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Countdown to declassification: Finding answers to a 1983 nuclear war scare

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Abstract

In November 1983, NATO, during what became known as the Able Archer 83 exercise, rehearsed a nuclear response to a hypothetical Soviet attack on Western Europe. For many reasons—including the anticipated deployment of Pershing II and cruise missiles in Europe—Soviet intelligence was at that time actively preparing for a possible surprise nuclear missile attack by the West. Recently declassified documents show that Kremlin leadership genuinely feared a full-scale war with the West, and that this fear greatly increased the risk of nuclear war in the fall of 1983. But due to failures of the US declassification system, the most important documents about this potentially dangerous nuclear episode remain unavailable, locked in secure facilities. Declassification of those Cold War-era documents, the author writes, could help protect the United States and the rest of the world from nuclear war.

Keywords

Able Archer, Autumn Forge, Freedom of Information Act, Kyl-Lott, Mandatory Declassification Review, NATO, Operation RYaN, Pershing II, Reforger

The Cold War turned hot in November of 1983, beginning with a change of leadership in the Soviet Union amid growing unrest in Eastern Europe. Then, after Yugoslavia requested economic and military assistance from the West, the Warsaw Pact invaded.

On November 3, the Soviet-backed forces broadened their advance, crossing the Finnish border, invading Norway the next day, and pressing on, hitting the entire Eastern border of West Germany with air attacks. The United Kingdom came next: On November 10, "attacks on UK airfields disrupted B-52 and KC-135 operations as well as destroy[ed] some aircraft" (US Air Force, 1983).

Unable to stop the Soviets' conventional advance, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) requested "initial limited use of nuclear weapons against pre-selected fixed targets" on the morning of November 8. Because this initial nuclear response did not stop the Warsaw Pact aggression, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) requested "follow-on use of nuclear

weapons" the next day (NATO, undated: 1). Washington approved this request within 24 hours, and on November 11 the follow-on attack was executed (NATO, undated; Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers, 2013; US Air Force, 1983).

Then, with nothing left to destroy, Able Archer 83, a NATO exercise designed to practice the release of nuclear weapons during wartime conditions, ended.

The exercise that scared the Soviets

Conducted from November 7 to November 11, Able Archer 83 was the name for the final phase of a much larger, months-long series of NATO maneuvers known as Autumn Forge 83. An exercise known as Reforger 83 occurred during the final phase of Autumn Forge; it included a momentous "show of resolve" in the face of a hypothetical Soviet invasion, airlifting 19,000 troops and 1,500 tons of cargo from the United States to Europe to simulate a response to a conventional war. Sponsored by the NATO Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, the much smaller Able Archer 83 subsequently simulated the transition from conventional to nuclear war.

But during the summer and fall of 1983, while NATO rehearsed its slow escalation from a conventional military response to a limited nuclear strike, and finally into full nuclear war, the Soviet Union was not rehearsing. For a variety of reasons—including the Reagan administration's strident rhetoric and the anticipated deployment of Pershing II missiles in Europe—the Soviets were actively preparing for an actual surprise nuclear missile attack by the West.

On November 8, as NATO was practicing its launch of nuclear weapons at "pre-selected fixed targets," Oleg Gordievsky, a KGB colonel turned double agent for the British MI6 intelligence service, reported that KGB and GRU (military intelligence) residencies in Western Europe received flash telegrams reporting "an alert on US bases" (Andrew and Gordievsky, 1991: 87). He later wrote that these telegrams "clearly implied that one of several possible explanations for the (non-existent) alert was that the countdown to a nuclear first strike had actually begun" (Andrew and Gordievsky, 1991: 88).

Gordievsky's British handlers passed his revelations on to their US allies. A memo to US Secretary of State George Shultz explained that "in response to British concerns, the intelligence community undertook a detailed review of recent Soviet military and political moves beginning with exercise Able Archer 83" (State Department, 1984). This report, a Special National Intelligence Estimate, found that the "elaborate" Soviet reaction to this exercise included "increased intelligence collection flights and the placing of Soviet air units in East Germany and Poland on heightened readiness in what was declared to be a threat of possible aggression against the USSR and Warsaw Pact countries" (CIA, 1984: 4). Despite this, the report concluded that "Soviet leaders do not perceive a genuine danger of imminent conflict or confrontation with the United States" (CIA, 1984: iii).

In reality, however, recently declassified documents released in response to Freedom of Information Act and mandatory declassification review requests by the National Security Archive show that the Kremlin genuinely did fear the possibility of an imminent onset of full-scale war with the West, and that this fear—and the West's aggressive policies and

postures—greatly increased the risk of nuclear war through miscalculation. The newly available history of Able Archer 83 therefore offers a unique opportunity to study the dynamics of the US–Soviet rivalry during one of the tensest periods of the Cold War. The release of these documents (and the non-release of others) also constitutes a case study that illustrates how the US classification system creates crippling and utterly unnecessary obstacles to a clearer public understanding of historical events, including the potential danger of nuclear miscalculation that occurred during Able Archer 83.

The 1984 Special National Intelligence Estimate and associated documents reveal that the US government tried to hide its findings. After the estimate was completed, the State Department requested a "sanitized version" to share with NATO allies (State Department, 1984). This sanitized version removed all mentions of Able Archer 83 and the Soviet response to that exercise—the very reason the estimate was drafted—and hid the increased danger the NATO exercise had engendered from the very countries that participated in it. The original estimate remained hidden for two decades, and other documents that could further clarify the events surrounding Able Archer 83 are still classified to this day.

Operation RYaN and the risk of war

Even the extremely limited access to US records about Able Archer 83 is better than the access to records in Russia. Still, the National Security Archive was able to obtain a few Soviet documents that illustrate the Soviet perspective as the United States deployed cruise and Pershing II missiles to Western Europe in late 1983 in response to the socialist state's installation of upgraded SS-20 intermediate range missiles.[1] Because the Pershing II could reach Soviet nuclear command-and-control facilities in just 10 minutes, Soviet nuclear strategy changed to include the option of preempting a "decapitating first strike" by the West (Varennikov, 2001: 168). After the election of US President Ronald Reagan, the Soviets also initiated the largest peacetime intelligence gathering operation in history to detect this nuclear first strike before its launch.

A document titled "Report of the Work of the KGB in 1981," written by then-KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov for General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, confirms that the KGB had "implemented measures to strengthen intelligence work in order to prevent a possible sudden outbreak of war by the enemy" (Andropov, 1982: 79). To do this, the KGB "actively obtained information on military and strategic issues, and the aggressive military and political plans of imperialism [the United States] and its accomplices," and "enhanced the relevance and effectiveness of its active intelligence abilities" (Andropov, 1982: 79).

These intelligence operations were named Operation RYaN, the Russian acronym for *raketno yadernoe napadenie,* or, in English, a nuclear missile attack. KGB station chiefs around the world received a directive, labeled "strictly personal," instructing them to "work systematically to uncover any plans in preparation by the main adversary 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" (Andrew and Gordievsky, 1991: 68). To do this, station chiefs were given seven "immediate" and 13 "prospective" tasks for their agents to observe and report on. 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 where nuclear weapons were stored; observation of key nuclear decision makers; observation of lines of communication; reconnaissance on the heads of churches and banks; and surveillance of security services and military installations (Andrew and Gordievsky, 1991: 68).

While the Soviets were expanding their human intelligence efforts to predict—with the hope of preempting—a possible Western first strike, NATO began Able Archer 83, which, according to recently declassified documents, included at least four potential indicators that could have been reported by Operation RYaN. These included: a 170-flight, radio-silent airlift of 19,000 US soldiers to Europe that occurred during Reforger 83, the much larger, conventional precursor exercise to Able Archer 83; the shifting of NATO commands to the alternate war headquarters that would be used for major military conflict (US Air Force, 1983); the practice of "new nuclear weapons release procedures," including consultations with small cells of US Defense Department and UK Ministry of Defense war-gamers (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers, 2013); and numerous slips of the tongue in which NATO personnel called B-52 sorties nuclear "strikes" during communications (US Air Force, 1983).

While Able Archer 83 progressed, the Soviets readied their nuclear-capable fighters and, as Gordievsky reported, sent flash telegrams to their intelligence residencies claiming, wrongly, that NATO bases had gone on alert. In its initial review of events, finalized in the May 1984 Special National Intelligence Estimate, the US intelligence community noted those Soviet responses to Able Archer 83 but concluded that the Soviet leadership did not genuinely fear a preemptive nuclear strike.

CIA Director William Casey presented a more ominous conclusion to President Reagan a month later, warning of "a rather stunning array of indicators of an increasing aggressiveness in Soviet policy and activities" in the aftermath of Able Archer 83 (Casey, 1984: 1). Casey concluded that "the behavior of the armed forces is perhaps the most disturbing. From the operational deployment of submarines to the termination of harvest support to the delayed troop rotation, there is a central theme of not being strategically vulnerable, even if it means taking some risks" (Casey, 1984: 7). These "high military costs" added "a dimension of genuineness to the Soviet expressions of concern that is often not reflected in intelligence issuances" (Casey, 1984: 7).

The debate framed by these two intelligence viewpoints continued within the government until at least 1991, and continues within the historical community today. Did miscalculation during Able Archer 83 increase the risk of nuclear war? Did the West's launch-on-warning doctrine stabilize or destabilize the international balance? Did the installation of decapitating Pershing II missiles in Europe make the world safer or more dangerous? How high was the actual risk

of nuclear war through miscalculation by the United States or the Soviet Union? Understanding the ramifications of Able Archer 83 is enormously important to the understanding of the general theory of nuclear deterrence. Yet many US documents relating to Able Archer 83—not to mention documents held by Russia and NATO—remain sealed in their vaults.

Among these inaccessible documents is a report delivered to US President George H. W. Bush in 1991 by the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board. The 110-page report, primarily authored by Nina Stewart, then the board's executive director, is still classified. According to one transcript of an interview conducted by international affairs expert and former journalist Don Oberdorfer with a source who was knowledgeable about its content, the retroactive report found "an expression of a genuine belief on the part of Soviet leaders that the US was planning a nuclear first strike, causing Soviet military to prepare for this eventuality, for example by readying forces for a Soviet preemptive strike" (Oberdorfer, 1990a: 1). Through Operation RYaN, the Soviets had mounted a huge collection effort to find out what the United States was actually doing, the source said, and "they were taking actions to be able to sustain a surprise attack, especially increased protection for their leadership in view of reduced warning time of [Pershing IIs]" (Oberdorfer, 1990a: 1).

Fritz Ermarth, the primary author of the CIA's initial Special National Intelligence Estimate on Able Archer 83, has written, "If it hasn't already been, [the advisory board] report should be declassified as much as possible … [T]he historical work done since then suggests [it] had a point, and it is worth pursuing further" (Ermarth, 2003: 5). Despite this suggestion, the report languishes in a sensitive compartmented information facility at the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library. The National Security Archive first requested the report in 2004.[2] The request remains open but unfulfilled, because of an egregious Catch-22 that is part of the broken US declassification system.

The referral black hole and other delays

The Obama administration issued Executive Order 13526 late in 2009 as part of a general effort to improve government transparency. The order outlines how classified information is handled, and administration press releases suggest the president wanted "top administration officials to lean toward disclosure when they can" (Associated Press, 2009). But according to this executive order, any federal agency can claim "equity" or ownership of any classified document and require the document to be provided to the agency for its own declassification review. Combined with the shortage of government-trained declassifiers, this equity regime constitutes an enormous impediment to prompt and effective declassification.

In one jaw-dropping example of this problem, the National Security Archive filed what is known as a mandatory declassification review request for a document related to Able Archer 83 in February 2012. Such requests, long authorized by presidential order, allow citizens to seek declassification of documents that no longer fall within classification guidelines. The National Security

Archive's request was referred to 14 different agencies, each of which claimed a need to review the document. Twenty months later, review of the document still has not been completed. Other important government documents about Able Archer 83 are stored at the US National Archives, classified and locked in enclosed areas known as sensitive compartmented information facilities and unavailable for public review.

These documents are part of some 357 million pages of classified documents that have exceeded their declassification dates, usually 25 years after their creation. Soon after his election, President Obama created the National Declassification Center at the US National Archives so this backlog "shall be addressed in a manner that will permit public access to all declassified records . . . no later than December 31, 2013" (White House, 2009a). Historians, researchers, and others seeking access to these documents initially applauded the move. Now, as the December 2013 deadline looms, that excitement has turned to something near despair.

According to the declassification center's most recent report, only 71.5 million of these pages (20 percent) had been released to the public by August 2013, while 46.5 million (13 percent) had been reviewed and denied declassification. The remaining 239 million pages (67 percent) remained unreviewed (National Archives and Records Administration, 2013). According to the center, the greatest challenge to declassifying the remaining pages is a process known as the Kyl-Lott review, named after John Kyl and Trent Lott, the senators who sponsored an amendment to the 1999 Defense Authorization Act that seeks to prevent the inadvertent release of documents related to nuclear weapons design or use (National Archives and Records Administration, 2013).

The Kyl-Lott review stems from a fear that, somehow, a nuclear blueprint or other nuclear information could have gotten into a box of records created by almost any federal agency. For example, the applications of US personnel seeking to marry Vietnamese citizens during the Vietnam War had to achieve Kyl-Lott certification before they could be viewed by the public (Lardner, 2001). Of course, it is unlikely that truly sensitive nuclear information could have been accidentally placed in a box of marriage applications—or millions of other boxes of federal records—and escape review, considering the safeguards originally placed on documents containing nuclear information. Still, the declassification center has decided to comply with Kyl-Lott by screening all records in the backlog to certify that the documents contain no restricted or formerly restricted nuclear weapons information[3] before again reviewing it for declassification (White House, 2009a).

President Obama was aware that referral black holes and wasteful Kyl-Lott reviews were the primary impediments to the efficient declassification of documents when he created the National Declassification Center. In fact, he issued a memorandum to eliminate these multiple re-reviews of historic documents, instructing that, "[i]n order to promote the efficient and effective utilization of finite resources available for declassification, further referrals of these records are not required except for those containing information that would clearly and demonstrably reveal [confidential human sources or key WMD design concepts]"

(White House, 2009a). He also instructed the National Declassification Center to overcome, or even sidestep, the halting process of restricted and formerly restricted data reviews, writing that the Secretary of Energy, as well as other secretaries, must "provide the Archivist of the United States with sufficient guidance to complete this task [of reviewing and declassifying 357 million pages of historic documents by December 2013]" (White House, 2009a). But the agencies balked and continued superfluous Kyl-Lott screening and multiple document reviews.

If, as seems likely, the National Declassification Center fails to review the remaining 239 million pages of historic documents by December, it will be clear that the US classification system is not responsive even to presidential authority. And this is anything but a one-time backlog. Tens of millions of documents were added to the backlog over the past few years, and hundreds of millions of classified e-mail records will reach the declassification center very soon, as the digital revolution reaches 25 years of age.

Because of the failures of the National Archives and its National Declassification Center, researchers have been forced to use other tools to pry loose once-classified documents related to Able Archer 83: the Freedom of Information Act, which allows researchers to threaten to sue over improperly withheld documents, and the mandatory declassification review appeals mechanism established by executive order during the Clinton administration, which provides for review by an independent panel should a declassification request be rejected. Thanks to these tools and the aid of a well-trained cadre of FOIA officers and declassification reviewers in some agencies, the National Security Archive obtained more than 1,000 pages of previously classified documents about Able Archer 83 (National Security Archive, 2013). Often, in fact, government FOIA reviewers within these agencies helped the author craft requests so they would avoid referral problems and whispered document titles and record systems that should be sought. Sometimes, they even produced—from scratch— unclassified summaries of classified documents.

The common denominator

Thanks to the help of inside experts, the National Security Archive has been able to post on its website (National Security Archive, 2013) historic documents that present the clearest narrative of Able Archer 83 available to the public, including details not provided in previous accounts. This information provides the exact dates that Able Archer 83 occurred (from November 7 to November 11), and the fact that Able Archer 83 was the nuclear conclusion to the conventional, and much larger, Autumn Forge 83, which included some 40,000 NATO troops. Significantly, Soviet doctrine held that large exercises such as Autumn Forge 83 could be used to mask a preemptive attack. For this reason, after the Cold War's end, the Soviet chief of staff, Marshal Sergei F. Akhromeyev, described the Autumn Forge exercises as "the most dangerous" (Oberdorfer, 1990b).

From these documents, it's also clear that NATO's launch-on-warning policy and the Pershing II's 10-minute flight time to Russia increased the danger of war by miscalculation. As Vice

Chairman of the National Intelligence Council Herbert E. Meyer quipped in one classified missive, 10 minutes was "roughly how long it takes some of the Kremlin's leaders to get out of their chairs, let alone to their shelters" (Meyer, 1983: 3). The documents show that the danger presented by quick-strike weapons and hair-trigger alerts was frequently missed by the generals and analysts in the field—on both the Soviet and US sides of the Cold War.

"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 any reasonable explanations, but used one selective response to whatever an option was," Soviet General Staff analyst Vitalii Nikolaevich Tsygichko admitted (Hoffenaar and Findlay, 2006: 161). "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" (Hoffenaar and Findlay, 2006: 161).

Fortunately, two men who did grasp the danger of the scenario happened to lead the superpowers. In May of 1983, Yuri Andropov, by then general secretary of the Soviet Union, met with an envoy sent by the Reagan administration, W. Averell Harriman, who had been US ambassador to the Soviet Union during World War II. In what the Soviets believed was "the first real meeting" between the United States and the Soviet Union since the beginning of the Reagan presidency (Harriman, 1983a: 1), Andropov warned of nuclear war four times. 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'" (Harriman, 1983b: 3).

Reagan, eventually, embraced this common denominator. "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 . . ." he wrote in his autobiography. "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, 1990: 257).

Why Able Archer 83 still matters

Days after Able Archer 83 ended, Reagan began the process that would eliminate medium-range missiles in Europe and halve both countries' nuclear stockpiles. "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," he wrote in his diary (2009: 290). "I feel the Soviets are so defense minded, so paranoid about being attacked that without being in any way soft on them we ought to tell them that no one here has any intention of doing anything like that."[4]

To reach these conclusions about the untenable nature of the nuclear arms race

in the early 1980s, Andropov and Reagan relied upon classified information unavailable to their citizens. This poses a tricky question about the public's right to know about the danger posed by events like Able Archer 83, both at the time and afterward. This question was probably easier for the Soviet Union to answer or avoid altogether during the early 1980s; the state security organs were responsible for the protection of the motherland and, by design, required and brooked no public oversight. Of course, this is not to say that Moscow's security apparatus operated well. The Soviet leadership's narrow, unaccountable decision-making process led to the gargantuan, misguided, and dangerous Operation RYaN, which sought out evidence of a US plan for a decapitating first strike that, despite the bellicose rhetoric of the early Reagan administration, was not contemplated.

The withholding of information about close brushes with nuclear war is more difficult to justify in the United States, ostensibly a representative democracy then fighting a Cold War against totalitarian communism to preserve its citizens' democratic way of life, relative freedom, and open society. Were these values expressed when events suggesting that there had been a real risk of accidental nuclear war were concealed from the public through the classification system?

Indeed, immediately after the first Special National Intelligence Estimate on Able Archer 83 was produced, the US government sanitized all mention of the possibility that the Soviets viewed it as a possible first strike vehicle from reports to its NATO allies. Part of the reason for this sanitization was to protect the MI6 source inside the KGB, Gordievsky. But clearly, some US policy makers also did not want to tell their NATO allies that Able Archer 83 may have increased the risk of nuclear war, because doing so might have caused some of those allies to reconsider decisions to deploy nuclear-armed US cruise and Pershing II missiles on their territory.

In the early 1980s, the decision to conceal the risks created by Able Archer 83 may have seemed necessary to US national security. One can at least understand the belief that the forward-basing of US nuclear missiles was a more important concern than abstract notions of open government. The continued classification of significant documents related to Able Archer 83, 30 years after the fact, is much harder to defend. Documents that deal with this exercise—including the most comprehensive report ever written about it—contain information of interest not only to scholars of the Cold War, but also to all concerned about the danger of nuclear weapons. If, as some within the US intelligence community have claimed, there was an increased danger of nuclear war through miscalculation in 1983, the documents detailing the danger of Able Archer 83 could help avert current and future nuclear standoffs and reduce the probability of accidental war. Furthermore, revelations about the risk and possibility of nuclear miscalculation complicate the argument that nuclear deterrence has gifted humanity with a "long peace" and undermine the contention that the danger of worldwide nuclear war ended with the 1962 Cuban missile crisis (Gaddis, 1987).

Now, the Soviet SS-20s and American Pershing IIs have been removed and retired, the Cold War has ended, and the Soviet Union no longer exists. After

the fact, a fuller picture of the dangers of Able Archer 83 has emerged. But due to failures of the US declassification system, honest and malicious, the most important documents about this potentially dangerous nuclear episode remain unavailable to the public, locked in secure facilities, under the rubric that their release "reasonably could be expected to cause exceptionally grave damage to the national security" (White House, 2009b), when, in fact, their declassification could help protect the United States and the rest of the world from the gravest of all security threats: nuclear war.

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Notes

1. Pershing IIs were not deployed to Europe until November 23, 1983, but former CIA analyst Peter Vincent Pry speculates that it is likely that Soviet intelligence believed several Pershing II missiles had been deployed before their announced date. Their impending deployment, along with launch-on-warning doctrine, led to an increased reliance upon human intelligence (as opposed to radar and satellite technology) to monitor for a nuclear attack, and to the creation of Operation RYaN (Pry, 1999).
2. The author serves as the Freedom of Information Act Coordinator at the National Security Archive.
3. Restricted data and formerly restricted data (the latter of which is still restricted, despite its name) are designations spelled out in the 1954 Atomic Energy Act. Restricted data was defined in 1954 as information concerning the development or design of nuclear weapons. Most concede this information should remain classified—although nuclear blueprints are currently available on the Internet, and the withholding of nuclear secrets from archives did not stop the A. Q. Khan network from stealing them. The case for exempting formerly restricted data—defined primarily as information about the use and location of nuclear weapons—is a much harder case to make. This information is already well known. It is extremely unlikely that protecting these facts—already public knowledge—prevents harm to US national security.
4. He also wrote in his journal, "What the h–l have they got that anyone would want." See Reagan (2009).

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