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## Manchester's Chilling Cold War Nuclear Plans Revealed

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In a newly surfaced collection of documents, Greater Manchester's Cold War-era emergency plans have been laid bare, revealing just how grave the authorities considered the threat of nuclear war during the tense standoff between the West and the Soviet Union. The material offers a sobering glimpse into strategies that anticipated catastrophic loss of life and sweeping societal upheaval should the unthinkable occur.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Soviet Union competed for global influence, the United Kingdom quietly developed contingency plans to maintain some semblance of order in the aftermath of a nuclear strike. Manchester, a major urban and industrial hub, was singled out

as a likely target. One scenario outlined in local government planning materials predicted that a single megaton-scale detonation over the city centre would obliterate the surrounding area, killing approximately 300,000 people instantly and causing severe injuries to many more across a six-mile radius.

Worse still, military assessments warned that a coordinated assault involving multiple warheads targeting strategic sites such as the Manchester Airport, military airfields, and densely populated districts could lead to an unprecedented death toll. According to projections by the non-governmental organisation Scientists Against Nuclear Arms, up to 2.5 million residents across Greater Manchester could have perished within two months from blast effects and radiation exposure.

In anticipation of such devastation, civil defence officials drafted plans to decentralise government authority. Regional command centres were slated for locations including Fulwood Barracks in Preston and Hack Green bunker near Nantwich. The intention was to replace the central government with twelve regional administrations tasked with coordinating emergency responses, policing, and the grim business of managing mass casualties.

The plans detailed how public order would be enforced during the chaotic period before an attack. Authorities expected large crowds to ignore directives to shelter in place, attempting instead to flee into rural areas such as Cumbria. In a chilling admission, officials prepared to seal off roads and compel residents to return to target zones if necessary, using what one report described as “sophisticated riot technologies.”

Civilian survival was to be sustained by rationing, to distribute a daily half-pint of stew to millions of survivors cooked over burning refuse and, in some regions, offering a cup of tea. Sanitation, emergency feeding, and burial of the dead were all considered essential components of a “return to normality,” however tenuous.

The sense of urgency during this era was hardly baseless paranoia. Events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Soviet invasion of Eastern Europe had stoked genuine fears of escalation. Yet by the early 1980s, Greater Manchester took an unprecedented stand, declaring itself the world’s first “nuclear-free city” and opposing the stationing of atomic weapons within its boundaries, a move that some defence analysts today view as symbolic but not legally binding.

More recently, global tensions have resurfaced with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, persistent threats from rogue states, and a renewed nuclear arms race. Even Prime Minister Keir Starmer, typically keen to project a conciliatory posture, has acknowledged that the United Kingdom faces a "moment of danger and threat," pledging to increase defence spending to 2.5% of gross domestic product by 2030.

This acknowledgement of reality, however belated, underlines the need for credible deterrence and practical preparation rather than empty gestures.

While the prospect of an all-out nuclear war remains relatively remote, these historical plans serve as a reminder that complacency in defence policy can have grave consequences. A clear-eyed approach to national security, rather than wishful thinking, is what ultimately keeps the country safe.

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