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Deterrence & Reassurance: Sir Michael Howard and the Nuclear Strategy Debate in the 1980s

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Deterrence & Reassurance: Sir Michael Howard and the Nuclear Strategy Debate in the 1980s

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ABSTRACT
In the 1980s, Michael Howard took an active part in the debate about nuclear strategy. He used his historical expertise, his personal military experience, and his links with academia and government to offer a balanced analysis of the nature, risks and ethical implications of the use of nuclear weapons. This article examines the debate among security experts when rapid technological advances, and a tendency to over-estimate the nuclear capability of the Soviet Union, increased the risk of miscalculations and accidental nuclear annihilation. As this article demonstrates, Howard's contribution stands out for his unique ability to bring together multiple dimensions in a balanced and considered approach to nuclear strategy and to its ethical implications.

Introduction
In the late 1970s, diverging conceptions of détente started to merge. Western Europe was keen to play an active role through its new foreign policy cooperation strategy via the Helsinki Process. This was, in their view, an opportunity to encourage the Soviet Union to engage with an expanded concept of security that included human rights. The United States, on the other hand, pursued bilateral superpower relations and a strengthened deterrent posture to force the Soviet Union to engage in arms control negotiations. The breakdown of Bretton Woods and the aftermath of the oil crisis with consequent diverging policies in the Middle East led to further fractures in the western security architecture.[1]

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[1]Leopoldo Nuti, ed., *The Crisis of Détente in Europe: From Helsinki to Gorbachev, 1975-1985,* (London: Routledge, 2009); Odd A. Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of our Times,* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005); Andreas Wenger, Christian Nuenlist, Anna Locher (eds), *Transforming NATO in the Cold War: Challenges beyond Deterrence in the 1960s,* (London: Routledge, 2006).

As far as nuclear deterrence was concerned, the West's approach did not change in the 1970s and 1980s. NATO's nuclear deterrent continued to remain anchored to the principle of Flexible Response as outlined in its Fourth Strategic Concept.[2] Yet, the narrative and the conciliatory attitude that had characterised the previous decade was replaced by more confrontational tones. In December 1979, the US and NATO offered talks on mutual limitation of medium-range ballistic missiles and intermediate-range ballistic missiles. If this offer was rejected by Moscow, then NATO threatened to deploy more medium-range nuclear weapons (Pershing II) in Western Europe. This approach became known as the Dual-Track Decision as NATO was strengthening its deterrent strategy as a leverage to force the Soviet Union to engage in arms reduction talks.[3]

At the same time, technological advances allowed for higher accuracy, fast response, and smaller nuclear yields. In other words, it had become possible to carry out limited nuclear strikes. In other words, it had become possible to carry out limited nuclear strikes that could hit exclusively counterforce targets that could be used in a retaliatory nuclear response. In 1980, President Jimmy Carter adopted the new countervailing strategy (Presidential Directive 59), whereby a response to a Soviet nuclear attack was no longer to target the Soviet population centres but to focus instead on Soviet leadership, and military targets. This led to the idea of the possibility of conducting a limited nuclear war, which could be won without mutual annihilation.[4]

More than just counting beans
Michael Howard, who in the early 1980s was Regius Professor of Modern History at the University of Oxford, took an active part in the debate on nuclear strategy and

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[2]MC 14/3, January 1968 and MC 48/3, December 1969.
[3]Christophe Becker-Schaum, eds, *The Nuclear Crisis: The Arms Race, Cold War Anxiety and the German Peace Movement of the 1980s,* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2020); M. Schulz and T.A. Schwartz, eds., S*trained Alliance*: *U.S.-European Relations from Nixon to Carter,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 333-354; Kristina Spohr Readman, **'**Germany and the politics of the neutron bomb, 1975-1979**'**, *Diplomacy & statecraft*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2010), pp. 259-285; Kristina Spohr Readman, 'Conflict and Cooperation in Intra-Alliance Nuclear Politics. Western Europe, the United States, and the Genesis of NATO's Dual-Track Decision, 1977–1979, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 13 (2011), pp. 39-89; Henry H. Gaffney, 'Euromissiles as the Ultimate Evolution of Theatre Nuclear Forces', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Winter 2014), pp. 180-199.
[4]Walter Slocombe, 'The Countervailing Strategy', *International Security*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Spring 1981), pp. 18-27. Steven E. Miller, ed., *Strategy and Nuclear Deterrence,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Colin S. Gray, 'Nuclear Strategy: The Case for a Theory of Victory', in Miller, *Strategy and Nuclear Deterrence*, pp. 23-56.

deterrence. He was aware that the implications of scientific and technological breakthroughs on strategy were not fully grasped by the public and often not even by many political leaders. Scholars – in Howard's view – had a duty to weigh in and support the debate by giving historical context, asking difficult questions, demonstrating fallacies, and arguing against lazy historical equivalence.[5]

In his autobiography, Howard recalls that his initial position on nuclear deterrence was shaped by the writing of P M S Blackett, Sir John Slessor and Basil Liddell Hart, who warned of the implications of nuclear strategy in terms of miscalculations and potential accidental self-annihilation.[6] These readings stirred Howard towards a cautious approach towards nuclear deterrence and towards the need to understand the difference between the possibility of a Soviet nuclear attack and the probability of it. It was therefore essential to acquire an in-depth understanding of the applications of the new technological breakthroughs, an honest appraisal of the Soviet Leadership's concerns and appetite for risk, and finally an assessment of the ethical implications of the use of nuclear weapons.[7]

In addition, Howard himself came from an Anglican family with strong anti-war and humanitarian traditions. His aunt, Elizabeth Fox Howard, was a Quaker.[8] By Howard's own admission, his family and his own experience in the Second World War shaped his relatively cautious approach to nuclear strategy.[9] Throughout his life, Howard was alarmed by the risk of nuclear annihilation. In writing Howard's obituary, Adam Roberts revealed that Howard had confessed to him that in 1958 he had obtained by unofficial channels two suicide pills, as a precautionary measure because of his concern

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[5]Michael Howard, *Studies in War and Peace, (London: Temple Smith, 1970);* Michael Howard, 'War and Technology,' *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 132, No. 4 (1987): 17–22; Michael Howard, 'On Fighting a Nuclear War,' in Howard, *The Causes of War,* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); Michael Howard 'The Forgotten Dimensions of Strategy,' *Foreign Affairs* 57 (Summer 1979), pp. 975–86; Howard, 'Surviving a Protest,' 116–33; 'On Fighting a Nuclear War,' in *The Causes of Wars,* 133–50.

[6]Sir John Slessor, *The Great Deterrent,* (London: Cassell, 1957); P.M.S. Blackett, *Military and Political Consequences of Atomic Energy,* (London: Turnstile Press, 1948); Basil Liddell Hart, *The Revolution in Warfare,* (London: Faber and Faber, 1946).

[7]Michael Howard, *Captain Professor: A Life in War and Peace,* (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 193-195.

[8]'Three Remarkable Women of the Twentieth Century: Joan Mary Fry, Elizabeth Fox Howard and Francesca Wilson', 23 March 2016.
https://quakerstrongrooms.org/2016/03/23/three-remarkable-women-of-the-twentieth-century-joan-mary-fry-elizabeth-fox-howard-and-francesca-wilson/
Accessed 3 May 2022.

[9]Howard, *Captain Professor,* Prologue.

about what to do in the event of a nuclear war. He indicated that his worries had probably resulted from a combination of factors linked to the fluctuating East-West tensions and the technological advances. In the 1980s, at the time of controversies about nuclear missiles at Greenham Common, he was again very worried.[10]

Not surprisingly, therefore, Howard worked tirelessly to bring historical context, cultural understanding, and nuance to the table. He was close in temperament and in approach to the nuclear strategic thinking of Bernard Brodie, the father of American nuclear strategy who had passed away in 1978. A historian by training, Brodie had dedicated his work to understanding the strategic and ethical implications of nuclear weapons.[11] In one of his writings, often quoted by Howard, Brodie argued that due to the unprecedented devastation caused by nuclear weapons, the role of military leaders and security experts had changed forever. 'Thus far, the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have almost no other useful purpose.'[12]

As early as 1957, Howard argued in a lecture at the Royal United Service Institute that political leaders had to strive to keep up with the pace of technological advances and to understand their impact on military and security strategy without losing sight of the ethical implications.[13] Similarly, in his 1981 lecture 'The Causes of War', Howard conjured up the hellish scenario in which a nuclear power unleashed a preventive nuclear attack to stop an adversary from growing their nuclear arsenal and thus becoming an unbeatable opponent.[14] The lecture articulates effectively the concern felt by the peace movements, who protested the deployment of Pershing II missiles in Western Europe. The lecture also gave a detailed examination of reasons for concern felt by Soviet leaders and caution against unnecessary nuclear threats.[15]

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[10]Adam Roberts, 'Sir Michael Howard Obituary', 1 December 2019.
https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/dec/01/sir-michael-howard-obituary
Accessed 3 May 2022.
[11]Bernard Brodie, 'The Development of Nuclear Strategy', in Miller, *Strategy and Nuclear Deterrence*, pp. 3-22; Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983).
[12]Bernard Brodie (ed)., *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1946), p. 76.
[13]Michael Howard, 'Strategy in the Nuclear Age', *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 102, No. 608 (1957), pp. 473-482.
[14]The text was printed as the first chapter in Howard, *The Causes of Wars*, (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1983).
[15]Beatrice Heuser, 'The Soviet Response to the Euromissile Crisis, 1982-83', in Leopoldo Nuti, ed., *The Crisis of Détente in Europe: From Helsinki to Gorbachev, 1975-1985,* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 137-149.

Howard expanded his thinking in 'On Fighting a Nuclear War' (1981), 'Deterrence, Consensus and Reassurance' (1983), and 'War and Technology' (1987).[16] In these essays, Howards put forward a robust criticism of the tendency of western – particularly American – security experts to adopt double standards when comparing the deterrent measures adopted by the West and those put in place by Moscow. For example, in 'On Fighting a Nuclear War' Howard focuses on perceptions surrounding civil defence: while preparations in the West are described by western security experts as sensible and pragmatic, similar measures taken by the Soviet Union are seen as evidence of the Soviet preparations for an imminent nuclear attack against the West.[17]

Throughout his career, Howard rejected the black and white vision of the Soviet Union as 'hostile and ruthless, bent on world conquest' promoted by experts like Albert Wohlstetter.[18] A mathematical logician by training, Wohlstetter was at the time the reference figure among the American security experts. His *The Delicate Balance of Terror* (1958) had been highly influential in shaping the thinking of the Washington establishment, particularly because of its emphasis on the looming threat of Soviet attack. Wohlstetter and his supporters at RAND (and later his students at the University of Chicago) were convinced of the vulnerability of the US to Soviet nuclear attack and argued that the only solution was a massive increase in expenditure to strengthen the American nuclear capability, which should be integrated in an aggressive deterrent posture.[19] Howard, who had met him in person on several occasions, noted

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[16]Michael Howard, 'On Fighting a Nuclear War,' in Howard, *The Causes of War,* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); Michael Howard, 'Deterrence, Consensus and Reassurance in Defence of Europe' *Adelphi Paper*, No. 184 (1983), reprinted in *A Historical Sensibility: Sir Michael Howard and the International Institute for strategic Studies, 1958-2019* (London: Routledge, 2020). Michael Howard, 'War and Technology,' *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 132, No. 4 (1987), pp. 17–22 https://doi.org/10.1080/03071848708522802 Accessed 1 July 2022; See also, Howard, *Studies in War and Peace.* Michael Howard 'The Forgotten Dimensions of Strategy', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 57 (Summer 1979), pp. 975–86; Michael Howard, 'Surviving a Protest', first published in *Encounter* (1980), reprinted in Michael Howard, *The Causes of Wars,* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1983).
[17]Howard, 'On Fighting a Nuclear War', pp. 6-7.
[18]Howard, *Captain Professor*, p. 192.
[19]Fred Kaplan, *The Bomb: Presidents, Generals, and the Secret History of Nuclear War,* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020); Albert Wohlstetter, 'The delicate Balance of Terror', *Foreign Affairs,* 37, 2, (January 1959), pp. 211-234. Albert Wohlstetter et al., *Selection and the Use of Strategic Air Bases: A Report Prepared for the United States Air Force Project RAND,* R-266, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, April 1954); Albert

in his memoirs Wohlstetter's 'ferocity in conducting his arguments, inherited by some of his students'.[20]

Hence, while Howard appreciated Paul Nitze's efforts in arguing the case for a detailed examination of the Soviet military might, he called for caution against Nitze's maximalist approach to US nuclear capability and strategy.[21] At the time, Nitze was US President Ronald Reagan's chief negotiator for the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and was later Special Advisor to the President and Secretary of State on Arms Control. During this time, Nitze consistently argued that the Soviet ultimate objective was to establish a pro-Soviet global system through the nuclear obliteration of the West.[22] Nitze was notably behind the US assessment that the Soviets had developed an aggressive military strategy and had obtained nuclear superiority. Although this assessment was criticised at the time and was later proved flawed, it did allow several security experts to justify the countervailing strategy and the idea of a winnable nuclear war.[23]

Contrary to Wohlstetter's and Nitze's approach, Howard invited experts to understand the Soviet position and to gauge a precise sense of their appetite for risk and war. Howard consistently argued that after the stabilisation that followed the foundation of NATO and of the Warsaw Pact, the Soviet Union did not seek further expansion in Europe as it already had substantial difficulty in controlling the existing satellites. Of course, Howard acknowledged, Soviet leadership would always support emerging socialist countries because it was for them a moral imperative to support what they considered a just cause. However, Howard strongly believed the Soviet

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Wohlstetter et al*., Protecting the US Power Strike Back in the 1950s and 1960s: Staff Report*, R-290, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, September 1956).

[20]Howard, *Captain Professor* p. 173; in 1964, Wohlstetter joined the Political Science Faculty at the University of Chicago, where he trained numerous students including Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle. He continued to engage in classified research and to advise government agencies about US national-security strategy.

[21]Howard, 'Deterrence, Consensus and Reassurance'.

[22]Paul Nitze, 'Deterring our Deterrent', *Foreign Policy,* No. 25 (Winter 1976-77); Paul Nitze, 'Living with the Soviets', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (Winter 1984), pp. 360-374; Paul Nitze. 'Military Power: A Strategic View', *The Fletcher Forum*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Winter 1981), pp. 152-162; Paul Nitze and Willard C. Matthias, 'Confronting the Soviets', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (Winter 1980), pp. 422-425.

[23]Richard Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence: Knowledge and Power in American National Security,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Nicholas Thompson, *The Hawk and the Dove: Paul Nitze, George Kennan and the History of The Cold War,* (New York: Henry Holt, 2009); Slocombe, 'The Countervailing Strategy'.

leaders would do so only if their own interests and security were not at risk and that the annihilation of Western Europe was not on their horizon.[24] In his view,

> the leadership of the Soviet Union, and any successors they may have within the immediately foreseeable future, are cautious and rather fearful men, increasingly worried about their almost insoluble internal problems, increasingly aware of their isolation in a world in which the growth of Marxian socialism does little to enhance their political power.[25]

Howard was puzzled by many security experts' tunnel vision and inability to produce a nuanced assessment of the Soviet Union's geopolitical outlook. Too many experts, he argued, invariably saw the Soviet Union as 'cosmic evil whose policy and intentions could be divined simply by multiplying Marxist dogma by soviet military capacity.'[26] Howard was concerned by the inability of key government advisors, particularly in Washington, to think that the Soviets had 'fears and problems of their own derived from past history and present weakness and who might be dealt with as rational adults'.[27] Crucially, he expressed concern about the tendency among several American security experts 'to reduce the infinite complexities of world affairs, in particular of relations with the Soviet Union, to "bean counts" of nuclear weapons'.[28]

It was easy, Howard warned, to fall into the temptation to consider primarily or even exclusively the opponent's capabilities, as they were calculable in a way that political intentions, cultural assumptions and appetite for risk were not.[29] Yet, Howard pushed experts to go beyond the mere comparison of number of warheads, nuclear yield, efficiency of delivery, and target acquisition capability. It was essential to acquire an in-depth understanding of the opponent's views, plans and fear as well as a realistic assessment of the value of the nuclear deterrent at a time in which western society was growing critical of the use of nuclear weapons. In Howard's own words, 'The problem of deterrence […] is not fundamentally military or technological. It is political and psychological'.[30] Hence, in his view, nuclear strategy *per se* did not provide necessarily a clear path to victory and posed new – yet unexplored – problems about

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[24]Michael Howard, 'On Fighting a Nuclear War', *International Security*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Spring 1981). Howard, 'Deterrence, Consensus and Reassurance'.
[25]Howard, 'On Fighting a Nuclear War', (1981), pp. 7-8.
[26]Howard, *Captain Professor,* p. 167.
[27]Ibid., p. 167.
[28]Ibid., p. 173
[29]Howard, 'The Future of Deterrence', p. 6.
[30]Ibid., p. 3.

the conduct of war and the nature of victory.[31] Deterrence, in other words, must not be conceived exclusively as nuclear deterrence and must be bound to a wider defence approach which include the diplomatic, political and economic dimensions.[32]

Howard shared Dimitri Simes's invitation to attempt a more nuanced approach to the understanding of Soviet Leadership, who firmly believed that a nuclear war is unwinnable. For both Howard and Simes, it was essential to move beyond the simple comparison of nuclear warheads and yields and to move the analysis towards the assessment of the Soviet mentality.[33] Simes's suggestion to contextualise the attitude of Soviet Leadership to deterrence within the history of Russian militarism was a valid one and it echoed Howard's comments about the need to think about the Soviet attitude to risk in the historical context.[34]

This more nuanced approach was supported by Henry Trofimenko, who in the pages of *International Security*, argued for a less ideologically-driven approach to the study of the Soviet nuclear strategy. [35] Writing in support of the arguments put forward by Simes and Howard, Trofimenko invited security experts to distinguish between myth and reality and to refer to the official position of the Soviet Leadership as articulated in the Declaration adopted by the Summit Anniversary Conference of the Political Consultative Committee of the Warsaw Treaty member states in May 1980 according to which the Soviet Union rejected the idea of a first nuclear pre-emptive strike as part of their strategy.[36]

Howard warned against the risk of mirror-imaging and tunnel vision when assessing the intention of the Soviet leadership.[37] Howard was particularly critical of the idea that Russians would ever be receptive to Western values. In Howard's view, Cold War tensions aside, Russian culture and society offered no fertile ground for western values as 'Russians see the West, with all its material advantages, as deeply corrupt and implacably hostile; an adversary with whom peaceful co-existence is possible, but

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[31]A similar point has been recently discussed by Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Weapons and American Grand Strateg.y* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2020).

[32]Howard, 'The Future of Deterrence' and Howard, 'On Fighting a Nuclear War'.

[33]Dimitri K. Simes, 'Deterrence and Coercion in Soviet Policy', *International Security*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Winter 1980/81), pp. 80-103; and Howard, *Captain Professor*, p. 173.

[34]Dimitri K. Simes, 'The Military and Militarism in Soviet Society', *International Security*, Vol. 6, No. 2, (Winter 1981/82), pp. 123-143.

[35]Henry A. Trofimenko, 'Counterforce: Illusion of a Panacea', *International Security*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Spring 1981), pp. 28-47.

[36]*Pravda,* 16 May 1980, as quoted in Trofimenko, 'Counterforce'.

[37]Howard, 'On Fighting a Nuclear War'; Howard, 'Deterrence, Consensus and Reassurance'; Howard, 'The Future of Deterrence'.

no more'.[38] In this context, even if a countervailing strike was successful, how would the West ensure that the new Russian leaders would be able and willing to adopt 'western values'? in addition, Howard was profoundly sceptical about the ability of the West to be able to destroy the Soviet leadership apparatus without wiping out millions of Russians in the process. Certainly, in Howard's view, inflicting massive physical and human destruction as a foreign power would likely enhance Russian cohesion and support for their leadership and would lead to a total rejection of 'western values'.[39]

Colin Gray agreed with Howard on the need for further nuance when examining the nature of Soviet strategic culture and argued the need to build on the work of Ken Booth and Jack Snyder.[40] However, Howard and Gray disagreed on the responses that the West should consider. Following the thought of Nitze and Wohlstetter, Gray argued forcefully in favour of a nuclear strategy aimed at obliterating the Soviet centre of military and political power and to inflict an enormous shock on the Russian population to create the condition for the emergence of a new order compatible with western values.[41] Howard, on the other hand, was critical of this approach and was appalled by the relatively easy dismissal of millions of Russian casualties.[42] He disagreed with Gray's suggestion that a targeted nuclear attack against the Soviet Union with the intent to remove its top echelons would likely inflict a limited number of casualties and quotes 20 million as an approximate figures.[43] While 20 million may be better than the 180 million often quoted at the time when discussing an all-out nuclear attack, it was still an unacceptable number. In addition, as Howard argued convincingly, these figures referred only to the immediate casualties, leaving out those dying later due to radiation, and it would not include the trauma, material destruction and devastation that such a 'limited' attack would cause.[44] In such a scenario, survival first, and revenge

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[38]Howard, 'The Future of Deterrence', p. 4.

[39]Howard, 'On Fighting a Nuclear War', pp. 10-11.

[40]Jack L. Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: implication for Limited Nuclear Operations* RAND Report R-2154-AR (September 1977); Ken Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism,* (London: Routledge, 1974); Colin S Gray, 'National Style in Strategy: The American Example', *International Security*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Fall 1981), pp. 21-47; Colin S. Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and National Style,* (Lanham, Md: Hamilton Press, 1986).

[41]Colin Gray, 'Nuclear Strategy: The Case for a Theory of Victory' *International Security*, Vol. 4, No. 1, (Summer 1979), pp. 54-87; Colin Gray and Keith Payne, 'Victory is Possible', *Foreign Policy*, No. 39 (Summer 1980).

[42]Howard, 'On Fighting a Nuclear War'.

[43]Colin S. Gray, 'National Style in Strategy'; Colin S. Gray and Michael Howard, 'Perspectives on Fighting Nuclear War', *International Security*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Summer 1981.

[44]At the time, the extent of such devastation had been modelled by the US Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, 'The effects of nuclear war', 1979; see also the much

later would become the new Russian priorities and there would be certainly no fertile ground for 'Western values' to take root. Crucially, Howard argued, a nuclear attack on the Soviet Union would have a massive political impact on the West too as its moral and political consequences would push towards political extremism and authoritarianism.[45]

While this assessment clearly belongs to the field of guesswork, it is undeniable that Howard saw a nuclear war as a totally new dimension of war, with yet unpredictable ramifications and consequences not only on the battlefield but also on society, culture and politics. Consequences that were to be felt across the globe. Hence, Howard rejected the idea of a limited nuclear war and of a winnable nuclear war and he indefatigably pushed for caution and reflection. Quoting Brodie, Howard argued that nuclear weapons' primary function was to deter. In case this function failed, the West should 'retaliate in kind.'[46] Howard put emphasis on 'in kind' and always rejected a maximalist approach as strategically unsound, politically counterproductive, and ultimately unethical.[47] Similarly, Howard argued the need to consider all dimensions of deterrence – nuclear, political, economic – not only in times of crisis but also in the strategic planning process both in terms of examining the level of threats and appetite for risk of the opponent in the early stages as well as in developing the conduct of war once hostilities have begun.[48]

It should not be forgotten that while in his writing Howard was critical of the maximalist approach of the American security experts, he was equally concerned about the lack of expertise and the tendency to excessive alarmism of his colleagues in the UK. He lamented that outside the armed force themselves there is no community of well-informed laymen capable of or interested in developing any kind of expertise on the subject [of defence]. Public debate is left very largely to passionate but ill-informed ideologues on the left, and equally passionate and barely better-informed supporters of government policy, often themselves retired service-officers, on the right.[49]

For this reason, he was one of the founders of the Institute for Strategic Studies (today IISS) precisely with the intent of stimulating and sustaining an informed debate on

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older but still relevant, 'Implications of Nuclear Weapons on Total War', RAND Memorandum, p. 1118, July 1957

[45]Howard, 'On Fighting a Nuclear War', p. 14; Gray and Howard, 'Perspectives on Fighting Nuclear War'.

[46]Howard, 'On Fighting a Nuclear War', p. 15.

[47]Ibid., pp. 15-17.

[48]Gray and Howard, 'Perspectives on Fighting Nuclear War'.

[49]Letter to *The Times* published in Howard, *Captain Professor*, pp. 160-1.

nuclear strategy, which – in Howard's view – should not be left entirely to officials at the UK Ministry of Defence and Foreign Office.[50] Interestingly, Howard recalls how the bleak title of the new institute's journal , *Survival,* 'indicated our view of the seriousness of the situation' and reminded readers of what was at stake when discussing nuclear strategy. [51]

Howard also noted that – paradoxically – Europeans seem less scared of the Soviets than the Americans. In Howard's view, this was due to geographical proximity, which brought the necessity to work towards better understanding and the ability to see the Soviet leadership and the Russian people as humans with similar concerns and fears.[52] In discussing the position of the non-nuclear NATO allies, Howard remarked that the nuclear deterrent has a second – not less important – role to play: to reassure all NATO allies that the UK and the US would include the western European region in their nuclear strategy.[53] The positive role of reassurance could be compared, in Howard's own words to, 'the kind of reassurance a child needs from its parents or an invalid from his doctors against dangers which, however remote, cannot be entirely discounted'.[54] There was no doubt that nuclear reassurance was working. It was working so well that the western European partners had progressively become reluctant to contribute effectively to their own defence and had grown over-reliant on the American – and to a certain extent British – nuclear deterrent.[55]

Howard's approach requires strategists, military leaders and heads of state to strike a sensible balance between the possibility of a nuclear attack and the probability of it. Deterrence comes at a cost and enacting it requires the transfer of huge resources as well as political and social capital to create and to maintain it, hence, Howard warns again, planning for the worst-case scenario as the only option as – in his view and based on his understanding of the Soviet Leadership's position – this was an improbable scenario. The Soviet Union may indeed have the capability to annihilate most of western Europe, but what is the West's assessment of its intention to do so? Due to its political, economic and social costs, deterrence must be fully endorsed by the society it is designed to defend. Ultimately, Howard argued, the final position must not be based purely on military analysis but on political judgment.[56]

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[50]Howard, *Captain Professor*, p. 161.

[51]Ibid., *Captain Professor*, p. 161.

[52]Howard, 'On Fighting a Nuclear War', p, 8.

[53]Howard, 'The Future of Deterrence', p. 6.

[54]Howard, 'Deterrence Consensus and Reassurance', p. 253

[55]Howard, 'On Fighting a Nuclear War' and Howard, 'Deterrence Consensus and Reassurance'.

[56]Howard, 'The Future of Deterrence' and Howard, 'On Fighting a Nuclear War'.

Howard and the maximalists agree on the importance of distinguishing between short-term intentions and long-term goals. The former – of both the West and the Soviet Union – change regularly depending on small changes in the geopolitical context and micro-decision of all parties involved. The long-term goals however are much more permanent and determine the political and military responses in time of crisis. The difference between Howard and the maximalists is that Howard never thought that the Soviet Union's ultimate aim was to militarily annihilate the West via an all-out nuclear attack.[57] In his own words: 'The Soviet leadership is certainly Clausewitzian: it regards the use of armed force as an entirely legitimate instrument of policy. But there is no evidence that the Soviet Union is a militaristic society which considers war to be a noble activity in itself.'[58]

Hence, when Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher gathered a group of experts to discuss the future of British nuclear deterrent strategy, she called Michael Howard too.[59] In Washington, the Committee for the Present Danger was led by several of Wohlstetter's supporters and not surprisingly it argued sternly in favour of massive rearmament and against any arms control talks with the Soviet Union.[60] Howard continue to express support for the need to preserve a credible nuclear deterrent but thought this possible without accepting the worst-case analysis being put forward by Paul Nitze and by the Committee on the Present Danger. Thatcher, who was sensitive to the American approach to nuclear deterrence, seems not to have been receptive to Howard's invitation for caution and Howard immediately felt side-lined.[61]

Public fears and peace movements
By the early 1980s, pacifism and neutralism were on the rise on both sides of the Atlantic and the anti-nuclear movement was vocal and well organised. In the 1980s, the peace movements in Western Europe and North America tried to bridge across the iron curtain and to bring about a wider movement to feed into the international talks between the two blocs, in what has been called 'détente from below'. This new phenomenon found its most important institutional expression in the European Nuclear Disarmament (END) movement, an association of individuals and groups on both sides of the Curtain for a 'nuclear-free Europe from Poland to Portugal'. In

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[57]Howard, 'The Future of Deterrence'. Howard, 'On Fighting a Nuclear War'; Howard, 'Deterrence, Consensus and Reassurance'.
[58]Howard, 'The Future of Deterrence', p. 4.
[59]Howard, *Captain Professor*, p. 192.
[60]Justin Vaïsse, 'Chapter 5: Nuclear Alarm: The Committee on the Present Danger', *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement,* (Harvard: Belknap, 2010).
[61]Howard, *Captain Professor*, p. 192.

October 1983, nearly 3 million people across Western Europe protested nuclear missile deployments and demanded an end to the arms race. [62]

The emergence of vocal peace movements affected the credibility of the nuclear deterrent. Military leaders and security expert recognised that the western nuclear strategy could only be maintained if the western public approved the basic tenets of this strategy and would allow the use of nuclear weapons. The protest movements that developed because of NATO's Dual-Track decision have often been examined within the paradigms of the Cold War and therefore there has been a tendency to focus primarily on the role of ideologies. More recent works have however underlined the need to undertake a more holistic approach that includes important sociological, cultural and religious elements and to place the protest movements within larger shifts in international relations and domestic politics in response to the breakup of détente. These studies show that the peace movement had a significant impact in undermining the nuclear deterrent strategy from within and ultimately opened a space for diplomatic dialogue about arms control and arms reduction.[63]

Contrary to many colleagues who dismissed the peace movements either as naïve flower-waving youth or as ideological zealot in the service of Moscow, Howard engaged with their arguments and understood their stance. In the heated debates about nuclear strategy and disarmament, Howard argued that ultimately Whitehall and the military had the same goal as the anti-nuclear campaigners and peace protesters: to avoid escalation and to prevent World War III. The disagreement was about how to do it. The anti-nuclear campaigners focused on the ever-present danger of war and stressed the risk of nuclear escalation by accident or miscalculation.[64] The supporters of nuclear deterrence — and Howard counted himself as one of them — argued that nuclear weapons make major war an impossible rational choice and that the West

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[62]Among the most relevant contributions: Henry Richard Maar, *Freeze!: The Grassroots Movement to Halt the Arms Race and End the Cold War,* (Cornell, University Press, 2021); Christophe Becker-Schaum et al, eds., *The Nuclear Crisis: The Arms Race, Cold War Anxiety and the German Peace Movement of the 1980s,* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2020); Jeremy Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the rise of détente,* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003); Cortright D., *Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 148

[63]Maar, *Freeze!.* Becker-Schaum, *The Nuclear Crisis; f*or an excellent example of this approach applied to a case study: Eirini Karamouzi, 'Out with the Bases of Death': Civil Society and Peace Mobilization in Greece During the 1980s', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (2020), pp. 617-638.

[64]Michael Howard, *The invention of Peace and the Reinvention of War,* (London: Profile Books, 2002).

would not be in a position to negotiate disarmament if the Soviet Union had undisputed nuclear superiority. As he put it in 1981,

> Society may have accepted killing as a legitimate instrument of state policy, but not, as yet, suicide. For that reason, I find it hard to believe that the abolition of nuclear weapons, even if it were feasible, would be an unmixed blessing. Nothing that makes it easier for statesmen to regard war as a feasible instrument of state policy, one from which they stand to gain rather than lose, is likely to contribute to lasting peace.[65]

As he argued in 'The Forgotten Dimensions of Strategy', Howard explored all dimensions of strategy: historical, operational, logistical, tactical, and technological and how they mutually influence each other and how they develop over time.[66] Howard pushed further and laid the groundwork for the expansion of the 'war and society' approach, which is now well established across the field of war studies. Whether examining the origins, conduct or aftermath of war, Howard stressed the importance of societal, political, and cultural factors. In his memoir *Captain Professor*, Howard spelt out his philosophy of military history,

> The history of war, I came to realize, was more than the operational history of armed forces. It was the study of entire societies. Only by studying their cultures could one come to understand what it was they fought about and why they fought in the way they did.[67]

While this is now a well-established approach and it would be unthinkable to study war without understanding its social and cultural dimension, it was a novel approach at the time which required a multidisciplinary study of a layered phenomenon in all its complexity. In a similar vein, it is not possible to speak about nuclear deterrence without speaking about the risk of miscalculation and annihilation and therefore one cannot speak about the strategic choices of the 1980s without considering the peace movements and the campaigns for nuclear disarmaments.[68]

In one of his last public appearances, at a conference at the Royal United Service Institute in 2014 marking the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War, Howard again explained the need to understand the social and moral factors that shaped European society's response to war in 1914 and which impacted on its

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[65]Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 11.
[66]Howard 'The Forgotten Dimensions of Strategy'.
[67]Howard, *Captain Professor, p.* 145.
[68]Ibid., p. 145; Howard, *The Causes of Wars*, pp. 90-103.

conduct and outcome.[69] Today, the 'New Military History' – which is no longer 'new' – is well established and it would be unthinkable to write the history of a conflict excluding the study of the relationships between military institutions and armed conflicts without an analysis of the societies and cultures that created them.[70]

Conclusion

In the debate on nuclear deterrent strategy, Howard's approach stands out for his ability to bring together a wide breath of issues ranging from the complexities of the most recent technological advances in military technology to a balanced assessment of the intentions of the Soviet Leadership. Howard did not limit himself to high-level strategic analysis and he did not shy away from engaging with the concerns of the peace movements and discussed the ethical implication of the use of nuclear weapons. Howard used the analogy of a drunk man who lost his watch in a dark alley at night and was found looking for it under a streetlamp because 'that is where there was more light'.[71] Similarly, the light provided by western technological capabilities and western sophisticated strategic analysis can be dazzling as well as hypnotic. Howard reminded his colleagues that 'it is in our knowledge of social development, cultural diversity and patterns of behaviour that we have to look for answers.'[72]

Howard was aware of the potential for abuse of history and of the inability of making predictions based on what has happened in the past.[73] However, he believed that history can provide historians with patterns and trends and may allow those who study it to identify structures and processes of human interactions and that these may allow scholars to anticipate important patterns of behaviour. As new evidence emerges,

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[69]Michael Howard 'The Great War and the Mentalité of 1914,' *RUSI Journal* 159, 4 (2014), pp. 14-16.

[70]Tami Davis Biddle and Robert M. Citino 'The Role of Military History in the Contemporary Academy,' Society for Military History White Paper, Sept. 27, 2018; on the meaning of the 'new military history,'; see also, Joanna Bourke, 'New Military History,' in Matthew Hughes and William J. Philpott, eds., *Modern Military History*, (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 2006); Robert M. Citino, 'Military Histories Old and New: A Reintroduction,' *American Historical Review*, Vol. 112, No. 4 (October 2007), p. 1071.

[71]Howard, 'The Future of Deterrence', p. 10.

[72]Ibid., p. 10.

[73] Michael Howard, 'The Use and Abuse of Military History,' *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 138, No. 1 (1993), pp. 26–30; Michael Howard, 'Military History and the History of War', in Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich, eds., *The Past as Prologue: The Importance of History to the Military Profession*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); see also, Howard, *The Lessons of History*.

historians re-evaluate and re-calibrate their understanding of the past, they ask new questions according to what is relevant at the time in which they are living.[74]

Howard always remained open to criticism and to new ideas and approaches. He constantly pushed for precision in language and argument. His approach was always one of avoiding outrightly offending an adversary, rather seeking to persuade and to stimulate further thinking and reflection.

As a historian, Howard thought that the best contribution he could make to the debate on nuclear strategy and deterrence was to place these issues issue in their wider context, to highlight synergies and patterns as well as frictions and misunderstanding. Crucially, he never lost sight of the ethical dimension and of the need to foster understanding of the opponent's position and of their interests, fears and concerns. He invited colleagues to differentiate between long-term strategy and short-term objectives both for the West and for the Soviet side. Crucially, he was also always very careful to distinguish the will, goals and responsibilities of the Soviet leadership and the broad need to protect the Russian people as much as the western population form the devastating effects of a nuclear war.

Howard's call for an informed and articulated approach to the study of nuclear strategy, and the need for historians to engage effectively with security makers and policy-makers is as important today as it was 40 years ago.

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[74]Howard, *The Lessons of History*, pp. 188–200.