

A Colder War a novelette by Charles Stross

Analyst

Roger Jourgensen tilts back in his chair, reading.

He's a fair-haired man, in his mid-thirties: hair razor-cropped, skin pallid from too much time spent under artificial lights. Spectacles, short-sleeved white shirt and tie, photographic ID badge on a chain round his neck. He works in an air-conditioned office with no windows.

The file he is reading frightens him.

Once, when Roger was a young boy, his father took him to an open day at Nellis AFB, out in the California desert. Sunlight glared brilliantly from the polished silverplate flanks of the big bombers, sitting in their concrete-lined dispersal bays behind barriers and blinking radiation monitors. The brightly coloured streamers flying from their pitot tubes lent them a strange, almost festive appearance. But they were sleeping nightmares: once awakened, nobody -- except the flight crew -- could come within a mile of the nuclear-powered bombers and live.

Looking at the gleaming, bulging pods slung under their wingtip pylons, Roger had a premature inkling of the fires that waited within, a frigid terror that echoed the siren wail of the air raid warnings. He'd sucked nervously on his ice cream and gripped his father's hand tightly while the band ripped through a cheerful Sousa march, and only forgot his fear when a flock of Thunderchiefs sliced by overhead and rattled the car windows for miles around.

He has the same feeling now, as an adult reading this intelligence assessment, that he had as a child, watching the nuclear powered bombers sleeping in their concrete beds.

There's a blurry photograph of a concrete box inside the file, snapped from above by a high-flying U-2 during the autumn of '61. Three coffin-shaped lakes, bulking dark and gloomy beneath the arctic sun; a canal heading west, deep in the Soviet heartland, surrounded by warning trefoils and armed guards. Deep waters saturated with calcium salts, concrete coffer-dams lined with gold and lead. A sleeping giant pointed at NATO, more terrifying than any nuclear weapon.

Project Koschei.

Red Square Redux

Warning

The following briefing film is classified SECRET GOLD JULY BOOJUM. If you do not have SECRET GOLD JULY BOOJUM clearance, leave the auditorium *now* and report to your unit security officer for debriefing. Failing to observe this notice is an imprisonable offense.

You have sixty seconds to comply.

Video clip

Red Square in springtime. The sky overhead is clear and blue; there's a little wispy cirrus at high altitude. It forms a brilliant backdrop for flight after flight of five four-engined bombers that thunder across the horizon and drop behind the Kremlin's high walls.

Voice-over

Red Square, the May Day parade, 1962. This is the first time that the Soviet Union has publicly displayed weapons classified GOLD JULY BOOJUM. Here they are:

Video clip

Later in the same day. A seemingly endless stream of armour and soldiers marches across the square, turning the air grey with diesel fumes. The trucks roll in line eight abreast, with soldiers sitting erect in the back. Behind them rumble a battalion of T-56's, their commanders standing at attention in their cupolas, saluting the stand. Jets race low and loud overhead, formations of MiG-17 fighters.

Behind the tanks sprawl a formation of four low-loaders: huge tractors towing low-sling trailers, their load beds strapped down under olive-drab tarpaulins. Whatever is under them is uneven, a bit like a loaf of bread the size of a small house. The trucks have an escort of jeep-like vehicles on each side, armed soldiers sitting at attention in their backs.

There are big five-pointed stars painted in silver on each tarpaulin, like outlines of stars. Each star is surrounded by a stylized silver circle; a unit insignia, perhaps, but not in the standard format for Red Army units. There's lettering around the circles, in a strangely stylised script.

Voice-over

These are live servitors under transient control. The vehicles towing them bear the insignia of the second Guards Engineering Brigade, a penal construction unit based in Bokhara and used for structural engineering assignments relating to nuclear installations in the Ukraine and Azerbaijan. This is the first time that any Dresden Agreement party openly demonstrated ownership of this technology: in this instance, the conclusion we are intended to draw is that the sixty-seventh Guard Engineering Brigade operates four units. Given existing figures for the Soviet ORBAT we can then extrapolate a total task strength of two hundred and eighty eight servitors, if this unit is unexceptional.

Video clip

Five huge Tu-95 Bear bombers thunder across the Moscow skies.

Voice-over

This conclusion is questionable. For example, in 1964 a total of two hundred and forty Bear bomber passes were made over the reviewing stand in front of the Lenin mausoleum. However, at that time technical reconnaissance assets verified that the Soviet air force has hard stand parking for only one hundred and sixty of these aircraft, and estimates of airframe production based on photographs of the extent

