

Book review: 2017 ♦ War with Russia. General Sir Richard Shirreff

In the late 1970s one book was a must read for all junior officers; The Third World War by General Sir John Hackett. It was set in 1985 and showed how an enfeebled NATO could be taken by surprise, by the Warsaw Pact. A similar book, which should be a must read for all junior officers and politicians, is 2017 War with Russia.

As Deputy Supreme Commander Europe (DSACEUR) General Shirreff was Britain's most senior NATO officer. He served in this position from 2011 until 2015. During this period General Shirreff saw at first-hand how Vladimir Putin was able to wrong foot the west through a series of moves which were, in themselves, irritating ♦ but not so much so as to cause alarm. This changed in March 2014.

With hind sight Russia's annexation of Crimea and its incursion into eastern Ukraine was foreseeable ♦ given a combination of circumstances. Shirreff saw at first hand the confused response of the West; high flown rhetoric but little by way of action. His book is based on scenario planning undertaken by NATO and posits a possible future based on a combination of circumstances.

Shirreff uses dramatic narrative to advance the story. Astute readers will, however, see beyond the characterisation at the scenario which is unveiled. Western politicians and senior commanders are painted as fallible humans; a reflection of the divided approach to Russia's increasing bellicosity. The scenario Shirreff uses has echoes of another book: Red Storm Rising published by Tom Clancy in 1986. Economic woes beset the Motherland (Russia) and the President decides on confrontation. We now know that Communism collapsed because of economic woes. How resilient will Putin's Russia prove to be with economic sanctions and a low oil price?

The question that Shirreff poses with this book is ♦ at what point does the Atlantic Alliance and its EU partners reassert itself? A new generation of political leaders on both sides of the Atlantic is having to learn the language of deterrence. But deterrence must be credible. Of course, the Third World War as envisaged by both Hackett and Clancy never took place. Putin's plan is that war with Russia won't take place in 2017. We may all hope that war in Europe does not occur, but we must ensure that we don't wind up with a peace dictated by Moscow.

2017 War with Russia. General Sir Richard Shirreff. Published by Coronet.

See also Nick Watts interview with General Shirreff last year : <http://www.defenceviewpoints.co.uk/interviews/baltic-watch-forward-presence-needed-says-ex-nato-commander>