

The Lovely Little Town That Would Have Been Absolutely Screwed by World War III

This small German city was ground zero for a Cold War turned hot

by KYLE MIZOKAMI

For 40 years, during the height of the Cold War, the future battleground of World War III was a little known place.

Just east of the West German town of Fulda, near the Inter-German Border, it was one of the most heavily armed places on Earth. It was also one of the few places where, in the event of war, nuclear weapons were almost certain to be used.

The Fulda Gap, like the North German Plain and Hof Corridor, became code for World War III. Mentioning the Fulda Gap was like name dropping “Afpak” today—it implied you knew a lot about World War III. They were places where, if the Cold War turned hot, geography made fighting inevitable. [Wargames were made](#) of the Battle of the Fulda Gap, and a fictionalized portrayal of the battle appeared in the novel [The Third World War](#).

When war came, the Fulda Gap would have very quickly become one of the worst places on Earth.



U.S. Army M-60A2 tanks in Germany. U.S. Army photo

A little city screwed by geopolitics

Fulda is a small German city of 60,000 people, nestled among rolling farmland laid out in a checkerboard fashion.

The town is of no particular military value; the value is in the terrain leading up to and away from Fulda. The “Gap” in “Fulda Gap” refers to the local valleys and routes around nearby mountains. Armies crossing the Inter-German border would be channeled through these valleys—and once beyond Fulda, it’s a light and quick march to the strategic city of Frankfurt and the Rhine River beyond.

The job of defending Fulda was left to the United States Army in Europe, specifically V Corps. Just across the East German border was the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany, an army whose job was to ensure that World War III would be fought on someone else’s soil, not the Soviet Union’s.

More locally on the American side, the Gap was the responsibility of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR), a unique mechanized reconnaissance unit of approximately 5,000 men. The “Blackhorse Regiment,” as it was called, was tasked with being the eyes and ears of American forces in that part of West Germany, screening the invading Warsaw Pact forces and reporting their positions to NATO. Tracing its ancestry to the U.S. Army’s old horse cavalry units, battalions in the 11th were known as squadrons, and companies known as troops.

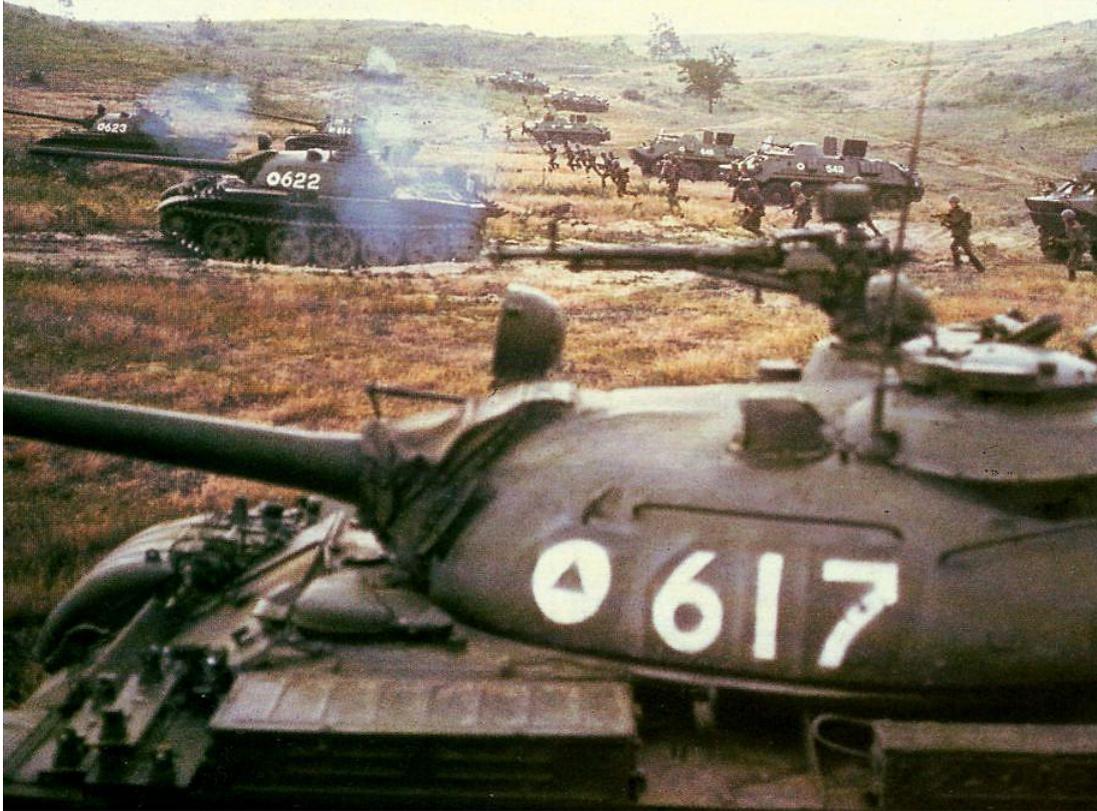
Armored cavalry regiments were not your typical ground combat unit. Each consisted of more than 100 heavy Abrams battle tanks and an equal number of Bradley cavalry fighting vehicles. ACRs resembled divisions in miniature: unlike most units their size, ACRs had their own heavy artillery, scout and attack helicopters.

Backing up the 11th Armored Cavalry was the rest of V Corps: the 3rd Armored and 8th Infantry Divisions, consisting of another 700 Abrams tanks and an equal number of Bradley fighting vehicles, plus attack helicopters and artillery. American airpower in the form of A-10 tank killers and F-16 fighter bombers were capable of being called upon for battlefield close air support.

All in all, it was a powerful force and as close to being an immovable object as modern warfare had to offer at the time.

Facing it was the closest thing to an unstoppable force: five Soviet armored and four mechanized infantry divisions dedicated to forcing through the Gap and driving on the West German financial capital, Frankfurt. The Soviet 8th Guards Army would spearhead the attack, followed by the 1st Guards Tank Army. More than 100,000 men in all, with 1,000 tanks and another 1,000 infantry carriers, backed up by helicopters and artillery.

In the Fulda Gap, these two armies would have clashed in one of the largest tank battles ever recorded, with the fate of 70 million West German civilians and their government at stake.



Soviet T-54 tanks and BTR-60 armored personnel carriers. Internet photo

Tactics

The Soviet plan was relatively simple. First, Soviet forces would have pushed through the gap with the four divisions of the 8th Guards Army in the lead, plus lots of T-80 tanks and [BTR armored personnel carriers](#) surging across the border and crashing into American defenses. Artillery rounds would crash into pre-identified NATO positions, and air assault units would land infantry at key locations. Chemical warfare was probable.

Once the 8th Guards was exhausted, the four armored and one motor rifle division of the 1st Guards Tank Army would take over, exploiting gains and continuing the push to Frankfurt, the Rhine and beyond that the Franco-German border.

To counter this armored juggernaut, the U.S. Army and Air Force created an operational doctrine called [AirLand Battle](#). AirLand Battle was a fusion of ground and air power designed to break up Soviet tank formations. The air aspect of AirLand battle would use aircraft such as the now-mothballed F-111 bomber to conduct deep strikes, disrupting the flow of reinforcements and supplies to the front lines, while Air Force A-10 and Army Apache helicopters would attack enemy front-line units, particularly tanks.

The land aspect forces would be tanks and infantry holding the front lines, supported by artillery. The overall effect would be to harass and destroy the enemy from the moment it was sent in the direction of the Fulda Gap, all the way to the front lines.



Davy Crockett nuclear recoilless gun. US Army photo

And if that weren't bad enough...

Both sides had plans to use tactical nuclear weapons in the Gap.

The Americans would have used them to destroy formations of tanks, supplies and headquarters units. The Soviets would have used them to simply to blast their way through American defenses. Both sides had low-yield nuclear rockets and artillery, but the Americans also had [nuclear land mines](#), best described as regular land mines but 5,000 times worse, with lethal nuclear fallout thrown in for good measure.

Whether or not they would have been used would have largely depended on how well things went for the Americans—if V Corps had been able to hold, nukes and chem use would have been unlikely.

The Soviet side, however, is a different story. One of the lessons learned after the fall of the Berlin Wall was that, although NATO considered nuclear weapons use in an invasion a possibility, to the Soviets, their use was a foregone conclusion. Every Soviet war plan [unearthed from Warsaw Pact](#) archives assumed liberal use of nuclear weapons—up to 300 or more.

This would have almost certainly turned the Fulda Gap into one big radioactive zone, and the 11th Armored Cavalry—or at least a large part of it—would have been blasted into oblivion.

In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell and it was clear the Warsaw Pact, and perhaps even the Soviet Union itself, was in collapse. In 1992, the mighty Group of Soviet Forces in Germany was demobilized, and the 8th Guards and 1st Guards Tank Armies ceased to exist. All nine divisions had never fired a shot in anger, and never would.

The Americans, on the other hand, would. Although the Battle of the Fulda Gap was never fought in Germany, it was, in a way, fought in Iraq in Operation Desert Storm.

The 3rd Armored Division, which in late 1990 had been in the process of being deactivated, was brought back up to strength and deployed to Saudi Arabia. The division formed part of the U.S. Army's VII Corps and participated in the five-day ground offensive that crushed the Iraqi army and liberated Kuwait. The Iraqi army was equipped with T-72 tanks and BMP infantry fighting vehicles similar to those that would have streamed through the Fulda Gap by the thousands.

Today there is little sign of the devastation that could have been brought to Fulda, or the military presence that would have wrought it.

The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union—and the reunification of Germany—has left Fulda comfortably nestled in the bosom of one of the most peaceful countries on Earth. It seems absurd that this small city could have become a radioactive wasteland in a tactical nuclear war. But in the cold logic of the time, it completely made sense. Someday there may be a new Fulda in another part of the world, threatened with annihilation the same way the old one was, along new fault lines of history and geopolitics.

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