Able Archer 83: What Were the Soviets Thinking?

Gordon Barrass

Over the past 30 years, there has been much debate over how close the world came to nuclear war in 1983, as US–Soviet relations became increasingly fraught. Were we at the brink of Armageddon and, if so, why? Or was the so-called war scare part of a Soviet propaganda campaign to thwart the deployment of cruise and *Pershing* II missiles to Western Europe, throwing the NATO alliance into disarray? This haunting problem is part of a much bigger story – a story about the rivalry between NATO and the Warsaw Pact from the early 1970s to the late 1980s, as they each struggled to enhance their own security and boost their political clout by exploiting the revolution taking place in military technology.[1]

The debate over what happened in 1983 – in particular, the Soviet reaction to NATO's *Able Archer* exercise that year – received a new lease of life in October 2015 with the release of a top-secret review of the issue written in 1990 under the auspices of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB). The review concluded that 'we may have inadvertently placed our relations with the Soviet Union on a hair trigger', in response to which the Kremlin 'might have launched a pre-emptive strike against the US in response to a perceived but non-existent threat'.[2]

Several informed observers have expressed their reservations regarding this conclusion.[3] A principal reservation concerns how much the authors of

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the PFIAB report did *not* know at the time the report was written. Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a flood of new material: from Soviet and East European archives; from extensive interviews US officials conducted with Soviet military commanders, scientists and intelligence officials immediately after the end of the Cold War; and from British interviewers in 2005–06 preparing for a TV docudrama entitled *1983: The Brink of Apocalypse*. In addition, there are many memoirs by former Soviet leaders, officials and officers.[4]

This material makes it possible to take a fresh look at what really happened and reassesses how serious the risk of war had been in late 1983. Even so, the old rules of evidence still apply: we must give priority to what actors said at the time versus what they said later, when people often wish to portray themselves as having been more insightful or effective than they were; we must consider how well placed the source was to know about what was happening; and we must take into account the need of generals and heads of intelligence services to show their bosses that they have not missed a trick and are keeping their staff on their toes.

We also need to keep in mind that there was not one Soviet view; rather, there were several, reflecting the structure of the regime, the tight control over information and the persistent use of propaganda in the Soviet Union itself. In particular, we should remember the historic institutional rivalry between the KGB and the GRU, the Soviet military-intelligence service, with the former believing they could see things the GRU could not, and the GRU full of contempt for the KGB's ignorance of the realities of military matters.

What did Soviet leaders say in private?

The starting point for such an effort must be what Soviet leaders were saying to each other and to their close East European allies about president Ronald Reagan – the first American president to believe that the United States could end the Cold War by putting the Soviet Union under intense pressure on all fronts.[5]

Reagan's challenge was menacing because it came at a time when the Soviet leadership felt increasingly vulnerable. On the one hand, the Soviet economy was in trouble, Soviet forces were bogged down in Afghanistan, the declaration of martial law in Poland could not eliminate the threat from

Solidarity, and discontent was rising across the Soviet bloc. On the other, the Soviets' early-warning systems were unreliable; the Soviet Union could not match America's ability to harness IT to enhance the effectiveness of their weaponry and coordination of warfare; and NATO was preparing to deploy *Pershing* II ballistic missiles and *Gryphon* cruise missiles.[6]

One of the first signs of the depth of Soviet concern came, unsurprisingly, from the KGB. In a secret speech in February 1981, Vladimir Kryuchkov, the head of the KGB's foreign operations, exhorted KGB residencies to 'prevent the US and its allies from deciding to make a first-strike against the Soviet Union'.[7]

Almost immediately, the Soviet armed forces began the long process of heightening their readiness. Su-24 bombers, for instance, were deployed in East Germany, Poland and Hungary to boost the availability of nuclear-strike forces in the forward area. For the first time, nuclear-capable artillery was also deployed with Soviet forces on the NATO front line.[8]

In May 1981, the ailing president Leonid Brezhnev denounced Reagan's policies in a secret address to a major KGB conference in Moscow. The most dramatic speech, however, was given by Yuri Andropov, the chairman of the KGB and a leading member of the Politburo.[9] Andropov declared that the new American administration was actively preparing for nuclear war and that a nuclear first strike was possible. He then announced that, by a decision of the Politburo, the KGB and the GRU were for the first time to cooperate in a worldwide intelligence operation code-named RYAN (the Russian acronym for 'Nuclear Missile Attack').[10]

Since the end of the Second World War the chief task of the KGB had been 'to help frustrate the aggressive intentions of the American imperialists'.[11] Now, for the first time, the KGB was placing strategic military intelligence at the top of its collection priorities. The KGB's primary task was to provide advance warning of any decision by the US and its NATO allies to launch a nuclear attack. The underlying concept of RYAN, which had been developed by the KGB, was the belief that deviations from peacetime routines in a wide variety of spheres – military, political, economic, health administration, civil defence – could provide preliminary warning of Western preparations for a first strike.

'The slogan', General Oleg Kalugin of the KGB vividly remembered, was 'do not miss the moment when the West is about to launch war'.[12] The thrust of what Andropov said that day and later, however, was not that the Soviet Union needed enough warning to pre-empt a missile attack, but that it needed enough time to dissuade or deter the Americans from taking such a fatal step.

We know a lot about how the KGB went about this task from Colonel Oleg Gordievsky, who was working with the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) at the same time as being the number two in the KGB residency in London from 1982–85.[13] As always, the GRU's responsibility was to monitor NATO's capabilities and activities, and any signs that preparations were being made to attack the Warsaw Pact. Over the years they had collected a formidable amount of intelligence.[14]

In his speech to the KGB conference, Andropov had chosen his words carefully. Although he accused the United States of 'preparing' for war, he did not go so far as to accuse it of planning to initiate one. Two months later, Andropov spelt out his thinking to Erich Mielke, the member of the East German Politburo responsible for foreign and domestic intelligence:

> The US is preparing for war, but it is not willing to start a war. They are not building factories and palaces in order to destroy them. They are striving for military superiority in order to 'check' us and then declare 'checkmate' against us without starting a war. Maybe I am wrong.[15]

In December 1982, following Brezhnev's death, Andropov took over as general secretary. On 4 January 1983, he gave East European leaders in Prague an unemotional assessment of the shift that had taken place over the past four years. The *Pershing* IIs and *Gryphon*s were the 'most serious challenge', he said, and 'the military situation was especially dangerous'. It was 'difficult to say', he continued, 'where the line lies between extortion and actual preparations to take a fateful step'. Despite American hostility, the Soviet Union was willing to 'go very far' to end the arms race. To that end, Andropov would try to get relations back on a better course and reopen a 'dialogue of equals' with Reagan.[16]

What was Andropov's objective?

Andropov's main aim was to prevent NATO deployment of *Pershing* II and *Gryphon* missiles. Moscow's most powerful tool for doing this was the massive peace movements that had sprung up in several NATO countries. While they reflected genuine concerns, some were secretly supported by Soviet funding, and all were bolstered by Soviet propaganda. To that end, Andropov hyped the threat these 'Euromissiles' posed to world peace, saying darkly that the prospect of 'nuclear war was overhanging mankind'.[17]

Much of this problem was of Moscow's own making. NATO's disarray in the early 1970s emboldened Moscow to undermine the confidence of the Western Europeans in America's ability to protect them in time of war, which would have required escalating to the first use of nuclear weapons to avoid defeat and restore deterrence. To this end, in the late 1970s, Moscow began deploying the SS-20, a new triple-warheaded missile with a range of some 4,500 kilometres. That made it possible to hold all of Western Europe at risk from deep within Soviet territory.

NATO's response was that, unless the Soviet Union massively cut its SS-20 force (which would eventually comprise some 400 missiles and launchers), NATO would deploy two new theatre weapons – the *Pershing* II and *Gryphon* missiles – at the end of 1983. When Reagan became president, the terms of this deal became tougher: the 'double zero' solution. NATO would not deploy its 108 *Pershing* IIs and 464 *Gryphon*s if the Soviet Union eliminated all of its SS-20s.[18]

By the end of March 1983, soon after Reagan's announcement of the Strategic Defense Initiative, it became clear that the peace movement had failed and NATO's 'Euromissiles' would begin to be deployed on schedule in November. When the Politburo met on 31 May, Andropov asked its members whether American policymakers would use the Euromissiles without being provoked. Foreign minister Andrei Gromyko rightly replied: 'I think they wouldn't dare to use nuclear missiles without sufficient reason.'[19]

In Moscow on 4 May 1983, Andropov admitted to East German leader Erich Honecker that he did not really consider that *Pershing* II would change things much, as the Americans already had plenty of missiles with which

to attack the Soviet Union and East Germany. The real reason for focusing on these missiles, he explained, was 'to raise the struggle against the whole course of militarisation onto a higher level'. 'Should the deployment take place', he explained, 'and everything indicates that it will, then the struggle against militarisation would nevertheless continue.'[20]

One way of continuing the 'struggle' would have been to provoke the West German peace movements into violence. That is probably why in early 1983 the KGB set about identifying places near US bases to conceal explosives that, when detonated, would have appeared to be a terrorist attack.[21] When, in October 1984, Honecker discussed with Gromyko the failure of the peace movement to prevent the deployment of the Euromissiles, Honecker said this was due to the fact that the protests had remained non-violent. It seems that as East–West relations became increasingly fraught in the following months, Moscow was not willing to take such a risk.

Soviet fear of nuclear war

Soviet leaders and generals had long threatened to 'launch on warning' if the Kremlin believed NATO was going to resort to the use of nuclear weapons in the context of a war between the Warsaw Pact and NATO. The military and the Strategic Rocket Forces regularly practised the deployment and use of their nuclear forces. There are, however, many first-hand accounts showing that Soviet leaders and generals alike were horrified by the prospect of nuclear war. Indeed, the Politburo adamantly refused to delegate the authority to launch nuclear missiles to military commanders.[22] When Vitalii Kataev, a former senior Central Committee defence adviser, was asked how the leadership would respond to a limited strike, he pondered silently for a while and then said 'I just don't know'.[23]

Despite the weaknesses of their early-warning systems, Soviet leaders had a high degree of confidence in nuclear deterrence. They believed that the Americans understood that, even if they opted for a surprise first strike, the Soviet Union would be able to launch enough land-based and submarine-based missiles to obliterate America's main cities and military facilities. This was a risk that American leaders would not take; and Soviet leaders themselves would not do so for precisely the same reason.

It was against this background that in the late 1970s to early 1980s a major shift took place in Soviet strategy: everything possible had to be done to prevent nuclear war. In practice, this meant that should conflict break out in Europe, 2,000 Soviet strike aircraft (carrying conventional weapons) would launch simultaneous attacks to destroy all NATO nuclear facilities there within 48 hours. By doing so, they hoped to be able to prevent NATO from resorting to theatre and tactical nuclear weapons, which they believed would inevitably escalate into global nuclear war.

A small number of Americans knew about this from tens of thousands of pages of documentary intelligence provided by Major-General Dmitry Polyakov of the GRU, and Colonel Ryszard Kuklinski, an officer on the Polish General Staff who was working with the Russians on the Warsaw Pact's command-and-control arrangements in time of war.[24] Kuklinski's contribution on the Warsaw Pact's operational concepts, command structure and exercises was of an unprecedented and unparalleled duration.[25]

American satellites had produced a lot of information about the new, deep command-and-control bunkers that were being built in the Moscow area for the Soviet leadership and the general staff.[26] In addition, Kuklinski had the details of the new bunker from which a war against NATO on the central front would be directed. And after Kuklinski's defection to the US in December 1981, Soviet leaders knew that the Americans knew about their bunkers and how they would fight a war in Europe.[27]

The nightmare of *Pershing* II

Soviet military experts believed *Pershing* IIs deployed in West Germany to be a greater danger than the ICBMs deployed in the United States.[28] These missiles would, after all, undermine Moscow's assumptions about deterrence – firstly, because of the capabilities of these missiles and, secondly, because if they were deployed it would show that NATO had achieved a new resilience, both politically and in terms of deterrence. According to the 1990 PFIAB report:

> The Pershing II missile 1800 km range would not have reached Moscow from planned deployment sites in West Germany. Warsaw Pact sources, however, attributed to this system a range of 2500 km, an accuracy of 30

meters, and an earth-penetrating warhead. With a range of 2500 km the Soviets feared it would have been able to strike command and control targets in the Moscow area with little or no warning.[29]

The American figure of 1,800km was the publicly declared range for *Pershing* II, with a marginally shorter one for *Gryphon*. The figures claimed by the Soviets were the classified figures, which are now quoted on official American websites.[30]

Although the Soviet leadership judged that Reagan would not dare to launch a surprise nuclear strike, what might he do if he lost his sanity or believed that he had the capability to prevent Soviet retaliation? The possibility that made the most military sense to the Soviet strategists was for the US to use *Pershing* IIs to destroy Soviet command-and-control bunkers before the leadership could order a retaliatory strike, followed in short order by strikes from submarines and land-based missiles.[31]

The top intelligence priority

In these circumstances, the GRU's key intelligence requirement was to know whether *Pershing* IIs had arrived in Europe, whether enough of them were operational for an effective first strike, the state of their alert and whether political decisions had been taken to use them.

This was a task for which the GRU was well prepared. Over the years, the Soviet General Staff had acquired staggering amounts of documentary and other intelligence on NATO. The intelligence came not only from the GRU, but also from the KGB and the Soviet Union's Warsaw Pact allies, especially the East Germans. Markus Wolf, the former head of the East German foreign intelligence service, recalled that when, in the 1970s, he asked the commander of Soviet forces in East Germany what intelligence he needed, the commander replied 'Nothing, just the precise map co-ordinates of all NATO nuclear facilities.'[32]

The GRU had taken a keen interest in *Pershing* missiles since the mid-1960s, when 108 *Pershing* 1As were deployed by the US Army in West Germany, with a further 72 operated by the German Air Force, as part of SACEUR's nuclear force. The US Army had three battalions, each of which

had four batteries of nine missiles. At all times one battalion was on Quick Reaction Alert. The 1As had a range of 740km and a nuclear warhead, with a blast yield between 60 and 400 kilotons. Their task was to strike at Warsaw Pact forces in Eastern Europe.

The *Pershing* II, however, was designed for attacks on the Soviet Union. The US and West Germany agreed that while the US *Pershing* force would be upgraded one-for-one, the West German Air Force would retain its ageing *Pershing* 1As.

Monitoring *Pershing* II

In 1979, NATO had announced that the deployment of the 108 *Pershing* II missiles to Germany would begin in late 1983. Following a vote the previous day by the West German Bundestag, deployment began on 23 November.[33]

There were plenty of indicators to help the GRU monitor the timing of the deployment and the operational readiness of these missiles. Knowing what was happening in Germany was relatively easy because the GRU had many different human and technical sources, plus intensive coverage by East German intelligence.

In the US, much of the GRU's attention would have been focused on the Martin Marietta production plant at Orlando, Florida, where the *Pershing* IIs were produced; nearby facilities on Cape Canaveral, where they were tested and crews were trained; and Patrick Air Force Base, from which the missiles would be transported to Germany.[34] Agent coverage of what was going on in the US was less good than in Germany, but the GRU did have intercept stations in Washington, New York and Los Angeles. In addition, some 2,500 staff based at Lourdes, Cuba, were well placed to monitor activities at Cape Canaveral, just over 600km away.[35]

An intensive programme of flight tests of the *Pershing* IIs began in July 1982. Prior to the deployment to Germany, three *Pershing* IIs were flight-tested at Cape Canaveral on 23 September 1983.[36] The missile, however, was never tested beyond its declared range of 1,800km.

In preparation for the arrival of the new *Pershing* IIs in Germany, some of the crews that were already there manning the *Pershing* 1As were sent back to Cape Canaveral for additional training; over the next two years some

1,500 personnel based in Germany were sent on this course, and new crew members were trained at Fort Sill in Oklahoma. As the erector transporters for the *Pershing* IIs were those used for the *Pershing* 1As that had been modified in Germany, the deployment of the *Pershing* IIs would not be a complicated task. The *Pershing* II missile itself was only 10.6 metres long by 1m wide. It comprised five sections, one of which was the approximately 2m-long warhead. This made it possible for the four sections to be transported by truck or helicopter, though never together with the warheads.

Pershing II missiles were brought by ground convoys to the training facility at Cape Canaveral and from there flown to Germany from the nearby Patrick Air Force Base. As the erector transporters were already in Germany, a battery of nine missiles could easily be transported on one C5a *Galaxy* aircraft. The warheads, the fifth section, were as always flown separately.

Rising tensions

The shoot-down by a Soviet pilot of Korean Air Lines Flight 007 on 1 September 1983 over the Sea of Japan, killing 269 passengers and crew, led to a spiral of vituperous exchanges between Washington and Moscow. A Tass article by Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov on 22 September reminded the Reagan administration that, even if it did launch a first strike, Soviet retaliation would impose 'unacceptable damage' on the US.[37] A week later, as relations deteriorated further, Andropov issued a blunt statement in *Pravda* on 29 September saying, in effect, that there was no hope of improving Soviet–US relations while Reagan remained president. The implication, however, was that, while waiting for him to go, the Soviet Union would need to be cautious.

Some of the top Soviet commanders had been reminded of this just three days earlier, when their recently established satellite early-warning centre showed that five American *Minuteman* missiles had been launched against the Soviet Union. The officer on duty decided this was a false alarm because, firstly, he did not believe the Americans would launch a surprise attack on such a small scale, and secondly, the ground-based radar was showing no signs of the missiles coming over the horizon.[38] As the system was unreliable, the leadership would have to be ultra-cautious.

Nevertheless, the Soviet military took the threat of a surprise nuclear attack seriously. In talking about these events in 2005, General Viktor Yesin of the Soviet Strategic Missile Forces explained that NATO's large-scale military exercises were 'fraught with possibilities that under the cover of such an exercise an unexpected nuclear missiles strike could be launched'.[39]

Thanks to Gordievsky we know what telegrams the KGB Centre was sending to their residencies in NATO capitals about RYAN.[40] These have often been cited for what they said about Moscow's increasing concern that the US would launch a first strike against the Soviet Union.

In February 1983, for example, the centre issued a permanent operating assignment to uncover NATO preparations for a nuclear-missile attack on the Soviet Union. This task was of 'growing urgency' given the expected arrival of the *Pershing* IIs and *Gryphon* cruise missiles towards the end of the year. In June, the Centre instructed residencies to step up their efforts. The accompanying briefing material showed the KGB's considerable knowledge of the different levels of NATO alerts.[41]

The dogs that didn't bark

Even more interesting, however, is what the telegrams from the Centre do not say. They are among 'the dogs that didn't bark', whose silence draws attention to other aspects of Soviet conduct and the thinking that lay behind it.

Despite RYAN, the centre did not put serious pressure on residencies to increase their efforts and vigilance, nor did it provide significant new briefing even as NATO prepared for its annual autumn exercises, stretching from Norway to Turkey, under the overarching title of *Autumn Forge*. In 1983, these involved approximately 100,000 troops, some 16,000 of which had, as always, been flown in from the United States.

The last in the series was *Able Archer*, the annual command-post (meaning no troops on the ground) exercise of NATO's Allied Command Europe, designed to practise command and staff procedures, with particular emphasis on the transition from conventional to nuclear weapons. The *Able Archer* exercise was always held around early November at the end of *Autumn Forge*. Although the dates were not widely known, Soviet intelligence could easily obtain them from its many sources in NATO. In 1983 it was to run

from 2–11 November, with the transition to nuclear weapons usually taking place during the last five days.[42]

Each year the exercises were changed in minor ways. In parallel, according to the PFIAB report, there were some live mobilisation exercises of some US forces in Europe. Some US aircraft, for example, practised nuclear-warhead handling procedures, including taxiing out of hangars carrying realistic-looking dummy warheads.[43] Moscow would have learned about most of these changes from their intelligence sources and those of their allies.

The top Soviet intelligence priority, however, remained the question of whether the US had the capability to launch a 'decapitating' first strike. Given the GRU's close study of *Pershing* 1As over many years, the agency could be confident that the *Pershing* IIs were not yet in West Germany. What they needed to know was when the delivery got under way, how quick the build-up was, and how many of the missiles were operational. After all, 'decapitation' would require a lot of *Pershing* IIs.

It was three days after *Able Archer* began that the centre sent the London residency a bland telegram revealing, for the first time, the timetable of the (non-existent) Western plan for a first strike. 'It can be assumed', it stated, 'that the period of time from the moment when the preliminary decision for RYAN is taken up to the order to deliver the strike will be of very short duration, possibly 7 to 10 days.' The centre added a checklist of likely indicators that the countdown had begun.[44] Meanwhile, *Able Archer* rolled on.

On 8 or 9 November, when *Able Archer* was drawing to its nuclear close, out of the blue KGB residencies received a 'most urgent' telegram from the centre. The telegram claimed that American forces had been put on alert, when in fact the Americans had simply been tightening security at their overseas bases in response to the recent massacre of some 300 US and French troops in Beirut.

The most interesting feature of this telegram was that it was so pathetic. On the one hand, it listed several possible explanations for this so-called alert, one of which was that the countdown to a nuclear strike had begun under the cover of *Able Archer*. On the other, residencies were instructed to confirm the alert and evaluate the hypotheses.[45]

Similarly, the absence of panic in Moscow is attested to by Rainer Rupp, the star agent of East German intelligence at NATO headquarters. He was not contacted by East German intelligence about *Able Archer* until 9 November. In response to the simple question of whether NATO was preparing for war, his reply was that 'There was no indication that NATO was preparing for war at that time'. He was never contacted on this matter again.[46]

Had the Soviet leadership really feared war was likely, let alone imminent, all branches of Soviet intelligence would have been frantically active. The KGB certainly was not – but the GRU was.

Hedging bets

As usual, when NATO exercises were taking place the GRU assiduously monitored NATO communications from within Soviet embassies in Western Europe. Other GRU officers roamed around Western Europe in cars with listening devices to intercept any communications they could and, above all, to make sure that what was happening was still an exercise, not a guise for launching missiles.[47] Meanwhile, according to Werner Grossman, the deputy head of East German intelligence, he had 'around 500 very important sources in West Germany at that time and we knew the missile locations exactly'.[48] Soviet concerns were reflected in an unusually sharp increase in the volume and urgency of Warsaw Pact communications. Much of this was probably reporting from the GRU, which was providing situation reports on *Able Archer* every six to eight hours.[49]

Meanwhile, on the Western side, the US National Security Agency (NSA) and the UK Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) were constantly monitoring communications for signs of changes in the deployment and alert status of Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces. The information they obtained was not merely classified Top Secret, but also UMBRA, indicating that it came from highly sensitive intercept operations. Most of this information, especially that concerning the alert status for Soviet forces, has been redacted from the PFIAB report. Nevertheless, what remains does show that Soviet forces took a number of unusual actions during *Able Archer 83*, which they had not taken in earlier years. These began on 20 October and included:

- Air armies in East Germany and Poland were placed on alert;
- A suspension of all flight operations from 4–10 November, with the exception of intelligence flights, of which there were 35 (significantly more than in previous years);
- Increasing the number of Mig-23s on strip alert and fully armed (these fighter-interceptors were designed to track and shoot down the low-flying *Gryphon* cruise missiles with conventional armaments);
- Invoking a 30-minute, round-the-clock readiness time and assigning priority targets.

In addition, SU-24 nuclear-capable strike bombers had for the previous two years been deployed in East Germany and Hungary, greatly enhancing the availability of strike forces in the forward areas, and efforts had been made to speed up the loading of nuclear bombs onto aircraft and delivery units.[50]

At first glance, these steps may seem scary. But, as will become clear below, they were not taken in panic; rather, they were part of the continuing effort by Soviet military forces to show that they were alert and could respond effectively in a real crisis – and they were signalling to the US to be careful. Had the CIA been alerted to the closeness of the timing of *Able Archer* and the deployment of *Pershing* II, it would probably have expected to see something of this sort, and would have detected these signs earlier than it did.

Some 15 years after the PFIAB report was written, some tantalising information emerged, according to which, on the day that *Able Archer* began (2 November), Marshal Ogarkov moved to his wartime command bunker deep beneath Moscow. From there he ordered a 'heightened alert' for some of his forces in the greatest secrecy, so as not to generate a crisis he wished to avoid.

Although there is no collateral for this from Western sources, it seems highly likely that this happened, given other changes detected by the NSA and GCHQ. The main Soviet source was General Yesin, who in 1983 had been a senior operations officer for the SS-20 force. In a separate interview Captain Viktor Tkachenko also spoke of the heightened alert, during which he had been in charge of a unit of ten SS-19s.[51]

When he was interviewed by Flashback Television in 2005, Yesin said that part of the land-based Soviet strategic missile force went on heightened alert. This included 75 of the mobile SS-20s targeted to Western Europe, which had been moved out of their garrisons to well-camouflaged wartime firing positions, as well as an unknown number of SS-19s and an intercontinental ballistic missile with ten warheads, which remained hidden in their silos. As *Able Archer* reached its climax, commanders of the rocket forces spent all their time in their command centres and were on the most heightened state of alert waiting for orders.

On the morning of 8 November SACEUR requested initial use of nuclear weapons against fixed targets in the satellite countries of Orange (the hypothetical opponent). SACEUR's request was approved late that evening, and nuclear strikes were launched on the morning of 9 November. Fighting continued and SACEUR was authorised to use more nuclear weapons, which he did on the morning of 11 November, bringing the exercise to a close.[52]

Not only did the GRU not flinch, but by that day, the Soviet alert had been withdrawn and Soviet Air Force units in East Germany resumed flight training.[53] If the GRU had had any doubts about what was happening those flights would not have been resumed so quickly. On 14 November, three days after *Able Archer* had officially ended, Soviet Strategic Rocket Forces were 'brought back to their normal positions'.[54]

The aftermath

Shortly before the West German Bundestag approved the deployment of the *Pershing* IIs to US forces in Germany on 22 November, the first batch of nine missiles had already arrived at the US Rhein-Main Air Base, which was under exclusive US control. Missiles for a second battalion arrived on 24 November.[55]

Three days after the vote by the German Bundestag, *Pravda* and *Izvestia* published a statement in which Andropov lambasted Reagan, asserting that he was bent on 'world domination' and 'inventing new plans on how to unleash a nuclear war in the best way, with the hope of winning it'. It also listed the countermeasures that Moscow would take.[56]

It was not until 27 November that the *Pershing* IIs were taken approximately 100 miles to the 1st Battalion 41st Field Artillery Regiment. This

unit was based at Mutlangen, near the main operational base of its head-quarters group, the 56th Field Artillery Brigade, at Schwäbisch Gmünd. To avoid protesters trying to block the roads, convoys travelled in the middle of the night. The nuclear warheads were transported by *Chinook* helicop-ters to safe storage bunkers nearby. The personnel and equipment of the first battalion were certified combat-ready and assumed target coverage on 15 December.[57] One day earlier, Marshal Dmitry Ustinov, the Soviet defence minister, had given a speech in Moscow in which he said that, 'no matter how complicated the military and political situation, there is no point in dramatizing it', adding that the Soviet Union was not frightened by threats.[58]

In April 1984, two months after Andropov died and was replaced by Konstantin Chernyenko, the Soviet armed forces conducted the most comprehensive rehearsal of a nuclear war that the US has ever detected.[59] This was clearly to warn the US not to try to exploit its success in deploy-ing Euromissiles. Over the next year tensions between the US and the Soviet Union began to ease and paved the way for the breakthroughs made by Mikhail Gorbachev, who was elevated to general secretary after Chernyenko's death in March 1985, with Reagan and UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher.

Looking back on the events of 1983, Yesin said:

> We knew that NATO was doing an exercise … although we couldn't fully eliminate the possibility that a nuclear strike might have been delivered … [We were] on heightened vigilance, not waiting for a strike to be delivered … I was in Cuba at the height of the 1962 missile crisis when we were expecting that any minute we would be given the order to launch missiles and we were waiting for the American attack to begin. In 1983, the atmosphere was so different.[60]

Learning lessons

The debate in Washington over the *Able Archer* 'war scare' began in early 1984, as the close study of signals intelligence revealed that there had been

some unusual Soviet military activity in October–November 1983, and SIS also provided some indications, while remaining determined not to risk exposing that it had a Soviet source as well placed as Gordievsky.

In the somewhat calmer atmosphere of late April–early May 1984, Fritz Ermarth, then the national intelligence officer for the Soviet Union, and his team of senior analysts reviewed the events surrounding *Able Archer*. Their conclusion was the same as it had been in the latter part of 1983:

> We believe strongly that Soviet actions are not inspired by, and Soviet leaders do not perceive, a genuine danger of imminent conflict or confrontation with the United States.

Statements to the contrary, they believed, were 'propaganda'.[61] At the time, Ermarth had a high degree of confidence in the CIA's ability to detect that Soviet forces were being readied for war. The CIA had, he said, long been receiving 'an extraordinary range of intelligence on Soviet and Warsaw Pact military activities. This would show whether their forces had been put on a higher alert, were on the move or were readying for a major offensive.'[62]

After the Cold War was over, General Gelii Batenin, Marshal Ogarkov's deputy, expressed a similarly high degree of confidence in the Soviet ability to detect when NATO was preparing to launch nuclear weapons:

> We had confidence in our knowledge of when NATO was preparing to launch nuclear weapons. We would detect mating of warheads to missiles and uploading of nuclear bombs and artillery. We listened to the hourly circuit verification signal of your nuclear release communications systems and *we believed we would recognise* a release order. [63]

Despite their confidence, the two sides were both aware that their monitoring was not perfect. Each side needed to be particularly vigilant in looking for other indicators. That said, the above analysis, based on what we now know, demonstrates the soundness of the CIA's judgement. Even when General Yesin's information about Soviet missiles being put on a higher alert is taken into account, the events surrounding *Able Archer* were

less frightening than many have claimed. But *Able Archer* was just one part of the long-running Soviet concerns over American intentions.

The *Able Archer* episode itself, however, does provide lessons on how to analyse and respond to situations of great tension, especially when the stakes are high. On this score, the PFIAB report made two sound recommendations. The first is to know what your own side has been doing. This is easier said than done. Much of the relevant information is highly classified, or politically sensitive, or both. It involves, for example, knowing what exercises your own military is conducting, and understanding its 'probing' exercises to see how the other side reacts or, more seriously, to undermine their confidence;[64] ensuring that your intelligence agencies are not feeding double agents with false information that may be detrimental to your own interests;[65] and being kept abreast of what is being said between leaders and what messages are being passed via back channels.

The PFIAB's other recommendation was that, when unusual things happen, one should consider a number of competing hypotheses and the assumptions that underpin them. This technique was already being adopted by the CIA at that time, and is now widely accepted by Western intelligence agencies. Making sure that this is done properly, however, is always a challenge, especially when many issues demand attention at the same time. The task is now made easier by computerised programmes that marshal the intelligence and information supporting different hypotheses. These programmes also help highlight the 'dogs that didn't bark', asking such questions as: Why don't we know anything about that issue? Why is it that the only information that we have relates to things that happened long ago?

Even more can be gained by getting inside the minds of others. Robert Gates, who was deputy director of intelligence at the CIA at the time of *Able Archer 83*, stressed that 'One of the things that kept the Cold War scary was the lack of understanding on each side of the mentality of the other'.[66] Another leading Soviet expert at the CIA phrased it more pithily: 'We didn't realise just how f***ing scared Soviet leaders were of us.'[67]

As Andrew Marshall, the head of the Office of Net Assessment at the Pentagon from 1973–2015, put it:

> To get inside the mind of another leadership you really have to start from scratch. It is not just a question of how their history and culture make them different from us, but the ways in which the structure of their regime affects the way they view the outside world and respond to developments … Valuable insights can be gained by observing what the other side does, but the real gains come from asking why they have done it. It may not seem reasonable to you, but it probably does to him. Rationality, after all, can come in many different forms.[68]

The PFIAB report confirms Gordievsky's contribution to alerting the US to broader Soviet fears that deterrence was breaking down and the risk of war was increasing. And that brings us to one of the paradoxes of intelligence: the extraordinary precautions that have to be taken to conceal the identity of an extraordinary source versus the dangers in withholding that information from the very people who need it. In each case, it is a judgement that even King Solomon would have had to think long and hard about.

It was not until SIS had smuggled Gordievsky out of the Soviet Union and his defection had been announced in London on 12 September 1985 that the CIA began to receive his detailed reports on *Able Archer*, the war scare and many other issues. Robert Gates graphically described Gordievsky's importance:

> Our sources in the Soviet Union tended to be those who provided us with information about their military and military R&D. What Gordievsky was giving us was information about the thinking of the leadership – and that kind of information was for us as scarce as hens' teeth.[69]

Ultimately, the war scare was a reflection of the wider Soviet concerns that would lie at the heart of the talks Reagan would be having with Gorbachev in Geneva in November 1985. As soon as Bill Casey, the director of central intelligence and a close friend of Reagan's, heard of the defection, he flew to Britain to debrief Gordievsky himself. Later, Reagan thanked Gordievsky at a meeting in the Oval Office, the first time a KGB officer had ever been there.

When powerful adversaries face each other but do not want war, good intelligence by both sides is vital to avoiding catastrophe. Equally important is the need to understand that one side's actions influence the other's perceptions. This is an interactive and dynamic process. One of the best pieces of advice that Gorbachev's foreign-policy adviser, Anatoly Chernyaev, ever gave him was that he had to understand how he was perceived by others, because everything he did – like it or not – sent a message.[70]

There are many things one could have disagreed about with Yuri Andropov, but he did understand that whereas it was vital not to underestimate the danger, overestimating could be disastrous.

Notes

1 This subject has been perceptively analysed by Diego A. Ruiz Palmer, NATO's expert on Soviet strategy. See Diego A. Ruiz Palmer, 'The NATO–Warsaw Pact Competition in the 1970s and 1980s: A Revolution in Military Affairs in the Making or the End of a Strategic Age?', *Cold War History*, vol. 4, 2014, pp. 533–73.

2 President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, 'The Soviet "War Scare"' [hereafter 'PFIAB report'], 15 February 1990, p. xii, http://nsarchive. gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb533-The-Able-Archer-War-Scare-Declassified-PFIAB-Report-Released/2012-0238-MR.pdf.

3 Benjamin B. Fischer, 'Scolding Intelligence: The PFIAB Report on the Soviet War Scare', paper delivered to the International Studies Association in Atlanta, GA, 18 March 2016.

4 See, for example, John G. Hines, Ellis M. Mishulovich and John F. Shull, *Soviet Intentions 1965–1985*, Volume 2: *Soviet Post-Cold War Testimonial Evidence* (McLean, VA: BDM, 1995); broadcast and unbroadcast inter-

views for *1983: The Brink of Apocalypse*, Flashback Television, 2008, some of which are quoted in Gordon Barrass, *The Great Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 285–310, and others held by Flashback Television; Dmitry Adamsky, 'The 1983 Nuclear Crisis – Lessons for Deterrence Theory and Practice', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2013, pp. 4–41.

5 Ben B. Fischer, 'A Cold War Conundrum: The 1983 Soviet War Scare', CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1997, https://www.cia. gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/a-cold-war-conundrum/source.htm.

6 Barrass, *The Great Cold War*, pp. 243–76.

7 PFIAB report, p. 53.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

9 Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *Comrade Kryuchkov's Instructions: Top Secret Files on KGB Foreign Operations, 1975–1985*

(Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. 67–90.

10 Later the term 'VRYAN' ('Surprise Nuclear Missile Attack') was also used.

11 Andrew and Gordievsky, *Comrade Kryuchkov's Instructions*, p. 91.

12 Oleg Kalugin, interviewed on *1983: The Brink of Apocalypse.*

13 See Andrew and Gordievsky, *Comrade Kryuchkov's Instructions*; and Oleg Gordievsky, *Next Stop Execution: The Autobiography of Oleg Gordievsky* (London: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 246–321.

14 Heinz Busch, *Die Militärspionage der DDR-Staatssicherheit* (Bonn: Europäische Sicherheit, 1993), pp. 130–1; 'East German Intelligence Assessment of NATO's Intelligence on the Warsaw Pact, 16 December 1985', in Vojtech Mastny and Malcolm Byrne (eds), *A Cardboard Castle? An Inside History of the Warsaw Pact, 1955–1991* (Budapest: Central European Press, 2005), pp. 514–15.

15 'Note About the Talks of Comrade Minister [Erich] Mielke with the Chairman of the KGB, Comrade [Yuri] Andropov on 11 July 1981 in Moscow', Office of the Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Records (BStU), MfS, ZAIG 5382, http://digitalarchive. wilsoncenter.org/document/115717.

16 Yuri Andropov, speech to the Political Consultative Committee of the Warsaw Pact, 4 January 1983, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book no. 14, document 19, http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/ NSAEBB14/doc19.htm.

17 'Secretary General Andropov's Address to the Central Committee, Moscow, 16 June 1983', *Pravda*, 17

June 1983.

18 NATO Communiqué, 12 December 1979.

19 *Ibid*.

20 Andropov quoted in Michael Ploetz, *Wie die Sowjetunion den Kalten Krieg verlor. Von der Nachrüstung zum Mauerfall* (Berlin and Munich: Propyläen Verlag, 2000), p. 274. See also Marian K. Leighton, 'Strange Bedfellows: The Stasi and the Terrorists', *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence*, vol. 4, 2014, pp. 647–65.

21 The Mitrokhin file, a collection of notes made by a former KGB archivist, reveals that in the 1980s, Yuri Andropov, first as head the KGB and then as Leonid Brezhnev's successor, authorised his service and its Warsaw Pact allies 'to use, or connive in the use of, terrorism against the United States and NATO targets'. Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive: The KGB in Europe and the West* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 512.

22 Hines et al., *Soviet Intentions*, pp. 58–62, 145.

23 *Ibid*., p. 101.

24 Sandra Grimes and Jeanne Vertefeuille, *Circle of Treason* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2012). The authors were part of the CIA's Soviet and East European Division in the 1970s and 1980s.

25 Ruiz Palmer, 'The NATO–Warsaw Pact Competition in the 1970s and 1980s', p. 546.

26 Interview with A.S. Kalashnikov, former member of the Military-Technical Committee of the Soviet Ministry of Defence, in Hines et al.,

Soviet Intentions, pp. 89–90.

27 Benjamin Weiser, *Colonel Ryszard Kuklinski: A Secret Life* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), p. 245. Robert Gates, director of central intelligence 1991–93, described Kuklinski as 'one of the most important CIA sources of information on the Soviet military'. Robert Gates, *From the Shadows* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 238.

28 Aleksandr G. Savel'yev and Nikolay N. Detinov, *The Big Five: Arms Control Decision-Making in the Soviet Union* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995), p. 57.

29 PFIAB report, p. 39.

30 See 'The Pershing Missile: Peace Through Strength', Lockheed Martin, http://www.lockheedmartin. co.uk/us/100years/stories/pershing. html; and 'General Dynamics/ McDonnell Douglas BGM-109G Gryphon', National Museum of the US Air Force, 29 May 2015, http:// www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/ Visit/MuseumExhibits/FactSheets/ Display/tabid/509/Article/196000/ general-dynamicsmcdonnell-douglas-bgm-109g-gryphon.aspx.

31 It was this concern that led the Soviet leadership to order work on 'Dead Hand', a system that could automatically launch a retaliatory strike if the leadership could no longer do so. Far into the future there was the daunting possibility that the Strategic Defense Initiative would become a reality and nullify even the revenge of the dead. See Barrass, *The Great Cold War*, p. 281; and David E. Hoffman, *The Dead Hand* (New York: Random House, 2009).

32 Author interview with Markus Wolf, Prenden, 26 August 2005.

33 The information in this section on *Pershing* II is drawn from Steven T. Burns, *The History of the Pershing Missile Systems* (print on demand, 2014). Burns served with *Pershing* 1A units in Germany and was closely involved in the deployment there of *Pershing* IIs. I am grateful to him for his comments on my draft. See also Department of the Army, 'Pershing II Weapon System Operators Manual', June 1986, http://pershingmissile.org/ pershingdocuments/manuals/tm%20 9-1425-386-10-1.pdf.

34 Cliff Lethbridge, 'PERSHING II Fact Sheet', http://spaceline.org/rocketsum/ pershing-II.html.

35 Jonathan Haslam, *Near and Distant Neighbours: A New History of Soviet Intelligence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 234.

36 Burns, *The History of the Pershing Missile Systems*, p. 329.

37 Bernard Gwertzman, 'Soviet Dismissal Now Being Laid to a Policy Split', *New York Times*, 13 September 1984, http:// www.nytimes.com/1984/09/13/world/ soviet-dismissal-now-being-laid-to-a-policy-split.html.

38 Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, 'On Presentation of the World Citizens Award to Stanislav Petrov', press release, 19 January 2006.

39 Viktor Yesin, quoted on *1983: The Brink of Apocalypse*.

40 Andrew and Gordievsky, *Comrade Kryuchkov's Instructions*, pp. 67–90.

41 *Ibid.*, pp. 69–81.

42 Gregory Pedlow, SHAPE Historian, 'Exercise Able Archer 83: Information from SHAPE Historical Files', 28 March 2013, http://nsarchive.

gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB427/
docs/6.a.%20Exercise%20Able%20
Archer%20SHAPE%20March%20
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43   PFIAB report, p. 35.

44   Andrew and Gordievsky, *Comrade Kryuchkov's Instructions*, pp. 86–7.

45   *Ibid*., pp. 87–8.

46   Rainer Rupp, quoted on *1983: The Brink of Apocalypse*.

47   Ted Bliss (chief of nuclear operations, *Able Archer*), quoted on *1983: The Brink of Apocalypse*.

48   Werner Grossman, *ibid.*

49   Yesin, background interview for *1983: The Brink of Apocalypse*.

50   PFIAB report, pp. 56 and 71–3. (Note that many items have been redacted.)

51   Viktor Yesin and Viktor Tkachenko, background interviews for *1983: The Brink of Apocalypse*, quoted in Barrass, *The Great Cold War*, p. 300.

52   Pedlow, 'Exercise Able Archer 83: Information from SHAPE Historical Files', pp. 1–2.

53   PFIAB Report, p. 74.

54   Yesin, background interview for *1983: The Brink of Apocalypse*.

55   Correspondence with Steven T. Burns, member of the *Pershing* II force, September–November 2016.

56   *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, 25 November 1983, p. 1.

57   *Ibid*.

58   Dmitry Ustinov quoted in Don Oberdorfer, *From the Cold War to the New Era* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 69.

59   PFIAB report, p. 83.

60   Yesin, background interview for *1983: The Brink of Apocalypse*.

61   Director of Central Intelligence, 'Implications of Recent Soviet Military-Political Activities', Special National Intelligence Estimate 11-10-84JX, 18 May 1984, p. iii, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/19840518.pdf.

62   Barrass, *The Great Cold War*, p. 300. The US, however, had not seen a force-wide Soviet alert since the Second World War. PFIAB report, p. 13.

63   Gelii Batenin, interview in Hines et al., *Soviet Intentions*, p. 8. Author's italics.

64   Fischer, *Cold War Conundrum*, pp. 6–9.

65   PFIAB report, p. 36.

66   Robert Gates, background interview for *1983: The Brink of Apocalypse*, quoted in Barrass, *The Great Cold War*, p. 379.

67   Milton Beardon, quoted in Barrass, *The Great Cold War*, p. 379.

68   Barrass, *The Great Cold War*, pp. 405–6.

69   Gates, background interview for *1983: The Brink of Apocalypse*.

70   Author interview with Anatoly Chernyaev, Moscow, 27 February 2006.