the very value of these sources. While he does not break new theoretical and methodological ground but rather uses the aforementioned approaches, he does so quite well by logically building his arguments based on this wide array of sources and his use of the existing literature.

Mr. Pondělíček is able to present his arguments well. Minor grammatical mistakes do not minimize the good impression of how the author shapes his convincing arguments. No flaws in the correctness of citations and references to the secondary literature could be detected. Those primary sources that could be checked online have been used correctly.

This thesis is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the changes in the impetus for civil defense planning and organization, its constant under-funding, and its final demise after only a few short years. The initial hope to harness the power of the uranium through the United Nations, and to make it available for civilian use for all mankind, may sound naive in hindsight. However, it was supported not only by American decision-makers but also by a large part of the public. The explosion of the first nuclear device by the Soviet Union changed that attitude. Pondělíček lets us understand that during and even before that period, military planners nonetheless planned for an all-out nuclear war, plans that would enable the United States to swiftly change from peace-time to war-time society, despite anticipated tremendous civilian casualties in case of an attack with nuclear bombs. He points out that to instill “fear was the basic precondition for a sufficient number of Americans to voluntarily militarize their everyday lives through participating in civil defense volunteer efforts.” While the Federal Civil Defense Administration was not established before 1950, its basic reasoning, the author makes clear, goes back to even before 1945. His argument that the Sputnik-shock was “the final nail in the coffin of practicable civil defense” is well put.

With the current treat of a new arms race fostered by the development of hypersonic missiles, his dissertation is a stark reminder that in case of a nuclear attack, civil defense planning to prevent massive casualties is pretty useless.

What seems missing in the dissertation, however, is a more solid argument for why an “evolutionary game theory” approach will provide a better understanding of the processes involved in planning civil defense and the forces that drove change. How does the approach Pondělíček chose for his dissertation compare to other theoretical approaches military historians have favored in the past? Also, a somewhat clearer delineation of how discourse analysis, that supposedly is also required to better understand how language and imagery play a role, is linked or even intertwined with “evolutionary theory”. If these questions could be addressed during Mr. Pondělíček’s defense and also in a strongly recommended publication of his very informative thesis, his argument should be even further strengthened.

It is without any reservation that I recommend Jiří Pondělíček’s doctoral thesis for defense.

  
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