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*Threat Perception, Scare Tactic, or False Alarm?*

# The 1983 War Scare in US-Soviet Relations

Ben B. Fischer

*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.*

*Mikhail Gorbachev,  
February 1986*

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**Reagan was repeatedly compared to Hitler and accused of “fanning the flames of war”—a more sinister image than Andropov as a Red Darth Vader.**  
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US-Soviet relations had come full circle in 1983. Europeans were declaring the outbreak of a Cold War II, and President Mitterrand compared the situation to the 1962 Cuban crisis and the 1948 Berlin blockade. Such fears were exaggerated. Nowhere in the world were the superpowers squared off in a conflict likely to erupt into war. But a modern-day Rip Van Winkle waking up that year would not have noticed much change in the international political landscape or realized that a substantial period of détente had come and gone while he slept.

[Redacted]

The second Cold War was mainly a war of words. In March, President Reagan referred to the Soviet Union as the “focus of evil in the world,” as an “evil empire.” General Secretary Andropov suggested Reagan was insane and a liar. Then things got nasty. Following Andropov’s lead and no doubt his direction, the Soviet media launched a verbal offensive of a kind not seen since Stalin that far surpassed Reagan’s broadsides. Reagan was repeatedly compared to Hitler and accused of “fanning the flames of war”—a more sinister image than Andropov as a Red Darth Vader

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[Redacted]

## The Soviet War Scare

Such rhetoric was the consequence rather than the cause of tension, but frightening words masked real fears. The Hitler analogy was more than an insult and may have been a Freudian slip, because war was on the minds of Soviet leaders. Moscow was in the midst of a “war scare” that had two distinct phases and two different dimensions—one concealed in the world of clandestine intelligence operations since 1981, and the other revealed in the Soviet media two years later.

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The KGB assessment was more of a storm warning than a hurricane alert. But Politburo forecasters reached a stark political judgment: the chances of a nuclear war, including a US surprise nuclear attack, were higher than at any time during the entire Cold War. In May 1981, General Secretary Brezhnev and then KGB chief Andropov briefed the Politburo assessment to a closed KGB conference. Then Andropov took the podium to tell the assembled intelligence managers and officers that the KGB and the GRU were being placed on a permanent intelligence watch to monitor indications and warning of US war-planning and preparations. Codenamed RYAN, this alert was the largest Soviet peacetime intelligence effort [ ]

During 1982, KGB Center assigned RYAN a high, but not overriding, priority. Then, on 17 February 1983, KGB residents already on alert received "eyes only" cables telling them that it had "acquired an especial degree of urgency" and was "now of particularly grave importance." They were ordered to organize a permanent watch using their entire operational staff, recruit new agents, and redirect existing ones to RYAN requirements. A circular message from the Moscow Center to all KGB residencies put on alert status stated:

*Therefore one of the chief directions for the activity of the KGB's foreign service is to organize detection and assessment of signs of preparation for RYAN in all possible areas, i.e., political, economic, and military sectors, civil defense and the activity of special services. Our military neighbors [the GRU] are actively engaged in similar work*

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And, for the first time since 1953, a Soviet leader was telling the Soviet people that the world was on the verge of a nuclear holocaust.

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*in relation to the activity of the adversary's armed forces.* [ ]

Moscow's urgency was linked to the impending US deployment of Pershing II intermediate-range missiles in West Germany. Very accurate and with a flight time under 10 minutes, these missiles could destroy hard targets, including Soviet command and control bunkers and missile silos, with little or no warning. Guidance cables referred to RYAN's critical importance to Soviet military strategy and the need for advance warning "to take retaliatory measures." But Soviet leaders were less interested in retaliation than in pre-emption and needed RYAN data as strategic warning to launch an attack on the new US missile sites. [ ]

The overt war scare erupted two years later. On 23 March 1983, President Reagan announced a program to develop a ground- and space-based, laser-armed, anti-ballistic-missile shield designated Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) but quickly dubbed "Star Wars" by the media. Four days later—and in direct response—Andropov lashed out. He accused the United States of preparing a first-strike attack on the USSR and asserted that Reagan was "inventing new plans on how to unleash a nuclear war in the best way, with the hope of winning it." The war scare had joined the intelligence alert [ ]

Andropov's remarks were unprecedented. He violated a longstanding taboo by describing US nuclear weapons' numbers and capabilities in the mass media. He referred to Soviet weapons and capabilities—also highly unusual—and said explicitly that the USSR had, at best, only parity with the United States in strategic weaponry. And, for the first time since 1953, a Soviet leader was telling the Soviet people that the world was on the verge of a nuclear holocaust. If candor is a sign of sincerity, Moscow was worried [ ]

#### The War Scare as an Intelligence Issue

The Soviet war scare posed two questions for the Intelligence Community: was it genuine, that is, did the Soviet leadership actually believe that the United States might attack? If so, why had the Kremlin reached that conclusion? If the alarm was not genuine, then what purpose did it serve? [ ]

By and large, the Community played down both the intelligence alert and the war-scare propaganda as evidence of an authentic threat perception. It did so in part because the information reaching it about the alert came primarily from British intelligence and was fragmentary, incomplete, and ambiguous. Moreover, the British protected the identity of the source—KGB Col. Oleg Gordievsky, number two in the London residency—and his bona fides could not be independently established. US intelligence did have partially corroborating information from a Czechoslovak intelligence officer, but apparently it was not detailed enough or considered reliable enough to confirm what was coming from Gordievsky [ ]

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The Intelligence Community continued to scoff at the war scare even after Gordievsky defected—actually, after MI6 exfiltrated him from the USSR—and was made available for debriefing.<sup>2</sup> But intelligence analysts were not alone in their skepticism. For example, one critic who attributes many of the problems in US-Soviet relations to the Reagan administration concluded *10 years later* and with the benefit of hindsight: “Above all, the idea that the new American administration might actually attack the Soviet Union seems too far out of touch with reality to have been given credence.”<sup>3</sup> A Soviet émigré scholar who wrote the most perceptive article on Soviet war-scare propaganda found the analytic task so daunting that he refused to speculate on *why* the Kremlin had adopted this line or *to whom* the message was directed—West European governments, the US electorate, or the Soviet people.

Searching for an explanation of the war scare, intelligence analysts and other interested observers offered three answers: propaganda, paranoia, and politics.

The consensus view regarded RYAN and the war scare as grist for the KGB disinformation mill—a sophisticated political-psychological scare tactic operation. Who was the KGB trying to scare? Answers differed. Most agreed that the Soviets wanted to frighten the West Europeans and above all the nervous West Germans into backing out of an agreement to deploy US intermediate-range Pershing II and cruise missiles on their territory. Besides, Moscow was engaged in an all-out, go-for-broke propaganda and covert action program that was flagging and needed a boost.

Some observers, however, believed that the campaign was inwardly, not outwardly, directed toward the Soviet people. There was evidence to support this interpretation. Andropov had launched an anticorruption and discipline campaign to get the long-suffering proletariat to work harder, drink less, and sacrifice more while cutting down on the theft of state property. War scares had been used in the past to prepare people for bad times, and, with ideology dead and consumer goods in short supply, the Kremlin was trotting out a tried and true mobilization gimmick.

A second explanation argued that the war scare was clearly bogus but potentially dangerous because it was rooted in Soviet leadership paranoia. Paranoia is a catchall explanation for Russian/Soviet external behavior that goes back to early tsarist times. But it was given credence. This was how Gordievsky explained the war scare, and the advanced age and poor health of Andropov and the rest of the gerontocracy suggested that the leadership’s debilitation might be mental as well as physical.

The third explanation held that the war scare was rooted in internal bureaucratic or succession politics. The military and intelligence services might be using it as a form of bureaucratic turfbuilder to make their

budgets and missions grow at a time when the competition for resources was fierce. Or the war scare might have been connected in some way—a debate over foreign and defense policy?—to a succession struggle that was continuing despite, or because of, Andropov’s poor health. Explanations were plentiful, but evidence was scarce.

Although quite different, these explanations had much in common. Each started from the premise, whether articulated or not, that there was no objective threat of a US surprise attack on the USSR; therefore, the war scare was all smoke and mirrors, a false alarm being used for some other purpose. In most instances, outside observers did not give the war scare credence, refusing to imagine that the Soviet leadership could view the United States as the potential aggressor in an unprovoked nuclear war, because they themselves could not imagine the United States in that role. This idea was “too far out of touch with reality.” Reagan was not Hitler, and America does not do Pearl Harbors.

US perceptions of the US-Soviet balance of strategic power also weighed against the idea that the war scare could indicate genuine, even if greatly exaggerated, concern on Moscow’s part. The United States was in the midst of the largest military buildup in its history whose aim was to close a perceived “window of vulnerability” in the mid-1980s created by US loss of superiority in delivery vehicles and then counterforce capabilities. The buildup had begun during the previous administration, but was greatly accelerated during Reagan’s first term in the belief that the USSR might exploit a temporary advantage—appropriately called a

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window of opportunity—to engage in adventuresome behavior, use nuclear blackmail, or even perhaps attack the United States. Moreover, Soviet claims about the “irreversibility” of changes in the “correlation of forces” in the 1970s—a reference to both Soviet gains in the Third World and achievement of “robust parity” in strategic power with the US—did little to allay US concerns.

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US observers were half right in dismissing the war scare as groundless, but also half wrong in viewing it as artificially contrived. Moscow apparently was worried about something.

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**Evidence From the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe**

For a long time, Gordievsky was the only publicly acknowledged source of information on RYAN.

[ ]

Meanwhile, former Soviet Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Dobrynin and ex-KGB officers Oleg Kalugin and Yuriy Shvets have published memoirs that dovetail with Gordievsky's account. We know a lot more than we did about the war scare, even though a complete understanding is still elusive.

Gordievsky, the original source, is also the most prolific. Almost a decade after he arrived in London, he and British coauthor Christopher Andrew published a sheaf of KGB

cables that describe the alert and collection requirements. No one in the US, British, or Soviet/Russian intelligence communities has questioned these documents, so silence is tantamount to authentication.

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a small circle of White House and Pentagon aides—and, of course, the Kremlin. "It was very sensitive," recalls former Undersecretary of Defense Fred Ikle. "Nothing was written down about [ ] [ ] would be no paper trail." [ ]

The PSYOP was calculated to play on what the White House perceived as a Soviet image of the President as a "cowboy" and reckless practitioner of nuclear politics. US purpose was not to signal intentions so much as keep the Soviets guessing what might happen next:

*"Sometimes we would send bombers over the North Pole, and their radars would click on," recalls Gen. Jack Chain the former Strategic Air Command commander. "Other times fighter-bombers would probe their Asian or European periphery." During peak times, the operation would include several maneuvers a week. They would come at irregular intervals to make the effect all the more unsettling. Then, as quickly as the unannounced flights began, they would stop, only to begin a few weeks later.* [ ]

Another participant echoes this assessment:

*"It really got to them," recalls Dr. William Schneider, Undersecretary of State for Military Assistance and Technology, who saw classified "after-action reports" that indicated US flight activity. "They didn't know what it all meant. A squadron would fly straight at Soviet airspace, and other radars would*

### Spooking the Russians

During the first Reagan administration, US policy toward the Soviet Union was conducted on two tracks. The first encompassed normal diplomatic relations and arms control negotiations. The second was a covert political-psychological effort to attack Soviet vulnerabilities and undermine the system. According to a recent account based on interviews with Reagan-era policymakers, it was a "secret offensive on economic, geo-strategic, and psychological fronts designed to roll back and weaken Soviet power."<sup>6</sup> For most of 1981-83, there were more trains running on the second track than on the first.

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RYAN may have been a response to the first in a series of US military probes along Soviet borders initiated in the Reagan administration's first months. These probes—called psychological warfare operations, or PSYOP, in Pentagon jargon—aimed at exploiting Soviet psychological vulnerabilities and deterring Soviet actions. The administration's "silent campaign" was also practically invisible, except to

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*light up and units would go on alert. Then, at the last minute, the squadron would peel off and return home."*<sup>8</sup>

The Navy played an even bigger role than SAC after President Reagan authorized it in March 1981 to operate and exercise in areas where the US fleet had rarely—or never—gone before. Major exercises in 1981 and 1983 in the Soviet far northern and far eastern maritime approaches demonstrated US ability to deploy aircraft carrier battle groups close to sensitive military and industrial areas without being detected or challenged.<sup>9</sup> Using sophisticated and carefully rehearsed deception and denial techniques, the Navy eluded the USSR's massive ocean reconnaissance system and early-warning systems.<sup>10</sup> Some naval exercises included "classified" operations in which carrier-launched aircraft managed to penetrate Soviet shore-based radar and air-defense systems and simulate "attacks" on Soviet targets. Summing up a 1983 Pacific Fleet exercise, the US chief of naval operations noted that the Soviets "are as naked as jaybird there [on the Kamchatka Peninsula], and they know it."<sup>11</sup> His remark applied equally to the Kola Peninsula in the far north.

Was there a connection between PSYOP and RYAN? There clearly was a temporal correlation. The first US missions began in mid-February 1981; Andropov briefed RYAN to the KGB the following May. Moreover, when top officials first learned of RYAN, they reportedly connected it to the Soviet border probes, noting that the Soviets were "increasingly frightened by the Reagan administration."

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Andropov's advisers urged him not to overreact, but overreact he did, accusing the President of “deliberately lying” about Soviet military power to justify SDI.

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The Intelligence Community, not clued in to the PSYOP program, could be forgiven for not understanding the cause-and-effect relationship. This is a reminder of a perennial problem in preparing estimates that assess another country's behavior in terms of its interaction with the United States and in response to US actions. The impact of the action-reaction-interaction dynamic is often overlooked or neglected, not because of analytic failure or conceptual inadequacy, but for the simple reason that the intelligence left hand does not always know what the policy right hand is doing.

There may have been another problem in perception that affected policymakers as well as intelligence analysts. While the US probes caught the Kremlin by surprise, they were not unprecedented. There was a Cold War antecedent that Soviet leaders may have found troubling. From 1950 to 1969, the Strategic Air Command conducted similar operations, both intelligence-gathering and “ferret” missions aimed at detecting the location, reaction, and gaps in radar and air-defense installations along the USSR's Eurasian periphery in preparation for nuclear war.<sup>13</sup> It is possible, though not provable, that the Soviets remembered something the American side had already forgotten.

#### 1983 Through the War-Scare Prism

Despite their private assessment, Soviet leaders maintained a public posture of relative calm during 1981-82. Even Reagan's erstwhile Secretary of State Alexander Haig gave them credit, saying “[t]he Soviets stayed very, very moderate, very, very responsible during the first three years of this administration. I was mind-boggled with their patience.” But that patience wore thin as 1983 wore on. In September, Andropov would officially close off an internal debate over the causes and consequences of the collapse of détente in an unusual foreign policy “declaration.” In it, he limned the outline of the war scare:

*The Soviet leadership deems it necessary to inform the Soviet people, other peoples, and all who are responsible for determining the policy of states, of its assessment of the course pursued in international affairs by the current United States administration. In brief, it is a militarist course that represents a serious threat to peace. . . . If anyone had any illusions about the possibility of an evolution for the better in the policy of the present American administration, recent events have dispelled them once and for all. [emphasis added]*

What were those “recent events”?

SDI. The SDI announcement came out of the blue for the Kremlin—and most of the Cabinet. Andropov's advisers urged him not to overreact, but overreact he did, accusing the President of “deliberately lying” about Soviet military power to justify SDI. He denounced it as a “bid to disarm the Soviet Union in the face

of the US nuclear threat." Space-based defense, he added,

*... would open the floodgates of a runaway race of all types of strategic arms, both offensive and defensive. Such is the real significance, the seamy side of, so to say, of Washington's 'defensive conception'... The Soviet Union will never be caught defenseless by any threat... Engaging in this is not just irresponsible, it is insane... Washington's actions are putting the entire world in jeopardy.* [redacted]

SDI had obviously touched a sensitive nerve. The Soviets seemed to treat it more seriously than many US scientists and even some White House aides did at the time. There were two reasons. First, the Soviets, despite their boasting in the 1970s, had practically unlimited faith in US technical capability. Second, SDI had a profound psychological impact that reinforced the trend predicted by the computer-based "correlation of forces" model. In a remarkable tête-à-tête with a US journalist and former arms control official, Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, first deputy defense minister and chief of the general staff, assessed the symbolic significance of SDI:

*... We cannot equal the quality of United States arms for a generation or two. Modern military power is based on technology, and technology is based on computers.*

*In the United States, small children... play with computers... Here, we don't even have computers in every office of the*

*Defense Ministry. And, for reasons you know well, we cannot make computers widely available in our society.*

*... We will never be able to catch up with you in modern arms until we have an economic revolution. And the question is whether we can have an economic revolution without a political revolution.* [redacted]

Ogarkov's private rumination is all the more remarkable because in his public statements he was a hawk's hawk, frequently comparing the United States to Nazi Germany and warning of the advent of new weapon systems based on entirely "new physical principles." The duality, even dichotomy, between Ogarkov's public stance calling for continuation of the Cold War and his private acknowledgment that the USSR could not compete may have been typical of other Soviet leaders and contributed to their frustration and anxiety [redacted]

**KAL 007.** At 3:26 a.m. Tokyo time on 1 September 1983, a Soviet Su-15 interceptor fired two air-to-air missiles at a Korean Boeing 747 airliner, destroying the aircraft and killing all 269 crew and passengers. Soviet air-defense units had been tracking KAL Flight 007 for more than an hour as it first entered and then left Soviet airspace over the Kamchatka Peninsula. The order to destroy the aircraft was given as the airliner was about to leave Soviet airspace for the second time after overflying Sakhalin Island. The ill-fated Boeing 747 was probably downed in international airspace. [redacted]

[redacted] the White House learned about the shutdown within a few hours of the event and, with Secretary of State Shultz taking the lead, denounced the Soviet act as one of deliberate mass murder of innocent civilians. President Reagan called it "an act of barbarism, born of a society which wantonly disregards individual rights and the value of human life and seeks constantly to expand and dominate other nations."

Air Force intelligence dissented at the time of the incident, and eventually US intelligence reached a consensus view that the Soviets probably did not know they were destroying a civilian airliner. The charge should have been criminally negligent manslaughter, not premeditated murder. But the official US position never deviated from the initial assessment. The incident was used to keep up a noisy campaign in the UN and to spur worldwide efforts to punish the USSR with commercial boycotts, law suits, and denial of landing rights for Aeroflot airliners. These various efforts focused on indicting the Soviet system itself and the top leadership as being ultimately responsible [redacted]

Moscow's public response to the incident came more than a week later on 9 September in the form of an unprecedented two-hour live press conference conducted by Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov with support from Deputy Foreign Minister Georgi Kornienko and Leonid Zamyatin, chief of the Central Committee's International Information Department. The five-star spin-doctor's goal was to prove—despite 269 bodies to the contrary—that the Soviet Union had behaved rationally in

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deciding to destroy Flight 007. At first, Ustinov said the regional Soviet air defense unit had identified the aircraft as a US intelligence platform, an RC-135 of the type that routinely performed intelligence collection operations along a similar flightpath. In any event, Ogarkov asserted, whether an RC-135 or a 747, the plane was unquestionably on a US or joint US-Japanese intelligence mission, and the local Soviet commander had carried out the correct order. The real blame for the tragedy, he argued, lay with the United States, not the USSR. [redacted]

Remarkably, a classified memorandum coordinated by the Ministry of Defense and the KGB shows that privately the Soviet leadership took pretty much the same view as their public pronouncement on KAL 007. Released in 1992, the secret memorandum was sent to Andropov by Ustinov and KGB Chairman Chebrikov. It claimed that:

*... We are dealing with a major, dual-purpose political provocation carefully organized by the US special [intelligence] services. The first purpose was to use the incursion of the intruder aircraft into Soviet airspace to create a favorable situation for the gathering of defense data on our air-defense system in the Far East, involving the most diverse systems, including the Ferret reconnaissance satellite. Second, they envisaged, if this flight were terminated by us, using that fact to mount a global anti-Soviet campaign to discredit the Soviet Union.* [redacted]

Soviet angst was reflected in the rapid and harsh propaganda reaction,

with Andropov once again taking the lead rather than remaining silent. He moved quickly to exploit KAL 007, like SDI before it, for US-baiting propaganda. Asserting that an "outrageous military psychosis" had overtaken the United States, he declared that:

*The Reagan administration, in its imperial ambitions, goes so far that one begins to doubt whether Washington has any brakes at all preventing it from crossing the point at which any sober-minded person must stop.* [emphasis added]

[redacted] the Soviet air-defense commander made an honest, though serious, error because the entire air-defense system was on high alert and in a state of anxiety. He claims this was a result of incursions by US aircraft from the Pacific Fleet in recent months during a joint fleet exercise with the Japanese. He could not provide details, but he did know that there was concern about both military and military reconnaissance aircraft. [redacted]

The specific incident to which he almost certainly was referring occurred on or about 4 April, when at least six US Navy planes from the carriers Midway and Enterprise flew simulated bombing runs over a heavily fortified Soviet island in the Kuril chain called Zeleny. The two carriers were part of a 40-ship armada that was patrolling in the largest-ever exercise in the north Pacific. According to the Soviet démarche protesting the incursion, the Navy aircraft flew 20 miles inside Soviet airspace and remained there

for up to 20 minutes each time.<sup>14</sup> As a result, the Soviet air-defense organization was put on alert for the rest of the spring and summer—and perhaps longer—and some senior officers were transferred, reprimanded, or dismissed. [redacted]

[redacted] Andropov himself issued a "draconian" order that readiness be increased and that any aircraft discovered in Soviet airspace be shot down. Air-defense commanders were warned that if they refused to execute Andropov's order, they would be dismissed. There is corroborating information for this from a curious source—an apparent KGB disinformation project executed in Japan and then fed back into the USSR. A *Novosti* news agency pamphlet entitled *President's Crime: Who Ordered the Espionage Flight of KAL 007?* revealed that two important changes—one in Article 53 of the Soviet Air Code on 24 November 1982 and the other in Article 36 of the Soviet Law on State Borders on 11 May 1993—in effect had closed Soviet borders to all intruders and made Andropov's shoot-to-kill order a matter of law, changing the Soviet (and internationally recognized) rules of engagement. [redacted]

This incident raised Soviet fears of a possible US attack and made Moscow more suspicious that US military exercises might conceal preparations for an actual attack. Within weeks, Soviet intelligence would react in exactly that way to a US-NATO exercise in Western Europe—with potentially dangerous consequences. [redacted]

**Able Archer 83.** The second significant incident of 1983 occurred during an annual NATO command post exercise codenamed Able Archer 83.



The Soviets were familiar with Able Archer from previous years, but the 1983 version included several changes. First, in the original scenario that was later changed, the exercise was to involve high-level officials, including the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in major roles with cameo appearances by the President and Vice President. Second, the exercise included a practice drill that took NATO forces from the use of conventional forces through a full-scale mock release of nuclear weapons. [ ]

The story of Able Archer has been told many times, growing and changing with each retelling. The original version came from Gordievsky, who claims that on the night of 8 or 9 November—he cannot remember which—Moscow sent a flash cable from the Center advising, incorrectly, that US forces in Europe had been put on alert and that troops at some US bases were being mobilized. The cable reportedly said that the alert may have been in response to the recent bombing attack on a US Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, or related to impending US Army maneuvers, or the US may have begun the countdown to a surprise nuclear war. Recipients were asked to evaluate these hypotheses. At two airbases in East Germany and Poland, Soviet fighters were put on alert—for the first and last time during the Cold War. As Gordievsky described it:

*In the tense atmosphere generated by the crises and rhetoric of the past few months, the KGB concluded that American forces had been placed on alert—and might even have begun the countdown to war.... The world did not quite reach the edge of the*

*nuclear abyss during Operation RYAN. But during Able Archer 83 it had, without realizing it, come frighteningly close—certainly closer than at any time since the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. [emphasis added]* [ ]

British and US journalists with inside access to Whitehall and the White House have repeated the same story.<sup>16</sup> Three themes run through it. The United States and USSR came close to war as a result of Kremlin overreaction; only Gordievsky's timely warning to Washington via MI6 kept things from going too far; and Gordievsky's information was an epiphany for President Reagan, who was shaken by the idea that the Soviet Union was fearful of a US surprise attack. According to US journalist Don Oberdorfer:

*Within a few weeks after...Able Archer 83, the London CIA station reported, presumably on the basis of information obtained by the British from Gordievsky, that the Soviets had been alarmed about the real possibility that the United States was preparing a nuclear attack against them. A similar report came from a well-connected American who had heard it from senior officials in an East European country closely allied to Moscow. McFarlane, who received the reports at the White House, initially discounted them as Soviet scare tactics rather than evidence of real concern about American intentions, and told Reagan of his view in presenting them to the President. But a more extensive survey of Soviet attitudes sent to the White House early in*

*1984 by CIA Director William Casey, based in part on reports from the double agent Gordievsky, had a more sobering effect. Reagan seemed uncharacteristically grave after reading the report and asked McFarlane, "Do you suppose they really believe that?"... I don't see how they could believe that—but it's something to think about," Reagan replied. In a meeting that same day, Reagan spoke about the biblical prophecy of Armageddon, a final world-ending battle between good and evil, a topic that fascinated the President. McFarlane thought it was not accidental that Armageddon was on Reagan's mind.<sup>17</sup>*

For all its drama, however, Able Archer seems to have made more of an impression on the White House than on the Kremlin. A senior Soviet affairs expert who queried Soviet political and military leaders reported that none had heard of Able Archer, and all denied that it had reached the Politburo or even the upper levels of the defense ministry.<sup>18</sup> The GRU officer cited above said that watch officers were concerned over the exercise. Tensions were high as a result of the KAL 007 incident, and Soviet intelligence always worried that US military movements might indicate war, especially when conducted during major holidays.<sup>19</sup> Other than that, he saw nothing unusual about Able Archer.

### The Iron Lady and the Great Communicator

Did Gordievsky's reporting, especially his account of the KGB Center's reaction to Able Archer,

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influence US attitudes toward the Soviet Union? Gordievsky and coauthor Andrew believe so and have repeated the story dozens of times in books, articles, and interviews. The British agent's information, Andrew noted, "was of enormous importance in providing warning of the almost paranoid fear within some sections of the Reagan leadership that President Reagan was planning a nuclear first strike against the Soviet Union."<sup>20</sup> [ ]

But did the British go further and put their own spin on the reporting in an effort to influence Reagan? Analysts who worked with the Gordievsky file during the war scare think so, and their suspicions are supported, if not confirmed, in British accounts. Prime Minister Thatcher was engaged in an effort to moderate US policy toward the USSR, convinced that the US hard line had become counterproductive, even risky, and was threatening to undermine the NATO consensus on INF deployments. She also was mindful of the growing strength of the peace movement in Britain and especially in West Germany [ ]

Thatcher launched her campaign to modify US policy, appropriately enough, in Washington at the annual dinner of the Churchill Foundation Award on 29 September, where her remarks were certain to reach the White House and attract US media coverage. Her theme—"we live on the same planet and must go on sharing it"—was a plea for a more accommodating alliance policy that she repeated in subsequent addressees. As her biographer notes, Thatcher did not make an urgent plea or sudden flight to Washington to press her views, rather:

“  
 Stalin's heirs decided that  
 it is better to look through  
 a glass darkly than through  
 rose-colored glasses.

”

*... the essence of the [Thatcher-Reagan] partnership at this stage was that the two governments were basing their decisions on much the same evidence and on shared assessments at professional [sic] level. In particular, both governments would have had the same intelligence. A critical contribution in this field was made over a period of years by Oleg Gordievski [sic]...<sup>21</sup> [ ]*

British intelligence sources confided to a US journalist that London used the Gordievsky material to influence Reagan, because his hardline policy was strengthening Soviet hawks:

*Since KGB reporting is thought to be aimed at confirming views already held in Moscow—to bolster the current line—the British worried that the impact on Moscow of the bluster in Washington would be enlarged by the KGB itself. They had cause to worry.<sup>22</sup>* [ ]

The question is: how much spin did MI6 use? Unfortunately, Gordievsky did not include the KGB Center's flash message on Able Archer in his otherwise comprehensive collection of cables published in 1992. Gordievsky's claim to fame for influencing White House perceptions of Soviet "paranoia" is probably justified, but his assertion that a paranoid Kremlin almost went to war by overreacting to Able Archer is questionable [ ]

#### RYAN and the Soviet Pearl Harbor

A Czechoslovak intelligence officer who worked closely with the KGB on RYAN noted that his counterparts were obsessed with the historical parallel between 1941 and 1983. He believed this feeling was almost visceral, not intellectual, and deeply affected Soviet thinking [ ]

The German invasion was the Soviet Union's greatest military disaster, similar to—but much more traumatic than—Pearl Harbor. It began with a surprise attack that could have been anticipated and countered, but was not because of an intelligence failure. The connection between surprise attack and inadequate warning was never forgotten [ ]

The historical example of Operation Barbarossa may account for the urgency, even alarm, that field intelligence officers like Gordievsky and Shvets attributed to Kremlin paranoia. This gap in perceptions may have reflected a generation gap. The Brezhnev-Andropov generation had experienced the war firsthand as the formative experience of their political lives; for younger Soviets, it was history rather than living memory [ ]

The intelligence "failure" of 1941 was a failure of analysis, not collection.<sup>23</sup> Stalin received multiple detailed and timely warnings of the impending attack from a variety of open and clandestine sources. But he gave the data a best case or not-so-bad case interpretation, assuming—incorrectly—that Hitler would not attack without issuing an ultimatum or fight a two-front war while still engaged in the West. Stalin erred in part because he deceived himself and in part because German counterintelligence also deceived him. Stalin's heirs decided

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**What the Soviets feared most was that they were losing the Cold War and the technological arms race with the US.**

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that it is better to look through a glass darkly than through rose-colored glasses. This was probably one reason why RYAN employed an explicit worst case methodology.

RYAN appears to have incorporated—or misappropriated—another lesson from 1941. Despite the prowess of his intelligence services, the ever-suspicious Stalin ironically distrusted clandestinely acquired intelligence, including agent reporting and even communications and signals intercepts. He did so because he believed that all sources could be controlled by the enemy and corrupted by disinformation, leading him to reject both accurate and inaccurate information. As a corrective, he insisted that Soviet intelligence select indirect indicators of war planning that could not be concealed or manipulated. His chief of military intelligence had the idea of surveying mutton prices in Nazi-occupied Europe, arguing that the Germans would need sheepskin coats for winter campaigning in Russia, and, by buying up available livestock supplies for skins, they would flood the market with cheap mutton.<sup>24</sup> This deceptively simple indicator turned out to be simply deceptive. Hitler believed he could defeat the Red Army by fall and did not prepare for wintertime operations.

RYAN requirements reveal the same kind of unorthodox thinking. For example, the KGB residency in London was instructed to monitor prices paid for blood at urban donor banks. The Center assumed that prices would increase on the eve of war as the banks scurried to stockpile supplies. But there was a problem: British donor banks do not pay donors, all of whom are volunteers. Another example: the London

residency was told to visit meat-packing plants, looking for signs of “mass slaughter of cattle and putting of meat into long cold storage” in preparation for RYAN. The parallel with 1941 is so close as to suggest that some of the RYAN requirements were dug out of the NKVD and GRU files.

Finally, there is another plausible, but unprovable, lesson learned from 1941. The prewar intelligence failure was Stalin's, but he blamed the intelligence services. This left an indelible stain on Soviet intelligence that Andropov, as KGB chief and later party chief, may have been determined not to let happen again. Soviet intelligence certainly had a vested interest in promoting a dire threat assessment of US intentions, but bureaucratic self-interest may not have been as important as professional, not to say hurt, pride.

### Conclusion

RYAN was for real. Skeptics should consider Dobrynin's response to a doubting Thomas TV interviewer: “Make your conclusions from what he [Andropov] said in telegrams to his residents.” The KGB-GRU—or more appropriately the joint Warsaw Pact—alert was a crash effort to build a strategic warning system by substituting manpower for technology, HUMINT for satellites and sensors. Soviet actions were panicky, but not paranoid or unprecedented.

As one historian noted, even under the tsars Russian strategists were often quite fearful when confronted by superior Western military technology, but their fears, while exaggerated, were scarcely insane.<sup>25</sup> Dobrynin claims that Andropov worried because President Reagan was “unpredictable.” But this places too much weight on a single personality. What the Soviets feared most was what their “correlation of forces” calculations told them—that they were losing the Cold War and the technological arms race with the US.

The real war scare almost certainly was not the one the Kremlin envisioned. The presumed threat of a US surprise nuclear attack was nonexistent. The possibility of Soviet preemptive strike may have been more likely. Well-informed observers like Gyula Horn, the last Communist foreign minister and current Prime Minister of Hungary, revealed in his memoirs that Soviet marshals, fortified with a little vodka, openly advocated an attack on the West “before the imperialists gain superiority in every sphere.” The information is anecdotal, but there is a certain grim logic to it.

The war scare was the last paroxysm of the Cold War. It was a fitting end.

### NOTES

1. This was a reference to the 1973 overthrow of Marxist President Salvador Allende.
2. According to interviews conducted by Murray Marder, “[m]any senior administration officials scoff now, as they did then, at the suggestion that the Soviet Union was genuinely alarmed by US military moves or

~~Secret~~  
~~War Scare~~

- public statements, or that Moscow had any justification for feeling vulnerable. The "war scare" in the Soviet Union in 1982-83 was deliberately engineered for propaganda purposes, these officials maintain—a pretext to create a siege mentality in the Soviet Union and to frighten the outside world about US intentions. ("Defector Told of Soviet Alert; KGB Station Reportedly Warned US Would Attack," *Washington Post*, 8 August 1986, p. A1.)
3. Raymond L. Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1994), p. 60. Garthoff carefully considers all the details surrounding Gordievsky's recruitment and espionage for British intelligence, his bona fides, and his defection, but still questions whether the Soviets could have really believed in the war-scare scenario. Garthoff states, wrongly, that Gordievsky's information on RYAN was given to US intelligence only after his defection in May 1985. The British shared the information—in sanitized form to conceal the source—contemporaneously with the United States. Garthoff speculates that the British had some doubts about Gordievsky's reporting and did not want to offend the Reagan administration with intelligence that might suggest that its hardline policies were raising Soviet anxiety to an unusually high level. In fact, one reason the British pressed Gordievsky's information on US intelligence was precisely to influence Reagan's views on the USSR.
  4. Vladimir Shlapentokh, "Moscow's War Propaganda and Soviet Public Opinion," *Problems of Communism*, Vol. 33 (September-October 1983), p. 88.
  5. Peter Schweizer, *Victory: The Reagan Administration's Secret Strategy That Hastened the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994), p. xvi.
  6. *Ibid.*
  7. *Ibid.*
  8. *Ibid.*
  9. See Gregory L. Vistica, *Fall from Glory: The Men Who Sank the U.S. Navy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), pp. 105-108, 116-118, and 129-135, *passim*.
  10. Equally important, the Navy was able to offset the Soviets' ability to track the fleet by reading naval communications, which the KGB had been able to decrypt since the late 1960s, thanks to ex-sailor John Walker and his spy ring. The FBI arrested Walker in 1985.
  11. As cited in Seymour Hersh, "The Target is Destroyed": *What Really Happened to Flight 007 and What Americans Really Knew About It* (New York: Random House, 1986), p. 18.
  12. Schweizer, *Victory*, p. 190.
  13. In 1970, the United States abandoned the risky practice of flying into Soviet, Chinese, and North Korean airspace to provoke reactions by radar and air-defense installations. For recently declassified information on the US overflight program, see "Secrets of the Cold War," *U.S. News & World Report*, Vol. 114, No. 10 (15 March 1993), pp. 30-50.
  14. This incident is recounted in Seymour Hersh, "The Target is Destroyed", chapter 2, *passim*. The Soviets saw both political and military machinations in the overflight, because Zeleny is one of several islands that comprise the so-called northern territories that have been in dispute between Moscow and Tokyo since the Soviets seized them in 1945. The United States does not recognize the Soviet claim to the islands and supports Japan. The Soviets viewed the overflight as provocative and a challenge to their sovereignty over the islands. Hersh notes on p. 18 that the "Navy never publicly acknowledged either the overflight or its error; it also chose to say nothing further inside the government."
  15. This strange pamphlet was issued by a one-room Japanese "publishing" firm in editions of 1,000 each in English and Japanese. However, *Novosti* "reprinted" 100,000 copies in Russian. This suggests two things: the pamphlet was intended primarily for the internal Soviet audience, and the Soviet people did not believe their government's explanation of the KAL 007 tragedy. See Murray Sayle, "Closing the File on Flight 007," *The New Yorker*, Vol. LXIX, No. 42 (13 December 1993), pp. 90-101, especially 94-95.
  16. The two British accounts of Gordievsky's role and how British intelligence used him to influence President Reagan's thinking on Soviet policy are: Gordon Brooke-Shepherd, *The Storm Birds: The Dramatic Stories of the Top Soviet Spies Who Have Defected Since World War II* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), chapter 18, *passim*; and Geoffrey Smith, *Reagan and Thatcher* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), pp. 122-23. See also Nicholas Bethell, *Spies and Other Secrets: Memoirs from the Second Cold War* (New York: Viking, 1994), p. 191. Brooke-Shepherd received assistance from British and US intelligence. Smith's book is an "authorized" inside account of its subject. Bethell is a Tory MP and friend and fan of Gordievsky's. The US version, which is identical in many respects, is Don Oberdorfer, *The Turn: From Cold War to a New Era* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1991), p. 67.
  17. Oberdorfer, *The Turn*, p. 67.
  18. Garthoff, *The Great Transition*, p. 139, n. 160.

19. Able Archer coincided with October Revolution Day, the USSR's national holiday. Holidays turned into national drinking binges that incapacitated practically the entire country. This is an interesting bit of mirror-imaging, because NATO military planners almost certainly did not factor the holiday into Allied war plans.
20. Christopher Andrew, "We Will Always Need Spies," *The London Times*, 3 March 1994, Features, p. 1
21. Smith, *Thatcher and Reagan*, p. 122.
22. John Newhouse, *War and Peace in the Nuclear Age* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), p. 338.
23. For a discussion of the wealth of accurate information that was available to Stalin, see John Costello and Oleg Tsarev, *Deadly Illusions: The KGB Dossier Reveals Stalin's Master Spy* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1993), pp. 85-90. This analysis is based on declassified Soviet intelligence reports from the KGB archive. See also Barton Whaley, *Codeword BARBAROSSA* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1973), which details more than 80 indications and warnings received by Soviet intelligence.
24. Viktor Suvorov, *Icebreaker: Who Started World War II?* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1990), pp. 320-321.
25. William J. Fuller, Jr., *Strategy and Power in Russia 1600-1914* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), p. 12.