

**Edward M. Geist.** *Armageddon Insurance: Civil Defense in the United States and Soviet Union, 1945-1991.* The New Cold War History Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. 338 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-4524-7.

**Reviewed by** Bruce Zellers (Greenhills School)

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**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Most of us can visualize civil defense in the Cold War era: youngsters hiding under desks in their classroom, neatly groomed families in fallout shelters, and the scenes of chaos as cities are evacuated in Roland Emmerich's post-Cold War *Independence Day* (1996). Fewer readers will know anything about the actual civil defense policies of the United States; fewer still know anything about parallel efforts in the Soviet Union. Edward M. Geist's book can remedy these lacunae. As it turns out, civil defense in both countries was more Emmerich than the comforting images of stoic children and calm families.

Geist's book grows out of his research in archives in the United States, the Russian Republic, and the Ukraine. Scholarly work on American civil defense is already substantial, but Geist sees his book as "the first historical study of the USSR's civil defense programs during the Cold War" (p. 3). His conclusions will surprise many readers. First, and most important, he argues that "both the US and Soviet civil defense failed abjectly to achieve the goal of fortifying their societies to survive nuclear war" (p. 244). Furthermore, he finds that civil defense planning was almost wholly disconnected from the arcane musings of the nuclear strategists. As he says: "the United States did not forgo civil defense for strategic reasons, nor did the Soviet

Union invest in civil defense in pursuit of strategic advantage" (p. 239). More specifically, in the US, there was only a "tenuous" "connection between civil defense and nuclear strategy" (p. 238).

Why? Here Geist introduces a bit of political science modeling. He labels the Soviet Union a centralized, authoritarian "garrison state" and the United States a complex, often conflicted "contract state" (pp. 8-11). Neither worked very logically or effectively. Joseph Stalin, Harry S. Truman, and Dwight D. Eisenhower were never more than lukewarm toward civil defense; little was done under their leadership. John F. Kennedy, however, was an advocate, but at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, "neither the US nor Soviet civil defense was ready to protect its citizens" (p. 138). Congress applied the brakes to any large-scale program. The Reagan administration was enthusiastic, but its civil defense leaders were incompetent, while vocal anti-nuclear campaigners mocked the whole idea of survival from nuclear war. Local officials were often cool. In both the US and the Soviet Union, "tactical evacuation" of cities (the *Independence Day* scenario) became a central strategy, but the very idea was the object of public mockery. Much of the opposition in the US turned on fears of "too much federal intervention into everyday life" (p. 44). In reality, "civil defense never enjoyed

widespread popularity or support from the inhabitants of either the United States or the Soviet Union”; officials dreamed of large-scale efforts but were unable “to convince political elites to pay for them” (pp. 12, 7). In the end, Geist concludes that civil defense issues “demonstrate the limited ability of both the United States weak contract state and the Soviet partisan-garrison state to make good-quality defense decisions” (p. 95).

Both sides confronted similar impediments; ironically, analysts on both sides missed the facts. They viewed one another through a looking glass darkly. Indeed, Geist notes that both sides were “inept at inferring and interpreting each other’s civil defense policies,” and thus civil defense programs “sent no meaningful strategic signal” (p. 6). In place of clear signals, ideologically driven views, institutional interests, and defense budget allotments became key drivers. More and better weapons always seemed to be the answer to the question of “how to survive.”

The book is not a quick read. Geist deploys somewhat discursive language (“garrison state,” “contract state”) and sprinkles his text with words like “architected,” “actualize,” and “bellicist” (pp. 11, 22). But Geist also leaves readers with questions. He tells us that those fortunate enough to be sheltered at Hiroshima “fared remarkably well” (p. 18). However, he tells us very little about the effects of hydrogen weapons. Could effective shelters have been designed? Would fallout dissipate fast enough to allow rebuilding? Nor does he tell us what those “tactical evacuation” plans in the ’70s and ’80s actually required; he merely tells us that that they “became laughingstock” among citizens (p. 244). How many millions needed removal and how far did they have to go? How would evacuees be fed and cared for? Such questions reveal something of the limitations of Geist’s book but also of the fantasy of civil defense in the first place. Would Marine captain Will Smith and US president Bill Pullman have survived to smite our

enemies in the real world—as they did in *Independence Day*?

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