

135. Editorial Note

In early November 1983, NATO forces in Europe conducted an annual, planned command and control exercise, codenamed Able Archer 83. During that fall, tensions in the U.S.-Soviet relationship had mounted, in particular after the downing of the KAL 007 airliner by the Soviet Union on August 31 and the NATO INF deployments to Western Europe loomed for the end of November. The Kremlin continued to protest the planned INF deployments by waging a propaganda war both in Western Europe and within the Soviet Union, as they covertly promoted the peace movement in Western Europe. This Soviet propaganda fostered a “war scare” mentality by claiming that a conflict might erupt if the missiles were installed in NATO countries. The bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut and the U.S. invasion of Grenada further heightened international tensions in late October.

Amidst the tense situation, the NATO Able Archer exercise began as planned on November 2. In a March 1984 report, the British Head Office summarized the exercise as follows: “Able Archer 83 which took place from 2–11 November was an annual command post exercise designed to practice NATO nuclear release procedures. It differed from previous exercises in the series in a number of ways which made it of considerable interest to the Soviet authorities. In 1983, the detailed NATO procedures and message formats used for the transition from conventional to nuclear war were substantially changed. The 1983 exercise featured increased emphasis on headquarters-to-subordinate-echelon messages. Unlike previous Able Archer scenarios, in which NATO forces remained at General Alert from the beginning of exercise play throughout the exercise, in 1983 there were pre-exercise communications which notionally moved forces from normal readiness through various alert phases to General Alert. [1 line not declassified] The exercise also took place at a time when there was actually considerable political strain between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, shortly before the start of INF deployment in Western Europe. Able Archer 83 nevertheless remained entirely a Command Post Exercise, as in previous years.” (Reagan Library, Jack Matlock Files, Intelligence Reports [pre-1980, May 85–Jan 86])

While Soviet reactions to Able Archer later caused great debate, at the time of the exercise in early November, the Intelligence Community (IC) in the United States did not have a complete picture of the Soviet responses. After some reporting on Soviet anxieties began to emerge, which were more specifically related to the war scare and INF deployments, intelligence analysts and policymakers began contemplating how Soviet leadership perceived and reacted to Able Archer. As a result, in February 1990, during the George H.W. Bush administra-

tion, the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB) completed a study on "The Soviet 'War Scare.'" (George H.W. Bush Library, Bush Presidential Records, President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, Subject Files; Reports to the President—War Scare Report 1990 [OA/ID CF01830–020]) The PFIAB reviewed intelligence, analysis, and information related to Able Archer and the Soviet war scare, examining what was known at the time and after the fact, and then wrote the following summary of Soviet responses to Able Archer in November 1983:

"Able Archer 83

"From 7–11 November, NATO conducted its annual command post exercise [*less than 1 line not declassified*]. This is a recurring event that includes NATO forces from Turkey to England, and is routinely monitored by Soviet intelligence. Typical Soviet responses in the past have included increased intelligence collection and increased readiness levels at select military garrisons.

"The 1983 version of Able Archer, however, had some special wrinkles, which we believe probably fueled Soviet anxieties. NATO tested new procedures [*less than 1 line not declassified*] that emphasized command communications from headquarters to subordinate units. In addition, unlike previous scenarios wherein NATO forces remained at General Alert throughout, the 1983 plan featured pre-exercise communications that notionally moved forces from normal readiness, through various alert phases, to a General Alert.

"Soviet intelligence clearly had tip-offs to the exercise, and HUMINT elements underwent a major mobilization to collect against it. On 8 or 9 November, Moscow sent a circular telegram to KGB Residencies in Western Europe ordering them to report on the increased alert status of US military bases in Europe. Residencies were also instructed to check for indications [*less than 1 line not declassified*]; the London KGB Residency interpreted this as a sign of Moscow's VRYAN concern. Similar messages to search for US military activity were received by GRU Residencies. [*footnote text not declassified*]

"Other Warsaw Pact intelligences services reacted strongly as well. [*1½ lines not declassified*] during the Able Archer time frame he had been, 'particularly occupied trying to obtain information on a major NATO exercise . . .' [*less than 1 line not declassified*] efforts were in response to a year-old, high-priority requirement from Moscow 'to look for any indication that the United States was about to launch a preemptive nuclear strike against the countries of the Warsaw Pact.'

"The Pact also launched an unprecedented technical collection foray against Able Archer 83. Beginning on November 1, Soviet, East German, Czechoslovak, and Polish [*less than 1 line not declassified*] units were tasked to concentrate on the exercise. [*1½ lines not declassified*]

The Soviets also conducted over 36 intelligence flights, significantly more than in previous Able Archers. These included Soviet strategic and naval aviation missions over the Norwegian, North, Baltic, and Barents Sea—probably to determine whether US naval forces were deploying forward in support of Able Archer.

“Warsaw Pact military reactions to this particular exercise were also unparalleled in scale. This fact, together with the timing of their response, strongly suggests to us that Soviet military leaders may have been seriously concerned that the US would use Able Archer 83 as a cover for launching a real attack.

“The Soviets evidently believed the exercise would take place sometime between 3 and 11 November, but they initiated significant military preparations well in advance. [7 lines not declassified] Several days before the exercise actually began, the Soviets placed elements of at least two forward-based air armies on alert: [less than 1 line not declassified]

“These alerts were highly unusual. Most notably, they probably involved [less than 1 line not declassified]—activity seen only during crisis periods in the past. Moreover, [3½ lines not declassified]

- Transporting nuclear weapons from storage sites to delivery units by helicopter.

- A ‘standdown,’ or suspension of all flight operations, from 4 to 10 November—with the exception of intelligence collection flights—probably to have available as many aircraft as possible for combat.

- Invoking a 30-minute, around-the-clock readiness time and assigning priority targets [3½ lines not declassified]

- [1 paragraph (3 lines) not declassified]

- [1 paragraph (2 lines) not declassified]

“Similar measures were taken by about a third of the Soviet Air Force units [3½ lines not declassified].

- [1 paragraph (2 lines) not declassified]

[4 paragraphs (17 lines) not declassified]

“There were a number of other unusual Soviet military moves that, taken in the aggregate, also strongly suggest heightened concern:

[7 paragraphs (19 lines) not declassified]

“By November 11, the Soviet alert evidently was withdrawn. Flight training by Soviet Air Force units in East Germany returned to normal on the 11th [1½ lines not declassified].

“On the same day that Soviet forces returned to normal status, Marshal Ustinov delivered a speech in Moscow to a group of high-ranking military officers that, in our view, offers a plausible explanation for the unusual Soviet reactions to Able Archer 83. Calling the US ‘reckless’ and ‘adventurist,’ and charging it was pushing the world toward ‘nuclear catastrophe,’ Ustinov implied that the Kremlin saw

US military actions as sufficiently real to order an increase in Soviet combat readiness. Finally, possibly referring to the use of an exercise to launch a surprise attack, he warned that ‘no enemy intrigues will catch us unawares.’

“Ustinov also voiced his apparent conviction that the threat of war loomed heavy. Exhorting his forces, he declared that the international situation—‘the increased danger of an outbreak of a new world war’—called for extraordinary measures:

We must actively and persistently foster high vigilance and mobilize all servicemen both to increase combat readiness . . . and to strengthen military discipline.

“There is little doubt in our minds that the Soviets were originally worried by Able Archer; however, the depth of that concern is difficult to gauge. On one hand, it appears that at least some Soviet forces were preparing to preempt or counterattack a NATO strike launched under cover of Able Archer. Such apprehensions stemmed, in our view, from several factors:

- US-Soviet relations at the time were probably at their lowest ebb in 20 years. Indeed, the threat of war with the US was an ever-present media theme throughout the USSR, especially the armed forces.
- Yuriy Andropov, probably the only man in the Soviet Union who could authorize the use of nuclear weapons at a moment’s notice, was seriously ill and, in fact, may have been incapacitated.
- [*1½ lines not declassified*] Pact exercises to counter a NATO surprise attack always portrayed NATO ‘jumping off’ from a large training maneuver before reaching full combat readiness. Soviet doctrine and war plans have long posited such a scenario for a Warsaw Pact preemptive attack on NATO.

“On the other hand, the US intelligence community detected no evidence of large-scale Warsaw Pact preparations. Conventional thinking assumes that the Soviets would probably undertake such a mobilization and force buildup prior to a massive attack on NATO. The Board questions, however, whether we would indeed detect as many ‘indicators’ as we might expect, given, for example, Soviet improvements in communications security and procedures for secret mobilization.

“The ‘mixed’ Soviet reaction may, in fact, directly reflect the degree of uncertainty within the Soviet military and the Kremlin over US intentions. Although the Soviets usually have been able to make correct evaluations of US alerts, their increased number of intelligence reconnaissance flights and special telegrams to intelligence Residencies regarding possible US force mobilization, for example, suggests to us serious doubts about the true intent of Able Archer. To us, Soviet actions preceding and during the exercise appear to have been the

logical steps to be taken in a period when suspicions were running high. Moreover, many of these steps were ordered to be made secretly to avoid detection by US intelligence. This suggests that Soviet forces were either preparing to launch a surprise preemptive attack (which never occurred) or making preparations that would allow them a minimum capability to retaliate, but at the same time not provoke the attack they apparently feared. This situation could have been extremely dangerous if during the exercise—perhaps through a series of ill-timed coincidences or because of faulty intelligence—the Soviets had misperceived US actions as preparations for a real attack.” (PFIAB, pages 69–76)

Unlike the drafters of the 1990 PFIAB report, in November 1983 the IC did not have the benefit of hindsight, let alone the full range of evidence eventually collected through various sources and methods. While intelligence on the Soviet air alerts existed concurrent to and shortly after Able Archer 83 (see Document 134), it remains unclear who received this information and when. In reviewing the intelligence collected and reported during the exercise, the PFIAB paper stated: “This abnormal Soviet behavior to the annual, announced Able Archer 83 exercise sounded no alarm bells in the US Indications and Warning system. United States commanders on the scene were not aware of any pronounced superpower tension, and the Soviet activities were not seen in their totality until long after the exercise was over. For example, while the US detected a ‘heightened readiness’ among some Soviet air force divisions, the extent of the alert [*less than 1 line not declassified*] was not known until two weeks had passed after the completion of the exercise. The Soviet air force standdown had been in effect for nearly a week before [*less than 1 line not declassified*] aircraft were noted on air defense alert in East Germany.”

The PFIAB report continued: “There were plenty of reasons why the Soviet military response to Able Archer was missed; there was no context by which to judge behavior. First, Moscow’s ‘war scare’ activity was not yet the focus of intelligence or policy attention. Additionally, Soviet intelligence requirements against the exercise, [*less than 1 line not declassified*] learned until long after the fact. Moreover, the air stand-down was not at first perceived abnormally because it occurred during the Soviet Revolution holiday; about midway through the exercise, [*2½ lines not declassified*]. Despite late-developing information, the intelligence community evaluated the Soviet response as unusual but not militarily significant. Analysts reasoned that more indicators should have been detected if the Soviets were seriously concerned about a NATO attack.” (PFIAB, pages 8–9) Aside from the November 10 National Intelligence Daily, no documentation was found in the President’s Daily Briefs or other sources relating to Reagan or other high-

level policymakers information about this heightened Soviet alert status or possible Soviet anxieties over a first strike nuclear attack.

Reagan's November 18 diary entry demonstrates some awareness of Soviet apprehensions, perhaps coincidentally or perhaps as the result of some verbal reporting or documentation that was not found. He met with George Shultz on both November 16 and November 18 to discuss "establishing a pipe line outside the bureaucracy for direct contact with Soviets." On November 18, he wrote: "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 no one here has any intention of doing anything like that. What the h--l have they got that anyone would want." (Brinkley, ed., *The Reagan Diaries*, volume I, January 1981–October 1985, page 290)

What prompted Reagan to make these comments remains unclear.

For further discussion of Able Archer and the PFIAB report, see Appendix A.

136. Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (McFarlane) to President Reagan¹

Washington, November 16, 1983

SUBJECT

Discussion of Channels to the Soviets

Secretary Shultz has advised me that he intends to discuss alternative approaches for dealing with the Soviets during his meeting with you today at 1:30.²

This is an extremely complex, important and timely issue. Numerous analysts and observers returning from the Soviet Union in recent weeks have reported uniformly a high level of anxiety among Soviet

¹ Source: Reagan Library, Robert McFarlane Files, Chronological File, Chron (Official) November 1983; NLR-362-6-10-5-7. Secret.

² According to the President's Daily Diary, Reagan held a private afternoon meeting with Shultz on November 16 before an NSPG meeting. (Reagan Library, President's Daily Diary) Reagan wrote in his diary: "Met with Geo. S. about establishing a pipe line outside the bureaucracy for direct contact with Soviets." (Brinkley, ed., *The Reagan Diaries*, vol. I, January 1981–October 1985, p. 198)