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Cold War spies got Red terror wrong

Were we hoodwinked into terror for half a century?

According to a former Australian intelligence officer and a specialist on superpower rivalry, the West — including Australia and New Zealand — was tricked into believing that the now-defunct Soviet empire was ready, willing and capable of launching a devastating and unstoppable assault on democracy.

Mr Greg Austin, who served as head of the Defence Intelligence Organisation section responsible for the superpowers, counter-terrorism and the Middle East, said the "Armageddon school" view that the Soviets were prepared to wage only all-out nuclear war was "potentially one of the most dangerous fallacies" of the Cold War.

He also said that the lessons of Cold War analysts and propaganda should be remembered in new assessments of a volatile world, including those

affecting the emerging great powers of China and India.

In a study published by the Australian Defence Studies Centre, Mr Austin said the West by and large had depended on American scholars for its view of Soviet intentions.

But many of those had misjudged their subject by relying unduly on incomplete evidence filtered through American intelligence, later admitted to be seriously flawed.

flimsy sources as a substitute for comprehensive analysis or serious reflection," he said.

"The record is clear that many ... who concerned themselves with the study of Soviet military doctrine served as the agents or tools of a process that seriously aggravated the risks associated with the Cold War."

Mr Austin said that despite vast improvements in American intelligence — which from the 1970s was

"While the elements of fear and exaggeration [later] abated, the overall assessments held out the spectre of a massive Soviet attack on the West as a possibility actively favoured by the Soviet leadership at some time in the future.

"This assessment was not correct. Nor was it wrong. It was hypothetical ... and illogical."

Intelligence failures affecting academic assessments also persisted until

By comparison, American readiness levels ran at 98 per cent for ICBMs and 66 per cent for submarines.

More ominously, American assessments reflected the official Communist Party line that Moscow would automatically escalate any war in Europe into global holocaust.

This was reinforced by American analysts' "surprising" preference for the party's armed forces journal — designed to spread propaganda on a broad range of subjects — rather than others reflecting as much as the system would allow of the view of the Soviet general staff.

This gave rise to the unrelenting fear of global nuclear warfare that abated only with the collapse of Soviet communism.

But Mr Austin said that since the 1960s the Soviet general staff had made important decisions on the structure and operations of its forces, based on the likelihood of having to fight local, not global, wars.

The West was told otherwise. Said Mr Austin: "Scholarship on the USSR and strategic issues in general in the United States was heavily influenced by the military establishment, particularly the intelligence community.

"The question therefore arises as to the scholarly disinterest achieved by American scholars, many of whom came from the military establishment and continued to get lucrative contracts from it."

For the hundreds of millions who year after year watched the hands of the doomsday clock tick closer to midnight, this is cold comfort.

GREG ANSLEY reports from Canberra

In the study, Mr Austin suggested the trillion-dollar American intelligence industry largely neutralised effective scholarship of Soviet military doctrine, while at the same time appearing to support it with funding and access to information.

"Many in the United States intelligence ... scholarly community were willing to trade in half-truths, unsubstantiated claims and the most transparent reliance on

consistently good at providing information on the locations, equipment, and activities of Soviet military units — poor assessments between the end of the Second World War and 1961 continued to exert a strong influence on American thinking.

"Between 1946 and 1961, American intelligence assessments of Soviet military capability were grossly inflated and reflected powerful political biases," he said.

the late 1980s, as shown by the Central Intelligence Agency's 1988 admission that it had consistently exaggerated the Soviet military threat in central Europe.

Others included estimates of the size and readiness of Moscow's force of intercontinental ballistic missiles: far from war-ready, only a third of Soviet ICBMs, and 15 per cent of its submarine-launched missiles, were at that level in 1977.

