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Nate Jones, ed.. *Able Archer 83: The Secret History of the NATO Exercise That Almost Triggered Nuclear War.* New York: New Press, 2016. 320 pp. $27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-62097-261-8.

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Did the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) unwittingly push the Soviet Union to the brink of war in 1983? A choir of voices echoes the claim that the superpowers came "frighteningly close" to nuclear war—"certainly closer than at any time since the Cuban missile crisis of 1962."[1] Unlike the showdown over missiles in Cuba, however, this episode of nuclear peril played out in the shadows. No banner headlines heralded what the faithful believe was the moment of peak danger: the second week of November 1983, when misperceptions of a NATO military exercise code-named Able Archer 83 evidently prompted the Soviets to put nuclear-capable forces on alert. Trapped in an intelligence cycle that reinforced fears of susceptibility to surprise nuclear attack, Soviet leaders took steps toward an anticipatory counterattack.

Within days, the Soviet alert was called off. The situation did not escalate; war did not break out. The "crisis" moment even passed unnoticed by American political leaders, who learned of the apparent brush with catastrophe only after the fact from revelations by Oleg Gordievsky, a KGB/MI6 double agent. The Soviet "War Scare" became a subject of considerable interest within then president Ronald Reagan's administration in late 1983 and well into 1984. Retrospective intelligence assessments were quietly undertaken to improve US understanding of Soviet actions and motivations, including perceptions of vulnerability, hypervigilance, and fears of surprise nuclear attack. Unsurprisingly, these proceedings were kept secret.

For years, secrecy and relative obscurity kept Able Archer 83 from public view. Journalists like Don Oberdorfer and a few historians picked up the thread in the 1990s, but the documentary trail was scanty at best.[2] Gordievsky defected and published accounts of Soviet intelligence activities associated with fears of a decapitating first strike, but produced little by way of authenticated documents.[3] Former US officials like national security advisor Robert McFarlane and deputy director for intelligence Robert Gates spoke and wrote openly about the war scare and Able Archer, but minced words and tolerated (and perhaps encouraged) ambiguity concerning the particulars.[4] Reluctant governments and bureaucracies balked at requests for relevant classified documents.

Welcome, then, is *Able Archer 83: The Secret History of the NATO Exercise That Almost Triggered Nuclear War*, an edited collection of documents ferreted out by the National Security Archive. Known for its dogged use of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests in sustained campaigns to expose historic secrets of the US national security establishment, the not-for-profit orga-

nization has posted on its website a substantial collection of declassified documents related to the war scare.[5] This print volume features thirteen document reproductions, mostly from US sources. Nate Jones, the archive's head researcher on Able Archer 83 and clearly an authority on the subject, includes in the book a richly detailed sixty-five-page introductory section. Extensively researched and documented with over 280 intricate and often informative endnotes, it serves as a fine complement to the selection of declassified documents.

Jones's densely packed introduction is an expanded version of his 2009 master's thesis, which argued (without the benefit of many documents unearthed since) that Able Archer 83 pushed the Soviets to the brink of nuclear war.[6] The account inevitably echoes themes of earlier works on the subject by Benjamin B. Fischer, Beth A. Fischer (no relation), and others, but it also adds considerable context and evidence, and makes original claims rooted in analysis of primary documents and (to a lesser extent) the secondary literature.[7] Using facts and information from recently declassified documents, together with archival sources and the occasional interview, Jones corrects mistakes and clarifies ambiguities in the historical record.

But this is not a wholly dispassionate enterprise. Jones frames the subject and its subtopics around two purposes: to convince readers that 1983 was a year of exceptional danger that culminated in a needlessly provocative NATO military exercise that had unintended consequences; and second, that the Able Archer 83 exercise provoked a secret, one-sided crisis that nearly triggered a nuclear war, averted perhaps only by a US Air Force lieutenant general's "instinctual decision not to respond to the Soviet escalation in kind" (p. 67). Faithful believers in the Able Archer narrative will find both purposes fulfilled by the contents of the volume; agnostics and skeptics are likely to remain unconvinced of the second.

The book's central claims are familiar to students of the "Second Cold War." In an atmosphere of renewed hostility and mutual recriminations, a ramped-up arms race and a US president willing to destabilize mutual deterrence put superpower relations on "a hair trigger" (p. 3). President Reagan's outspoken vitriol toward the Soviet "evil empire" and unrelenting US pressure on NATO allies to host intermediate-range nuclear forces exacerbated tensions, particularly since it appeared that a surprise attack using the so-called Euromissiles would reduce Soviet reaction times to virtually nil —"render[ing] Moscow, including the Soviet nuclear command, vulnerable to a decapitating first strike" (p. 10).

Fearing the United States' pursuit of a decisive military advantage and development of a secret doctrine of nuclear first-use, Soviet leaders initiated an extraordinary Warsaw Pact program of data gathering and analysis: Operation RYaN (for ***Raketno-Yadernoe Napadenie***, or "nuclear missile attack"). RYaN fueled a "vicious circle of intelligence" that reinforced and ratcheted up Soviet fears of a surprise nuclear attack (p. 32). Resolved not to relive the harsh lessons of 1941, some hypervigilant Soviet leaders perceived NATO's command post exercise Able Archer 83—the concluding phase of the annual Autumn Forge military exercises, known to the Soviets but featuring in 1983 several "special wrinkles" (p. 153) —as the moment of impending doom. After months of US psychological military operations (PSYOPs) designed to keep the Soviets on edge, unusual military movements and a simulated escalation to nuclear launch by US/NATO forces prompted Soviet officials to put nuclear-armed forces on alert, and possibly to contemplate an anticipatory counterattack. Though the Soviets never initiated military action against NATO, the risk of war via miscalculation was, in the editor's judgment, "unacceptably high" because the unusual Soviet alerts could have triggered an escalatory response from US/NATO forces (p. 57).

Only later (the timeline remains unclear) did high-level US officials become aware of the acute danger of the Able Archer 83 episode, thanks largely to Gordievsky's revelations. Alarmed by the revelations, Reagan came to the "realization of the danger of nuclear war through miscalculation encapsulated by the Soviet reaction to Able Archer 83" (p. 46), which in turn contributed to the tipping of his administration's stance from confrontation to cooperation.[8] Unlike the president, the US intelligence community (IC) appeared unmoved by the reports, and remained sanguine about Soviet fears and any corresponding risk of unintended escalation—at least until taken to task in 1990 by the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB) in a highly classified, retrospective report that chided the IC for discounting Soviet fears and critiqued the IC's process for assessing Soviet actions and intentions.

That PFIAB report is the real gem among the reproduced documents offered in support of the war scare narrative. The ninety-four-page final report of a year-long, all-sources intelligence review by the PFIAB on the Soviet "War Scare" (quotation marks in original report, p. 69) reportedly was held back for twelve years before the archive's FOIA request for its release was fulfilled. The published report is partially redacted but is nonetheless quite revealing in its account and analysis of the war scare; it is also remarkably frank in its criticism of the IC. Cold War aficionados and intelligence historians alike will find the document fascinating. Together with a once-classified article on the war scare by Central Intelligence Agency historian Benjamin Fischer, a US Air Force after-action report filed in the weeks following Able Archer 83, various internal memoranda, a declassified May 1984 Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE), and other intriguing documents, the PFIAB report creates a credible basis for belief in the possibility that Soviet leaders feared a US first strike and took steps toward war in response to Able Archer 83.

And yet, despite the documents and Jones's detailed analysis, it is reasonable to harbor doubts about the gravity and significance attributed to the Able Archer incident. Indeed, to respond affirmatively to the question raised at the start of this review requires a leap of faith. The leap is now a far shorter one than it was when the Able Archer affair made the jump from minor Internet sensation to subject of serious scholarly inquiry, and the publication of Jones's ***Able Archer 83*** narrows the gap considerably more. Ultimately, however, the claim of an acute nuclear crisis in November 1983 is not conclusively demonstrated, if only because—as Jones plainly acknowledges—whatever we can gather from declassified documents about how *US* military, intelligence, and political officials understood the events of 1983 and their implications, "how Able Archer 83 shaped the ***Soviet*** leadership and its policy is more difficult to ascertain" (p. 51, emphasis added).

Part of the problem is that direct evidence of an acute nuclear crisis in the Kremlin is lacking. Scholars associated with the National Security Archive and the Wilson Center's Cold War International History Project have acquired and disseminated various Eastern Bloc documents that illuminate a few once-darkened corners, but no one has yet produced incontrovertible evidence of high-level Soviet political officials grappling with the frightening possibility that Able Archer 83 masked the opening moves of a surprise attack. Jones draws on much of what is available, but his refutation of critics like Vojtech Mastny amounts to little more than the old aphorism made familiar by former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld: "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence."[9] The sentiment is logically true but nonetheless rings hollow. Historians and other specialists should continue to investigate the war scare—and especially the alleged crisis of November 1983—from the perspective of Soviet leadership, however that may be defined.

The relevant documents on this subject that are included in the book are often speculative, are redacted, or furnish information filtered through the lenses of a single individual (for example, Averell Harriman's June 1983 memorandum of conversation with General Secretary Yuri Andropov, and a report on an unnamed American academic's observations on the emotionalism and paranoia of Soviet officials). Others are cautiously phrased to capture contributors' differences of opinion or interpretation, or to communicate uncertainty.

Much of the uncertainty reflects a lack of complete information about Soviet perceptions and intentions behind observed Soviet actions; the PFIAB report provides a case in point. Jones is keen to highlight the board's seemingly unequivocal statement: "There is little doubt in our minds that the Soviets were genuinely worried by Able Archer ... it appears that at least some of the Soviet forces were preparing to preempt or counterattack a NATO strike launched under cover of Able Archer" (p. 68). But the ellipsis, and the implied ellipsis at the end of the quotation, cloak caveats in the actual report: "There is little doubt in our minds that the Soviets were genuinely worried by Able Archer; ***however, the depth of that concern is difficult to gauge. On one hand,*** it appears that at least some of the Soviet forces were preparing to preempt or counterattack a NATO strike launched under cover of Able Archer ... ***On the other hand, the US intelligence community detected no evidence of large-scale Warsaw Pact preparations***" (p. 158; emphasis added). Discerning readers will appreciate such subtleties when they read the reproduced documents.

Observed Soviet reactions to Able Archer 83 were interpreted by the PFIAB as indicative of Soviet leaders' "uncertainty" and suggestive of "serious doubts about the true intent of Able Archer," prompting the board to conclude, "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" (p. 159). Counterfactual speculation—alongside generous use of hedges like "could have," "perhaps," "may have," and "suggests"—suggests to readers that it could be a mistake to treat this document as conclusive. The board itself indicates as much, stating that its discussion of the war scare "is what we view as a plausible interpretation of events based upon a sizable, but incomplete, body of evidence" (p. 118). Still—and despite its caveats, speculations, and redactions—the declassified 1990 PFIAB report comes as close as anything we have to a "smoking gun" to warrant claims of crisis and increased danger of war, as seen from an American vantage. As the board concluded, "In 1983 we may have inadvertently placed our relations with the Soviet Union on a hair trigger" (p. 80).

A larger, related issue that bedevils the literature on this subject is failure to reliably parse the notion of a prolonged war scare, broadly conceived, from allegations of an acute crisis on the occasion of the Able Archer 83 command post exercise. Though they are intimately connected, the distinction between them is crucial, because evidence for the former is not necessarily evidence for the latter. Indeed, evidence for a period of months or years during which the Soviets had concerns about US armaments, Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) deployments, US pursuit of a first-strike capability, and an unfavorable shift in the overall correlation of forces is more abundant than evidence of a specific crisis stemming from fears of imminent attack during Able Archer 83. Support for the Able-Archer-as-crisis narrative is often traceable back to Gordievsky's revelations, or is inferred from conclusions drawn by privileged parties (e.g., the PFIAB, Benjamin Fischer, etc.) privy to information that remains concealed, either by redaction or by refusal to declassify documents (a "tightly controlled" annex to a 1988 intelligence estimate is particularly tantalizing). Jones rarely falls victim to the pitfall

of conflating the two but occasionally stumbles in keeping the distinction clear for readers. In one such instance, as evidence to support his contention that "the Soviet fear of war during Able Archer 83 was real, not manufactured," Jones cites Soviet defense advisor Vitalii Kataev's remarks characterizing "the early 1980s to be a crisis period, a pre-wartime period" during which the impending deployment of Pershing II missiles was "extremely destabilizing" (p. 11). The reader is left to judge whether Kataev's words substantiate the claims of an acute crisis during Able Archer 83, as distinct from an extended period of more diffuse anxieties.

Minor issues related to the book's presentation of materials are worth mentioning but scarcely diminish the value of the work. Fussy readers may be disappointed by the handling of document 3, which appears to be a two-page excerpt of a KGB report on its activities; as it is presented in Russian without translation into English, the casual reader is at the mercy of Jones's brief English-language description on page 195. An unfortunate typographical error labels a British Ministry of Defence document "May 9, 1983" (p. 251) even though the document is date-stamped May 8, 1984. Readers occasionally may find portions of reproduced documents difficult to read, though in one case the blame may be placed on a former president's cursive handwriting. Quibbles and quirks aside, the documents are carefully selected and competently reproduced.

A minor concern deals with the organization of Jones's introductory chapters. The overarching narrative addresses a complex array of topics, which makes a singular, chronological account difficult; hence, Jones's decision to organize his work by subject is a sensible one. However, this means that the text jumps around in time, frustrating linear thinkers' efforts to understand what happened first and who knew what and when. A timeline of events, developments, and vital communications would have been an excellent addition to the volume.

At bottom, ***Able Archer 83: The Secret History of the NATO Exercise That Almost Triggered Nuclear War*** is a valuable addition to the literature on the post-détente "Era of Renewed Confrontation." Despite its sensationalistic subtitle and occasional overreaches, this is a serious work that makes significant contributions to our collective understanding of a tense and perhaps alarming episode in Cold War history. Substantiating and widening the discussion with an accessible collection of declassified documents is a public service, and one for which students of history and concerned citizens owe a debt of gratitude to the National Security Archive, and to Jones in particular. Whether this book produces new converts or merely preaches to the choir, it is a vital resource that deserves to be read and evaluated.

Notes

[1]. Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, ***KGB: The Inside Story of Its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev*** (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 605.

[2]. Don Oberdorfer, ***The Turn: From the Cold War to a New Era, the United States and the Soviet Union, 1983-1990*** (New York: Poseidon, 1991); and for treatments by historians see, for example, Raymond L. Garthoff, ***The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War*** (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 1994); and Christopher Andrew, ***For the President's Eyes Only:Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush*** (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

[3]. See, for example, Christopher M. Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, ***Comrade Kryuchkov's Instructions: Top Secret Files on KGB Foreign Operations, 1975-1985*** (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

[4]. See, for example, Beth A. Fischer, ***The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the***

Cold War (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997); and Robert M. Gates, ***From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War*** (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

[5]. National Security Archive, "The Able Archer Sourcebook," http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/nukevault/ablearcher/.

[6]. Nathan Bennett Jones, "'One Misstep Could Trigger a Great War': Operation RYAN, Able Archer 83, and the 1983 War Scare" (master's thesis, The George Washington University, 2009), http://gradworks.proquest.com/14/65/1465450.html.

[7]. Benjamin B. Fischer, ***A Cold War Conundrum: The 1983 Soviet War Scare*** (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1997), updated 2008 version at https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/a-cold-war-conundrum/source.htm ; and Fischer, ***Reagan Reversal.***

[8]. For a nuanced account, see Jonathan M. DiCicco, "Fear, Loathing, and Cracks in Reagan's Mirror Images: Able Archer 83 and an American First Step toward Rapprochement in the Cold War," ***Foreign Policy Analysis*** 7, no. 3 (2011): 253-274.

[9]. Vojtech Mastny, "How Able Was 'Able Archer'? Nuclear Trigger and Intelligence in Perspective," ***Journal of Cold War Studies*** 11, no. 1 (2009): 108-123.