

# NEW

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# STATESMAN

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# WAR GAMES

How the Home Office rigged 'World War III'

# Bad day at Hard Rock

In the first of three reports based on his forthcoming book\*, DUNCAN CAMPBELL exposes the basis on which the government proposed to carry out this year's civil defence exercise, code-named HARD ROCK

WAR BETWEEN BRITAIN and the Soviet Union was due to start at 4.30am on 27 September, and become a nuclear war five days later — or would have done on paper if the Home Secretary had not been forced to cancel the 'home defence' exercise *Hard Rock*, planned for the end of this month. The enforced 'postponement' is the principal reason why the government is now planning new legal regulations to force unwilling 'nuclear free zone' councils to take part in planning and carrying out such exercises.

*Hard Rock* was to have been the biggest such exercise for 15 years — since 1968 when the Civil Defence Corps and all large-scale civil defence planning was abandoned. It would have been the largest, in a series of such exercises which began in 1975 with *Inside Right*. We had *Scrum Half* in 1978, and the sporting metaphors continued with *Square Leg* in 1980.

*Hard Rock* was to have been the centrepiece of the revived civil defence activities of the Thatcher government. But an examination of its details shows that the exercise was based on the most absurd conception of nuclear war ever to have disgraced the desk of a military planner. Previous exercises have tested the (trivial) capacity of civil defence measures against a nuclear attack at the level Britain would be likely to receive — at least 200 Megatons of nuclear fire power, or roughly 15,000 times the power of the bomb used at Hiroshima.

In *Hard Rock*, the nuclear attack on Britain was scaled down to only 54 weapons, delivering about 48 Megatons — a quarter of levels previously assumed. But a great deal more doctoring has been done to the plans to assist Home Office make-believe about the efficacy of civil defence. Nuclear bombs have been conveniently targetted on tiny villages (e.g. Mallaig in Scotland, population 953 or Builth Wells in Wales, population 1,287) or on empty moorland (e.g. near Bideford in Devon).

At the same time, almost all the major cities of Britain were assumed not to have been attacked — London, Manchester, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Bristol, Cardiff, Sheffield in particular were to be left unscathed — while any bombs that were actually aimed at cities generally were to miss their targets. No bombs were aimed at, far less assumed to hit, any American

military bases or indeed any major strategic military targets at all. The Polaris missile submarine bases at Holy Loch and Faslane on the Clyde were *not* to be attacked. Nor were any British or NATO military control centres.

The complete 'bomb plots' which were to have been used in *Hard Rock*, part of the still-confidential plans for the exercise, are shown overleaf. The target lists, marked 'DISTAFF (Directing staff) EYES ONLY' are, presumably, those which the Home Office would still use in future, if it went ahead with *Hard Rock* after getting its new legal powers to compel local authorities to cooperate. The target list would appear to have been doctored for two reasons; first, the Home Office did not wish to appear to confirm that any particular site — however obvious — might indeed be a nuclear target. US bases and major nuclear targets were, therefore, removed from the list. This would have been done during the submission of the plans for 'political clearance' by the Ministry of Defence.

Secondly, by writing an absurd scenario for the nuclear war exercise, omitting almost all obvious major targets, the Home Office could subsequently set out to 'prove' that its plans could work to save lives. When planning for the exercise began in June 1981, there were supposed to be 105 targets, already an optimistically low level of attack. By the time the Home Office and the MoD had deleted targets which were 'politically' undesirable (and turned hits into misses for the convenience of civil defence plans), this number was halved.

The scenarios for nuclear war on which *Hard Rock* was to have been based were

more convincing than the target list. In order to prepare central and local government officials, who were to have taken to their bunkers for the exercise, the Home Office produced a set of simulated daily TV news bulletins, and daily official briefings for a ten-day period starting on 19 September. These chart the country's headlong rush to war, with daily ministerial broadcasts announcing 'all's well' — until on the evening of 2 October the nuclear holocaust begins.

AS ALWAYS, the Soviet Union is the supposed aggressor. At the beginning of September, it urged 'immediate action to dissolve military alliances' and by 18 September, NATO ('Blue Alliance') fears that Soviet ('Orange Pact') action if not countered, would inevitably lead to Soviet military domination of NATO members'. The Prime Minister broadcasts on 19 September that Britain has decided to reinforce NATO:

In an evening broadcast to the nation, the Prime Minister urged the country to remain calm and support the government in its efforts to persuade the Soviet Union to draw back from the point of no return. Public opinion polls continued to show a substantial majority of the population agreed with the firm line being taken by the government.

By the next day, Soviet ships are circling North Sea oil rigs, and the population is showing signs of panic:

There has been a run on tinned food, sugar and other storable items, fuel shortages were hindering resupply in some areas but overall there was no shortage of stocks and the public should calm down and buy sensibly . . . orders calling out the Reserves were signed in the afternoon. Country wide reporting-in by reservists is going well.

The schools start to close on 21 September and war looms. The simulated broadcasts report, in part:

Public meetings continue to make most of the news. There is growing evidence of anxiety among the civil population as they realise that hostilities between NATO and the Warsaw Pact may be inevitable. There is increased evidence of movement to holiday accommodation in the west.

Some government personnel and local authority staff are reported to have moved to secret wartime locations to get them ready for use should the situation deteriorate further.

On 22 September, the crisis deepens and the Home Office acts. According to a broadcast:

In response to Parliamentary pressure, the Home Office 'Protect and Survive' guidance is to appear as four page inserts in tomorrow's newspapers. Guidance is expected to be broadcast on radio and TV throughout the coming week. The Home Office emphasises that these steps in no way imply that a nuclear attack on the United Kingdom is regarded as likely, let alone imminent.

Now read the book...

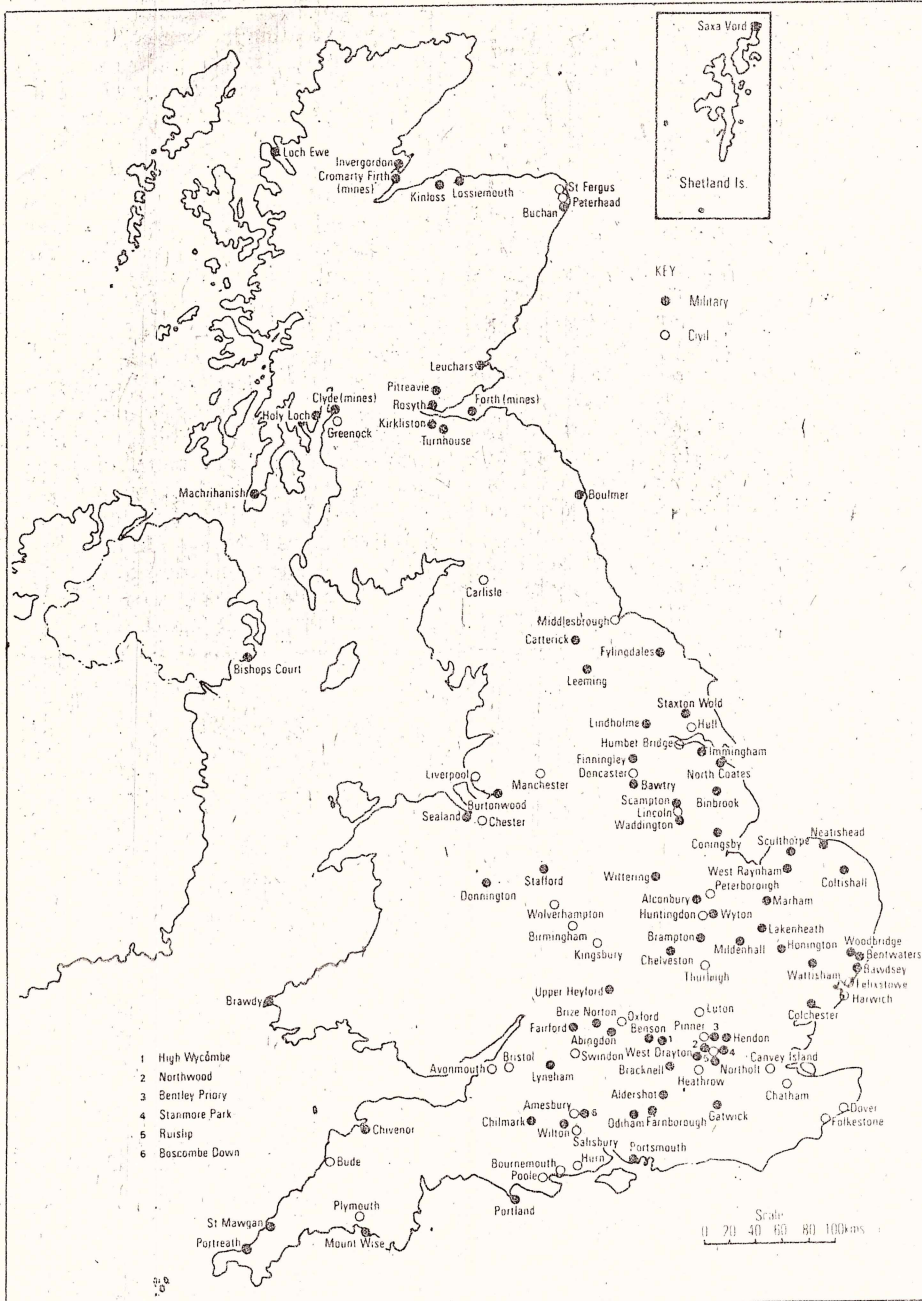


The paperback edition of Duncan Campbell's new book, **WAR PLAN UK**, will be available soon through the **New Statesman** at £6.95 post free. Reserve your copy now by sending a cheque/postal order for £6.95, payable to "New Statesman", to:

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\**WAR PLAN UK*, to be published on 25 October by Burnett Books/Hutchinson, 488 pp, price £6.95.



### HARD ROCK — 'conventional' targets

Conventional military targets for the exercise were generally realistic. Most US bases — except those being prepared for the new cruise missile bases are included. If large cities were added to this list, it would become an authentic nuclear target list — similar to the nuclear target list of previous home defence exercises, such as a *Square Leg*, on which the *NS* reported in 1980.

nuclear target areas, while the Royal Navy would have practiced getting its ships in and out of unattacked ports.

UNTIL 2 OCTOBER, the exercise would only have been concerned with the effects of a conventional bombing attack, whose cumulative effects were assumed to be rather less than during some days during the World War 2 blitz. Then, at 2pm on Saturday, 2 October, the *Hard Rock* wargamers would have been read a further news bulletin:

In Europe, heavy fighting continues on all fronts and there has been a sharp increase in the number of casualties on both sides. The extent of present Soviet penetration is not clear but second echelon forces have been committed and NATO forces are under extreme pressure. . . . In the United Kingdom, conventional air attacks on military airfields . . . have continued. Large numbers of casualties have been suffered in areas adjacent to these targets. Localised disruption of transport and fuel supplies has brought about

some shortages of food. Public reaction to the continued failure of peace initiatives is muted, but fear of escalation is now uppermost in everyone's minds. As a result, the population fears that nuclear attacks are imminent. All remaining home defence measures have been implemented and, where applicable, remaining staff of government departments and military headquarters have been deployed to their post-strike positions.

In this standard and much-rehearsed NATO scenario, one in which nuclear attack has been conveniently held back until home defence measures are complete, the next moves are clear. NATO forces are giving way, and standard NATO doctrine is to use tactical nuclear weapons in this situation to stop the advance. Soviet policy is equally clear — they will not make 'first use' of nuclear weapons but, once attacked, will reply massively.

So at 8pm on Saturday evening, the *Hard Rock* nuclear bombs start falling. The first three strike near West Drayton, Middlesex; Newhaven in Sussex; and

Catterick in Yorkshire. The nuclear attack continues until 2.46am on Sunday morning, when a final 500 kiloton weapon strikes the inconsequential Humber-side town of Skipwith. In the bunkers, the *Hard Rock* players would then spend a day practising the 'survival' phase after attack, and a further two days (theoretically, a month later) rehearsing what the Home Office whimsically calls 'recovery' from a nuclear attack. Once this was over, emergency planners would be free to discuss the general aspects of the exercise in public, proclaiming — with the aid of the carefully placed bomb plots — how effective government civil defence measures had been. The *Hard Rock* 'exercise specification' observes:

Both Conventional and Nuclear Bomb Plots will be devised to meet the Home Office exercise requirements. Following comment by planning staffs, political clearance will be sought by UKCICC (the UK Commanders-in-Chief Committee) through the Ministry of Defence.

The plans also note:

Exercise plans . . . should not be taken as a realistic description . . . of the weight or distribution of an enemy's attack.

That is not a mistake which anyone who examines the Bomb Plots in detail is likely to make.

REMARKABLY, WHEN the effects of the *Hard Rock* nuclear attack are examined in detail, they provide a quite surprising, and for the Home Office unwelcome, illustration of the devastation that would be caused by a nuclear attack. The Home Office has a computer programme for estimating the dead and injured after any type of nuclear attack.\* A similarly organised, but more accurate computer analysis has been constructed by Philip Steadman of the Open University and Dr Stan Openshaw of Newcastle University. The *Hard Rock* nuclear attack has already been examined by them. Even with the bombs bursting on tiny hamlets instead of large cities, on realistic assumptions some 12 million people would have died or been severely injured — about 2 million from the direct effects of the bombs, and 5 million from fallout, while the vast majority of the severely injured would also soon die, given the unavailability of necessary medical care. Paradoxically, therefore, even the cosmetic fiction of *Hard Rock* undermines the government's case.

Reporting the 'postponement' of *Hard Rock* in July, the Home Secretary promised that the 'devoted effort' put into drawing up the plans 'will not be wasted. We can be sure that the experience will be put to good use when the exercise is held at a later date'. New regulations under the Civil Defence Act of 1948, are being devised to force councils to 'play' in and test their plans with such exercises as *Hard Rock*. But can a law really be devised to force a society to play at make-believe? □

Next week: The Maggiebunker

\*The deficiencies of these Home Office computer assessments, which have been the basis of ministerial pronouncements, will be examined in a further extract from *WAR PLAN UK* in the *New Statesman* on 1 October.