

2009

h-diplo

H-Diplo Article REVIEWS

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/>

No. 223

Published on **23 April 2009**

H-Diplo Article Review Managing Editor: Diane N.

Labrosse

H-Diplo Article Review General Editor and Web Editor:

George Fujii

Vojtech Mastny. "How Able was 'Able Archer'? Nuclear Trigger and Intelligence in Perspective." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 11:1 (Winter 2009): 108-123. DOI: 10.1162/jcws.2009.11.1.108. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2009.11.1.108> .

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/Fischer-Mastny.pdf>

Reviewed by **Beth A. Fischer**, University of Toronto

I first stumbled across Exercise Able Archer about sixteen years ago while working on a project regarding U.S. foreign policy. At the time, it was an obscure incident: In November 1983 NATO had conducted a military exercise that simulated some of the procedures involved in a nuclear attack, and it appeared that the Warsaw Pact responded with alarm. Early studies suggested that Moscow feared the exercise was a cover for the first stages of an actual nuclear attack, and that it began to prepare to respond in kind. Further details were murky, and there were a thousand questions to be answered. How close had the world come to a nuclear exchange? Did Moscow sincerely believe Washington was initiating a nuclear first strike, or was it feigning in an attempt to sow discord within the Western alliance? What was the reaction within Washington?

My research took me elsewhere, but I remained curious about Able Archer and would check the scholarly literature from time to time. The key sources regarding the incident were a series of books co-authored by Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky.¹ At the time of the Able Archer exercise Gordievsky was a Soviet spy based in London. He was also passing information along to the British, and it was his reports that first alerted the West to the alarm inside the Iron Curtain. Another key source has been Benjamin B. Fischer, *A Cold War Conundrum: The 1983 Soviet War Scare* (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1997). Fischer wore various hats during his more than thirty years at the Central Intelligence Agency and his work reflects his expertise both in intelligence gathering and assessment.

But for a long time Able Archer remained obscure.

¹ See Oleg Gordievsky and Christopher Andrew, *KGB: The Inside Story* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990); *Instructions from the Centre: Top Secret Files from KGB Foreign Operations, 1975-1985* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991); and *More Instructions from the Centre: Top Secret Files on KGB Operations, 1975-1985* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1992).

One can imagine my surprise, then, when I recently Googled “Able Archer” and discovered over 4.4 *million* references, some of which referred to an American indie band that has adopted the name. I don’t know which was more shocking: the degree of interest in Able Archer, or the idea that Cold War studies could have anything to do with cutting edge music.

While I certainly can’t claim familiarity with all of the references cited by Google, an overview of material suggests that while there is increased interest in Able Archer, there has not been a commensurate increase in the amount we know about the incident. Andrew and Gordievsky and Fischer remain the seminal sources. Indeed, this is an issue ripe for an international conference.

Vojtech Mastny’s article is a welcome addition to this literature. Drawing upon his extensive knowledge about the Warsaw Pact, he fills in some of the many blanks by drawing upon East German and Danish sources which may be unfamiliar to English-speaking audiences. As well, he seeks to place the incident in a broader context. Many have contended that Able Archer brought the superpowers to the brink of a nuclear war. Mastny considers whether this was indeed the case, and evaluates the ability of intelligence agencies to prevent (or precipitate) such a disaster. As Mastny makes clear, throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s Moscow and Washington misunderstood each other’s intentions. Key decision makers within the USSR believed that NATO – and the U.S. in particular – was seeking military superiority. There was growing alarm in some quarters in Moscow owing to NATO’s 1979 “dual track decision,” which led to the deployment of U.S. intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Western Europe, the greater degree of French cooperation with NATO, NATO’s development of rapid reaction capabilities, and the Soviet belief that China would support the U.S. in a war against the Warsaw Pact. In addition, the Soviets felt threatened by American technological innovations. Yuri Andropov, who headed the KGB before becoming General Secretary in late 1982, was the most prominent of this group.

President Reagan’s strident rhetoric and military buildup only heightened these concerns, as did the surprise announcement in March 1983 that the U.S. would begin research on a space-based anti-ballistic missile system (SDI). Many Soviet leaders believed the American president to be both belligerent and unpredictable.

American strategists were equally misguided. “They made the dreary assumption that the enemy’s capabilities, rather than intentions, were the only thing that mattered,” Mastny explains (110). The American arms control community’s devotion to nuclear deterrence and its increasingly abstruse theories regarding fighting and winning a nuclear war led to a fixation on the size of Moscow’s arsenal. (In all fairness, however, divining the Kremlin’s intentions during the pre-Gorbachev era was no small task.)

As Mastny suggests, questions remain regarding the way in which American and Soviet leaders understood the incident and responded to it. For reasons that remain unclear, KGB intelligence analysts did not pass along information on Able Archer to top Soviet leaders. Mastny attributes this, in part, to East German spies who were intimately familiar with the West’s defensive military strategy and therefore knew that NATO was not planning to attack. There was, as he

calls it, “a critical margin of willingness to give the enemy the benefit of the doubt” (120). This seems eminently reasonable. But given Andropov’s long-standing grave concern regarding a nuclear attack, and the manner in which he pushed Soviet intelligence to find evidence of such an attack, it remains curious that information on Able Archer would not have been passed along to him.

Likewise, the impact on President Reagan and his advisers remains murky. It appears that the bulk of Regan’s advisers discounted the incident as a feint intended to create panic in Europe and sow discord among NATO allies over Reagan’s policies. Officials have offered conflicting accounts of the president’s response, however. National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane has recalled that Reagan responded to the incident with “genuine anxiety” and that it had a “big influence on his subsequent approach to the Soviets.”² As Mastny points out, other advisers have suggested this was not the case (121). Regardless, it is now clear that the administration had been in the process of adopting a more conciliatory approach to the USSR when this incident took place. The possibility that Moscow had been sincerely alarmed and that a nuclear exchange had been narrowly averted would have only leant further urgency to this shift.

Mastny concludes that Able Archer was not as close a call as we may have once believed, but neither was it inconsequential. The incident may well have focused leaders’ attention on the folly of maintaining such overwhelming arsenals and their impotence in resolving most political challenges. Although further investigation is necessary it is plausible that Able Archer bolstered both Reagan and Gorbachev’s beliefs that nuclear abolition was necessary.

Beth Fischer is Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Toronto. Her major relevant publication is *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (1997), and her current project is *Triumph?: The Reagan Legacy and American Politics Today* (on triumphalism and its effect on contemporary U.S. foreign policy).

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—Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

² Robert McFarlane, Interview with Author, Washington, D.C., 7 July 1995.