

The War Scare That Wasn't

Able Archer 83 and the Myths of the Second Cold War

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Did the reinvigorated Cold War of the early 1980s nearly turn hot? Did the leaders of the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact countries fear a surprise attack from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)? Above all, did NATO's Able Archer 83 command-post exercise (CPX) in November 1983 cause officials at the highest levels of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) to consider preemptive war out of fear of a U.S.-led nuclear first strike?

These questions have haunted policymakers and puzzled scholars. The answer, to many, is a resounding "yes." With superpower tensions already running high in the early 1980s, a host of scholars point to Able Archer 83 as an episode that brought the United States and the Soviet Union to the brink of nuclear war. In Moscow and throughout the Warsaw Pact, this narrative claims, key officials misperceived NATO's command-and-control exercise as cover for a surprise nuclear attack and entertained the idea of launching a preemptive strike against the West.¹ Revelations of the Warsaw Pact's ongoing effort to detect a NATO surprise attack, dubbed Project RYaN (short for

1. Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 124; Stephen J. Cimbala, "Revisiting the Nuclear 'War Scare' of 1983: Lessons Retro- and Prospectively," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2014), pp. 234–253; Campbell Craig and Fredrik Logevall, *America's Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 322; Jonathan M. DiCicco, "Fear, Loathing, and Cracks in Reagan's Mirror Images: Able Archer 83 and an American First Step toward Rapprochement in the Cold War," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2011), pp. 253–274; Beth A. Fischer, *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997), pp. 122–140; John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin, 2007), pp. 227–228; George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 861; David E. Hoffman, *The Dead Hand: The Untold Story of the Cold War Arms Race and Its Dangerous Legacy* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009), pp. 94–100; Nate Jones, ed., *Able Archer 83: The Secret History of the NATO Exercise That Almost Triggered Nuclear War* (New York: The New Press, 2016), pp. 1–59; Nate Jones and J. Peter Scoblic, "The Week the World Almost

Raketno-Yadernoe Napadenie, or nuclear missile attack), reinforced arguments that Moscow's nuclear arsenal had been on a hair trigger at the time.² Popular media accounts, too, echo the near-miss narrative. In the summer of 2015, the German television network RTL aired *Deutschland 83*, a fictional series about an officer of the East German Ministry for State Security (MfS, or Stasi) who infiltrates the West German Bundeswehr and stops a Soviet preemptive nuclear strike during Able Archer 83.

Not all share this interpretation of the events of November 1983, widespread though it may be. Mark Kramer, Gordon Barrass, Raymond Garthoff, Beatrice Heuser, Vojtech Mastny, and others have challenged the notion of a brush with disaster, drawing on newly available archival materials from former Warsaw Pact member-states (especially the Soviet Union), as well as access to their top-level policymakers for interviews, following the end of the Cold War.³ Although relations between the superpowers did experience a significant downturn in the early 1980s and thus made officials in Washington

Ended," 13 April 2017, *Slate*, <http://slate.com/news-and-politics/2017/06/able-archer-almost-started-a-nuclear-war-with-russia-in-1983.html>; Arnav Manchanda, "When Truth Is Stranger than Fiction: The Able Archer Incident," *Cold War History*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2009), pp. 111–133; James Mann, *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan: A History of the End of the Cold War* (New York: Viking, 2009), pp. 42, 77; Don Oberdorfer, *From the Cold War to a New Era: The United States and the Soviet Union, 1983–1991* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 65–68; Serhii Plokhii, *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), p. 7; Peter Vincent Pry, *War Scare: Russia and America on the Nuclear Brink* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), pp. 33–44; Doug Rossinow, *The Reagan Era: A History of the 1980s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 101; Len Scott, "Intelligence and the Risk of Nuclear War: Able Archer-83 Revisited," in Michael Herman and Gwilym Hughes, eds., *Intelligence in the Cold War: What Difference Did It Make?* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 5–23; Jeremi Suri, "Explaining the End of the Cold War: A New Historical Consensus?," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (2002): p. 63; Frank Umbach, *Das rote Bündnis: Entwicklung und Zerfall des Warschauer Paktes 1955 bis 1991* (Berlin: Christoph Links, 2005), pp. 220–227; James Graham Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev's Adaptability, Reagan's Engagement, and the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), pp. 78–81; and Jay Winik, *On the Brink: The Dramatic, Behind-the-Scenes Saga of the Reagan Era and the Men and Women Who Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), pp. 289–291.

2. Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB: The Inside Story of Its Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990), pp. 492–507; and Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, eds., *Comrade Kryuchkov's Instructions: Top Secret Files on KGB Foreign Operations, 1975–1985* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 67–90. Though herein referred to as RYaN, the project is also sometimes referred to in documents VRYaN (prefending *Vnezapnoe*, surprise).

3. Gordon Barrass, *The Great Cold War: A Journey through the Hall of Mirrors* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 297–312; Mark Kramer, "Die Nicht-Krise um 'Able Archer 1983': Fürchtete die sowjetische Führung tatsächlich einen atomaren Großangriff im Herbst 1983?," in Oliver Bange and Bernd Lemke, eds., *Wege zur Wiedervereinigung: Die beiden deutschen Staaten in ihren Bündnissen 1970 bis 1990* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2013), pp. 129–149; Gordon Barrass, "Able Archer 83: What Were the Soviets Thinking?," *Survival*, Vol. 58, No. 6 (2016), pp. 7–30; Raymond L. Garthoff, "Soviet Leaders, Soviet Intelligence, and Changing Views of the United States, 1965–91," in Paul Maddrell, ed., *The Image of the Enemy: Intelligence Analysis of Adversaries since 1945* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015), pp. 28–67; Beatrice Heuser, "The Soviet Response to the Euromissiles Crisis," in Leopoldo Nuti, ed., *The Crisis of Détente in Europe: From Helsinki to*

and Moscow all the more alert, these scholars argue that Soviet leaders never entertained the idea that Able Archer 83 masked a nuclear surprise attack by NATO, nor did they ever contemplate a preemptive strike of their own.

Warsaw Pact policymakers watched Able Archer 83 unfold against a backdrop of heightened East-West tension, to be sure, but what did they see and foresee? Using new sources from archives across the former Warsaw Pact, this article examines Warsaw Pact policymakers' reactions to Able Archer 83 and considers why the notion of a near-miss remains so durable. In particular, the article revisits and reevaluates RYaN's role in bringing about the alleged crisis. So often seen as the mechanism that sounded the alarm in November 1983, RYaN in fact was little more than a fledgling research and development project during Able Archer 83 and for many years thereafter. The article also deepens our understanding of what actually happened in the corridors of power east of the Iron Curtain as the Able Archer 83 scenario played out.

A more complete understanding of what actually happened during Able Archer 83 matters not only for the sake of establishing whether a nuclear war nearly broke out (itself an intrinsically important historical issue), shattering the "long peace," but also for understanding the broader significance of the early 1980s for the Cold War and, ultimately, its largely peaceful conclusion by the end of the decade.⁴ What actually happened during NATO's CPX is especially poignant because the universe of cases pertaining to such sensitive nuclear questions is so small—for reasons ranging from over-classification (as well as entirely legitimate classification) to obliviousness—that changing our understanding of just one has a significant impact on our conception of the whole.⁵ As this article shows, both the history and historiography of Able

Gorbachev, 1975–1985 (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 137–149; Beatrice Heuser, "Military Exercises and the Dangers of Misunderstandings: The East-West Crisis of the Early 1980s," in Beatrice Heuser, Tormod Heier, and Guillaume Lasconjarias, eds., *Military Exercises: Political Messaging and Strategic Impact* (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2018), pp. 113–137; and Vojtech Mastny, "How Able Was 'Able Archer'? Nuclear Trigger and Intelligence in Perspective," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2009), pp. 108–123.

4. John Lewis Gaddis, "The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System," *International Security*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (1986), pp. 99–142.

5. Francis J. Gavin, "What We Talk About When We Talk about Nuclear Weapons," *H-Diplo/ISSF Forum*, No. 2 (2014), <http://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Forum-2.pdf>. Able Archer 83 is often cited as evidence in studies of the security dilemma, deterrence, and crisis behavior. See, among others, Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation, and Trust in World Politics* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 52; Dmitry Adamsky, "The 1983 Nuclear Crisis—Lessons for Deterrence Theory and Practice," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2013), pp. 7–8; and Matthew Kroenig, "Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve: Explaining Nuclear Crisis Outcomes," *International Organization*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (2013), p. 154.

Archer 83 are important reminders of the need to gain access to primary documents from the “other side” and of the value of international history.

This article proceeds in three sections. The first sets the scene, laying out how Able Archer 83 entered the public consciousness as a near brush with Armageddon and delineating two central components of the argument that Able Archer 83 nearly triggered a nuclear exchange between the superpowers. The second section reassesses Warsaw Pact intelligence activities in the early 1980s, demonstrating that RYaN, the intelligence mechanisms purported to have given the Soviet Union and its allies the idea that a Western surprise nuclear attack was imminent, remained far from operational at the time of Able Archer 83. The third section examines the Warsaw Pact’s reactions during the exercise, building on the existing literature to enrich our understanding of how NATO’s command-and-control exercise was perceived east of the Iron Curtain. As this account shows, it is entirely possible that some in the West came to believe that Able Archer 83 almost led to a nuclear war, that there is ample documentation from Western sources to support this conclusion, and that their conclusion is still entirely wrong.

Making the Myth

East-West tensions increased significantly in the early 1980s, culminating in a string of crises in late 1983. On 1 September, a Soviet interceptor aircraft shot down Korean Airlines flight 007, with 269 passengers and crew on board as it passed through prohibited Soviet airspace en route from New York to Seoul. Soviet authorities were “absolutely convinced that the plane was on a reconnaissance mission,” according to Vladimir Kryuchkov, the head of the First Chief Directorate of the Soviet State Security Committee (KGB), responsible for foreign intelligence, in a conversation with Stasi chief Erich Mielke. “Had we known it was a passenger plane, we would not have shot it down. But everything pointed in the other direction.”⁶ Soon thereafter, on 22 October, U.S. President Ronald Reagan decided to “rescue” roughly 1,000 medical students by invading the Caribbean island of Grenada after a Communist-led coup ousted—and then executed—its prime minister, Maurice Bishop. After Grenada, many in the East (and, for that matter, in the West) questioned

6. Mielke-Kryuchkov, memorandum of conversation, 19 September 1983, in Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der Ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (BStU), Berlin, Germany, Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (MfS), Zentrale Auswertungs- und Informationsgruppe (ZAIG), No. 5306.

their earlier assumptions about U.S. restraint.⁷ Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko sarcastically wondered whether the United States would now undertake to “widen the so-called American way of life to the entire world?”⁸

Meanwhile, Soviet frustration mounted with West Europeans who had yet to “get it into their heads” that the planned deployment of U.S. intermediate range nuclear forces (INF) beginning in November 1983 would make them “hostages.”⁹ Once the Pershing 2s and ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs) in Europe became operational, the strategic balance would tip definitively in the West’s favor. The new U.S. weapons would be a “cocked pistol to Moscow’s temple,” in the words of Yurii Votintsev, then commander of the Soviet Union’s missile defense forces.¹⁰ Moscow’s security would be undermined, as would its credibility. Soviet officials had assured their Warsaw Pact allies that the INF deployments would be prevented, and they had been proven wrong: their prolonged, heavy-handed propaganda campaign had amounted to naught.¹¹

Throughout this tense period, policymakers expressed concern that the superpower confrontation was spiraling out of control. These questions preoccupied Soviet General Secretary Yurii Andropov, in office from November 1982 to February 1984. Before succeeding Leonid Brezhnev, then-KGB Chairman Andropov had worried that Western leaders might entertain the idea of a nuclear first strike against the Soviet Union.¹² Andropov, however, concluded that U.S. policymakers understood the risks. “The [United States] is preparing for war, but it is not willing to start a war,” he explained to Mielke in July 1981. “They are not building factories and palaces in order to destroy

7. Kolačkovský memorandum, “Záznam z besedy veľvyslancov ZSS s 1. zástupcom vedúceho odboru informácií ÚV KSSZ s. Četverikovom N. N.,” 10 January 1984, in Archiv Ministerstva Zahraničních Věcí (AMZV), Prague, Czech Republic, Teritoriální Odbory-Tajné (TOT), 1980–1989, Svaz Sovětských Socialistických Republik (SSSR), Box 2, Folder 9.

8. Kommunisticheskaya Partiya Sovetskogo Soyuza (KPSS) Politburo memorandum, “Informace o setkání A.A. Gromyka s ministrem zahraničních věcí NSR H.D. Genscherem, které se konalo 15. až 16. října 1983,” October 1983, in AMZV, TOT, 1980–1989, SSSR, Box 2, Folder 8.

9. Mielke-Kryuchkov memorandum of conversation, 19 September 1983, in BStU, ZAIG, No. 5306.

10. Yurii Votintsev, “Neizvestnye voiska ischeznuvshei sverkhderzhavy,” pt. 2, *Voennno-istoricheskii žurnal*, No. 9 (1993), p. 34.

11. MfS memorandum, “Aufstellung neuer amerikanischer Mittelstreckenraketen,” 28 November 1983, in BStU, ZAIG, No. 7171.

12. Markus Wolf with Anne McElvoy, *Man without a Face: The Autobiography of Communism’s Greatest Spymaster* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997), p. 221. Even in this conversation, Andropov reserved his “deepest vituperation” for West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and *Ostpolitik*.

them. They are striving for military superiority in order to check us and then declare checkmate against us without starting a war.”¹³

One of Andropov’s first actions as General Secretary was to call for improved East-West relations when eulogizing his predecessor.¹⁴ The briefing papers for his later meeting with U.S. Vice President George H. W. Bush and Secretary of State George P. Shultz, representing the Reagan administration at Brezhnev’s funeral, indicated that not only was this improved relationship with the Reagan administration desirable; it was entirely possible.¹⁵ In that meeting, Andropov bemoaned the fact that “almost the entire stock of stability between the two countries ... had been carelessly squandered,” but he underlined Moscow’s desire for “cooperation and progress” through an “active and businesslike dialogue.” In both capitals, “it was absolutely necessary [for policymakers] to act as sober-minded and normal people.” If not, “the result could only be catastrophe.”¹⁶ If Washington were found wanting in this regard, he explained to the Warsaw Pact Political Consultative Committee some two months later, “it is in our common interest to influence the U.S. administration away from extreme measures.”¹⁷

In a meeting with W. Averell Harriman, a former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, in the summer of 1983, Andropov returned to the danger of accidental nuclear war, warning “war may perhaps not occur through evil, but could happen through miscalculation.” This was Washington’s and Moscow’s “common foe.”¹⁸ Warsaw Pact foreign policymakers had long made clear to

13. Mielke-Andropov memorandum of conversation, 11 July 1981, in BStU, ZAIG, No. 5382.

14. “USSR: The Immediate Post-Brezhnev Policy Agenda,” Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) memorandum, November 1982, in National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, MD, CIA Records Search Tool (CREST), Doc. CIA-RDP83T00853R000200100002-2. This bore a striking resemblance to the rhetoric of the post-Stalin Soviet leadership. See Vojtech Mastny, “The Elusive Détente: Stalin’s Successors and the West,” in Klaus Larres and Kenneth Osgood, eds., *The Cold War after Stalin’s Death: A Missed Opportunity for Peace?* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), p. 4.

15. “K besede s Bushem i Shultsem,” KPSS memorandum, November 1982, in Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Noveishei Istorii (RGANI), Moscow, Russia, Fond (F) 82, Opis’ (Op.) 1, Delo (D.) 36.

16. Andropov-Bush memorandum of conversation, 15 November 1982, in RGANI, F. 82, Op. 1, D. 36; and Bush-Andropov memorandum of conversation, 15 November 1982, in Ronald Reagan Presidential Library (RRPL), Simi Valley, CA, Richard E. Pipes Files (REPF), Box 16, “11/18/1982” Folder.

17. Andropov remarks, Warsaw Pact Political Consultative Committee, Prague, Czechoslovakia, 5 January 1983, in Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (SAPMO), Berlin, Germany, DY 30/IV 2/2.035/31.

18. Andropov-Harriman memorandum of conversation, 2 June 1983, in RGANI, F. 82, Op. 1, D. 36; and Harriman-Andropov memorandum of conversation, 2 June 1983, in RRPL, Jack F. Matlock Files (JFMF), Box 20, “Andropov 5” Folder.

their Western counterparts that they saw a nuclear conflagration as an acute threat to international security.¹⁹ “The politics of confrontation and conflict in the atomic age,” one Czechoslovak Foreign Ministry official wrote, ascribing blame to both sides, “may serve only to bring about nuclear catastrophe and the extinction of mankind as a species.”²⁰ Around the world, policymakers knew that a nuclear war would bring only disaster, and this common understanding was a crucial force for its prevention.

Fear over a crisis was not restricted to policymakers as the world watched Reagan make, in Andropov’s words, a string of “vulgar speeches.”²¹ The president’s address on 8 June 1982 to the British Parliament focused on “the decay of the Soviet experiment” and committed the United States to lead “the march of freedom and democracy which will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history.”²² Then, on 8 March 1983, he warned the annual convention of the National Association of Evangelicals not to “ignore . . . the aggressive impulses of an evil empire.”²³ The palpable sense of international tension drove ten-year-old Samantha Smith of Maine to write to Andropov, asking “are you going to vote to have a war or not?”²⁴ Speaking to this public sentiment, the 1983 made-for-television film *The Day After* depicted the destruction of the

19. Voigt-Arbatov memorandum of conversation, 13 October 1980, in Bundesarchiv (BA), Koblenz, Germany, B 136/17484.

20. “Výsledky prezidentských volieb v U.S.A.,” Kukan memorandum, 19 November 1980, in AMZV, TOT, 1980–1989, Spojené Státy Americké (SSA), Box 4, Folder 21.

21. Mielke-Andropov memorandum of conversation, 11 July 1981.

22. Reagan remarks, Palace of Westminster, London, United Kingdom, 8 June 1982, quoted in Wilma P. Greene et al., eds., *The Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1982*, Vol. 1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), pp. 742–748.

23. Reagan remarks at Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals, Orlando, Florida, 8 March 1983, quoted in Maxine Hill and Thomas Kevan, eds., *The Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1983*, Vol. 1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), pp. 359–364. Though his comments about the Soviet Union overshadowed it, Reagan also used the speech to call for “reductions in the world’s nuclear arsenals and one day . . . their total elimination.”

24. Smith to Andropov, November 1982, in RGANI, F. 82, Op. 1, D. 61. Andropov reassured Smith that this was not the case, and, seeing a possible public relations victory, he invited Smith and her parents to visit the Soviet Union. See Andropov to Smith, 19 April 1983, in RGANI, F. 82, Op. 1, D. 61. To reinforce the “anti-war character of the trip,” Smith spent much of her visit at Artek, the premier camp for Young Pioneers in Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula. In that same spirit, the Ukrainian KGB turned a blind eye when Smith’s father brought with him letters from Jewish émigrés to Andropov asking that their friends and relatives still in the Soviet Union be allowed to join them. See “Informatsionnoe soobshchenie,” Mukha memorandum, 14 July 1983, in Haluzevyi Derzhavnyi Arkhiv Sluzhby Bezpeky Ukrainiï, Kyiv, Ukraine, F. 16, Op. 1, Sprava 1101.

town of Lawrence, Kansas, in graphic detail by Soviet nuclear weapons. Reagan confided in his diary that the film “left [him] greatly depressed.”²⁵

Planners based the scenario for the Autumn Forge 83 series of exercises, of which Able Archer 83 was the final portion, on the real East-West tensions of the period. The Soviet Union, in NATO’s fictional scenario, had initiated proxy wars with the United States in early 1983 in Iran, Syria, and Yemen, and by the early autumn, Soviet troops had begun to take part in the hostilities, invading Yugoslavia, Finland, and Norway. On 4 November, according to the scenario, the Soviet Army crossed the Fulda Gap between East and West Germany, aided by the use of chemical weapons. This was the point at which Able Archer 83 began. NATO would retaliate with chemical weapons of its own—and then with nuclear strikes against East European cities to dissuade the Warsaw Pact. When these initial strikes failed to stop the advance, NATO would launch an all-out attack into the heart of the Pact’s territory. From 7 to 11 November, this scenario for Armageddon played out according to script across NATO command and operational units.²⁶

The Soviet defector Oleg Gordievsky was the first to suggest that this doomsday scenario, imagined by NATO planners but closely resembling the fears of ordinary people, had nearly transpired in real life. A double agent who in 1983 was working at the KGB station in London, told his incredulous British handlers of mounting paranoia over Western behavior and the NATO exercise in particular.²⁷ (Though some of Gordievsky’s reporting was passed to the U.S. intelligence community, this did not become systematic until after his defection—and after the British were assured that they would be given similar access to defectors in the United States.)²⁸ In 1988, Gordievsky introduced Able Archer 83 to the public consciousness. The brief final chapter of journalist Gordon Brook-Shepherd’s *The Storm Birds*, a collection of profiles of Soviet defectors since World War II, reports that, amid the marked decline

25. Reagan diary entry, 10 October 1983, quoted in Douglas Brinkley, ed., *The Reagan Diaries*, Vol. 1 (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), p. 273. Leaders on the other side of the Iron Curtain also took note. Erich Honecker later referred to the film in a conversation with visiting U.S. congressional representatives about the importance of arms control. See “Gespräch des Honecker mit der Delegation des Repräsentantenhauses des U.S.A.-Kongress,” SED memorandum, 10 January 1986, in SAPMO, DY 30/2492.

26. Jones, *Able Archer 83*, pp. 1–2; and Kramer, “Die Nicht-Krise um ‘Able Archer 1983,’” p. 140.

27. Oleg Gordievsky, *Next Stop Execution* (London: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 262, 272–273. Gordievsky was not, as many claim, the highest-ranking KGB officer (i.e., the *rezident*) in the London embassy during Able Archer 83. He was not appointed to that position until a few months before his defection, on 28 April 1985.

28. “Gordiyevskiy,” “C” to Powell, 26 September 1985, in The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNAUK), PREM 19/1647.

in East-West relations, “the Kremlin pressed what came close to a panic button” over Able Archer 83. The chapter includes no citations, but the reader is given to understand that it is based on Gordievsky’s personal recollections.²⁹

Two years later, in a book coauthored with Christopher Andrew, Gordievsky elaborated on his testimony regarding Able Archer 83, claiming that during the exercise, as NATO rehearsed its nuclear launch procedures, “paranoia in the [headquarters of the KGB] reached its peak.” Because Soviet war plans often used exercises as cover for mobilization and an eventual offensive, the Able Archer 83 scenario allegedly triggered fears in Moscow that the United States and NATO had concocted a similar ruse.³⁰ Based on flash telegrams Gordievsky claims to have seen on either 8 or 9 November—he said he “cannot recall which”—he concluded that Moscow feared that U.S. forces “might even have begun the countdown to nuclear war” and that Able Archer 83 “marked the beginning of preparations for a nuclear first strike.” The source of these documents, according to Gordievsky, was Project RYaN, the Warsaw Pact intelligence initiative to gain foresight into Western strategy.³¹ Gordievsky reiterated these claims in his 1995 autobiography.³² Andrew and Gordievsky returned to the subject of Able Archer 83 in a published collection of documents that Gordievsky had smuggled out of the Soviet Union. For the most part, these documents focus on preparations for operationalizing Project RYaN, such as identifying evacuation routes and destinations for key government officials and increased intelligence-gathering operations in the Eastern bloc. RYaN, the two argue, caused Soviet leaders to worry a NATO nuclear surprise attack would occur under cover of the exercise. None of the documents, however, shows a direct link between Able Archer 83 and RYaN—they simply affirm RYaN’s existence. Gordievsky’s own testimony remains the basis of the link between the two.³³

29. Gordon Brook-Shepherd, *The Storm Birds: Soviet Post-War Defectors* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988), pp. 266–279.

30. In 1968, for example, the Soviet Union used Warsaw Pact exercises as cover for the insertion of Soviet troops into Czechoslovakia to suppress the Prague Spring. See Michail Prozumenščikov, “Die Entscheidung im Politbüro der KPdSU,” in Stefan Karner, ed., *Prager Frühling: Das internationale Krisenjahr 1968*, Vol. 1, *Beiträge* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2008), pp. 207–208, 228; and Mark Kramer, “The Kremlin, the Prague Spring, and the Brezhnev Doctrine,” in Vladimir Tismaneanu, ed., *The Promises of 1968: Crisis, Illusion, and Utopia* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), pp. 332–335.

31. Andrew and Gordievsky, *KGB*, pp. 492–507.

32. Gordievsky, *Next Stop Execution*, p. 272.

33. Andrew and Gordievsky, *Comrade Kryuchkov’s Instructions*, pp. 87–88. These preparations are consistent with the parameters for RYaN outlined in other documents. See, for example, MfS memorandum, “Merkmale zur Erkennung der gegnerischen Vorbereitung auf einen überraschenden Raketenkernwaffenangriff,” 26 November 1984, in BStU, Hauptabteilung (HA) 3, No. 11792.

These four sources—in essence, different versions of Gordievsky’s recollection of events—constitute the bulk of the evidence that Able Archer 83 nearly brought about a nuclear war between the superpowers. A host of later authors rely on Gordievsky’s telling of events. Even a report written by a U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) historian, Benjamin Fischer, about Able Archer 83 and surrounding events, released in 1997, relies on open-source publications of the Soviet defector’s testimony regarding Moscow’s response to the exercise. However, Fischer takes care to highlight the limitations of these materials and their almost exclusive reliance on Gordievsky’s testimony by noting that senior Soviet officials had no knowledge of Able Archer 83 and insisted that it never came to the attention of the top leaders, that the entire episode is missing from the otherwise candid memoirs of key players, and that documentary evidence supporting Gordievsky’s specific claims regarding the exercise remains absent.³⁴

Able Archer 83 has also cropped up in the memoirs and reminiscences of Western policymakers. Robert Gates, the CIA’s deputy director for intelligence at the time, mentions the NATO exercise explicitly, though his conclusions are oblique: “[The Soviets] may not have believed a NATO attack was imminent in November 1983, but they did seem to believe that the situation was very dangerous.”³⁵ Reagan speaks more to the mood of the Cold War in the mid-1980s than to any specific incident, confiding in his diary in mid-November that “the Soviets ... [were] so paranoid about being attacked that ... we ought to tell them no one here has any intention of doing anything like that.” (He went on to wonder, “What the [hell] have they got that anyone would want?”)³⁶ Again without specific reference to Able Archer 83, Reagan later recalled in his memoirs how he “began to realize that many Soviet officials feared us not only as adversaries but as potential aggressors who might hurl nuclear weapons at them in a first strike” in the autumn of 1983.³⁷

The 2015 declassification of a report on Able Archer 83 by the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB), an independent body appointed by the White House to advise the president on intelligence

34. Benjamin B. Fischer, *A Cold War Conundrum: The 1983 Soviet War Scare* (Langley, VA: CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1997).

35. Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider’s Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 273.

36. Reagan diary entry, 18 November 1983, quoted in Douglas Brinkley, ed., *The Reagan Diaries*, Vol. 1 (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), pp. 289–290.

37. Ronald Reagan, *An American Life: The Autobiography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), pp. 588–589.

matters, has spurred renewed interest in the exercise.³⁸ The PFIAB completed the report in February 1990 in response to a January 1989 “parting shot before retirement” from the outgoing director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Leonard Perroots. He had seen firsthand Warsaw Pact forces’ increased alert status during Able Archer 83 as the assistant chief of staff for intelligence at U.S. Air Forces Europe and feared the worst, instructing that U.S. forces not commensurately increase their own readiness. Since then, Perroots had grown increasingly convinced that war had only narrowly been averted. When the intelligence community proper responded to Perroots, insisting that “while Moscow was very unhappy with ... Reagan’s policies, it was not gearing up for a military confrontation,” the PFIAB and Perroots remained unsatisfied.³⁹

In 1989, the PFIAB conducted its own study. Its staff reexamined U.S. intelligence records and interviewed British and U.S. officials. Amid the atmosphere of the time, the report argues, “there was in fact a genuine belief among key members of the Soviet leadership that the United States had embarked on a program of achieving decisive military superiority that might prompt a sudden nuclear missile attack on the USSR.”⁴⁰ They “scolded” those who had looked at the matter before for downplaying its danger.⁴¹ But on the specifics of Able Archer 83, the final report is couched in cautious language. It is no full-throated endorsement of the idea of a near nuclear war. The PFIAB concluded that the United States “may have inadvertently placed [its] relations with the Soviet Union on a hair trigger.”⁴² In such a climate, the report goes on, “Soviet military leaders may have been seriously concerned that the [United States] would use Able Archer 83 as a cover for launching a real attack,” though it acknowledges that “the depth of that concern is difficult to

38. Scholars owe a debt of gratitude to the National Security Archive for speeding the declassification of this important document, and so many others, and making it available to researchers. See Nate Jones, Tom Blanton, and Lauren Harper, “The 1983 War Scare Declassified and for Real,” 24 October 2015, *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book*, No. 533, <http://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb533-The-Able-Archer-War-Scare-Declassified-PFIAB-Report-Released/>.

39. “The Soviet ‘War Scare,’” President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB) memorandum, 15 February 1990, pp. 27–29, in George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum (GBPLM), College Station, TX, Presidential Records (PR), PFIAB, Subject File (SF), OA/ID 85010, “War Scare Report 1990” Folder. The UK’s Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) also prepared a report on Able Archer 83 that remains classified. But according to Gordon Barrass, who served on the JIC, the UK report is even more sanguine. See Barrass’s letter to the editor, *Survival*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (2017), p. 209.

40. “The Soviet ‘War Scare,’” p. viii.

41. Benjamin B. Fischer, “Scolding Intelligence: The PFIAB Report on the Soviet War Scare,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2018), p. 103.

42. *Ibid.*, p. xii.

gauge.”⁴³ The report asserts that Project RYaN was a “major factor” in Soviet officials’ perceptions of Able Archer 83 as cover for a U.S. nuclear first strike—it sounded the proverbial alarm in Moscow. According to this logic, RYaN was both an outgrowth of Soviet concerns in the early 1980s and a conduit by which reporting on Western activities nearly led to war.⁴⁴

This assessment disputed the earlier, sanguine conclusions of the U.S. intelligence community. A May 1984 Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE), looking back on the events of 1983, had concluded that “Soviet actions are not inspired by, and Soviet leaders do not perceive, a genuine danger of imminent conflict or confrontation with the United States.” “Showing firmness through a controlled display of military muscle,” the SNIE said, was not indicative of Soviet preparations for “an imminent military clash” and was instead merely a reality of the Cold War “strategic and political struggle” in the 1980s.⁴⁵ Fritz Ermarth, the National Intelligence Officer responsible for the Soviet Union, wrote the SNIE at Gates’s request. The essential conclusions contained in the estimate had long since been reported to U.S. policymakers. The purpose of producing SNIEs was the process itself, which “double checks data, triple checks judgments, and surfaces disputes which need to be scrubbed down.” Ermarth’s conclusion, which reflected the broad consensus of the U.S. intelligence community at the time and after, was that before, during, and after Able Archer 83, the Soviets were “just rattling their pots and pans.”⁴⁶

Soon after the declassification of the PFIAB report, Nate Jones of the National Security Archive published a collection of documents (the first of which is the report itself) on Able Archer 83, all valuable sources on the Cold War in the early 1980s. In the introduction, Jones argues that the Soviet Union

feared that Able Archer 83 was not just a war game, but could potentially be an actual planned nuclear attack [T]he Soviets were so worried about U.S. and

43. *Ibid.*, pp. 71, 75.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

45. “Implications of Recent Soviet Military-Political Activities,” SNIE No. 11-10-84/JX, 1984, in NARA, CREST, Doc. CIA-RDP09T00367R000300330001-9.

46. Fritz W. Ermarth, “Observations on the ‘War Scare’ of 1983 from an Intelligence Perch,” 6 November 2003, ETH Zürich Parallel History Project on NATO and the Warsaw Pact, <http://www.php.isn.ethz.ch/lory1.ethz.ch/collections/colltopic320b.html?lng=en&cid=17325&navinfo=15296>. Some, while alleging that the SNIE downplays the extent to which aggressive U.S. military maneuvers surrounding Able Archer 83 frightened Soviet leaders, also maintain that the exercise did not nearly result in nuclear war. Benjamin B. Fischer, “Anglo-American Intelligence and the Soviet War Scare: The Untold Story,” *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2012), p. 87.

NATO intentions that they were actively preparing for an actual surprise nuclear missile attack by the West.⁴⁷

Elsewhere, he insists that “the Soviets mistook a NATO war game for the prelude to an actual attack.”⁴⁸ Echoing the PFIAB report, Jones cites Project RYaN as a key factor in informing Soviet leaders’ perception of the NATO exercise as possible cover for a surprise nuclear attack, relying on Gordievsky’s description thereof.⁴⁹ All but one of the documents in the collection are Western in origin—the Soviet and Warsaw Pact perspective is still largely missing.⁵⁰ Evidence that some in the U.S. intelligence community believed that their Soviet counterparts believed Able Archer 83 to have been a threat is not sufficient evidence to conclude that Soviet policymakers in fact thought so.

Yet popular interest in Able Archer 83 shows no signs of slowing. The year 2018 saw the publication of three more books advancing the view that the world came to the brink of nuclear war in the autumn of 1983. Ben Macintyre’s *The Spy and the Traitor* sheds new light on Gordievsky’s spying career, including through interviews with the former KGB officer, but the evidence presented does not support Macintyre’s account of the exercise as a “terrifying Mexican standoff.” Rather, in Gordievsky’s own words, the exercise was an indication that paranoia was mounting, but “not a cause of urgent concern.”⁵¹ Marc Ambinder’s *The Brink* argues that, as Soviet leaders observed Able Archer 83, they “prepared to strike first.”⁵² Ambinder tells a compelling story of the real mounting tensions of the time. His account is especially valuable for the new insight into how Able Archer 83 unfolded, based on interviews with eight participants in the exercise and many more associated policymakers. But his story remains a Western one, with none of the new evidence from the Soviet perspective needed to make the case for his assertions that Able Archer 83 brought the world to the nuclear brink. Taylor Downing’s book *1983* builds on the 2008 documentary he produced for Flashback Television, *1983: The Brink of Apocalypse*; in particular, it relies on the transcripts of interviews with U.S. and Russian policymakers conducted in connection with that program. These are valuable sources, to be sure, but Downing’s evidence does not prove

47. Jones, *Able Archer 83*, pp. 2–3.

48. Jones and Scoblic, “The Week the World Almost Ended.”

49. Jones, *Able Archer 83*, p. 22.

50. The outlier is an untranslated (but summarized) 10 May 1982 memorandum from Andropov to Brezhnev reviewing the KGB’s activities during 1981. See Jones, ed., *Able Archer 83*, pp. 195–197.

51. Ben Macintyre, *The Spy and the Traitor* (New York: Crown, 2018), pp. 179–180.

52. Marc Ambinder, *The Brink: President Reagan and the Nuclear War Scare of 1983* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), p. 10.

that Able Archer 83 “had brought the world to the very brink of nuclear war.” In fact, much of that body of interview evidence explicitly contradicts the “Able Archer 83 as war scare” thesis.⁵³

The archival challenges to telling both sides of the Able Archer 83 story are obvious. A great deal of material from the Soviet period remains inaccessible. The KGB archives, in particular, have never been generally accessible to Russian and foreign scholars.⁵⁴ But thanks to largely unfettered access to archives in other post-Communist states, a wide range of documentation on Able Archer 83 is already available.⁵⁵ These sources are, of course, an imperfect substitute for still-classified Russian archival holdings. The relationship between the KGB and the various intelligence agencies of the Warsaw Pact was at times mistrustful and dysfunctional, as were the information-sharing protocols among them.⁵⁶ On the specific topics of RYaN and Able Archer 83, the all-Warsaw Pact nature of intelligence activities—with the KGB, Czechoslovak Státní Bezpečnost (StB), and East German Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (MfS, more commonly known as the Stasi) all fulfilling the leadership’s requirements—calls for a broader scope than Russian sources alone.⁵⁷

Strikingly, scholars who have drawn on Warsaw Pact archival materials have reached far more conservative conclusions about the Warsaw Pact’s response to and level of anxiety resulting from the exercise than those who rely only on Western holdings. Those who make the most use of Eastern sources are also those who most forcefully rebut the narrative that Able Archer 83 almost triggered a nuclear war.⁵⁸ Also striking is the absence of Able Archer 83 in the Russian-language literature on the Cold War during the 1980s, in both

53. Taylor Downing, *1983: Reagan, Andropov, and a World on the Brink* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2018), p. 257.

54. Jonathan Haslam, *Near and Distant Neighbors: A New History of Soviet Intelligence* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015), p. xix.

55. Many of the documents cited herein are also available on-line through the Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the Former German Democratic Republic, which oversees the Stasi archives. See Douglas Selvage and Walter Süß, “Das MfS und die Zusammenarbeit mit anderen kommunistischen Geheimdiensten: Staatssicherheit und sowjetischer KGB,” in Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der Ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, http://www.bstu.bund.de/DE/Wissen/MfS-Dokumente/MfS-KGB/_node.html.

56. Paul Maddrell, “Cooperation between the HVA and the KGB, 1951–1989,” *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute Supplement*, No. 9 (2014), p. 175; and Wolf, *Man without a Face*, p. 224.

57. “The Soviet ‘War Scare,’” pp. 82–83.

58. Kramer, “Die Nicht-Krise um ‘Able Archer 1983,’” pp. 129–149; Dmitry Adamsky, “Not Crying Wolf: Soviet Intelligence and the 1983 War Scare,” in Leopoldo Nuti et al., eds., *The Euromissile Crisis and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2015), pp. 49–65; Barrass, *The Great Cold War*, pp. 297–312; Barrass, “Able Archer 83,” pp. 7–30; Garthoff, “Soviet Leaders, Soviet Intelligence, and Changing Views of the United States, 1965–91,” pp. 28–67; Heuser, “The Soviet Response to the Euromissiles Crisis,” pp. 137–149; Mastny, “How Able Was

the memoirs of policymakers (who would have been intimately involved in any Soviet response to the exercise) and secondary sources. Kryuchkov, who oversaw KGB espionage worldwide at the time, for example, cited the Soviet military's downing of the Korean airliner as the most dangerous episode of the Cold War in the 1980s.⁵⁹ A host of Russian sources corroborate this perspective, consistently referring to the Korean airliner as the greatest threat to the stability of the Cold War since the Cuban missile crisis—Able Archer 83 is not mentioned.⁶⁰ As Viktor Cherkashin, formerly of the KGB's First Chief Directorate and stationed in Washington during Able Archer 83, argues, “despite the tensions, reports that Washington and Moscow came close to nuclear war are exaggerated.”⁶¹ According to the Cherkashin, nothing about late 1983 was especially dangerous.⁶²

‘Able Archer?’, pp. 108–123; and Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), pp. 508–509.

59. Garthoff, “Soviet Leaders, Soviet Intelligence, and Changing Views of the United States, 1965–91,” p. 45.

60. Georgii Arbatov, *Zatianuvsheesia xyzdorovlenie, 1953–1985: Svidetel'stvo sovremennika* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya, 1991), pp. 297–332; Sergei Akhromeev and Georgii Kornienko, *Glazami marshala i diplomata: Kriticheskiivzgliad na vneshnyuyu politiku SSSR do i posle 1985 goda* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya, 1992), pp. 10–53; Andrei Alexandrov-Agentov, *Or Kollontai do Gorbacheva: Vospominaniya diplomata, sovetnika Gromyko, i pomoshchnika Brezhneva, Andropova, Chernenko i Gorbacheva* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya, 1994), pp. 275–285; Karen Bruntents, *Tridsat' let na Staroiploshchadi* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya, 1998), pp. 486–495; Andrei Burovskii, *Velikii Andropov: Zheleznyi Gensek* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2014), pp. 153–170; Anatolii Chernyaev, *Sovmestnyi iskhod: Dnevnik dvukh epokh, 1971–1991 gody* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2008), pp. 543–543; Anatolii Dobrynin, *Sugubo doveritel'no: Posol v Vashingtone pri shesti prezidentakh SShA, 1962–1986 gg.* (Moscow: Avtor, 1996) pp. 497–580; Sergei Chertopud, *Andropov i KGB* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2004), pp. 295–326; Mikhail Gorbachev, *Naedine s soboi* (Moscow: Grin Strit, 2012), pp. 318–357; Mikhail Gorbachev, *Zhizn' i reformy*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Novosti, 1995), pp. 223–272; Vyacheslav Kevorkov, *Tainyi kanal* (Moscow: Geia, 1997), pp. 273–291; Oleg Khlobustov, *Fenomen Andropova: 30 let iz zhizni General'nogo sekretarya TsK KPSS* (Moscow: Akva-Term, 2013), pp. 453–455; Oleg Khlobustov, *Neizvestnyi Andropov* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2009), pp. 424–468; Viktor Grishin, *Or Khrushcheva do Gorbacheva* (Moscow: Aspol, 1996), pp. 57–66; Georgii Kornienko, *Kholodnaya voina: Svidetel'stvo ee uchastnika* (Moscow: Olma, 2001), pp. 263–310; Rem Krasil'nikov, *Prizraki s ulitsy Chaikovskogo: Shpionskie aktsii TsRU SShA v Sovetskom Soyuze i Rossiiskoi Federatsii v 1979–1992 godakh* (Moscow: Geia, 1999), pp. 119–131; Roi Medvedev, *Yurii Andropov: Neizvestnoe ob izvestnom* (Moscow: Vremia, 2004), pp. 414–425; Sergei Semanov, *Yurii Andropov* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2003), pp. 273–340; Viktor Sukhodrev, *Yazyk moi—drug moi: Ot Khrushcheva do Gorbacheva* (Moscow: Olimp, 1999), pp. 421–422; Dmitrii Volkogonov, *Sem' vzhdei: Galereya liderov SSSR*, Vol. 2 (Moscow: Novosti, 1995), pp. 111–194; and Viktor Vorotnikov, *A bylo eto tak: Iz dnevnika chlena Politbyuro TsK KPSS* (Moscow: Kniga i biznes, 2003), p. 39.

61. Viktor Cherkashin with Gregory Feifer, *Spy Handler: Memoirs of a KGB Officer* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), p. 144.

62. Cherkashin oral history, 2007, in Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (LHCMA), London, BOA 3/1.

The Real RYan

“Much was made by the [Reagan] administration [of] the unclear or conflicting signals given to Moscow by the Carter administration,” Sir Nicholas Henderson, the British ambassador in Washington, opined late in the administration’s first year, “but I cannot believe that the Soviet authorities can have any very clear idea of what the Reaganauts are up to.”⁶³ Uncertainty did not suit Soviet or East European leaders. Guarding against surprise attack was at the core of Soviet military doctrine throughout the Cold War, especially during its later stages. The highest Soviet military commanders in the 1980s had come of age during World War II and witnessed firsthand the disastrous consequences of Nazi Germany’s 1941 surprise attack on the Soviet Union. “The enduring trauma of Barbarossa” haunted a generation of policymakers who had seen the danger of being caught unprepared, be it through failures of intelligence or, as was the case in 1941, failures of reaction. An overall sense of uncertainty regarding U.S. intentions in the early 1980s—verging, in some circles, on paranoia—exacerbated these perennial concerns.⁶⁴

Early Warsaw Pact assessments of the Reagan administration warned that, “although the arms race began under Carter... the Reagan administration aims to achieve strategic superiority.”⁶⁵ Czechoslovak analysts similarly expected the new president to “seize the strategic initiative and put the Warsaw Pact on the defensive.”⁶⁶ Warsaw Pact analysts had grave concerns that the ensuing expansion of U.S. strategic capabilities, such as MX intercontinental-range ballistic missiles (ICBMs), Trident D-5 submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and air-launched cruise missiles, would eventually lead to Western dominance.⁶⁷ The highly accurate MX and D5 caused particular concern for

63. Henderson to Bullard, “U.S. Foreign Policy,” 7 August 1981, in TNAUK, FCO 28/4372.

64. Louis Sell, *From Washington to Moscow: U.S.-Soviet Relations and the Collapse of the USSR* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 16–17.

65. “Notizen über Ausführungen des Genossen Generaloberst Krjutschkow, W. A. am 3.10.1983,” MfS memorandum, 3 October 1983, in BStU, Abteilung (Abt.) 10, No. 2020. The extent to which Soviet policymakers felt Jimmy Carter had caused a downturn in U.S.-Soviet relations—before Reagan—is key to understanding the superpower relationship during the 1980s. Even in 1985, Soviet experts on the United States believed that U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union would have been the same under a second Carter term as it had been during Reagan’s first. See Institut SShA i Kanady Rossiiskoi Akademii (ISKRAN) memorandum, “Nekotorye osobennosti voennoipolitiki administratsii Reigana,” 25 March 1985, in Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Akademii, Moscow, Russia, F. 2021, Op. 2, D. 3.

66. “Hlavní rysy zahraniční a vojenské politiky nové americké vlády,” MNO memorandum, No. 4 (244), 1981, in Archiv Bezpečnostních Složek (ABS), Prague, Zpravodajská Správa Generálního Štábu (ZSGŠ), Pomocný Materiál (PM), Box 106.

67. “Pokračující militaristické tendence v U.S.A. a perspektivy sovětsko-amerického dialogu,” Černý memorandum, 23 July 1981, in AMZV, TOT, 1980–1989, SSSR, Box 9, Folder 52; and

Soviet officials, who saw their development as evidence that U.S. nuclear war plans would focus on striking Soviet nuclear installations and command-and-control infrastructure, effectively disarming the Soviet Union.⁶⁸ The best-known aspect of Reagan's defense buildup, the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), also caused considerable anxiety east of the Iron Curtain after its unveiling in early 1983.⁶⁹ Warsaw Pact leaders envisioned a nightmare scenario: Washington would have the ability to launch a nuclear first strike on the East with impunity. MX and D-5 missiles would mostly disarm the Soviet Union, and SDI would protect the United States against any remaining missiles, thus eliminating the Soviet second-strike capability.⁷⁰ As Gromyko later stated to Shultz, the threat SDI posed to the Soviet Union was "clear almost to the point of being primitive."⁷¹ Finally, the INF deployments scheduled for the end of 1983 constituted "the transformation of... [Western Europe] into a launching pad for U.S. first-strike nuclear missiles" that threatened the territory—and, Soviet officials claimed, the capital—of the Soviet Union.⁷² Although mutual vulnerability still existed in 1983, the argument went, the Warsaw Pact prepared to confront an even stronger NATO in the future.⁷³ However, East German observers managed to find a glimmer of hope: "boundless increases" in military budgets had left little money for social programs, which,

"Information über den Zustand der strategischen Kernwaffeneinsatzkräfte der NATO und ihrer Mitgliedstaaten sowie über ihre zu erwartende Entwicklung bis in die 90er Jahre," Ministerium für Nationale Verteidigung (MfNV) memorandum, 22 January 1982, in Militärarchiv (MA), Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany, DVW 1/94239.

68. Kataev oral history, 23 June 1993, in John G. Hines, Ellis M. Mishulovich, and John F. Shull, eds., *Soviet Intentions, 1965–1985*, Vol. 2, *Soviet Post–Cold War Testimonial Evidence* (McLean, VA: BDM Federal, 1995), p. 100.

69. Reagan remarks, Washington, DC, 23 March 1983, quoted in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1983*, Vol. 1, pp. 437–443; and Shultz to Reagan, "Meeting with Dobrynin," 28 March 1983, in RRPL, JFME, Box 22, "USSR Diplomatic Contacts 3" Folder. Reagan surmised that SDI "might take [twenty years] or more" to develop. Reagan diary entry, 23 March 1983, quoted in *The Reagan Diaries*, Vol. 1, p. 209.

70. "Vojenské rozpočty států Severoatlantického pakty v roce 1985—základní údaje," Ministerstvo Národní Obrany (MNO) memorandum, No. 9 (314), 1985, in ABS, ZSGŠ, PM, Box 123.

71. Shultz-Gromyko memorandum of conversation, 15:35–18:55, 7 January 1985, in RRPL, JFME, Box 8, "March 1985 1" Folder.

72. "Material k besede s G. Kolem," KPSS memorandum, 4 June 1983, in RGANI, F. 82, Op. 1, D. 37.

73. "Protokoll der Sitzung des Komitees der Verteidigungsminister der Teilnehmerstaaten des Warschauer Vertrages," Nationale Volksarmee (NVA) memorandum, 4 December 1981, in MA, DVW 1/71039; and "Thesen zum Vortrag des Chefs der Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung des Generalstabes der Streitkräfte der UdSSR, Armeegeneral P. E. Iwaschutin," NVA memorandum, December 1981, in MA, DVW 1/71039.

they predicted, would result in greater support for socialist parties throughout the West.⁷⁴

The substance of U.S. national security initiatives appeared—with good reason—calculated to enable the United States to fight and win a nuclear war.⁷⁵ The intelligence agencies of the Warsaw Pact countries therefore went all-out to gain insight into Western intentions, especially any indication of a possible Western surprise attack.⁷⁶ Project RYaN was their high-technology answer to this atmosphere of uncertainty and tension, but it remained in its infancy during Able Archer 83.

The PFIAB report, for example, stresses RYaN's centrality to understanding the policymaking process that led to the purported war scare: a "self-reinforcing cycle" of high-level anxiety prompting increased reporting through RYaN channels and those reports, in turn, making Soviet leaders all the more worried.⁷⁷ By the time of Able Archer 83, Soviet leaders supposedly were "almost frantic over the threat of war" as a result.⁷⁸ The PFIAB report leaves the link between RYaN and the alleged war scare oblique, but other sources describe it (or rather, its product) much more explicitly as leading directly to Soviet fears of a NATO surprise attack.⁷⁹ Taylor Downing, for example, contends that RYaN "had persuaded an already paranoid KGB and political leadership to put Soviet nuclear forces on to a maximum state of alert."⁸⁰ Widespread though that view may be, it is simply not true. As Cherkashin admonished one interviewer, "we shouldn't exaggerate and overestimate the importance of [RYaN]."⁸¹ During the Able Archer 83 exercise, RYaN was a research and development project rather than a serious source of insight into

74. "Vorlag für die Außenpolitische Kommission beim Politbüro des ZK der SED: Zur Stellung der Sozialdemokratie in der internationalen Kassenseinwanderung," Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED) memorandum, 6 November 1981, in SAPMO, DY 30/11636.

75. "Vojenskopolitická situace na jižním křídle Severoatlantického paktu," MNO memorandum, No. 15 (255), 1981, in ABS, ZSGŠ, PM, Box 106; and "Zásady použití ozbrojených sil NATO ve strategické operaci na středoevropském válčišti s důrazem na stupeň skupiny armád a spojeneckého taktického leteckého velitelství," MNO memorandum, No. 14 (254), 1981, in ABS, ZSGŠ, PM, Box 106.

76. "Vereinbarung über die Zusammenarbeit zwischen dem Ministerium für Staatssicherheit der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik und dem Komitee für Staatssicherheit beim Ministerrat der Union der Sozialistischen Sowjetrepubliken," MfS memorandum, 6 December 1973, in BStU, Sekretariat des Ministers (SdM), No. 2637; and Mitrokhin notes, in Churchill Archives Center (CAC), Cambridge, UK, MITN 1/6/3.

77. "The Soviet 'War Scare,'" p. 81.

78. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

79. Jones, *Able Archer 83*, p. 31.

80. Downing, *1983*, p. 257.

81. Cherkashin oral history, 2007.

NATO's thinking—far from a sufficient basis on which to contemplate a pre-emptive strike.

Andropov's March 1981 report to the CPSU Politburo outlining KGB activities in 1980 emphasized the "timely detection" of an attack as the agency's principal activity.⁸² In 1981, Andropov reported that this work had been further strengthened through the expansion of Soviet espionage networks in the United States and throughout NATO.⁸³ Viktor Chebrikov, who succeeded Andropov as KGB chairman, reported that KGB activities in 1982 continued to focus on the possibility of a surprise attack by the West.⁸⁴ By then, Warsaw Pact military analysts warned, the United States was dangerously close to enjoying "military superiority."⁸⁵ To that end, at a May 1982 meeting, the heads of Warsaw Pact intelligence agencies developed "recommendations" for cooperation on "activities in the field of early warning."⁸⁶ Although this meeting may have been RYaN's official start date, the effort took years to get meaningfully underway. Not until February 1983, for example, did the KGB send directives to some overseas posts outlining preliminary intelligence-gathering instructions and listing indicators of a surprise attack.⁸⁷ Entering 1983, the KGB and Warsaw Pact intelligence services as a whole grew increasingly preoccupied with U.S. and Western efforts to "change the existing global military-strategic balance."⁸⁸ The 1983 meeting of Warsaw Pact defense ministers, for example, focused on the coming era of Western strategic superiority, dispensing with the usual boilerplate and instead talking about the very real ways in which the West was pulling ahead, but never entertaining the idea that NATO might strike first. Balance-of-power questions were at the forefront of military

82. "Otchet o rabote Komiteta gosudarstvennoibezопасnosti SSSR za 1980 god," Andropov to Brezhnev, 31 March 1981, in Library of Congress (LOC), Washington, DC, Dmitrii Antonovich Volkonov Papers (DAVP), Box 28, Folder 3.

83. "Otchet o rabote Komiteta gosudarstvennoibezопасnosti SSSR za 1981 god," Andropov to Brezhnev, 13 April 1982, in LOC, DAVP, Box 28, Folder 3.

84. "Otchet o rabote Komiteta gosudarstvennoibezопасnosti SSSR za 1982 god," Chebrikov to Andropov, 15 March 1983, in LOC, DAVP, Box 28, Folder 3.

85. "Information über den Zustand der strategischen Kernwaffeneinsatzkräfte der NATO."

86. "Bericht über die Entwicklung und den erreichten Stand der Arbeit zur Früherkennung gegenseitiger Angriffs- und Überraschungsabsichten (Komplex RJAN)," MfS memorandum, 23 April 1986, in BStU, Arbeitsgruppe des Ministers (AGM), No. 1021.

87. Douglas Selvage, "The Danger of Surprise: Yuri Andropov, the KGB, and U.S.-Soviet Relations, 1981–1983," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, Arlington, Virginia, 25 June 2019; and "O postoyanno deistvuyushchem zadaniya po ryavknennu podgotovki NATO k raketno-iadernomu napadeniyu na SSSR," KGB memorandum, 17 February 1983, in *Comrade Kryuchkov's Instructions*, pp. 69–81.

88. "Otchet o rabote Komiteta gosudarstvennoibezопасnosti SSSR za 1982 god."

planners' minds at this November 1983 meeting, not a perceived danger of surprise attack.⁸⁹

Warsaw Pact policymakers envisioned Project RYaN first and foremost as a "multi-year, complex scientific investigation" into the use of computers in intelligence analysis.⁹⁰ RYaN grew out of real security concerns, but it focused on "theoretical reflection" that would involve significant research in signals intelligence gathering and, above all, the use of technology as a complement to human analysts. Early documentation on RYaN stressed not increasing the number of intelligence collectors but the full mobilization of the KGB's research and development apparatus to develop an integrated computer operating system that could analyze a wide array of intelligence regarding the West at once. It would require the most sophisticated computer science and mathematics the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies could bring to bear.⁹¹ Only through centralization and computer assistance could such a massive amount of "data" be assessed with sufficient speed to detect a surprise attack.⁹² RYaN was accordingly housed within the KGB's Institute for Research on Operative Problems, where scientists worked on research and development questions, not under one of the agency's operational directorates.⁹³ Until early 1985, RYaN was regularly referred to as a "problem" to be investigated and solved, not an "operation" to be carried out.⁹⁴

In 1983 (and for years after), the factors that RYaN's analytical framework might use remained a topic of heated debate within the Warsaw Pact intelligence community.⁹⁵ Data fell into four categories of observation: politico-military, intelligence, civil defense, and economic. Politically, RYaN focused on comings and goings at the White House and elsewhere: from secretaries'

89. "Bericht über die Wichtigsten Ergebnisse der 15. Sitzung des Komitees der Verteidigungsminister der Teilnehmerstaaten des Warschauer Vertrages in Prag," NVA memorandum, November 1983, in MA, DVW 1/71040.

90. "Die Schaffung einheitliche Dokumente für die schnelle Aufdeckung und zuverlässige Beurteilung von Maßnahmen der NATO zur Überführung ihrer Mitgliedstaaten und Streitkräfte von Friedens- in den Kriegszustand sowie zur Erhöhung ihrer Kriegsbereitschaft in Krisensituation," MfNV memorandum, February 1983, in MA, DVW 1/94471.

91. "Vermerk über die Ergebnisse der Konsultationen mit Genossen Generalmajor Schapkin, Stellvertreter des Leiters der I. Hauptverwaltung der KfS und zwei Experten zur Problematik RJAN," Wolf to Irmeler, 29 August 1984, in BStU, ZAIG, No. 5384.

92. "Bericht über die Entwicklung und den erreichten Stand."

93. "Zu den Gesprächen mit Genossen W.A. Krjutschkow," MfS memorandum, 4 October 1983, in BStU, Abt. 10, No. 2020.

94. "Vermerk über die Ergebnisse der Konsultationen mit Genossen Generalmajor Schapkin."

95. "Kurznotiz zu 1/83 vom 6.1.1983," MfS memorandum, 14 January 1983, in BStU, ZAIG, No. 5172.

arrival times and unusually full parking lots to the arrival of several former presidents in Washington to “simultaneous, abrupt exiting of receptions, dinners, balls, and business meetings by officials.” Military factors included intensified maintenance schedules for nuclear weapons, particularly ICBMs; the distribution of hazmat suits to troops; and significant troop movements, especially if undertaken with commandeered civilian equipment. To gauge intelligence preparations for war, intelligence services would look for evidence that more Western agents (legal and illegal) were infiltrating Warsaw Pact countries; heightened activities at NATO bases that supported intelligence collection behind the Iron Curtain, such as those at Rammstein and Stuttgart; tightened travel restrictions for Warsaw Pact diplomats in the West; and the mass destruction of documents at Western diplomatic posts. Increased activity by the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency, especially spot checks on fallout shelters, major blood or vaccination drives, and the decentralization of blood banks would signal civil defense–related preparations. Historians will be glad to know that the KGB predicted that Western governments would, even on the road to war, share their concerns about the preservation of the past: major transfers of government documents to hardened U.S. National Archives and Records Administration facilities and the closure of museums to evacuate artifacts could, according to the RYaN rubric, indicate civil defense–related preparations for war. Finally, from an economic perspective, the KGB planned to watch for the transfer of major assets to banks in neutral countries (such as Switzerland) and the mass slaughter of livestock.⁹⁶

How to balance these indicators—and what indicators to include in the first place—remained an open question in the autumn of 1983. The final list of 292 data points for RYaN was not finalized until 1986.⁹⁷ In 1983, when presented with a “catalog of ‘surprise criteria,’” an unsatisfied Mielke argued that the parameters were still too narrow. Crucially, Soviet intelligence officials felt these debates needed to be resolved before RYaN would be reliable enough to provide real guidance to policymakers. This state of confidence in RYaN had yet to be reached by the time of Able Archer 83.⁹⁸

Debates over potential data points persisted throughout RYaN’s development, but these debates paled in comparison to those over the validity

96. “Merkmale zur Erkennung der gegnerischen Vorbereitung auf einen überraschenden Raketenkernwaffenangriff.”

97. “Bericht über die Entwicklung und den erreichten Stand.”

98. Mielke-Chebrikov memorandum of conversation, 9 February 1983, in BStU, Abt. 10, No. 1863; and “Zu den Gesprächen mit Genossen W. A. Krjutschkow,” MfS memorandum, 4 October 1983, in BStU, Abt. 10, No. 2020.

of one of RYaN's underpinnings: the use of computers in intelligence analysis.⁹⁹ Throughout the Warsaw Pact, skepticism abounded. In Moscow the first deputy head of the CPSU International Department, Vadim Zagladin, noted that U.S. computer systems frequently reported errant flocks of geese or forest fires as Soviet nuclear attacks. The Soviet government, he felt, should be similarly skeptical of any such system devised by Soviet scientists.¹⁰⁰ East German intelligence pointedly observed that, after so many past failures in integrating computers into intelligence, any of RYaN's successes should be taken with a grain of salt.¹⁰¹ To Markus Wolf, the long-time head of the Stasi's Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung, responsible for foreign intelligence, RYaN was a "burdensome waste of time" built on a far-fetched premise.¹⁰² Even Gordievsky himself later stressed on multiple occasions that "intelligence professionals on the Soviet side did not take seriously the much ballyhooed warning system."¹⁰³ As late as 1986, Warsaw Pact intelligence officials felt that the technology at the core of RYaN still needed significant improvement for it to be a solid basis for policymaking.¹⁰⁴

Barely a month before Able Archer 83, Kryuchkov summed up the state of Project RYaN for the Stasi: "The central and fundamental decisions have yet to be taken This work is done at the Institute for Research on Operational Problems ... and in the Information Department."¹⁰⁵ RYaN continued to evolve in significant ways after Able Archer 83, consistent with a research and development project. Because RYaN was still under development in the autumn of 1983, it would not have been trusted by the intelligence agencies or policymakers of the Warsaw Pact to make the decision to launch a preemptive nuclear strike on the West.¹⁰⁶ By the time RYaN was terminated in

99. "Die Schaffung einheitliche Dokumente für die schnelle Aufdeckung."

100. "Kak odoler' yadernuyu ugrozu," Zagladin memorandum, 1985, in Arkhiv Gorbachev-Fonda (AGF), Moscow, Russia, F. 1, Op. 8, D. 17757.

101. "Vermerk über die Ergebnisse der Konsultationen mit Genossen Generalmajor Schapkin."

102. Wolf, *Man without a Face*, p. 222.

103. Gordievsky, *Next Stop Execution*, p. 261; Gordievsky oral history, 2007, in LHCMA, BOA 3/3; and Ermarth, "Observations on the 'War Scare' of 1983 from an Intelligence Perch."

104. "Bericht über die Entwicklung und den erreichten Stand."

105. Wolf-Kryuchkov memorandum of conversation, 4 October 1983, in BStU, Abt. 10, No. 2020.

106. "Einige Fragen der Methodik der Arbeitsorganisation zur Feststellung von Anzeichen der unmittelbaren Vorbereitung des Gegners auf einen Überraschungsangriff durch Mittel der Funkaufklärung," MfS memorandum, 25 June 1984, in BStU, HA 3, No. 11792; "Plan der Entwicklung der Zusammenarbeit zwischen der Hauptabteilung XVIII des MfS der DDR und der VI. Verwaltung des KfS der UdSSR für die Jahre 1985–1990," MfS memorandum, 22 November 1984, in BStU, SdM, No. 2637; and "Perspektivplan für das Zusammenwirken zwischen der Hauptabteilung I des MfS der DDR und

late 1991—barely a month before the collapse of the Soviet Union—it had nothing to show for itself.¹⁰⁷

Warsaw Pact Responses

The mood in Moscow was tense in the autumn of 1983, and Able Archer 83 attracted the attention of Soviet and Warsaw Pact observers. However, available documents reveal that Soviet-bloc policymakers gave no consideration to the possibility of a Western surprise nuclear attack masked by the exercise or to a preemptive strike. Able Archer 83 was nothing new: similar exercises occurred on an annual basis. In 1980, for example, Warsaw Pact intelligence officials recognized, as they later did in 1983, that the aim of the exercise was to simulate beginning a nuclear war as well as negotiations with the Soviet Union between strikes (in the 1980 scenario these negotiations always failed and follow-on strikes ensued). The intelligence officers also took note of the scope and scale of the exercises, which seemed to be consistently increasing.¹⁰⁸ Soviet-bloc observers similarly watched Able Archer 81 unfold with sanguinity, even though it and its related exercises (especially Wintex/Cimex 81, the home-front counterpart to Able Archer) incorporated additional elements that reflected the increase in global tensions, such as the use of new integrated radio technology to enhance Western command-and-control capabilities.¹⁰⁹

U.S. policymakers understood that their Soviet counterparts were on edge.¹¹⁰ When planning for Able Archer 83, the National Security Council directed that several key figures remain uninvolved in the exercise to send a clear signal that it was nothing more than a rehearsal. Reagan, Bush, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and much of the leadership of U.S. European Command, including the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, accordingly did

der 3. Hauptverwaltung des KfS der UdSSR für die Jahre 1987 bis 1991," MfS memorandum, 4 June 1987, in BStU, SdM, No. 2637.

107. Umbach, *Das rote Bündnis*, p. 331.

108. "Podzimní série cvičení ozbrojených sil NATO 'AUTUMN FORGE-80,'" in MNO memorandum, No. 3 (243), 1980, in ABS, ZSGS, PM, Box 103.

109. "Aufklärungssammelbericht zum zur Kommandostabsübung 'Able Archer 81' im Bereich des NATO-Oberkommandos Europa vom 02.11.1981 bis 06.11.1981," NVA memorandum, 17 November 1981, in MA, DVW 1/94228; and "Strategické velitelsko-štabní cvičení ozbrojených sil NATO 'WINTEX/CIMEX-81,'" MNO memorandum, No. 8 (248), 1981, in ABS, ZSGŠ, PM, Box 107.

110. "American Academic on Soviet Policy," Matlock to McFarlane, 13 December 1983, in RRPL, JFME, Box 2, "December 1983 1" Folder.

not participate.¹¹¹ None of the key figures in U.S., British, or NATO policy-making circles participated in Able Archer 83; there is no evidence, for example, to support claims that Margaret Thatcher participated in the exercise.¹¹² Thatcher's engagement diary for the period of the exercise that involved nuclear use, 7–11 November, shows that the prime minister had an exceedingly busy schedule, spending two of those days in Bonn in bilateral meetings with West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, as well as attending meetings in London with Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau and U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Kenneth W. Dam, among others.¹¹³

The specifics of Able Archer 83 did not come as a surprise to Warsaw Pact observers, who took a keen interest in this comparatively open demonstration of NATO capabilities and knew that their own exercises similarly attracted the attention of the West.¹¹⁴ When East German defense minister Heinz Hoffmann briefed Erich Honecker, the SED General Secretary, he framed it as a means of further subordinating the militaries of independent NATO members to the United States and emphasized that the exercise would unfold as it had in previous years. He expressed no alarm over the increased nuclear element in his briefing, though he did highlight that it would involve fewer troops (250,000 in 1983 as opposed to 410,000 in earlier years) operating at "greater efficiency."¹¹⁵ Within the KGB, the political aspect of demonstrating and furthering Western cohesion also loomed large, and officials saw Able Archer 83 as a political, as much as military, exercise.¹¹⁶ A full East German military overview of the scenario for the "command staff exercise" demonstrates a striking familiarity with the exercise's script beforehand, including the escalation of a conventional war following the Warsaw Pact's use of chemical weapons and NATO's limited, five-day use of nuclear weapons soon thereafter. But the report stresses that the rehearsal of escalating to nuclear war with the Warsaw Pact was "a function of the exercise's objectives and does not reflect NATO's actual assessment of the international situation"; that is, it did not, in the East German military's view, indicate an intention to employ nuclear weapons. The inclusion of this disclaimer reflected the heightened

111. McFarlane oral history, 18 October 1989, in Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library (SMML), Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, Don Oberdorfer Papers (DOP), Box 2, Folder 22.

112. Kramer, "Die Nicht-Krise um 'Able Archer 1983,'" p. 141. For an example of the authors whose claims Kramer rebuts, see Manchanda, "When Truth Is Stranger than Fiction," p. 122.

113. Thatcher engagement diaries, 7–11 November 1983, in CAC, THCR 6/1/2/5.

114. Esin oral history, 2007, in LHCMA, BOA 2/1.

115. Hoffmann to Honecker, 14 September 1983, in MA, DVW 1/115702.

116. Cherkashin oral history, 2007.

tensions of the early 1980s but also indicates East-bloc policymakers' confidence that tensions would not boil over.¹¹⁷ In preparing these reports, East German officials had the benefit of intelligence from Rainier Rupp, the Stasi's best-placed spy at NATO in Brussels, who reported "there was no indication that NATO was preparing for war" during Able Archer 83.¹¹⁸ This confidence stemmed in large part from the fact that Soviet military officials "listened to the hourly circuit verification signal on [NATO] nuclear release communications systems and believed [they] would recognize a release order," according to Geli Batenin of the Soviet General Staff, corroborated by Kryuchkov from the KGB's perspective. This contradicts claims that recent developments in cryptography had suddenly rendered NATO codes undecipherable by the Warsaw Pact, triggering panic and elevating fears of a nuclear surprise attack before and during Able Archer 83.¹¹⁹

This same sanguinity can be found in the Czechoslovak military intelligence report on Autumn Forge 83, including Able Archer 83. The report is brief, which is telling in its own right: the section on Able Archer 83 is barely over a page in length. It outlines Able Archer 83's role as the culmination of Autumn Forge 83 and its unique inclusion of the transition from conventional to nuclear war. It notes the exercise's focus on rehearsing the transition to nuclear combat and ensuring that the entirety of NATO could be counted on to do so reliably. Able Archer 83, the Czechoslovak report explains, had three goals: practicing consultation at the highest levels of government to authorize the use of nuclear weapons, testing readiness for nuclear use throughout the chain of command, and testing the readiness of NATO's military command posts to launch the missiles.¹²⁰ One senior Soviet military intelligence officer, Vladlen Smirnoff, deputy head of intelligence for the Northern Fleet at the time, recalled that his staff came to the same conclu-

117. "Information über die bevorstehende strategische NATO-Kommandostabsübung 'Wintex/Cimex 83,'" MfNV memorandum, in MA, DVW 1/94469. Though the document's title refers to Wintex/Cimex, its contents address both the home front and international components of the scenario, as Warsaw Pact intelligence observers saw Able Archer and Wintex/Cimex as inextricably linked and regularly addressed the two, technically separate, exercises together. "Podzimní série cvičení ozbrojených sil NATO 'AUTUMN FORGE-83,'" MNO memorandum, No. 1 (294), 1984, in ABS, ZSGŠ, PM, Box 117.

118. Barrass, "Able Archer 83," p. 19; and Wolf, *Man without a Face*, pp. 299–301.

119. Batenin oral history, 6 August 1993, in *Soviet Intentions 1965–1985*, Vol. 2, p. 8; and Kryuchkov oral history, 2007, in LHCMA, BOA 3/5. For the erroneous assertions, see Brook-Shepherd, *The Storm Birds*, pp. 269–270; and Manchanda, "When Truth Is Stranger than Fiction," p. 122.

120. "Podzimní série cvičení ozbrojených sil NATO 'AUTUMN FORGE-83.'"

sion: by 1983, “Able Archer was just a typical exercise . . . there was nothing outstanding about it.”¹²¹

The post–Cold War reminiscences of Soviet military and civilian officials corroborate these archival sources. Anatolii Chernyaev, then a senior analyst in the CPSU International Department (before becoming Mikhail Gorbachev’s chief foreign policy adviser from 1986 onward), confirmed that Soviet leaders did not take seriously the idea that a nuclear surprise attack was coming. “We can rule out that there was real fear of a nuclear attack,” he concluded.¹²² General Viktor Esin, a former chief of staff of the Soviet Strategic Missile Forces, also recounted that Soviet commanders “knew that NATO were doing an exercise, [but were] not really planning for the nuclear blow.”¹²³ General Andrian Danilevich, when asked specifically about Gordievsky’s claims regarding Able Archer 83, “acknowledged that there was a ‘period of great tension’ of which he had vivid personal memories, especially in 1983, but [stated] that there was never a ‘war scare.’” Danilevich, the chief adviser on nuclear doctrine to the Soviet General Staff, insisted that “no one believed there was a real likelihood (immediate threat) of a nuclear strike from the [United States] or NATO.”¹²⁴ Georgii Kornienko, who in 1983 was first deputy minister of foreign affairs, twice confirmed that the Able Archer 83 exercise never rose to his attention.¹²⁵ “Quite frankly,” snapped Igor Kondrat’ev of Soviet military intelligence after a lengthy line of questioning on the subject, “I don’t understand your special interest [in] this particular exercise.”¹²⁶

The long-serving Soviet ambassador in Washington, Anatolii Dobrynin, echoes these conclusions in a section of his memoirs that explicitly asks, “was the [Soviet Union] afraid of a U.S. military attack?” Although Soviet policymakers saw Washington as a threat, at no point did they envision a U.S. surprise attack akin to Pearl Harbor (his own telling example of the quintessential surprise attack). Reagan’s words and deeds elevated fears of an accidental nuclear war in the Soviet Union and around the world, Dobrynin said, but the

121. Smirnoff oral history, 2007, in LHCMA, BOA 2/5.

122. William Wohlforth, ed., *Witnesses to the End of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 72–73.

123. Esin oral history, 2007.

124. Danilevich oral history, 18 December 1990, in *Soviet Intentions 1965–1985*, Vol. 2, p. 26; and Danilevich oral history, 24 September 1992, in *Soviet Intentions 1965–1985*, Vol. 2, p. 42.

125. Kornienko oral history, 19 January 1990, in SMML, DOP, Box 1, Folder 12; and Garthoff, “Soviet Leaders, Soviet Intelligence, and Changing Views of the United States, 1965–91,” p. 45.

126. Kondratiev oral history, 2007, in LHCMA, BOA 3/2.

1962 Cuban missile crisis was the only Cold War episode “truly fraught with the potential for a military clash” between the two superpowers.¹²⁷

At the operational level, Able Archer 83 merited some notice, as would any significant movement of NATO forces or demonstration of NATO capabilities, and those observers “did not flinch, because they knew they were monitoring an exercise.”¹²⁸ But this notice did not rise to the level of the CPSU Politburo, according to one of its most prominent members, Gorbachev.¹²⁹ Official Soviet military doctrine and the recollections of former senior officers in the Soviet Strategic Missile Forces confirm that Politburo involvement was a prerequisite for a preemptive strike. Hence, Politburo members certainly would have been briefed on any credible indicators of a NATO surprise attack.¹³⁰ The CPSU Politburo meeting on 15 November, the first after Able Archer 83, focused exclusively on domestic issues, such as selecting members of the Supreme Soviet. Far from being shocked by what they learned about Able Archer 83 and contemplating a preemptive strike as the exercise unfolded, top Soviet policymakers paid it no heed. The next meeting of the Politburo, on 24 November, also focused on domestic questions, this time economic. What discussion of foreign policy did take place revolved around the danger that Honecker and the rest of the East German leadership might become irate about the dramatic improvements in the Soviet Union’s relationship with West Germany. On national security, the Politburo decided that if a foreign aircraft again strayed into Soviet airspace, as Korean Airlines flight 007 had, the USSR would not shoot it down. These are hardly the conclusions of leaders recently shaken by evidence of a possible NATO surprise nuclear attack.¹³¹

During this period, Andropov’s poor health did keep him away from the Kremlin. He had not been seen in public since 18 August 1983 and was too sick even to make an appearance at the celebration on 7 November of the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. He resorted to making policy (as best

127. Dobrynin, *Sugubo doveritel’no*, pp. 550–553. This was also the conclusion of Esin, who was stationed in Cuba during the October 1962 crisis and in Moscow as Able Archer 83 unfolded. Esin oral history, 2007.

128. Barrass, *The Great Cold War*, p. 301.

129. Garthoff, “Soviet Leaders, Soviet Intelligence, and Changing Views of the United States, 1965–91,” p. 45.

130. Bruce G. Blair, *The Logic of Accidental Nuclear War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1993), pp. 64–81; and Steven J. Zaloga, *The Kremlin’s Nuclear Sword: The Rise and Fall of Russia’s Strategic Nuclear Forces, 1945–2000* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), pp. 122–125.

131. Kramer, “Die Nicht-Krise um ‘Able Archer 1983,’” pp. 142–143.

he could) from his sickbed.¹³² Was it there, and not in the Politburo, that the key discussions regarding Able Archer 83 took place, as Andropov summoned his key advisers to brief him and take direction?¹³³ According to his security detail, no such emergency visits occurred.¹³⁴ This scenario is highly unlikely for two further reasons. First, the very individuals who have spoken out against the idea that Able Archer 83 caused fear of war or contemplation of a preemptive strike are, for the most part, the officials who would have been summoned to Andropov's bedside. Others occupied positions close to these key figures, such as Minister of Defense Dmitrii Ustinov and Chief of the General Staff Nikolai Ogarkov, which ensured they would have been aware of such critical conversations. Gorbachev, Andropov's protégé and confidante, confirmed that the matter never came to his attention.¹³⁵ Second, during times of crisis such as the downing of the Korean airliner two months earlier, the Politburo did meet. Konstantin Chernenko chaired the 2 September emergency meeting of the Politburo in Andropov's stead. During that meeting, the participants had a frank discussion of the consequences the downing of the South Korean passenger aircraft would have for the Cold War and how the Soviet Union should proceed.¹³⁶ If the Politburo met in full at this time of crisis—the episode most Soviet sources cite as the nadir of East-West relations in the period—then presumably an indication of a U.S. surprise nuclear attack would also bring together the top policymakers. Without evidence that the Soviet Politburo responded to the exercise—and a host of evidence to the contrary—the argument that Able Archer 83 brought the world to the edge of nuclear war simply does not stand.

On 26 September 1983, the Soviet Union's Oko satellite early warning system indicated a "mass launch" of inbound ICBMs from the United States. In a scenario in which every minute counted—the year-old system gave the Soviet Union at most 25 minutes' warning—it is striking how a group of officials supposedly primed for nuclear war behaved in a fashion inconsistent with this characterization. The watch officer, Stanislav Petrov, took the "immediate" decision to dismiss the alarm as false, and the General Staff in Moscow

132. Evgenii Chazov, *Zdorov'e i vlast': Vospominaniya kremleskogo vracha* (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2015), pp. 154–187.

133. Jones, *Able Archer 83*, p. 35.

134. Klyuyukov oral history, 2007, in LHCMA, BOA 3/6.

135. Garthoff, "Soviet Leaders, Soviet Intelligence, and Changing Views of the United States, 1965–91," p. 45. Andropov's friendship with Gorbachev dated back to the 1970s and was a key factor in the latter's rise. See William Taubman, *Gorbachev: His Life and Times* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017), pp. 138–144.

136. KPSS Politburo meeting record, 2 September 1983, in LOC, DAVP, Box 25, Folder 4.

accepted his conclusion straightaway.¹³⁷ For the Soviet missile defense forces, the greatest danger lay in information not reaching the highest leaders quickly enough and the leaders in turn being too slow to decide what to do with it.¹³⁸ If Soviet military commanders really lived in constant fear of a U.S. surprise attack, confirmation bias alone would have led military leaders and policy-makers to challenge Petrov's prompt dismissal of the alarm. He was, of course, right, and the missiles never came, but the readiness of General Staff officers to disregard the warnings of the costly early warning system shows that they did not seriously expect a surprise U.S. attack in the first place.

Reports of heightened activity during the exercise at Soviet air bases in East Germany and Poland, as well as at some Soviet missile installations, are a key point made by those who see Able Archer 83 as having brought the superpowers close to nuclear war, including the authors of the PFIAB report.¹³⁹ But new evidence from Soviet-bloc sources bears out the U.S. intelligence community's initial, sanguine assessment documented in the May 1984 SNIE.¹⁴⁰ Since then, Soviet officials have confirmed that "in individual military districts certain steps were taken"—insisting, however, that this did not reflect serious concern over a surprise nuclear attack.¹⁴¹ The steps, for example, did not extend to a general military alert, according to Sergei Akhromeev, then first deputy chief of the Soviet General Staff. The Soviet nuclear arsenal did not, as some have argued, go on high alert to prepare either to preempt or to retaliate for an attack.¹⁴² Although some ICBM installations increased their alert level and conducted launch drills, they never approached the level required for war. Furthermore, the officers in their bunkers were told that the possibility of an attack was higher not because of Able Archer 83 but because of the 7 November national holiday commemorating the Bolshevik Revolution.¹⁴³ The alerts did reflect an awareness that NATO exercises were under way and a desire to remind Washington that the Soviet Union stood ready to respond to any provocation. After all, Able Archer 83 signaled NATO's readiness to the

137. Yuri Votintsev, "Neizvestnye voiska ischeznuvshei sverkhderzhavy," pt. 3, *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal*, No. 10 (1993), p. 38; Petrov oral history, 2007, in LHCMA, BOA 2/5; and Hoffman, *The Dead Hand*, pp. 6–11. This episode, like RYaN as a whole, highlights the limited confidence Soviet policymakers had in their own technological achievements.

138. Esin oral history, 2007.

139. "The Soviet 'War Scare,'" p. vi.

140. "Implications of Recent Soviet Military-Political Activities."

141. Wohlforth, *Witnesses to the End of the Cold War*, pp. 72–73.

142. Barrass, *The Great Cold War*, p. 300; and Garthoff, "Soviet Leaders, Soviet Intelligence, and Changing Views of the United States, 1965–91," p. 45. Cf. Pry, *War Scare*, pp. 43–44.

143. Tkachenko oral history, 2007, in LHCMA, BOA 2/2.

Warsaw Pact, and the latter's countermobilization signaled its own military capabilities. But timing was key: the Warsaw Pact alert ended on 9 November, precisely the day on which the Able Archer 83 scenario transitioned to nuclear use. Lifting the alert and resuming normal operations precisely when the portion of the exercise that might conceal a surprise attack began does not reflect the behavior of policymakers fearful of such an eventuality.¹⁴⁴

Able Archer 83 occurred as part of Autumn Forge 83, a series of NATO exercises. Its first phase focused on NATO's response to a crisis, such as Reforger 83, a sea- and airlift from the United States involving thousands of troops. The second phase (composed of over twenty individual exercises), focused on rehearsing "ground, air, and naval operations" and also involved the active participation of troops and materiel. The troops brought to Europe during Reforger 83, for example, went on to participate in Confident Enterprise 83, rehearsing a counterattack against Warsaw Pact aggression and reinforcing interoperability with the West German Bundeswehr.¹⁴⁵ In such a context, counter-maneuvers by the Warsaw Pact to such massive NATO exercises made sense—and were in keeping with the history of both superpowers' behavior in similar situations, not with Soviet military doctrine in a time of crisis.¹⁴⁶ There was nothing unusual or new about a wary adversary counter-mobilizing and -signaling during a major military exercise.

Able Archer 83, unlike the Autumn Forge 83 exercises that preceded it, was explicitly described in Czechoslovak and East German military intelligence reports as a "command post exercise" that involved no troops and was merely a rehearsal of how the alliance would "carry out decisions at the highest military and political levels" to use NATO's nuclear weapons.¹⁴⁷ Even if it did involve "some U.S. military forces in Europe," as the PFIAB report says, that is not outside the scope of a command-post exercise, insofar as command-and-control procedures logically require another party with whom to rehearse.¹⁴⁸ Warsaw Pact observers knew that the Pershing 1As deployed to their dispersal sites for the exercise were of limited range (a maximum of 740 km) and could not come close to traveling from West Germany to Moscow, making them an

144. Barrass, "Able Archer 83," p. 21; Esin oral history, 2007; and Fischer, "Scolding Intelligence," p. 107.

145. "Podzimní série cvičení ozbrojených sil NATO 'AUTUMN FORGE-83.'"

146. Douglas M. Hart, "Soviet Approaches to Crisis Management: The Military Dimension," *Survival*, Vol. 26, No. 5 (1984), pp. 214–223.

147. "Podzimní série cvičení ozbrojených sil NATO 'AUTUMN FORGE-83.;" and "Information über die bevorstehende strategische NATO-Kommandostabsübung 'Wintex/Cimex 83.'"

148. "The Soviet 'War Scare,'" p. 35.

implausible choice for a surprise nuclear attack.¹⁴⁹ Even though longer-range Pershing 2s were slated to begin replacing Pershing 1As in late 1983, that process could not begin until the West German Bundestag voted to approve it, and by then Able Archer 83 was already over.¹⁵⁰

What, then, are scholars to make of Gordievsky's claims that Able Archer 83 triggered a war scare? The former double agent is, after all, the ur-source of much of the historiography. Akhromeev went for the jugular in one 1991 interview:

[The revelations] were self-serving falsifications We in the General Staff probably would not brief a KGB officer on such secrets, especially if he was being posted to a Western embassy. [Gordievsky] did not know what the General Staff was doing. He told such stories to improve his standing in the West. War was not considered imminent.¹⁵¹

A more nuanced critique focuses on Gordievsky's own evidence, a "flash telegram" on 8 or 9 November reporting an alert at U.S. military bases that "marked the beginning of preparations for a nuclear first strike."¹⁵² The nature of this claim remains an open question because no such document has turned up in the archives, and KGB officials who were present in the Washington embassy do not recall seeing such a telegram, calling into question the extent of its distribution.¹⁵³ At the time, Warsaw Pact intelligence officials reported on everything they gleaned, including all manner of unsubstantiated rumors. Gordievsky himself remarks that KGB posts abroad "were required to report alarming information even if they themselves were skeptical of it."¹⁵⁴ The most plausible explanation, as Mark Kramer convincingly argues, is that unfounded rumors swirling around a nuclear-use exercise such as Able Archer 83—entirely conceivable—were reported on by KGB assets and then misinterpreted by Gordievsky.¹⁵⁵ None of the available evidence from

149. Jones, *Able Archer 83*, p. 33.

150. "Soviet Thinking on the Possibility of Armed Confrontation with the United States," CIA memorandum, 30 December 1983, in RRPL, JFME, Box 3, "January 1984 2" Folder. Helmut Kohl's government faced considerable opposition at home to its decision to base the new U.S. nuclear weapons in West Germany. See Helmut Kohl, *Erinnerungen*, Vol. 2, 1982–1990 (Munich: Droemer, 2005), pp. 191–202.

151. Akhromeev oral history, 8 February 1991, in *Soviet Intentions 1965–1985*, Vol. 2, p. 6.

152. Andrew and Gordievsky, *KGB*, p. 503.

153. Cherkashin oral history, 2007.

154. Andrew and Gordievsky, *KGB*, p. 489; and Gordievsky, *Next Stop Execution*, p. 261.

155. Kramer, "Die Nicht-Krise um 'Able Archer 1983,'" pp. 147–148.

east of the Iron Curtain indicates that policymakers were similarly alarmed by Able Archer 83.

Conclusion

NATO's Able Archer 83 exercise did not bring the world to the brink of nuclear war, even though tensions were high in the early 1980s. Soviet policymakers faced a slowing economy, aging political leaders, and serious challenges abroad. In such circumstances, they were understandably alert to any sign that the United States, led by the outspokenly anti-Soviet Reagan, might prey on the USSR. Project RYaN would, the KGB and its Warsaw Pact partners hoped, prevent such an eventuality in the future, but in 1983 it remained first and foremost a research and development project. During the Able Archer 83 exercise itself, as evidence from across the Eastern bloc demonstrates, policymakers did not take the idea of an imminent NATO surprise attack seriously. Their responses to the exercise were sanguine.

What, then, accounts for the longevity of the depiction of Able Archer 83 as a war scare in the popular and scholarly consciousness regarding the first half of the 1980s? The myth is an effective narrative device. One brief episode—a gripping tale of just how dangerous the Cold War was and how much worse it might have been, complete with spies and defectors, nuclear missiles, and both reckless and heroic policymakers (depending on the reader's perspective)—encapsulates all the anxieties of a world watching or looking back on the superpower struggle.

But there is more to the study of Able Archer 83 than correcting the historical record. Understanding this episode speaks to a broader methodological issue. How can and should scholars investigate “close calls,” be they real or imagined? Given the real dangers of potential nuclear use and the associated costs, this is an important area of inquiry for scholars of international security across disciplines. But the scarcity of data available pertaining to nuclear operations and, above all, the vulnerabilities and weaknesses thereof poses a unique challenge—and unique pitfalls. The first is overreliance on too narrow a source basis. In the case of Able Archer 83, Gordievsky's recollection of the time period conveyed to his British handlers while a double agent has taken on an outsized importance thanks largely to circular citation in the literature. Claims that November 1983 nearly witnessed a nuclear war rely, either directly or indirectly, on his version of events.

Beyond Gordievsky's testimony, the conventional wisdom regarding Able Archer 83 relies almost exclusively on U.S. sources. Although the conclusions

of the U.S. intelligence community should not be discounted out of hand, they are not authoritative evidence in and of themselves of Soviet perceptions, thinking, and intentions. The solution, at least in part, to this quandary is getting “both sides of the story” before making claims regarding international stability and nuclear weapons that have significant implications for policy today. As this article demonstrates, doing so can have significant consequences for our understanding of these events. “If the Soviets truly went on secret combat alert because the Americans were holding a nuclear exercise,” one author concludes, “the elaborate system of physical constraints, procedural safeguards, and geopolitical understandings that held the nuclear arsenals of both countries in check had somehow hollowed out.”¹⁵⁶ Fortunately, in November 1983 this was not the case.

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156. Ambinder, *The Brink*, p. 11.