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Able Archer: How close of a call was it?

Thomas Fraise  and Kjølsv Egeland 

ABSTRACT

Able Archer 83, a NATO nuclear exercise conducted in the fall of 1983, has been the subject of considerable debate in recent decades. While some analysts have argued that the superpowers came close to blows due to Soviet fears that the exercise was a ruse meant to disguise a NATO attack, revisionists have maintained that the danger associated with Able Archer 83 has been seriously overstated. In this article, the authors review the scholarship, take stock of the evidence, and discuss some of the challenges of studying nuclear history and close calls. They argue that further research is needed to determine how close of a nuclear call Able Archer 83 actually was and conclude that the case highlights the uncertainty inherent to nuclear policy making.

KEYWORDS

Able Archer; intelligence; propaganda; war scare; nuclear strategy; close calls

On November 2, 1983, NATO initiated that year's edition of Able Archer, a command-post exercise simulating nuclear war with the Warsaw Pact. The drill had been an annual occurrence for years, but in 1983, the Soviet reaction was "unprecedented"—Soviet nuclear capabilities were prepared and dispersed to the field (Jones 2016, 42). Western intelligence quickly picked up at least some of these unusual maneuvers, but US military leaders ultimately elected not to mirror the Soviet alert. The exercise was concluded without further incident on November 11. A week later, however, the Soviet Minister of Defense warned in a major Soviet newspaper that NATO's military exercises were "becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish from a real deployment of armed forces for aggression" (National Security Archive 2018). Did Soviet officials see Able Archer 83 as a possible subterfuge for a real attack? Or was the Soviet reaction a propaganda move or psy-op geared toward influencing Western policies?

While some have argued that the incident constituted a perilous close call, revisionists have maintained that the danger of Able Archer 83 has been seriously overstated. In this article, we review the scholarship, take stock of the evidence, and reflect on the challenges of studying nuclear history and close calls. While the claim that the Soviet Union was about to launch a "preemptive" attack lacks empirical support, it is too soon to conclude definitively that the event carried no risk of escalation. That we still do not know, four decades later, how close the Able Archer exercise brought

the world to nuclear war highlights the uncertainty that defines nuclear policy making.

Timeline of events

Able Archer 83 took place at the height of the Cold War. The months leading up to the drill saw some of the bipolar confrontation's most dramatic and iconic moments, including the US invasion of communist-led Grenada, Reagan's famous "evil empire" and Strategic Defense Initiative speeches, the Soviet Air Force's shooting down of a South Korean passenger jet (KAL 007) mistaken for an American spy plane, and the infamous September 26 Soviet false alarm. (For details on the false alarm, see <https://armscontrolcenter.org/the-soviet-false-alarm-incident-and-able-archer-83/>.) In late October, two weeks before Able Archer 83, Soviet intelligence officers noticed a tightening of security at US bases and an intensification in ciphered, high-level communication between Washington and London. According to Soviet intelligence, such activity could indicate preparations for a surprise nuclear attack. In reality, the tightening of security came in response to a terrorist attack against Marine Corps barracks in Beirut and the increase in communication between Washington and London concerned the US invasion of Grenada, formerly a British colony (Macintyre 2018, 342).

At any rate, as Able Archer got underway, the Soviet Air Force in East Germany uncharacteristically stood down all military flight operations. On November 5, 1983, two days before the commencement of the active

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phase of the NATO nuclear exercise, the KGB headquarters in Moscow sent the London residency a telegram: “In response to your request we are sending you the information which the Center has regarding possible Operations by the USA and its allies on British territory in preparations for [a nuclear strike].” The telegram continued to assert that “surprise” was the key element in the United States’ military strategy and that “it can be assumed that the period of time from the moment when the preliminary decision for [a nuclear strike] is taken, up to the order to deliver the strike will be of very short duration, possibly 7–10 days” (cited in Jones 2016, 41).

The nuclear-release part of Able Archer 83 was set to last from November 7 to 11. While in principle an annual war game, the 1983 edition came with several new elements. Organized as the last of a wider series of drills codenamed “Autumn Forge 83,” Able Archer would be immediately preceded by “Reforger,” a 170-flight, radio-silent airlift of 19,000 US soldiers to Europe. Able Archer 83 also saw non-routine elements such as the deployment of “non-warload” systems to dispersal sites in the woods of Germany; a simulated move through all DEFCON levels to “general alert;” the shifting of command from “Permanent War Headquarters” to “Alternate War Headquarters;” the practicing of new nuclear release procedures, including consultations between cells in Washington and London; and US aircraft practicing nuclear warhead handling procedures, including taxiing out of hangars carrying realistic-looking dummy warheads (Jones 2016, 32–33).

Able Archer 83 coincided with two points of immediate vulnerability for the Soviet security state. First, Yuri Andropov, the Soviet Union’s paramount leader, had at the time of the exercise been hospitalized for months and was unable to provide strong leadership. Second, the active phase of Able Archer 83 was set to begin on Revolution Day, a major Soviet holiday. Soviet military planners saw holidays as the perfect time to attack (Adamsky 2013, 27). They also saw exercises as useful means of covering up real preparations for attack; the Soviet Union had used this very method for its 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia. According to Beatrice Heuser (2018, 127), decision makers in the Kremlin may also have planned a similar move against Poland in 1981. “Such thoughts were clearly present in the minds of Soviet leaders” in 1983. Whether such thoughts did in fact play a role with respect to the Soviet reaction to Able Archer 83 remains speculation, however.

On either November 8 or 9 (day 2 or 3 of the nuclear-release part of the Able Archer exercise), the KGB distributed to its station chiefs around the world an urgent but incorrect message stating that US forces had been

put on alert (Jones 2016, 3). A potential reason for the alert, the KGB suggested, was that “the countdown to a nuclear first strike had begun under the cover of ABLE ARCHER” (Macintyre 2018, 343). At least some Soviet nuclear forces were also put on heightened alert. While the details are still unclear, the alert appears to have involved at least the Soviet Air Force in East Germany and Poland, as well as several intercontinental ballistic missile and intermediate-range missile sites in the Soviet Union; 75 of the Soviet Union’s 150 mobile intermediate-range ballistic missiles were reportedly camouflaged and dispersed to the field. A Soviet naval officer has reported that his submarine was deployed to “battle stations” under the arctic ice (Scott 2020; Jones 2016).

Soviet intelligence activities were also intensified (National Security Archive 2021). The former East German spy Rainer Rupp has claimed that he was contacted by his handlers on November 9 to report on whether NATO was preparing a nuclear attack. In a 2015 interview, he maintained that “the Soviets were completely convinced that ‘Able Archer’ was the cover for a real nuclear strike” (Jones 2017, 205). Rupp, however, responded that he could see no such preparations, possibly helping to allay any acute Soviet concerns (Downing 2018, 253). Rupp’s story can only be partially substantiated, however, and it remains possible that the former spy either exaggerated or misunderstood the Soviets’ true attitude. It is also possible that he had been influenced by the narrative of a Soviet war scare that developed in the years after the exercise.

War scare or propaganda?

There is no compelling evidence available in Soviet or other Warsaw Pact archives that high-level leaders in the Eastern bloc seriously believed that Able Archer 83 was a real attack. Notably, the relevant records of the Soviet Politburo contain no mention of Able Archer or a possible surprise attack by NATO. In addition, key Soviet leaders of the period, including Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev, Deputy Foreign Minister Georgi Kornienko, and Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Dobrynin, subsequently denied any knowledge of the alleged Soviet preparations to “preempt” a NATO attack (see Miles 2020). This appears, at a minimum, to put the most grandiose claims about a major Soviet war scare in serious doubt (Miles 2020; Barrass 2016; Kramer 2013). If high-ranking Soviet policymakers truly believed that NATO was about to launch a nuclear first strike against the Soviet Union, surely it would have left a paper trail? And if not, one might reasonably expect that at least a handful of former officials would have been able to remember the time

they thought human civilization was about to come to an end. At the same time, one might speculate that codes of military bravery and professionalism might discourage openness about fear, paranoia, or errors of judgment.

Pushing back against the revisionists, certain experts have pointed out that some Politburo records remain classified and that key political discussions may have taken place at Andropov's bedside at a Moscow hospital, leaving virtually no archival evidence (Jones 2016, 35). The overall Soviet intelligence assessments of November 1983 also remain classified. For these analysts, an absence of direct evidence for the war scare does not equal evidence for its absence. What is more, the situation on the ground in Germany and Poland could plausibly have escalated to dangerous levels irrespective of the beliefs, fears, or desires of high-level leaders in Moscow and Washington.

Perhaps the most important source for the Able Archer war-scare narrative was the Russian double agent Oleg Gordievsky, a British KGB asset. (On the methodological difficulties associated with relying on the personal testimonies of former spies, see Moran 2014.) Additional sources have slowly emerged. Drawing on signals intelligence and information from Gordievsky and an unnamed Czech spy, British intelligence authored two reports on Able Archer 83 in March and June of 1984. One of these, titled "The Soviet concerns about a surprise NATO attack," has been partly declassified. This report notes both the extraordinary Soviet nuclear alert and "other reports of alleged concern about a surprise NATO attack" (Jones 2016, 42). The second document, entitled "The detection of Soviet preparation for war against NATO," remains classified. Another key Western source is the 1990 report of the US President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB). While US intelligence initially held the reports of a Soviet war scare to be propaganda, the PFIAB concluded that "[i]n 1983 we [the United States] may have inadvertently placed our relations with the Soviet Union on a hair trigger" (PFIAB 1990, xii). In fact, the PFIAB claimed, "it appears that at least some Soviet forces were preparing to preempt or counterattack a NATO strike launched under cover of Able Archer" (PFIAB 1990, 75). The PFIAB report was based on approximately 100 interviews with key officials and concluded that "[t]here is little doubts in our minds that the Soviets were genuinely worried by Able Archer" (PFIAB 1990). Of course, the PFIAB report was written long before historians gained access to Soviet and other Warsaw Pact archives.

Interviews with former policy makers and security practitioners provide another important source of

information. Interestingly, existing interviews have hinted at a level of confusion over nomenclature: It appears that some or perhaps many Soviet officials did not distinguish between "Able Archer" and the preceding drill, "Reforger," or the wider umbrella exercise, "Autumn Forge." For example, in a 1990s interview with the *Washington Post*, Akhromeyev said he could not even remember Able Archer 83. The most dangerous NATO exercises, he claimed, had been Autumn Forge 83 and Reforger 83. Akhromeyev maintained that while he had never believed war to be "imminent," he recalled that in 1983 he had been of the opinion that "there [could] be a war between the Soviet Union and the United States on the initiative of the United States" (Barras 2016, 36). Andrian Danilevich, a senior Soviet military strategist, "recalled 'vivid personal memories' and 'frightening situations' during 'the period of great tension' in 1983, but that there was never a sense of 'an immediate threat' of attack within the general staff" (National Security Archive 2018).

While there is no "smoking gun" evidence of an acute Kremlin war scare in relation to Able Archer 83, some analysts see ample evidence for the weaker claim that elements of the Soviet security state did worry about surprise nuclear attack more generally and that this may have been connected to the unprecedented Soviet nuclear alert in November 1983. There may have existed a serious potential for inadvertent escalation due to misperception at lower levels of command.

High-level leadership had certainly made it clear that surprise attack was possible. In a speech to the KGB in 1981, Andropov stated that the intelligence community's "main objective" was "not to miss the military preparations of the enemy, its preparations for a nuclear strike, and not to miss the real risk of the outbreak of war" (National Security Archive 2018). Andropov insisted that "one of the crucial elements of a nuclear strategy is to strike in such a way that one strike disables as many vital installations of the enemy as possible." Thus, the side with better information would "gain the advantage long before the missiles hit the target" (National Security Archive 2018). Several intelligence sources from inside the Warsaw Pact, including the unnamed Czech intelligence officer, Stasi agent Rainer Rupp, and the East German spymaster Markus Wolf, described Soviet intelligence as being "convinced" or "obsessed" with the possibility of a surprise attack (Jones 2016, 21, 34; National Security Archive 2018).

Paranoia and rationality

Several researchers have argued that key leaders within the Soviet security state held conspiratorial, paranoid views, obsessing about the possibility of a repetition of

“Barbarossa,” the surprise German attack against the Soviet Union in 1941 (Mastny 2009, 116; Freedman and Michaels 2019, 532–534; Andrew and Gordievsky 1993; Downing 2018). For an opposing view, see Miles (2020). According to one commentator, Soviet decision makers were driven by dogmatic and extremist fears of surprise attack, and the KGB, forced to justify its own existence and funding, was happy to fan the fears of nuclear war: “This led to a vicious self-reinforcing cycle” (Manchanda 2009, 116–117). Others believe that “Soviet anxieties were far from irrational.” Instead, fears “reflected realities and trends in superpower relations, including in areas of nuclear technology and strategy” (Scott 2020, 133; Adamsky 2013).

Three years prior to Able Archer 83, the US Carter administration had adopted Presidential Directive-59, endorsing selective nuclear strikes and “decapitation” of the Soviet leadership as key options for the US military (Adamsky 2013, 11). The gist of the new strategy was deliberately leaked to the media and diplomatic community, ostensibly to enhance deterrence. In the words of a former US official, “we started to let it be known that one of our priorities was targeting the Soviet leadership—and we knew where their bunkers were and we had the weapons to destroy them” (Barrass 2009, 234). According to Adamsky, the early 1980s confronted the Soviets with a “triple window of vulnerability.” First, the Soviet Union’s nuclear early warning system “had crucial shortcomings and was unreliable” (Adamsky 2013, 14). Second, the Soviet command and control system “did not provide enough time for the leadership to receive the warning and to communicate the launch order” (Adamsky 2013). And third, US advances in precision technology were believed to have put Soviet command and control infrastructure at greater risk than before (Adamsky 2013, 16).

The establishment in 1981 of a Soviet intelligence project called “nuclear missile attack” (usually referred to under its Russian acronym “RIaN”) has also been pointed to as an indication of a heightened fear of surprise attack in the Kremlin. A major Soviet intelligence project, RIaN, was premised on the idea that “deviations from peacetime routines in a wide variety of spheres—military, political, economic, health administration, civil defence—could provide preliminary warning of Western preparations for a first strike” (Andrew and Gordievsky 1993, 69). RIaN received information from several Warsaw Pact services and pioneered the use of computers in Soviet intelligence. Among the indicators reportedly tracked by RIaN were the precise location of NATO policy makers, alert levels at NATO military bases, how late into the evening the lights stayed on in NATO defense ministry offices, and even the

whereabouts of the US Constitution and Declaration of Independence, the assumption being that such documents would be moved to secure locations in advance of the initiation of nuclear war (Mastny 2009, 113; Scott 2020, 135). The extent to which RIaN was truly exceptional or indicative of an exaggerated fear of surprise attack compared to the levels of fear in other nuclear-armed states remains open to interpretation, however. Seeking to predict or uncover attacks, after all, is a basic job for any intelligence service. That said, it does not appear that the CIA or other Western intelligence services were tracking Warsaw Pact movements with quite the same level of urgency as their RIaN counterparts.

Reflections and new avenues for research

Students of nuclear history are faced with several unique difficulties. These relate not only to regimes of nuclear secrecy but also the inescapable entanglement of nuclear weapons policies and behavior with government signaling and propaganda efforts. In the case of Able Archer, researchers are confronted with the specific problem that the survival rate of archival documents is not random. The security agencies involved (or sub-divisions or individuals within them) have been known to obfuscate or destroy records that might reveal incompetence or otherwise get them in trouble. As Mastny (2009, 118–119) points out with respect to East German intelligence, the Stasi “shredded many documents in late 1989 but exempted from destruction any items that revealed the agents’ professional competence and that could cast them in the role of peacemakers.”

Most of the key characters in the Able Archer story have now passed away. Oral history, which proved immensely valuable for scholarship on the Cuban Missile Crisis, accordingly seems increasingly unfeasible as a means to unearth new details about the case. Moreover, many Soviet documents of relevance to the study of Able Archer 83—and of superpower relations during the Cold War more generally—remain classified because they contain information about intelligence-collection practices or nuclear command and control procedures that may still be in use in Russia. These documents are therefore not likely to be released any time soon. Secrecy remains an issue also in the United States; the most recent volume of the *Foreign Relations of the United States* was recently withdrawn due to concerns that a handful of documents relating to Able Archer revealed too much about US intelligence collection methods (*Washington Post* 2022).

Further declassification of documents relevant to the Able Archer incident could be of major benefit

to nuclear learning. Sources of particular interest would be Soviet military and KGB/RlAN documents from 1983. There are also a multitude of Western sources that have yet to be declassified, including one of the British intelligence reports published in 1984 and the background material of the 1990 US PFIAB report. However, beyond investigating the important but narrow question of what high-ranking Soviet or Western leaders thought about Able Archer in November 1983, analysts might in the future dig more deeply into the possibilities that may have existed for escalation further down in the chain of command, be it through accidents, misperception, and/or unauthorized use of force. While Soviet field commanders ostensibly did not formally enjoy pre-delegated authority to launch nuclear weapons, they may have been physically able to do so in practice, at any rate for certain weapon systems. We simply do not know what might have happened had there been some unforeseen accident or had the United States responded more aggressively to the Soviet alert.

As of 2023, we still do not know how far or close we came to disaster in November 1983. This knowledge gap implies a challenge for academic historians but also a series of difficult questions for policymakers. Where do we place the burden of proof? Should the onus be on those who cry danger or those who put faith in the existing nuclear order? To what extent can deterrence be relied upon to hold in a long-term perspective? As we know from the case of the Cuban Missile Crisis, it can take years and decades for crucial information to surface. While many analysts were once of the opinion that Khrushchev and Kennedy had been in perfect control of events in October 1962 and that the danger of the Cuban Missile Crisis had been overstated, the most up-to-date historiography suggests the opposite (Plokhly 2021).

This is not to say that the scholarship on Able Archer will necessarily go the same way. However, in 2021, US authorities released previously classified intelligence information suggesting that the commander of the Soviet 4th Army Air Forces in Eastern Europe had in fact ordered all his units to make “preparations for the immediate use of nuclear weapons” during Able Archer 83 (National Security Archive 2021). While this revelation does not confirm maximalists’ accounts of a major war scare involving Soviet leaders in the Kremlin, it does hint at the potential for escalation at lower levels. Was Able Archer 83 a nuclear close call? The fact that we do not know may be more than scary enough.

Editor’s note: The analysis presented in this article is based in part on a roundtable discussion at Sciences Po in November 2018. The participants included many of the world’s top authorities on Able Archer and the Cold War: Beatrice Heuser, David Holloway, Nate Jones, Mark Kramer, Simon Miles, Benoît Pelopidas, Svetlana Savranskaya, and Martin Sherwin.

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