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Abstract of Thesis


War between the Soviet Union and United States, wrote President Ronald Reagan, would be “two spiders in a bottle locked in a suicidal fight until both were dead.” Early in his administration the USA and USSR approached this dire scenario In 1983, the Soviet Intelligence Operation RYAN –a global effort to provide strategic warning of a U.S. nuclear first strike erroneously reported to the Center that the NATO military exercise Able Archer 83 was really a cover for a planned nuclear attack upon the USSR, causing the USSR to ready nuclear strike forces in East Germany and Poland. Sergei Akhromeyev, Chief of Staff of the Soviet Armed Forces, has stated that he believed in 1983 that it was possible the United States would launch a nuclear first strike. This essay argues that that American foreign policy during the Reagan Administration contributed to the Soviet Union’s fear of American attack; that the United States intelligence community either failed to detect, or ignored, signs of this genuine Soviet fear; and that, after learning of this danger, President Reagan embraced the policy of cooperation with the Soviet Union which led to the end of the Cold War.
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INTRODUCTION

During a November 1983 NATO exercise named Able Archer 83, the world reached the brink of nuclear war. This NATO nuclear drill simulated war so precisely that the Soviet Union believed it might have been a cover for an actual nuclear attack. Relying on documents from the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, unpublished interviews with Reagan Administration officials, formerly secret Western and Eastern intelligence documents, and published sources, this paper will narrate this secret superpower confrontation.

As NATO conducted Able Archer 83, its largest and most realistic simulated nuclear release ever, Soviet KGB agents throughout the world received a chilling telegram from their Moscow headquarters: “It can be assumed that the period of time for the moment when the preliminary decision for [a nuclear missile attack] RYAN will be of very short duration, possibly 7 to 10 days.” The telegram conveyed orders to agents to collect and report observations of military

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1 It is important to note that the exercise was not known as “Able Archer 83” to Soviet intelligence as it was being conducted. Soviet analysts referred to it as “Autumn Forge 83,” the name for the larger, months-long, umbrella exercise in which Able Archer was the conclusion. “Able Archer 83” came into vogue with the first public exposé of the incident in a 16 October 1988 Sunday Telegraph article entitled “Brink of World War III: When the World Almost Went to War.” Hence, “Able Archer 83,” the term most used by the historical community was not the term most commonly used by actors as the event transpired. See for instance, Colonel L. V. Levadov, “Itogi operativnoi podgotovki obedinennix sil NATO v 1983 godu” (Results of the Operational Training of NATO Joint Armed Forces in 1983,” Voyennaya Misl’ (Military Thought), no. 2 (February 1984), 67-76; Sergei Akhromeyev interview conducted by Don Oberdorfer, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, 1990.

alerts, military exercises, new channels and methods of communications, and unusual activity by Western leaders. At the same time as Soviet Agents were instructed to detect and report a Western nuclear attack, NATO was practicing for one. The Soviet Union, believing a NATO attack to be possible, placed its nuclear forces on heightened alert. KGB agents abroad were categorically warned, “Ne Prozerot!” “Don’t Miss It!”

This paper uses new archival evidence to examine the Operation RYAN, Able Archer 83, and the danger of nuclear war which occurred during the 1983 War Scare. It presents three arguments to analyze the incident: that American foreign policy during the Reagan administration contributed to the Soviet Union’s fear and preparations for nuclear war; that the United States intelligence community either failed to detect, or downplayed, signs of this genuine Soviet fear of a US nuclear attack; and that President Reagan, upon learning of the danger caused by Able Archer 83, adopted a more conciliatory line towards the Soviet Union. Able Archer 83 holds the distinction of being an event which both pushed the world closer to the nuclear abyss and illuminated the necessity for better relations between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Sources and Methodology

Scholarship of the 1983 War Scare has recently been criticized for its “circle reference dependency,” an overreliance upon “the same scanty evidence.”

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5 Thorsten Borring Olesen, “Truth on Demand: Denmark and the Cold War,” in Nanna Hvidt and Hans Mouritzen, ed., Danish Foreign Policy Yearbook 2006, Danish Institute for international Studies, 105; see also Beth A. Fischer’s review of Vojtech Mastney’s “How Able was ’Able
This thesis begins to rectify this dependency by presenting new, documentary evidence found in the Reagan Presidential Library, the US National Archives and Record Administration, the Library of Congress, and CIA and State Department declassified document repositories.

At the Reagan Presidential Library, the collections of Soviet Advisor Jack F. Matlock Jr., National Security Advisor Robert C. “Bud” McFarlane, and National Security Council Staff Member Donald R. Fortier provided the most insight on this period. Still, the majority of documents in these collections remain classified. In addition to released documents, information can also be “triangulated” by critical use of cover letters and titles of withheld documents available to researchers.

This paper also relies upon interviews with Reagan administration officials. The author interviewed Reagan’s National Security Advisor Robert “Bud” McFarlane and his Ambassador to NATO David M. Abshire. A wealth of information can be gleaned from interviews conducted by journalist and author Don Oberdorfer with key Soviet and American officials which were once “on background,” and are now available to the public at the Princeton University’s Mudd Manuscript Library.

This paper also draws from military analysis of Able Archer 83 received through Freedom of Information Act requests, as well as declassified American, Russian, Czech, and Bulgarian intelligence documents, many of which were

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6 On 13 April 2009, President Barack Obama ordered the release of nearly 250,000 pages new records by the Reagan Presidential Library.
7 I have requested hundreds more documents from the Reagan Library by Freedom of Information Act requests and Mandatory Declassification Review requests.
collected by the Cold War International History Project and the National Security Archive.\textsuperscript{8}

**Historiography**

The evidence presented in this paper is an important contribution to the historical study of the November War Scare as well as the broader “Era of Renewed Confrontation” which spanned from the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to Reagan’s conciliatory, collaborative 1984 “Ivan and Anya” speech and his cooperation on improved relations and drastic arms reduction with Gorbachev.\textsuperscript{9}

Able Archer 83, the peak of the Era of Renewed Confrontation, is a relatively novel topic of study in academic journals; *Cold War History* and the *Journal of Cold War Studies* have both recently published articles relating to Able Archer 83 which provide further research and argument. “When Truth is Stranger than Fiction: the *Able Archer* Incident,” by the political scientist Arnav Manchanda, draws from earlier secondary accounts of Able Archer 83 to present a useful timeline and examines the incident through a theoretical lens.\textsuperscript{10} Manchanda states in his introduction that his tertiary approach is due to the fact that “[o]fficial NATO and Western documents regarding the exercise have not yet

\textsuperscript{8} The majority of Freedom of Information Act requests I submitted were either unfruitful or have not yet been processed. The agency of exception was the United States Air Force.


\textsuperscript{10} Arnav Manchanda, “When the Truth is Stranger than Fiction,” *Cold War History*, 9 no. 1 (Feb 2009), 111-133.
been declassified.”¹¹ This paper will use declassified official documents to elaborate on Manchanda’s timeline.

Vojtech Mastny in “How Able was ‘Able Archer’?: Nuclear Trigger and Intelligence in Perspective,” draws from Warsaw Pact documents, conferences and interviews to present a view of the War Scare from the Eastern side.¹² Notwithstanding his excellent research, the evidence presented in this paper contradicts his assertions that the danger appeared not to be genuine, and that Reagan tasked Jack Matlock with writing the pivotal 16 January, 1984 “Ivan and Anya” speech before the President was alarmed by reports of Able Archer,¹³ therefore challenging Mastny’s assertion that “[t]he ‘Able Archer’ crisis was not nearly as important as it may seem in the light of its retrospective notoriety.”¹⁴

Able Archer 83 is also mentioned – but frequently not elaborated upon – in many broader histories of the Cold War. John Lewis Gaddis in The Cold War: A New History, proclaims Able Archer 83 was “probably the most dangerous moment since the Cuban Missile Crisis.”¹⁵ Melvyn P. Leffler, in For the Soul of Mankind, credits Able Archer 83 as an important “learning experience” for the US President.¹⁶ Washington Post journalist Dan Oberdorfer interviewed several prominent American and Soviet officials regarding Able Archer 83 in From the Cold War to a New Era: The United States and the Soviet Union, 1983-1991.¹⁷

¹¹ Manchanda, “Truth is Stranger than Fiction,” 112.
¹² Vojtech Mastny, “How Able was ‘Able Archer’?: Nuclear Trigger and Intelligence in Perspective,” Journal of Cold War Studies, 11 no. 1 (Winter 2009), 108-123.
¹³ Mastny, “How Able was ‘Able Archer’?,” 121-122.
¹⁴ Mastny, “How Able was ‘Able Archer’?,” 122.
The best comprehensive account of Russian-Soviet relations during the post-Détente era remains Raymond L. Garthoff’s *The Great Transition*. In each of these works (as well as other histories), the authors’ accounts of Able Archer 83 are based on monographs which in turn are based on a handful of primary-source accounts and memoirs. Beth B. Fischer was the first to theorize upon the effect which Able Archer 83 had on Reagan’s policies in *The Reagan Reversal Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War*. Most recently, James Mann’s *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan: A History of the End of the Cold War* incorporates the President’s reaction to Able Archer 83 in his biographical view of Reagan’s struggle to end the Cold War.

Perhaps the most important account by an actor during Able Archer 83 comes from Oleg Gordievsky, the highest-ranking KGB agent ever to defect to the West. He convincingly presents the Soviet account of the 1983 War Scare through his book (co-authored by Christopher Andrew), *KGB: The Inside Story of Its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev*, and in *Comrade Kryuchkov’s Instructions*, based on smuggled and reprinted KGB documents. Key Western-centered accounts of the crisis are found in former CIA analyst Peter Vincent Pry’s, *War Scare: Russia and America on the Nuclear Brink*, and CIA staff historian Benjamin B. Fischer’s “A Cold War Conundrum,” and “The

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22 Pry, *War Scare*. 

President Reagan’s speeches, memoirs, and diary present his changing opinions of the Soviet Union and the effect – this paper argues – which Able Archer 83 had upon him. The public record of Reagan's speeches can be found in *Public Papers of the Presidents: Ronald Reagan, 1981-1988*. Reagan's own description of the evolution of his policy can be found in the day-by-day accounts in his diaries and – with hindsight– in his autobiography, *An American Life*.26 Members of his administration have also published memoirs which illuminate Able Archer 83 and its aftermath. These include, Secretary of State Alexander Haig’s *Caveat: Realism, Reagan and Foreign Policy*, his successor George Shultz's *Turmoil and Triumph*, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger's *Fighting for Peace*, National Security Council Member Richard Pipes’s *VIXI*, Soviet Advisor Jack F. Matlock’s *Reagan and Gorbachev* and National Security

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Advisor Robert C. “Bud” McFarlane’s *Special Trust.*

The far more fragmentary view from the Soviet side is described by Soviet officials, including Ambassador to the United States, Anatoly F. Dobrynin’s *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents (1962-1986)*, Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Gromyko’s *Memories,* and American specialist Georgi Arbatov’s *The System: An Insider's Life in Soviet Politics.*

Historian Vladislav M. Zubok presents the best available survey of Soviet decision-making in *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev.*

Russian language sources include the semi-official hagiography of Soviet and Russian Intelligence Services, *Vneshnaya razvedka Rossii* (The Foreign Intelligence Service of Russia);

*Glazami marshala i diplomatata: kriticheskii vzgliad na vneshniuiu politiku SSSR do i posle 1985 goda* (With the Eyes of a Marshal and Diplomat: A Critical Look at the International Politics of the USSR through 1985), an analysis by Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev and Foreign Affairs specialist Georgi Kornienko; and Arbatov’s *Delo: Iastreby i*

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Golubi Kholodnoi Voiny (Politics: Hawks and doves of the Cold War).\textsuperscript{32} Roy A. Medvedev’s biography Neizvestnii Andropov (The Unknown Andropov) chronicles Andropov’s life but does not mention Operation RYAN or Able Archer 83.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{32} Georgi Arbatov, Iastreby i Golubi Kholodnoi Voiny (Politics: Hawks and doves of the Cold War), (Moscow: Algoritm, 2009).
\textsuperscript{33} Roy A. Medvedev, Neizvestnii Andropov (The Unknown Andropov), (Rostov: Feniks, 1999), 429-443.
PART I: “STANDING TALL,” THE “MIRROR-IMAGE,” AND
OPERATION RYAN

When Reagan assumed the presidency, the era of Détente had ended. To
counter Soviet domestic human rights abuses, communist third world expansion,
the invasion of Afghanistan, and the placement of medium-range SS-20 missiles
in Europe, President Jimmy Carter had increased US military spending, imposed
embargos on the USSR, continued America’s diplomatic tilt toward China,
withdrew from the SALT II nuclear limitation treaty, and boycotted the 1980
Olympics. The superpower hostility and competition mirrored the beginning of
the Cold War, leading one historian to assert that “the early 1980s had a feeling of
déjà vu.” Deterioration of relations hastened with the election of Reagan. The
relative parity and cordiality achieved by the two powers during the 20 years
since the Missiles of October had disappeared by 1983, paving the way for the
Missiles of November.

Upon entering office, Reagan’s goal was determined to get America to
“stand tall” politically, economically, and militarily against the Soviet Union.
The pursuit of this aim, evidenced in his early speeches and actions, startled the
Politburo, which had predicted that despite election-year rhetoric, he would craft
US-Soviet relations similar to Nixon’s pragmatic approach. In fact, Reagan
immediately attempted to show the Soviet Union that “times had changed” by

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34 Zubok, A Failed Empire, 265.
35 Reagan, Remarks at a Meeting With Republican Congressional Candidates, East Room, White
sharply curtailing both formal and backchannel contacts. This changed attitude of reduced dialogue manifested itself in Reagan’s abandonment of SALT II, the sluggish pursuit of START (Strategic Arms Reduction Talks), and the refusal to compromise on INF (Intermediate Nuclear Forces) limitation and reduction treaties. Reagan’s first Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, justified this decline in dialogue by stating, “[a]t this early stage there was nothing substantive to talk about, nothing to negotiate, until the USSR began to demonstrate its willingness to behave like a responsible power. That was the basis of our early policy toward Moscow.”36

**Correspondence Between Statesmen**

Some scholars have argued that Reagan was determined to work with the Soviet Union from his inauguration but that the Soviet side had proved either unwilling or unable to cooperate. Often cited are his handwritten letters to Brezhnev and Andropov, as well as the President’s quip that, “the Soviet leaders kept dying on me,” preventing cooperation.37 Despite these gestures, it appears the administration was not eager to engage with the Soviets. At the first meeting between Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin and U.S. Secretary of State Haig, the former repeatedly asked how both governments could “begin to develop a dialogue?” Haig replied that, “there could be no business as usual,” until the

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36 Haig, *Caveat*, 105.
37 See James Graham Wilson, “Did Reagan Make Gorbachev Possible?” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 38 no. 3 (September 2008), 456-475. Wilson does an excellent job analyzing the newly released letters between Reagan and Soviet leaders. This paper differs from Wilson’s analysis of the correspondence, in that it sees the Soviet leaders as more eager to “extend the olive branch” of talks and negotiation, and the Reagan administration as more hesitant to engage; Reagan, *American Live*, 14.
Soviet Union showed “restraint” including among other things, “control of its client, Cuba.” The Reagan administration replied to the Soviet Union’s early requests for cooperation with preconditions that had to be met.

Reagan’s handwritten note, written a week after his release from George Washington Hospital after the 31 March 1981 assassination attempt, was a reply to a letter he had received from Brezhnev a month earlier. In February 1981, Brezhnev had indicated willingness for a summit meeting. Reagan’s response included two letters. The first, personal and cordial, recalled a 1973 meeting between the two leaders in San Clemente, and asked Brezhnev to cooperate to provide for the “real needs and wants of our people.” This constructive letter was accompanied by a more official missive, likely drafted by the State Department, which condemned the “USSR’s unremitting and comprehensive military build up over the past fifteen years, a build up which...carries disturbing implications for a search for military superiority.” The correspondence ended, likely owing to the harsh tone of the official letter.


38 Haig, Caveat, 102-109; Garthoff, The Great Transition, 45-46.
40 One opponent of Reagan meeting with Andropov was former President Richard M. Nixon. Nixon wrote a letter advising Reagan to skip a “get-acquainted meeting” with Andropov stating that the “spirit [of goodwill] evaporates very fast” from meetings without “substance.” Nixon advised Reagan to meet with Andropov more than a year later, in 1984. At this meeting, Nixon recommended Reagan should “work to reduce the possibility of war coming by miscalculation.”
leader “shared an enormous responsibility for the preservation of stability in the world” and recommended the two leaders communicate through “private and candid” channels. It was not until this August 1983 letter that Reagan acquiesced to the dialogue Dobrynin and Brezhnev had proposed in January and February of 1981.

American Defense: Catch Up or Build Up?

Notwithstanding Reagan’s vague overtures in his letters to Soviet leaders, Reagan’s early defense buildup and rhetoric towards the USSR were unquestionably hard-line. From his inauguration, President Reagan implemented and oversaw the largest peace-time military build up in American history. He proposed a $2.7 trillion defense budget for 1982-1989, more than was spent during the Korean and Vietnam wars combined.41 The President’s justification for this spending – that “the Soviet Union does have a definite margin of superiority” – was not true; the CIA, in a September 1983 Congressional hearing, testified that Soviet military expenditures – both absolute and relative to GDP – had been declining since 1976.42 Reagan’s belief in the need for increased military spending was influenced by the conservatives of his administration. Thirty-two of his advisors were members of the Committee on the Present Danger, a committee which had staunchly opposed START II and

Reagan’s early National Security Decision Directives 32 and 75 exemplified the United States’ aggressive military and geopolitical posture toward the Soviet Union. NSDD-32 attempted to weaken Soviet alliances (especially in Poland) by fostering nationalism and by forcing the USSR to “bear the brunt of its economic shortcomings,” and pledged “[t]o limit Soviet military capabilities by strengthening the U.S. military.” NSDD-75, enacted 17 January, 1983, declared that US policy toward the USSR would consist of “external resistance to Soviet imperialism; internal pressure on the USSR to weaken the sources of Soviet imperialism, and negotiations to eliminate, on the basis of strict reciprocity, outstanding disagreements.” This national security policy seemed very reminiscent of the “rollback” strategy of the Eisenhower administration. Reagan’s decision to continue the deployment of Pershing II and long-range cruise missiles in Western Europe played a key part of his early policy toward the Soviet Union.

While Reagan’s decision to deploy intermediate-range missiles in Europe was presented as an attempt to preserve nuclear parity with the Soviet Union, his Strategic Defense Initiative [SDI], defined in NSDD-85 as a space-based missile defense shield, was widely viewed by the Soviets as an expansion of the arms race.

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43 These included, CIA Director William J. Casey, Assistant Secretary of Defense, Richard N. Perle, NFC Staff Expert on Soviet Affairs, Richard Pipes; Powaski, Return to Armageddon, 15.
46 The decision to deploy NATO intermediate range missiles to Western Europe to counter the Soviet deployment of SS-20 intermediate range missiles along its Western border was made in December, 1979. NATO continued preparing intermediate-range missiles for deployment at the same time as they attempted to negotiate with the USSR for a reduction or elimination of intermediate-range missiles in Europe, this was known as the “dual-track decision.”
into space and an attempt to seek offensive nuclear superiority. The American introduction of SDI caused the Soviets to question the viability of missile-reduction treaties with the US and was a key factor in their 23 November walkout from the INF and START talks.\footnote{Sergei Akhromeyev interview conducted by Don Oberdorfer, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, 1990.}

**Pershing II’s, Launch On Warning, and Operation RYAN**

While Reagan’s plans for SDI proved a clear departure from nuclear parity, the imminent deployment of Pershing II missiles played the largest role during Able Archer 83. Because of their new “super-sudden first strike” capability – they could reach Moscow from West Germany in less than six minutes – Soviet nuclear command had now become more vulnerable to a decapitating first strike. On 4 August, 1983, the CPSU Politburo resolved to actively try to block the deployment of intermediate range missiles. Andropov outlined three pillars of this opposition to his colleagues:

1. We must not lose time setting in motion all the levers which could impact the governments and parliaments of the NATO countries in an attempt to create the most possible opposition towards the deployment of American missiles in Europe.
2. It is essential to specifically and overarchingly coordinate all opposition; diplomatic action and propaganda must complement and reinforce each other.
3. Steps should not be formal, but specifically designed to produce the effect [of aborted deployment].\footnote{4 August 1983, Zasedanie politbyuro TsK KPSS (Meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Dmitrii Antonovich Volkogonov Papers, Container 26, Reel 17.}

The Soviet Union’s coordinated attempt to stop the deployment of intermediate-range missiles was well known at the time. Mastny argues that the fear of war
within the Soviet Union during Able Archer 83 was “engineered” by Soviet leadership for “its campaign against NATO’s ‘Euromissiles,’” and was “called off” after the crucial 23 November 1983 vote for deployment in the West German Bundestag.49 This paper, however, asserts that Soviet fear of war during Able Archer 83 was real, not manufactured, and that the deployment of Pershings II missiles was a contributing factor to, not an end result of, the War Scare.50

Valentin Falin, a high ranking Soviet official in the Foreign Ministry, explained the reason behind this anxiety in the Central Committee’s prominent journal, Kommunist. He stated that with the deployment of Pershing II missiles, “[i]mperialism has decided to limit both the time and the space of the USSR and for all the world of socialism, to just five minutes for contemplation in a crisis situation.”51 Indeed, a small, five-minute window to launch a successful nuclear counterstrike put the very theory of Mutually Assured Destruction into question.

A great irony of the Cold War is that despite the central role the theories of Deterrence and Mutually Assured Destruction played, as the Cold War progressed, both superpowers perceived themselves as increasingly vulnerable to a decapitating nuclear strike. A preemptive nuclear strike could – both sides feared – cut communication between the central command of the respective superpowers and their arsenals, making it impossible to launch a counterattack

49 Mastny, “How Able was ‘Able Archer’?” 120-121. McFarlane believed Soviet bureaucracy “nurtured the idea” of a dangerous Ronald in an attempt to “drive a wedge between the US and Europe,” but also acknowledge genuine fear within some sectors of the Soviet Union. Robert McFarlane interview conducted by author, 22 April, 2009
51 Garthoff, The Great Transition, 173.
and hence voiding the vast nuclear stockpiles each side had built up to deter the other. To protect against a decapitating first strike, each side began to rely upon the doctrine of Launch on Warning (LOW); since only a few minutes would be available to counter a nuclear strike, early detection and preemption became a critical focus.\textsuperscript{52} The prospective introduction of newer, lightning-fast Pershing II missiles further increased pressure on Soviet leaders to adopt Launch on Warning doctrine.

One important consequence of this LOW doctrine was the reliance placed upon human intelligence (as opposed to radar and satellite technology) to monitor for a nuclear attack. At a secret May 1981 conference, KGB Chief Andropov announced to his agents that the United States was actively preparing for nuclear war. To combat this threat, Andropov announced that the Politburo had ordered the largest peace-time intelligence operation in history. Foreign (KGB) and military (GRU) intelligence would mount an unprecedented worldwide joint operation to detect – with the hopes of preempting – an American nuclear strike. This massive effort was codenamed Operation Nuclear Missile Attack [\textit{Raketno Yadernoye Napadenie}]; or, as it has become known to the West, Operation RYAN.\textsuperscript{53} Operation RYAN, in theory, used Soviet political and military intelligence to place the USSR’s nuclear arsenal on hair-trigger alert.\textsuperscript{54} Reagan’s aggressive buildup had placed the Soviet Union in a “hyper-

\textsuperscript{52} For a comprehensive discussion, see Bruce G. Blair, \textit{The Logic of Accidental Nuclear War}, (Washington D.C.: Brookings, 1993); Fisher, “Soviet-American War Scare.”
\textsuperscript{53} In \textit{The Storm Birds}, Gordon Brook-Shepherd states, without naming a source, that Andropov was persuaded to launch Operation RYAN by the Defense Minister Ustinov. Brook-Shepherd, \textit{The Storm Birds}, 331.
\textsuperscript{54} A quasi-official history of the Russian foreign intelligence states that the goal of Operation RYAN was ordered to counter “the real threat to the security of the USSR and Warsaw Pact
defensive” state, and Soviet agents were tasked with detecting, in order to preempt, a (nonexistent) nuclear attack. Reagan’s early buildup compelled Soviet nuclear strategy to rely on preemption, and hence, made the United States less safe.

**War of Words**

After the inception of Operation RYAN, President Reagan’s anti-Soviet public statements increased, creating more fear in the Soviet Union. From his first press conference, Reagan established his opposition to Détente and implied the impossibility of coexistence, declaring, “[w]ell, Détente’s been a one-way street that the Soviet Union has used to pursue its own aims...of world revolution and a one-world Socialist or Communist state, whichever word you want to use.” This statement directly clashed with Brezhnev’s appeal two months earlier for cooperation, in which he pledged, “any constructive steps by the United States administration in the sphere of Soviet-American relations and pressing world problems will be met with a positive response on our part.” As soon as Reagan was elected, the Soviets were hopeful and willing to engage in dialogue; the American camp believed that compromise through dialogue favored only the Soviet Union, and rebuffed overtures for increased conversation.

In June 1982, Reagan continued his call for the end of the Soviet Union. In an address to the British Parliament he described:

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A plan and a hope for the long term - the march of freedom and democracy which will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history as it has left other tyrannies which stifle the freedom and muzzle the self-expression of the people... Let us now begin a major effort to secure the best— a crusade for freedom.\textsuperscript{57}

Six months later, in his State of the Union Address, Reagan stated that to achieve peace, “the Soviet Union must show by deeds as well as words a sincere commitment to respect the rights and sovereignty of the family of nations.”\textsuperscript{58}

When Reagan assumed the presidency, the Soviets were ready and hopeful for mutual cooperation with the United States. As his rhetoric illustrates, Reagan spurned engagement with the USSR. Secretary of State Alexander Haig explained in a 1984 interview, the early Soviet-American hostilities

}[were not] a tit-for-tat response. The Soviets stayed very, very moderate, very, very responsible during the first three years of this administration. I was mind-boggled with their patience. They were genuinely trying. What they hadn’t faced up to was what it would really take to convince us.\textsuperscript{59}

In November 1982, Brezhnev publicly announced an end to the Soviet Union’s attempt for mutual cooperation with the United States. “We know well,” Brezhnev stated, “that peace with the imperialists is not for the asking. It can be safeguarded only by relying on the invincible might of the Soviet Armed Forces.”\textsuperscript{60} Reagan’s rhetoric had impelled Soviet policy to shift from diplomatic to militaristic means.

The Reagan administration’s rhetoric reached its most inflammatory and


\textsuperscript{60} Garthoff, \textit{The Great Transition}, 85.
threatening point on 8 March 1983, when Reagan declared the Soviet Union to be “the focus of evil in the modern world.” In this speech, Reagan asked his followers “to resist the attempts of those who would have you withhold your support for our efforts” – that is, those supporting policies of rapprochement or a nuclear freeze. Reagan ended his speech by concluding that the struggle against communism was “a spiritual one; at root, it is a test of moral will and faith,” explaining to his followers that Communism was not born in nineteenth century Germany, but “in the Garden of Eden with the words of temptation, ‘Ye shall be as gods.’”61 Despite being a speech primarily to his constituents and not a declaration of policy, Reagan nonetheless evoked and embraced the image of a religious war to defeat communism. While his rhetoric and military expansion may have bolstered some domestic support, it also exacerbated fears of war between the superpowers: 47 percent of Americans polled by Gallup on 22 December 1983 felt that the Reagan administration’s defense policies had brought the United States “closer to war.”62

The outcome of Reagan’s rhetoric, combined with his downgrading of diplomatic efforts and vast military buildup proved to be the exact opposite of what he had hoped to achieve. Regan wrote in his memoirs: “at the foundation of my foreign policy, I decided we had to send as powerful message as we could to the Russians... Our policy was to be one based on strength and realism. I wanted

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61 Reagan, National Association of Evangelicals, 8 March 1983.
62 Only 28 percent of Americans polled stated they believed the Reagan administration’s defense policies had brought the United States “closer to peace.” In a separate question, 40 percent of Americans felt it “very likely” or “fairly likely” that the United States would “get into a nuclear war within the next ten years.” George Gallup, Jr., The 1983 Gallup Poll, (New York: SR Books, 1984), 265-266.
peace through strength, not peace through a piece of paper.”

“A Mirror-Image of Reagan’s Own Policy”

What Reagan viewed as “peace through strength,” the Soviets regarded as sheer aggression. In his memoirs, Ambassador Dobrynin claims that Reagan’s early foreign policy “was exactly the opposite from the one intended by Washington” and,

It strengthened those in the Politburo, the Central Committee, and the security apparatus who had been pressing for a mirror-image of Reagan’s own policy. Ronald Reagan managed to create a solid front of hostility among our leaders. Nobody trusted him. Any of his proposals almost automatically were considered with suspicion. This unique situation in our relations threatened dangerous consequences.

On 4 January 1983, Andropov, now General Secretary of the CPSU, gave a speech in Prague to the Political Consultative Committee, the controlling organ of the Warsaw Pact countries. Andropov spoke decried the escalation of Western weapons capabilities, especially the European deployment of Minuteman and Pershing II missiles. He announced that the Warsaw Pact’s only option was to continue striving to maintain parity but warned,

The new round of the arms race, which is being imposed by the United States, has principal qualitative features that distinguish it from the previous ones. If in the past the Americans, when speaking about their nuclear weapons, preferred to emphasize the fact that those were, first of all, means of "deterrence," now, by creating the improved missile systems, they are not trying to conceal the fact that those are realistically designed for a future war. This is where the doctrines of a "rational" or "limited" nuclear war come from, this is the source of the arguments about the possibility to survive

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63 Reagan, An American Life, 267.
64 Dobrynin, In Confidence, 482.
and to win in a protracted nuclear conflict.”

Andropov, believing Reagan to have aims of winning a nuclear war, stepped up the Warsaw Pact security establishment. Following the General Secretary’s remarks, KGB agents abroad received an Operation RYAN telegram entitled “Permanent operations assignment to uncover NATO preparations for a nuclear missile attack on the USSR.” It was addressed to each station chief by name, labeled “strictly personal,” and was designated to be kept in a special file. The telegram stated:

The objective of the assignment is to see that the Residency works systematically to uncover any plans in preparation by the main adversary [USA] for RYAN and to organize a continual watch to be kept for indications of a decision being taken to use nuclear weapons against the USSR or immediate preparations being made for a nuclear missile attack.

Attached to the telegram was a list of seven “immediate” and thirteen “prospective” tasks for the agents to complete and report. These included: the collection of data on potential places of evacuation and shelter, an appraisal of the level of blood held in blood banks, observation of places where nuclear decisions were made and stored, observation of key nuclear decision makers, observation of lines of communication, reconnaissance of the heads of churches.

65 Andropov, Speech by Andropov, to Political Consultative Committee in Prague, the VA-01/40473, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg; translated by Svetlana Savranskaya from the National Security Archive, George Washington University, 4 January 1983.
66 17 February 1983, KGB to London Residency, No. 373/PR/52 in Andrew and Gordievsky, Comrade Kryuchkov’s Instructions, 69.
67 Other sources vary the spelling of RYAN. Dobrynin spells it “ryon.” Another spelling includes the word “secret:” “VRYAN” “vnesapnoe raketno yadernoe napadenie” – secret nuclear missile attack. Czech Intelligence referred to the operation as NRJAN. Dobrynin, In Confidence, 523; Oleg Kalugin, The First Directorate: My 32 Years in Intelligence and Espionage Against the West, (New York: St. Martins, 1994), 302; 9 March 1984, Bulgarian Ministry of Interior; MVR Information re: Results from the work on the improvement of the System for detection of RYAN indications, AMVR, Fond 1, Record 12, File 553, Provided by Jordan Baev; Peter, Rendek, “Operation ALAN – Mutual Cooperation of the Czechoslovak Intelligence Service and the Soviet KGB as Given in One of the Largest Leakage Cases of NATO Security Data in the Years 1982 – 1986.”
and banks, and surveillance of security services and military installations.68

Many of the assigned observations would have been very poor indicators of a nuclear attack. Others, including communications lines, nuclear decision makers, and – most significantly – missile depots, would have accurately shown whether a nuclear attack was imminent.

Also attached to the telegram was a thorough and accurate description of the likely methods by which the United States or NATO would launch nuclear war. This attachment emphasized that once the West had decided to launch a nuclear attack, a substantial preparatory period would be required. These preparations included nuclear consultations through secret channels, transportation of nuclear weapons, and preparation of civil defense institutions.

“Whither the Soviet Leadership”

The Leadership of the Soviet Union was in a fluid state during the 1983 War Scare. At the center of shifting power was Yuri Andropov. Oleg Kalugin, head of KGB operations in the United States until 1980, confirmed that Reagan’s early policies and rhetoric “scared the wits out of our leadership, and Andropov notified KGB stations around the world to be on the lookout for signs of an imminent American attack. A brand new program [Operation RYAN] was

68 Interestingly, reliance on human intelligence to detect a first strike was a strategy not exclusively employed by the Soviets. A 1 February, 1985 memo from the US National Intelligence Officer for Warning to the US Director of Soviet Analysis entitled “Warsaw Pact Early Warning Indicator Project,” indicates that the United States also used human intelligence to warn of a Soviet Nuclear attack. The memo stated, “NIO/Warning has prepared a selected set of indicators for use by our Chiefs of Station in [redacted] to emphasize greater early warning cooperation with intelligence services.” The attached 50-page list of indicators has been redacted. 1 February 1985, “Warsaw Pact Early Warning Indicator Project,” CIA Memorandum, in CIA Records Search Tool, National Archives and Records Administration NARA, College Park, MD; 17 February 1983, KGB to London Residency, No. 373/PR/52 in Andrew and Gordievsky, Comrade Kryuchkov's Instructions, 71-73.
created to gather information on a potential American first nuclear strike.”

Dobrynin acknowledged that the KGB resident in Washington had informed him of Operation RYAN. He also wrote that none of the General Secretaries for whom he served – Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Chernenko, and Gorbachev – believed “an attack could take place unexpectedly at any moment.” Andropov proved the “probable exception” to this; he recalled a “very private” conversation with Andropov in which he cautioned that “Reagan is unpredictable. You should expect anything from him.”

By November 1983, however, the critically ill Andropov had dropped out of public view and his grasp on power was slipping. CIA analysts at the time speculated – and it has since been confirmed – that during this period the Politburo was steered by the triumvirate of Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, Andropov, and Defense Minister Dmitry Ustinov. Of the three, Gromyko was the most “moderate” and, due to his familiarity to the West, was likely doubtful of a Western first strike. According McFarlane, Gromyko was the “ultimate guarantor” against miscalculation. “He had been in Washington many, many years, and understood our processes and the consultative process between

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69 Kalugin, The First Directorate, 302.


71 He was not present at 2 September 1983, 20 October 1983, or 15 November 1983 meetings of the Politburo. At the time, there was a rumor circulating through Moscow that there had been an assassination attempt on his life. 4 August 1983, Zasedanie politbyuro TsK KPSS (Meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union); 2 September 1983, Zasedanie politbyuro TsK KPSS; 20 October 1983, Zasedanie politbyuro TsK KPSS, in Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Dmitrii Antonovich Volkogonov Papers, Container 26, Reel 17; 12 December 1983, Whither the Soviet Leadership, National Intelligence Council Report, in CIA Records Search Tool, National Archives and Records Administration NARA, College Park, MD, 3.
Congress and the Presidency about any significant escalation of the use of force.”

Accounts from Soviet political elite generally place Soviet Minister of Defense Ustinov to the right of Andropov. Oleg Gordievsky speculates that Ustinov advocated the creation of Operation RYAN to Andropov in 1981; in December 1982, Ustinov condemned Western military doctrines “which stem from the strategy of ‘direct confronta
tion’ proclaimed by Washington and are directed at achieving military superiority over the Soviet Union and establishing U.S. world supremacy.”

But in 1983 power in the Soviet Union was not wholly centered in the Politburo; the military’s grasp on power was expanding. A 12 December 1983 National Intelligence Council Document entitled, “Wither the Soviet Leadership,” noted that, “[t]he military’s influence appears to have expanded over the past several years and especially since the advent of Andropov.” Ustinov, the most hawkish of the triumvirate, appears to have been more rational than Soviet Military leadership. Take, for example, the issue of nuclear war fighting: in January of 1982, Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, Chief of Staff of the Soviet Military, published a pamphlet entitled, “Always in Readiness for Defense of the Fatherland.” In it he glorified “the cult of the offensive,” the importance of surprise in military operations, and alluded to the possibility of a Soviet preemptive strike. He stated that nuclear weapons would give Soviet

72 Robert McFarlane interview conducted by author, 22 April, 2009.
73 Andrew and Gordievsky, Comrade Kryuchkov’s Instructions; Garthoff, The Great Transition, 67.
commanders, “the increased ability to achieve war aims.”

Ustinov released a pamphlet in May 1982 entitled, “Serving the Country,” which strongly contradicted Ogarkov’s assertions about the viability of nuclear war. Ustinov wrote, “[t]o count on victory in the arms race and in the nuclear war is madness.” Nuclear war, he wrote, would cause “irreplaceable losses,” and would destroy “entire peoples and their civilizations.”

While it is clear that Andropov and Ustinov were fearful of a Western first strike, it is also clear that leaders of the military were more likely to suspect, attempt to preempt, and believe they could win a nuclear war with the West. Ustinov, although usually depicted as the most hard-line member of the Politburo, was clearly more moderate than the generals and used his powerful position to solidify control over the military during the “succession crisis.”

**Intelligence Collection During Operation RYAN**

Although Operation RYAN originated at the highest levels of the Soviet Government, intelligence collection was carried out by the KGB and the GRU, as well as by the intelligence agencies of its Warsaw Pact allies. The German Democratic Republic (GDR) provided an immense amount of intelligence to the Soviet Union. It is therefore not surprising that the GDR’s capable *Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung*, Main Reconnaissance Administration (HVA), played a large role in Operation RYAN. Marcus Wolf, known as “The man without a face,” who served for decades as East Germany’s spymaster wrote, “our

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75 See George G. Weickhardt, “Ustinov Versus Ogarkov,” *Problems of Communism*, (Jan-Feb 1985), 77-82.
76 Weickhardt, “Ustinov Versus Ogarkov,” 80.
Soviet partners had become obsessed with the danger of a nuclear missile attack.” The HVA’s most important priority became the surveillance of Pershing II and Cruise Missile sites.\footnote{Fischer, A Cold War Conundrum.}

Karl Kocher, a Czechoslovakian spy working illegally in the United States in the early 1980s confirms the existence of Operation RYAN and justifies it. In Novosti razvedki i kontrrazvedki, he asserts that Operation RYAN acted as an effective counter to the increased risk of nuclear war under Reagan.\footnote{Kocher, Karl. In Novosti razvedki i kontrrazvedki. (News of intelligence agents and counter agents), 1 September 2006.}

Documents from other Warsaw Pact countries corroborate Soviet descriptions of Operation RYAN. A Top Secret 1984 Bulgarian intelligence document provided instructions to its agents to monitor underground networks, diplomatic representatives from NATO, combat readiness in neighboring countries, and radio-electronic intelligence.\footnote{Bulgarian Ministry of Interior; MVR Information re: Results from the work on the improvement of the System for detection of RYAN indications, 9 March 1984, AMVR, Fond 1, Record 12, File 553, Provided by Jordan Baev.} Sources from Czech intelligence also confirm the existence of Operation RYAN and state that compiling an “index of sudden aggression” was the primary mission of Warsaw Pact intelligence agencies.\footnote{Rendek, “Operation ALAN – Mutual Cooperation of the Czechoslovak Intelligence Service and the Soviet KGB as Given in One of the Largest Leakage Cases of NATO Security Data in the Years 1982 – 1986,” Presented at The NKVD/KGB Activities and its Cooperation with other Secret Services in Central and Eastern Europe 1945 – 1989 Conference, Bratislava, 14-16 November 2007.}

Gordievsky, Kalugin, and Wolf – it is important to note – were extremely skeptical of the idea of a NATO first strike. Wolf recalls, "[l]ike most intelligent
people, I found these war games a burdensome waste of time.”81  Despite his skepticism, Wolf forwarded his agency’s Operation RYAN surveillance to his Soviet allies who were more persuaded by these “indicators” of possible nuclear war. Dobrynin and Gordievsky believed that the drive for Operation RYAN came from the leadership of Andropov, Ustinov and KGB chief of Foreign Operations, Vladimir Kryuchkov —the last guards of the Stalinist mentality.

Although most agents did not believe an attack was imminent, they were ordered to report their raw observations of events, not their estimation of what the observations meant. This critical flaw in the Soviet intelligence system—coined by Gordievsky as the “intelligence cycle”—played a key role in exacerbating the Soviet leadership’s fear of a US nuclear strike, even though Soviet agents abroad seriously doubted that an American attack was imminent. One American official believed Soviet intelligence agents abroad were “just going through the motions.”82

“Is All the Huff and Puff Just Part of Their Propaganda?”

A 2 June 1983 meeting between Andropov and World War II ambassador to Moscow, W. Averell Harriman, confirmed the Soviet leadership’s fear of an American attack. During the conversations, which the Soviets viewed as “the first real meeting between the United States and the Soviet Union since the start of the [Reagan] administration,” Andropov opened by stating: “Let me say that there are indeed grounds for alarm.” He bemoaned the harsh anti-Soviet tone of the

82 Andrew and Gordievsky, *Comrade Kryuchkov’s Instructions*, 69.
President and warned that, “The previous experience of relations between the Soviet Union and the United States cautions beyond all doubt that such a policy can merely lead to aggravation, complexity and danger.” Andropov alluded to nuclear war four times during his short statement; most ominously, he morosely stated,

“It would seem that awareness of this danger should be precisely the common denominator with which statesmen of both countries would exercise restraint and seek mutual understanding to strengthen confidence, to avoid the irreparable. However, I must say that I do not see it on the part of the current administration and they may be moving toward the dangerous ‘red line.’”\textsuperscript{83}

Harriman concluded that “the principal point which the General Secretary appeared to be trying to get ... was a genuine concern over the state of U.S.-Soviet relations and his desire to see them at least ‘normalized,’ if not improved. He seemed to have a real worry that we could come into conflict through miscalculation.”\textsuperscript{84}

While Harriman believed Andropov’s fear to be genuine, others thought he was coyly using “accidental nuclear blackmail” to trump the superior strategic position of the United States. The Acting Director of Central Intelligence, John N. McMahon, asserted in a 3 Feb 1984 letter to National Security Advisor Bud McFarlane that, “[c]learly, Andropov has a stake in the ‘appearance’ of bilateral tension as long as it appears that the United States is the offending party. This would not be the first time that Soviet leaders have used international tensions to

\textsuperscript{83} 2 June 1983, Averill Harriman, Memorandum of Conversation with Andropov, W. Averill Harriman Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box 655.
\textsuperscript{84} 2 June 1983, Memo of Harriman and Andropov Conversation.
mobilize their population.”85

The two views were neatly summarized in a secret November 1983 intelligence memorandum entitled, 1983 The View from Moscow. After presenting a bleak view for the future of the Soviet Union: its leadership would either “make necessary sacrifices to stay in the game, get their licks in whenever and wherever they can, and count on new successes to come” or, with less likelihood, “the Soviets might consider themselves backed into a corner and lash out dangerously.”86 This intelligence battle was accurately summed up by the question Reagan posed to his Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Arthur Hartman: “Do you think the Soviet leaders really fear us, or is all the huffing and puffing just part of their propaganda?”87 In 1983, US intelligence errantly believed the Soviet Union was just “huffing and puffing.”

Any lingering hopes Andropov had for normalized relations with the United States were lost on 1 September 1983, when the Soviet Union shot down a Korean civilian airliner, KAL 007, after it had flown into its airspace. To Reagan, the attack represented everything wrong with the Soviet Union; he decried the Soviet actions as “barbaric,” and a “crime against humanity.”88 KAL 007 illustrated the Soviet Union’s increased fear of US aggression. In his memoirs, Reagan pondered the danger posed by the hair-trigger mindset of the Soviet

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Union: “If, as some people speculated, the Soviet pilots simply mistook the airliner for a military plane, what kind of imagination did it take to think of a Soviet military man with his finger close to a nuclear push button making an even more tragic mistake?”89 In all probability, Reagan would continue to ponder the question.90

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90 In interviews by Don Oberdorfer confirm that Soviet officials genuinely thought that KAL 007 was a spy plane. Soviet Marshall and Defense Minister Dmitri Yazov once shared a carried with US Secretary of Defense Frank C. Carlucci and asked, “Why did you Americans use that Korean airliner as a spy plane?” Soviet Chief of Staff Marshall Akhromeyev stated in an interview that he was certain that the plane’s deviation off its flight path was “organized” by Washington. Sergei Akhromeyev interview conducted by Don Oberdorfer, 1990. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University; Frank Carlucci interview conducted by Don Oberdorfer, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, 1990.
PART II: “THOROUGHLY WHITE HOT,” ABLE ARCHER 83 AND
THE CRUX OF THE WAR SCARE

The United States and its allies had no plans to launch a preemptive nuclear attack in November 1983. However, in the nuclear era, fear of a nonexistent attack still presented a genuine danger. Soviet intelligence was not mistaken; it correctly assessed that from 2 through 11 November 1983, the United States and NATO were conducting exercises related to nuclear weapons which spanned the continent of Europe, which involved more than 40,000 American, Dutch, German, British, and Canadian soldiers, and “emphasized the transition from conventional to chemical and nuclear operations.” Able Archer 83 was a NATO command post exercise conducted by the United States European Command (USEUCOM) and sponsored by the Joint Chiefs of Staff; it was conducted annually after the Autumn Forge tactical exercise, but Able Archer 83 was far more realistic than previous Able Archer exercises. Able Archer 83 was conducted from Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), Casteau, Belgium with the three major NATO European commands: Allied forces

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91 Some Air Force Documents state the exercise was held from 7 to 11 November. Because all sources agree that the climax of Able Archer 83 was on 7 November 1983, the discrepancy of dates does not substantially alter analysis of the incident. According to the Congressional Budget, Able Archer 83 cost the United States $111 million. Eighth Air Force Strategic Air Command, History of the Headquarters, 7th Air Division: 1 October 1983-31 March 1984. Obtained by Freedom of Information Act Request; House Committee on Appropriations, Department of Defense Appropriations for 1986, 99th Cong., 1st sess., 1985, part 3, 562.
92 Tom Kuhn, “Moving the Forces of War,” Airman (March 1984); Eighth Air Force Strategic Air Command, History.
Northern Europe (AFNORTH) in Kolsaas, Norway, AFCENT, Brunssum, Netherlands, and AFSOUTH, Naples, Italy. The objectives of the exercise were to “conduct military operations in Europe with necessary command, control, and communications (C3) Systems,” and to, “exercise a scenario of decision-making that involved conventional attack in Europe that escalated to possible use of nuclear weapons.”

Able Archer 83 also incorporated a new type of nuclear launch encryption and included a very early instance of the use of “highly mobile mini-computers,” which allowed the military to “react quickly to changing situations, pass voluminous data between agencies,” as well as allowing units to “rapidly relocate.”

David Abshire, US Ambassador to NATO from July 1983 to January 1987, explained that in the usual NATO war game scenario, the Soviet Union broke through NATO lines on the continent and headed towards the English Channel; at this point, when they crossed the “nuclear trip wire,” SACEUR (Supreme Allied Command of Europe) would request to launch a signal attack on a Warsaw Pact country. If the USSR did not “understand” this signal, SACEUR would request another signal, this time attacking a Soviet republic. The exercises frequently concluded when the actors “got word from the White House that the Soviets

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94 Eighth Air Force Strategic Air Command, *History.*
95 The Soviet Union also routinely conducted large-scale military exercises, including June 1982 “seven hour simulation” of nuclear war. Ostensibly, the June 1982 exercise was less realistic than Able Archer 83. Mastney, “How Able was ‘Able Archer’,” 115; Eighth Air Force Strategic Air Command, *History.*
understand our determination and will withdraw from Europe.”

**PSYOPs and False Alarms**

A number of secret psychological military operations (PSYOP) which the United States conducted before Able Archer 83 caused further distortion and steered Soviet intelligence into reporting their belief in the increased likelihood of US aggression. These operations were intended “to keep [the Soviets] guessing what might come next.” US warships penetrated the far northern and eastern regions of the Soviet Union, areas where they had never before operated. In August and September of 1983, a US, British, Canadian, and Norwegian naval armada sailed through the strategically important Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GUK) gap undetected by the Soviets. During that period, US naval ships began operation in “forward areas” such as the Baltic, Black, and Barents Seas. US planes also probed Soviet air defense near their borders. These PSYOPs “exposed gaping holes in Soviet ocean surveillance and early warning systems.” They also alarmed Soviet leadership. According to a former US official with knowledge of the PSYOPs, “It really got to them... They didn't know what it all meant. A squadron would fly straight at Soviet airspace, and other radars would light up and units would go on alert. Then at the last minute the squadron would

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98 David Abshire interview conducted by author, 29 February 2008. Abshire “was not a M.A.D. man.” He recollected to me that he had always wanted to tell Reagan during a drill that Soviets were launching a nuclear attack on Boston but not to worry, “It’s only signaling.” His account follows the description provided in Shaun R. Gregory, *Nuclear command and Control in NATO*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996).

99 Fischer, “A Cold War Conundrum.”
peel off and return home.”

Soviet early warning systems not only failed to detect incursions, they also indicated false alarms. On 26 September 1983, a Soviet OKO [eye] satellite detected incoming Minuteman intercontinental missiles en route from the United States. After a few terrifying minutes, the on-duty officer Colonel Stainslav Petrov realized that the satellite had malfunctioned, and, on his own authority, stopped the false nuclear alert. It was later determined that this “bolt from the blue” was the result of rays of sunlight reflecting off of high-altitude clouds. These PSYOPs, early warning failures, and the tragic attack on the KAL civilian airliner heightened the tension and contributed to the frenzied fear of war held by Soviet citizens and leaders before the Able Archer 83 exercise.

The Peak of the War Scare

In addition to these PSYOPs and missile-detection malfunctions, a series of world events likely led Soviet agents abroad to report further “indicators” of a Western nuclear attack. US military bases heightened their security following the 11 October 1983 bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut which killed 220 Marines. The 25 October 1983 US invasion of the British protectorate of Grenada to prevent a Marxist revolution, also triggered an influx of ciphered communications between Great Britain and the United States.

The realistic nature of the drill further encouraged reports of an actual

101 Pry, War Scare, 37.
102 Pry, War Scare, 33-44.
attack. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl participated (though not concurrently) in the nuclear drill. US principals – including the Secretary of Defense, the Vice President, and the President – were originally supposed to participate. Due to the “considerable tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States,” McFarlane appealed to the President to scale back high level participation in the exercise, Reagan agreed.103

Soviet intelligence caused further alarm when it reported that NATO was, indeed, using unique, never-before-seen procedures as well as message formats more sophisticated than previous exercises.104 Communication was simulated with new Pershing II missiles. Pershing IIs were not actually deployed to Europe until 23 November but former CIA analyst Peter Vincent Pry speculates that it is likely that Soviet intelligence believed several Pershing II missiles to have been deployed before their announced date.105

Finally, during Able Archer 83, NATO forces simulated a move through all alert phases. While these phases were simulated, alarmist KGB agents may have mistakenly reported them as actual.106 According to Soviet intelligence, NATO doctrine stated, “Operational readiness No 1 is declared when there are obvious indications of preparation to begin military operations. It is considered that war

103 Neither Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger nor Secretary of George Shultz recall this modification of Able Archer 83. Robert McFarlane interview conducted by author, 22 April, 2009; Robert McFarlane interview conducted by Don Oberdorfer, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, 1990. George Shultz interview conducted by Don Oberdorfer, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, 1990; Caspar Weinberger interview conducted by Don Oberdorfer, Mudd Manuscript Library Princeton University, 1900.
104 Eighth Air Force Strategic Air Command; Pry, War Scare, 33-44.
105 Pry, War Scare, 34.
106 Pry, War Scare, 39-40.
is inevitable and may start at any moment.”

Soviet military doctrine held that a nuclear attack could be effectively obscured by war games or military exercise. Therefore, reports from Soviet intelligent agents of Able Archer 83 portrayed the West as “shifting from a peacetime to a wartime footing.”

Upon learning that US nuclear activity mirrored its hypothesized first strike activity, the Moscow Center sent its residencies a flash telegram on 8 or 9 November—Gordievsky cannot recall which—incorrectly reporting an alert on American bases and frantically asking for further information regarding an American first strike. This alert precisely coincided with the seven-to-ten day period estimated between NATO’s preliminary decision and actual strike. This was the peak of the War Scare.

The Soviet Union, believing its only chance of surviving a NATO strike was to preempt it, readied its nuclear arsenal. The CIA reported activity in the Baltic Military District and Czechoslovakia; nuclear-capable aircraft in Poland and Germany were placed “on high alert status with readying of nuclear strike forces.” Former CIA analyst Peter Vincent Pry suspects that the aircraft were

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107 Andrew and Gordievsky, Comrade Kryuchkov’s Instructions, 79.
108 The United States also feared that exercise could be used as “ruses of war.” Caspar Weinberger explained that, it is sometimes quite difficult to tell the difference between an exercise and the beginning—the raising of indicators [of a nuclear attack] that we watch all the time every day, every hour... The difference between a realistic exercise or maneuver and what could be preparations for an attack, that line is sometimes quite blurred.” He recounts a North Korean drill where, “they were moving a hell of a lot of stuff in position,” and he became worried that if it was not simply a drill, “we’ve lost about five days of time,” to prepare for war. Caspar Weinberger conducted by Don Orberdorfer, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University; 17 February 1983, KGB to London Residency, No. 373/PR/52 in Andrew and Gordievsky, Comrade Kryuchkov’s Instructions, 69; A. A. Sidorenko, The Offensive (A Soviet View) (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1970), 115.
109 Robert M. Gates, From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider’s Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 271-272; Pry, War Scare, 43-44; May 1984 Central Intelligence Agency Special National Intelligence Estimate, Implications
merely the tip of the iceberg; he hypothesizes that— in accordance with Soviet military procedure and history—ICBM silos, already at a high state of alert and difficult for the United States to detect, were also prepared for a launch.\textsuperscript{110} Commander Victor Tkachenko, stationed at a Soviet Missile Silo during Able Archer 83, recounts, “When we reached the command bunker that night, we received a special order. We were told to immediately go to raised combat alert. It was so serious that there was a third man there with us, to maintain uninterrupted communications.”\textsuperscript{111}

Sergei Tarasenko, who worked in the Foreign Ministry and later worked as assistant to Eduard Shevardnadze confirms that during Able Archer 83

[First Deputy Foreign Minister Georgi] Kornienko summoned me and showed me a top secret KGB paper. . . In the paper, the KGB reported that they had information that the United States had prepared everything for a first strike; that they might resort to a surgical strike against command centers in the Soviet Union; and that they had the capability to destroy the system by incapacitating the command center.\textsuperscript{112}

Vitalii Tsygichko, an analyst on the Soviet General Staff during Able Archer 83, elaborated on the mentality of the Soviet military and political leadership: during a 2006 oral history conference:

Among politicians as well as the military, there were a lot of crazy people who would not consider the consequences of a nuclear strike. They just wanted to respond to a certain action without dealing with the “cause and effect” problems. They were not seeking

\textsuperscript{110} During a January 2000 Congressional testimony, the former CIA analyst Pry asserted Able Archer 83 was “more dangerous than the Cuban Missile Crisis.” Pry, \textit{War Scare}, 44; House Committee on Government Reform, \textit{Russian Threats to the United States Security in the Post-Cold War Era}, 106\textsuperscript{th} Cong., 1\textsuperscript{st} sess., 2000, 70.

\textsuperscript{111} Interview with Viktor Tkachenko, for “Soviet War Scare 1983.” Director Henry Chancellor; Exec Producer Taylor Downing; Quoted with permission of Flashback Television, London, 2008.

any reasonable explanations, but used one selective response to whatever an option was. I know many military people who look like normal people, but it was difficult to explain to them that waging nuclear war was not feasible. We had a lot of arguments in this respect. Unfortunately, as far as I know, there are a lot of stupid people both in NATO and our country.\footnote{Hoffenaar and Findlay, Military Planning for European Theatre Conflict During the Cold War: An Oral History Roundtable Stockholm, 24-25 April 2006, Center for Security Studies ETH Zurich, 161.}

Tsygichko also stated that he felt no one on the Soviet side seriously believed that a nuclear war would take place; regardless the Soviet military was prepared to Launch on Warning to preempt a Western nuclear strike.\footnote{Hoffenaar and Findlay, Military Planning, 166.}

Vojtech Mastny, of the Parallel History Project asserts that neither East German nor Soviet intelligence agents, either “out of common sense or because of incompetence,” passed on intelligence about Able Archer 83 to the Defensive Ministry or Politburo. This conjecture has recently been refuted by Rainer Rupp, known as Agent Topaz.\footnote{Mastny, Vojtech. “Did East German Spies Prevent a Nuclear War?” for The Parallel History Project; Rainer Rupp interview, “Soviet War Scare 1983.”} Rupp, recently released from an espionage prison sentence, recounted in a 2008 televised interview that during Able Archer 83, a courier delivered him a message which read “High alert, the Russians are really scared and they want to know… NATO is preparing for war and so on. I was really upset, I was thinking where is this leading?” He went on to explain that he had then transmitted a message to his handlers stating: “There was no indication that NATO was preparing for war at this time.” Intelligence Official, Douglas MacEachin recounted that when US analysts first observed the Soviet Union’s heightened alert status they wondered, “What’s going on here?” The question
later evolved to “Are these people nuts?” The world was pushed toward the brink—and no American had known about it.

**Intelligence Battle**

Initial American intelligence of the Soviet reaction to Able Archer 83 reported that there was no genuine Soviet fear of a US attack. A secret December 1983 CIA report entitled, *Soviet Thinking on the Possibility of Armed Confrontation with the United States*, assessed, “Contrary to the impression conveyed by Soviet propaganda, Moscow does not appear to anticipate a near-term military confrontation with the United States.”

In May 1984 the Special National Intelligence Estimate entitled, *Implications of Recent Soviet Military-Political Activities*, concluded, "We believe strongly that Soviet actions are not inspired by, and Soviet leaders do not perceive, a genuine danger of imminent conflict with the United States."

These assessments fail to mention contradictory evidence from human intelligence. On 11 October 1983, a Soviet journalist, Sergei Vishnevsky, met with National Security Council Member Jack Matlock. The journalist said that he was...

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117 I have had a conversation with a nuclear submarine officer who was serving off the coast of Scotland during Able Archer 83. He stated that during the exercise his ship went to DEFCON 2. He recounts that his Commanding Officer stated over the intercom, “Spin up missiles this is not a drill. Repeat spin up missiles this is not a drill.” The officer recounted that during drills, his submarine typically left missiles in position for no longer than 45 minutes. But in this case his missiles were up for more than six hours. “The situation was very tense,” he recalled.

118 *Soviet Thinking on the Possibility of Armed Confrontation with the United States*, Reagan Presidential Library, Matlock Files, Chron January 1984 [2 of 3], Box 90887.

119 May 1984 Central Intelligence Agency Special National Intelligence Estimate, *Implications of Recent Soviet Military-Political Activities*, in CIA Records Search Tool, National Archives and Records Administration NARA, College Park, MD.
personally fearful and told Matlock that, “the state of U.S.-Soviet relations has
deteriorated to a dangerous point. Many in the Soviet public are asking if war is
imminent.”120 Intelligence documents report that a second, unnamed source
within the Soviet Union reported that “[f]ear of war seemed to affect the elite as
well as the man on the street,” that the source “perceiv[ed] a growing paranoia
among Soviet officials, and see them literally obsessed by fear of war.” Because of
these factors, the source claimed that he could “not discount the possibility of
irrational elements in Soviet Decision-making.”121

McFarlane recounts that throughout 1983, “we had been receiving reports
from [assets in] European capitals based on their interviews with Russian
attaches and ambassadors that there was fear, alarm, among Russians and
Soviets about the American intentions and whether we might even be planning
an attack of our own.”122

At a 5 November speech celebrating the Bolshevik Revolution, Politburo
member Grigory Romanov pronounced, “perhaps never before in the postwar
decades has the atmosphere in the world been as tense as it is now.” “Comrades,”
he went on to say, “the international situation is at present white hot, thoroughly
white hot.”123 An article in the February edition of the most prominent Military
theory journal, Voyennaya Misl,’ stated that during Autumn Forge (and hence
Able Archer), “it was more and more difficult to tell the difference between work

120 11 October 1983, Memorandum of Conversation between Sergei Vishenevsky and Jack F.
Matlock, Reagan Presidential Library, Matlock Files, Chron October 1983 [10/11/1983-
10/24/1983], Box 2, 90888.
121 13 December 1983, Memorandum for Robert C. McFarlane from Jack Matlock, “American
Academic on Soviet Policy,” Reagan Presidential Library, Matlock Files, Chron December 1983 [1
of 2], Box 2, 90888.
122 Robert McFarlane interview with author, 22 April 2009.
on military drills and real preparations for wide-scale aggression.”

These indications of “genuine fear of war” and “irrational decision-making” by Soviet leaders did not appear in the December 1983 report or May 1984 Special National Intelligence Estimate.

Retroactive analyses later refuted the earlier intelligence reports which dismissed Soviet fear of war as disingenuous. In late 1985, a 50-page document entitled “Soviet Perceptions of Nuclear Warfare,” used Gordievsky’s information to present a detailed report on the Kremlin’s shaky psychology during Able Archer 83. In February 1990 the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board issued a 110-page report which concluded that Soviet leadership “may have taken seriously the possibility of a US nuclear strike against the Soviet Union,” and that, US intelligence was “remiss in dismissing [this] possibility that the Soviet leadership actually believed the United States was planning a first strike.” Robert Gates, CIA Deputy Director for Intelligence during Able Archer 83, concurs:

Information about the peculiar and remarkably skewed frame of mind of the Soviet leaders during those times that has emerged since the collapse of the Soviet Union makes me think there is a good chance – with all of the other events in 1983 – that they really felt a NATO attack was at least possible and that they took a number of measures to enhance their military readiness short of mobilization. After going through the experience at the time, then

124 Colonel L. V. Levadov, “Itogi operativnoi podgotovki obedinennix sil NATO v 1983 godu” (Results of the Operational Training of NATO Joint Armed Forces in 1983,” Voyennaya Misl’ (Military Thought), no. 2 (February 1984), 68.
125 I have a Mandatory Declassification Review Request pending with the CIA for this document. Cited in Brook-Shepherd, The Storm Birds, 334.
126 I have heard this document referred to as the Cold War historian’s “Holy Grail.” I have a Mandatory Declassification Review Request pending with The George H. W. Bush Presidential Library for this document. Robert Gates interview conducted by Don Orberdorfer, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University; Anonymous Intelligence Analyst interview conducted by Don Oberdorfer, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, 1990. Oberdorfer, From the Cold War, 67.
through the postmortems, and now through the documents, I don’t think the Soviets were crying wolf. They may not have believed a NATO attack was imminent in November 1983, but they did seem to believe that the situation was very dangerous. And US intelligence had failed to grasp the true extent of their anxiety.  

Soviet Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev confirmed the danger during Reagan’s first term. Although Akhromeyev states he does not remember the Able Archer 83 exercise, he specifically named Autumn Forge (the larger military exercise which Able Archer 83 was the climax of) calling it the “most dangerous.” Speaking of the danger of the 1983 War Scare, Akhromeyev stated:

I must tell you that I personally and many of the people that I know had a different opinion of the United States in 1983 than I have today (1990). I considered that the United States is pressing for world supremacy... And I considered that as a result of this situation there [could] be a war between the Soviet Union and the United states on the initiative of the United States.

Retroactive intelligence analysis and the opening of Eastern archives now confirm that the American intelligence community misread the Soviet Union during the Era of Renewed Confrontation. In reality, the Soviet leadership considered an American first strike a genuine possibility and Able Archer 83 inflamed this fear. Genuine Soviet fears were reported as contrived Soviet propaganda.

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128 Sergei Akhromeyev interview conducted by Don Oberdorfer, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, 1990.
129 These Soviet statements of alarm, at least partially contradict Vojtech Mastny’s assertion that, “[n]o high-ranking Soviet official in a position to know, including such a key figure as the first deputy chief (and later chief) of the Soviet General Staff Marshal Sergei F. Akhromeyev, has been found who remembers any alarm being raised because of the NATO exercise.” Michael Gorbachev has also stated, “Never, perhaps, in the postwar decades was the situation in the world as explosive and hence, more difficult and unfavorable, as in the first half of the 1980s.” Akhromeyev interview conducted by Oberdorfer, 1990; Fischer, *A Cold War Conundrum*, Mastny, “How Able was ‘Able Archer’?,” 119.
PART III: AFTERMATH, “ONE MISSTEP COULD TRIGGER A GREAT WAR”

In 1990, Ronald Reagan was asked why he thought relations between the Soviet Union and United States had improved so dramatically. Reagan answered that it was due to mutual interest: Gorbachev’s interest in dealing with the economic emergency in the Soviet Union, and Reagan’s belief that “it was a danger to have a world so heavily armed that one misstep could trigger a great war.”130 Reagan acted on his interest thirteen months before Gorbachev rose to power, extending a hand to the Soviet leadership, and eventually meeting Gorbachev in Geneva to negotiate.

It is clear that after Able Archer 83, Reagan instigated a move away from a confrontational US policy towards the Soviet Union. In his journal, Reagan wrote of two events which profoundly affected him in the weeks leading up to Able Archer 83. The first was his 10 October screening of the film The Day After, a realistic portrayal of nuclear war described by the Washington Post as a “horrific vision of nuclear holocaust.” Reagan wrote in his diary that the film was “very effective and left me greatly depressed.”131 This glimpse of nuclear war psychologically primed Reagan for Able Archer 83, giving him a very specific picture of what would occur had the situation escalated further. Days after Able Archer 83, McFarlane shared intelligence reports describing the Soviet’s nuclear

130 Oberdorfer, From the Cold War, 479.
131 Reagan, Diaries, 186.
activity after Able Archer. The President read the reports and responded with “genuine anxiety” and disbelief that his actions could have led to an armed attack; “It did bother him that they [the Soviets] could even take seriously the very idea [of a US strike].”\textsuperscript{132} Other officials, including Shultz believed it to be “incredible, at least to us” that the Soviets would believe the US would launch a genuine attack.\textsuperscript{133} Reagan did not share the belief that cooler heads would prevail, he wrote:

We had many contingency plans for responding to a nuclear attack. But everything would happen so fast that I wondered how much planning or reason could be applied in such a crisis... \textit{Six minutes} to decide how to respond to a blip on a radar scope and decide whether to unleash Armageddon! How could anyone apply reason at a time like that (Reagan 1999)?\textsuperscript{134}

\textbf{Reagan’s Reaction}

The impetus of Reagan’s early 1984 change in policy has previously been explained as a seizure of power by the moderates in his administration, as simply election-year politics, or that Reagan, in 1984 was simply ready to negotiate.\textsuperscript{135} Of the three explanations the third seems the most plausible. The unprecedented

\textsuperscript{132} A comprehensive 50-page report entitled “Soviet Perceptions of Nuclear Warfare,” based primarily on Gordievsky’s observations, was presented to the president in late 1985. This, however, was not the first report of Able Archer 83; information about Soviet military action was analyzed in real-time. McFarlane presented Reagan “everything that [Director of Intelligence] Bill Casey had from Gordievsky [who was] reporting that Soviet leadership really was concerned about [Able Archer 83]. And he [Reagan] was interested in that.” The 1985 report is still classified, pending a Mandatory Declassification Review request. Robert McFarlane interview conducted by author, 22 April, 2009; Fischer, \textit{The Reagan Reversal}, 134; Oberdorfer, \textit{From the Cold War}, 67; Brook-Shepherd, \textit{The Storm Birds}, 334.

\textsuperscript{133} Shultz, \textit{Turmoil and Triumph}, 464.

\textsuperscript{134} Reagan, \textit{American Life}, 257.

\textsuperscript{135} Matlock ably refutes the first two of these claims in \textit{Reagan and Gorbachev}, 75-80. McFarlane believed that Reagan’s engagement with the Soviet Union was due “more by our [American political] readiness than this episode [Able Archer 83],” but also that Able Archer 83 was “timely” and “contributed to his wanting to begin to establish the dialogue and the more active mode.” Robert McFarlane interview conducted by author, 22 April, 2009.
tensions and nuclear fear of 1983 led the president who believed the prophecy of Armageddon would be fulfilled by a nuclear apocalypse, stated that “MAD policy was madness,” and wrote of civilization’s regression due to nuclear weapons, to seek a policy toward the USSR which reduced, rather than increased, the risk of nuclear war.136

Reagan, who had vocally opposed communism since his days in Hollywood, did not sit idly as his underlings pivoted his policy towards Moscow after the War Scare; the decision came from the top. It is equally unlikely that Reagan’s warming to the Soviet Union simply amounted to an election year ploy; Reagan took positions on abortion, the support of the Nicaraguan Contras, and the nuclear freeze which were (sometimes drastically) out of step with public opinion. The most generally accepted conclusion, presented by Reagan’s conservative base and the President himself, that “The United States was in its strongest position in two decades to negotiate with the Russians from strength,” is also incorrect.137 Even if Reagan used this rationalization as justification for his change in policy towards the Soviet Union, the United States did not hold a significantly stronger position in 1984 than it did in 1981.138

Reagan began changing the course of his Presidency in mid November 1983,139 days after Able Archer 83.140 According to McFarlane, Able Archer 83

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136 Robert McFarlane, as cited in, Fischer, Reagan Reversal, 106-107; Reagan, American Life, 278, 549.
137 Reagan, American Life, 586-587.
139 On 15 November 1983, National Intelligence Officer Major General Edward B. Atkeson met with General Richard G. Stilwell to discuss Soviet military operational analysis. I contend it is very likely this meeting concerned the Soviet Union’s perceptions of Able Archer 83. On 18 November, McFarlane received a Top Secret letter from Prime Minister Thatcher for President Reagan, the letter remains classified. On the cover letter, McFarlane handwrote, “We should get something out today.” It is plausible Thatcher was passing Reagan one of Gordievsky’s reports.
was on the President’s mind as he travelled throughout Asia from 8-14 November. The two spoke about the situation several times, “on Air Force One and elsewhere.” On 18 November, the President reflected on his decision in his diary:

George Shultz & I had a talk mainly about setting up a little in house group of experts on the Soviet U. to help us in setting up some channels. I feel the Soviets are so defense minded, so paranoid about being attacked that without being soft on them we ought to tell them no one here has any intention of doing anything like that. What the h--l have they got that anyone would want… A most sobering experience with Cap W[einberger] and Gen. Vessey in the situation room—a briefing on our complete plan in the event of a nuclear attack.

This “in house group,” included of Shultz, McFarlane, Weinberger, Casey, and Bush, and was chaired by Matlock. The discussions were confidential and took place on Saturday mornings. Notes from the first meeting of 19 November reveal that the group’s policy agenda was to:

1. Reduce use and threat of force in international disputes
2. Lower high levels of armaments by equitable and verifiable agreements; and
3. Establish minimal level of trust to facilitate the first two objectives, including
   a. Compliance with past agreements;
   b. Human rights performance;
   c. Specific confidence-building measures;

that things were getting dangerously out of hand. This letter may have affected Reagan’s diary entry that evening. 23 November 1983, Memorandum from Major general Edward B. Atkeson for General Richard G. Stilwell, “Soviet Use of Historical Data for Operational Analyses,” in CIA Records Search Tool, National Archives and Records Administration NARA, College Park, MD; 18 November 1983, Message from Oliver Wright to Robert C McFarlane, “Covering UK Top Secret [Message],” Reagan Presidential Library, National Security Affairs, Office of the AP for: Records: Citation File, 8391397.

140 The following evidence argues contrary to Vojtech Mastny’s assertion that Matlock “received his instructions to write the [16 January] speech before “Able Archer” was held.” And that “[t]he shift on Reagan’s part reflected general rather than specific concern about the war scare that had been spreading.” Mastny, “How Able was ‘Able Archer’?” 121.

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142 Reagan, Diaries, 199.
d. Bilateral ties when mutually beneficial.143

The notes also stated that to achieve these goals, the Reagan administration would use realism, strength, and negotiation. US policy would not challenge the legitimacy of the Soviet system, work towards military superiority, or attempt to force the collapse of the Soviet system. The notes to the meeting end with list of “specific steps” which should be taken to “maximize success” toward the Soviet Union. These steps included, more dialogue (including “informal and unofficial means of communication”), a letter from Reagan to Andropov offering to resume negotiations on Intermediate-range missiles, and a major speech by the President on US-Soviet relations.144

Attempts to establish backchannel contacts with Soviet leaders were quickly implemented. In December 1983, Matlock drafted a memo entitled, “Can a Private Channel [with the USSR] be Useful?” He wrote that, “if it is handled properly,” it could be. Matlock concluded that a private channel was important because, “we need informal communications most during periods of tension... We lose nothing from talking privately (so long as we are reasonably careful about what we say). And refusal to do so only encourages a Soviet stonewall—and perhaps worse.”145 A backchannel with the Soviet Union was quickly established, with Reagan’s Military Assistant Brent Scowcroft serving as this link.

After the first Saturday Breakfast, Matlock and McFarlane began drafting a public pronouncement of Reagan’s change in policy towards the Soviet

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143 19 November 1983, “Small Group Meeting, 730 AM,” Reagan Presidential Library, Matlock Files, [Saturday Morning Group – Notes] (Nov-Dec 1983), Box 34, 2219; Matlock, Reagan and Gorbachev, 75-76.
145 McFarlane, Special Trust, 294. This document is still classified in the Reagan Library.
According to Matlock, Reagan’s decision for his shift in policy was driven by Reagan’s “aspirations for his record as president.” McFarlane recounts that Able Archer had a “big influence” on Reagan’s shift. On 16 January, Reagan delivered the pivotal speech he had tasked Matlock and McFarlane with drafting a month earlier. In the speech, given at a special time and enabling new broadcasting technology which allowed his address to be heard live in the Soviet Union, Reagan no longer stressed the irresolvable differences of American capitalism and Soviet communism; instead he emphasized the necessity for working together to protect their common interests:

“If the Soviet Government wants peace, then there will be peace. Together we can strengthen peace, reduce the level of arms, and know in doing so that we have helped fulfill the hopes and dreams of those we represent and, indeed, of people everywhere. Let us begin now (Reagan 1984).”

Reagan drafted a last minute addition to his speech which explained this newfound logic of coexistence with a vintage Reaganesque parable:

Just suppose with me for a moment that an Ivan and an Anya could find themselves, oh, say, in a waiting room, or sharing a shelter from the rain or a storm with a Jim and Sally, and there was no language barrier to keep them from getting acquainted. Would they then debate the differences between their respective governments? Or would they find themselves comparing notes about their children and what each other did for a living?

Before they parted company, they would probably have touched on

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146 The first evidence of this decision is a 3 December 1983 memorandum from Matlock to McFarlane. This memorandum listed six goal Matlock wanted the speech to emphasize. The speech was ready for the President by 20 December 1983, but was delayed until 16 January 1984 on the advice of Nancy Reagan’s astrologer. 3 December 1983, Reagan Presidential Library Matlock Files, Saturday Group – Notes (Nov-Dec 1983), Box 34, 2219; 20 December 1983, Memorandum from Jack Matlock to Robert C. McFarlane, Fortier Files, Soviet Project [1 of 2], 90763; Matlock, Reagan and Gorbachev, 80.

147 Robert McFarlane interview conducted by Don Oberdorfer, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, 1990; Jack Matlock interview conducted by Don Oberdorfer, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, 1990; Fischer, Reagan reversal, 135.

ambitions and hobbies and what they wanted for their children and problems of making ends meet. And as they went their separate ways, maybe Anya would be saying to Ivan, ‘Wasn't she nice? She also teaches music.’ Or Jim would be telling Sally what Ivan did or didn't like about his boss. They might even have decided they were all going to get together for dinner some evening soon. Above all, they would have proven that people don't make wars.149

Immediately following Reagan's speech, Shultz drafted an earnest message to Gromyko which began by stating:

We have a problem, you and I. And we must do better than we have to date in dealing with it. The problem is how to manage the US-Soviet relationship in a manner which eliminates the risk of direct conflict, reduces the present dangerous level of confrontation, and turns our energies to peaceful competition and, where possible cooperation.150

Shultz stated that the US and USSR were “at a point of genuine opportunity in [their] foreign policy.” And then – echoing Andropov’s June plea to Harriman – called for an end to the existential danger each side posed to the other:

The central issue between us is the avoidance of war. If we do not agree, at least tacitly, on that issue, the remainder of our agenda and yours is irrelevant. We must face this question openly or, if you prefer, privately. But there must be some minimum level of understanding about what you consider essential to your national security and what we consider essential for ours.151

In his memoirs, Reagan, without specifically mentioning Able Archer 83 – he states earlier that he cannot mention classified information – wrote of his realization:

Three years had taught me something surprising about the Russians: Many people at the top of the Soviet hierarchy were

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150 16 January 1984, Cable from George Shultz to Ray Seitz/ Brunson McKinley, “Gromyko Meeting,” in CIA Records Search Tool, National Archives and Records Administration NARA, College Park, MD.
151 16 January 1984, Cable from George Shultz to Ray Seitz/Brunson McKinley.
genuinely afraid of America and Americans. Perhaps this shouldn’t have surprised me, but it did....
During my first years in Washington, I think many of us in the administration took it for granted that the Russians, like ourselves considered it unthinkable that the United States would launch a first strike against them. But the more experience I had with Soviet leaders and other heads of state who knew them, the more I 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.152

**Soviet Ripples**

How Able Archer 83 shaped the Soviet leadership and its policy is more difficult to ascertain. On 15 December 1983 Ustinov gave a prominent speech addressed to Soviet war veterans in which he spoke of the tension between the United States and Soviet Union. He stated:

> The Soviet people well remember the lessons of the last war and draw the necessary conclusions... As you can see comrades, the situation in the world is extremely tense. But no matter how complicated the political-military situation, there is point in overdramatizing it... Soberly appraising the full seriousness of the current situation, one must see that imperialism is not all powerful. And its threats do not frighten us. The Soviet people have strong nerves.153

American intelligence officers paid close attention to Ustinov’s speech.154 The Minister of Defense publicly warned American policy makers about the danger of miscalculation. Yet he also appeared to call for a “sober appraisal” from within the Soviet Union, signaling to Soviet leadership that America was not truly planning to win a nuclear war.

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154 Interview with Anonymous Intelligence Analyst conducted by Don Orberdorfer, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University.
On 28 January 1984, a sickly Andropov wrote his last letter to Reagan. Responding to Reagan’s offer to resume negotiations on Intermediate-range missiles, the General Secretary first criticized the President for his previous aggressive policies, stating that he could not, “fail to draw a conclusion that the U.S. pursued a goal... to challenge the security of our country and its allies.” Andropov then listed issues, including: general and European nuclear arms reduction, demilitarization in space, and limiting conventional arms sales to third-world countries. He then coolly stated his willingness for renewed dialogue.\footnote{28 January 1984, Letter from Yuri Andropov to Ronald Reagan, Reagan Presidential Library, McFarlane Files, Soviet Union – Sensitive File – 1984 (01/26/1984- 02/13/1984), Box 7.}

Another possible effect of Able Archer 83, according to Roy Medvedev, was Andropov’s 1983 implementation of the “nuclear briefcase,” in effect placing control of the Soviet Union’s nuclear arsenal in the hands of one political leader.\footnote{Medvedev, Neizvestnii Andropov, 439. Medvedev states this occurred in 1983 and does not say precisely when. The decision may or may not have been effected by Able Archer 83. Regardless, it was an important development.}

Operation RYAN died down, but did not end. In fact (illustrating the inertia of Soviet bureaucracy) the Operation lasted until the end of the Soviet Union. However, after Able Archer 83, the reports of US nuclear attack from Soviet agents abroad slowed to a trickle.\footnote{Andrew and Gordievsky, Comrade Kryuchkov’s Instructions, 90.} A Bulgarian document reported that in early 1984 units within Bulgarian intelligence held a meeting to coordinate, “the necessary working contacts between information-analytical units on nuclear-
attack [RYAN] problems.” One can only hope Bulgarian intelligence decided greater collaboration was needed to avoid future false alarms.158

The above examples notwithstanding, the changes in Soviet policy immediately following Able Archer 83 proved far less substantial than those of the United States.

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158 9 March 1984, Bulgarian Ministry of Interior; MVR Information re: Results from the work on the improvement of the System for detection of RYAN indications, AMVR, Fond 1, Record 12, File 553, Provided by Jordan Baev.
CONCLUSION: “WHY IS THE WORLD SO DANGEROUS?”

A 30 November 1983 memorandum entitled “Why Is the World so Dangerous?” circulated amongst Reagan administration principals.\textsuperscript{159} Had the principals answered honestly, they would have said that the danger was due, in part, to the US policies which had helped to make it so. US foreign policy played a role in the 1983 Soviet-American War Scare. American curtailment of formal and informal contacts with the Soviets, introduction of newer, balance-shifting nuclear weapons and defense systems, and frequent rhetorical pledges to destroy communism, enflamed Soviet fears of a United States nuclear attack and pushed the world closer to the brink.

The superpower intelligence agencies also bore responsibility for this danger. The history of the 1983 War Scare is lauding to neither the CIA nor KGB. Both sides were fundamentally wrong in their assumptions. Operation RYAN stands as a dubious example of the flawed intelligence which arrives from an agency which molds its evidence to fit predetermined conclusions. The Moscow Center asked its agents only for binary information, not its agents’ opinions of what the information they had collected meant. There was no Western intention to launch a first strike; therefore ordering agents to detect one was remiss.

\textsuperscript{159} The memorandum concluded the world was dangerous because the Soviet Union was “running out of time.” It did not mention any US contribution to the danger. 30 November, 1983, Memo from Herbert E. Meyer Vice Chairman, National Intelligence Counsel for Director and Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, “Why is the World so Dangerous?” in CIA Records Search Tool, National Archives and Records Administration NARA, College Park, MD.
American intelligence also failed to believe the obvious. It refused to accept that the West’s vast increase in nuclear strength combined with Reagan’s harsh rhetoric made some in the Soviet Union believe that a Western nuclear strike was a possibility. This ignorance or whitewashing of genuine Soviet fear led to the continuation of confrontational policies which could have caused a desperate Soviet Union to lash out against the West. American intelligence believed there was virtually no chance of nuclear war and refused to conceive that its adversary could think otherwise. –

Finally, the increased risk of nuclear miscalculation during Able Archer 83 chinks the theory of nuclear deterrence and idea of the “long peace.” The 1983 War Scare proves that the Cold War did not slowly wind down after the Cuban Missile Crisis. Rather, the danger of nuclear confrontation remained constant, and at times – including during Able Archer 83 – escalated. By 1983, each side had only a *six minute* window to survive a nuclear attack. Despite “nuclear learning,” and game theories, both of the superpowers became more unsafe as the Cold War progressed. While the USA and USSR maintained nuclear parity, both lacked nuclear security. The explanation to this nuclear paradox is simple: Theories don’t shape the course of human events; men do. Reagan was right when he wrote that the Soviet attack on KAL 007 negated “the moral precepts which guide human relations everywhere;” it also reaffirmed the danger of human irrationality.\textsuperscript{160} Cold War history must recount that human unpredictability was what caused the danger of nuclear war to be ever-present throughout the long peace— and, on more than one occasion, dangerously close.

\textsuperscript{160} Reagan, *American Live*, 548.
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