

15. Berliner Colloquium zur Zeitgeschichte

**1983—The Most Dangerous Year of the Cold War?**

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**Interview**

*Berliner Colloquien zur Zeitgeschichte: Why should one regard the year 1983 as the most dangerous year of the Cold War? What happened in 1983?*

Indeed many people would imagine that 1962 and the Cuban Missile Crisis, to name just one example, was the »most dangerous year of the Cold War,« and it is not for nothing that we have placed a question mark next to the phrase. Yet 1983 was a particularly dangerous year in that it saw a series of crises with great potential for escalation. The diplomacy of detente had finally run aground with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 which marked the start of the so-called Second Cold War. The change in political leadership in both Moscow and Washington, President Reagan's aggressive rhetoric and announcement of the Star Wars missile defense program had already helped to create tense relations with the Soviets at start of the year.

Subsequently, massive U.S. naval maneuvers, psychological operations of the Reagan government, a false alarm of the Soviet missile-warning system, the shooting down of a South Korean airline, and the American invasion of Grenada in the Fall of 1983 exacerbated tensions even further. At the same time Moscow was greatly concerned about the planned stationing of Pershing II medium-range ballistic missiles in Western Europe in November of that year. And then of course there was the military exercise Able Archer.

*BCZ: Able Archer was an important discussion starter for the conference; what was it all about?*

Able Archer was a NATO command post exercise that took place between 7 and 11 November 1983 and was intended to simulate the transition from a conventional to a nuclear war against the Soviet Union. If one buys into the prevalent reading of events, Able Archer set off a false alarm with the KGB. According to this reading, Soviet

intelligence believed that NATO was preparing a real nuclear attack against the Soviet Union under the guise of precisely this military exercise. Other crises of that year and a creeping erosion of the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) created a paranoid atmosphere in Moscow to that point. Strategic bomber units in Eastern Europe and possibly other components of the Soviet nuclear arsenal were put on high alert. Yet the crisis remained hidden to the public and failed to escalate when NATO gave the simulated order to launch its atomic weapons. This latter move partly occurred as a result of the intelligence information was exchanged behind the scenes. Top Western spy and KGB resident in London, Oleg Gordievsky, conveyed Russian misgivings to the British secret service. At the same time the Stasi spy Rainer Rupp (cover name »Topas«), who was stationed at NATO's main headquarters, informed Moscow that Able Archer was indeed only an exercise.

*BCZ: You say that this is the prevalent reading of events. Are there alternative interpretations of the Able Archer episode?*

There is indeed a dispute as to whether the world found itself on the brink of an atomic war at this moment or not. A number of historians have stressed that Moscow consciously used the supposed fear of war for propaganda purposes. Beyond that it is unclear as to whether the KGB alarm even reached the Politburo, how extensive the Soviet order for mobilization was, and whether the information from Gordievsky played any role at all during the crisis. We can also not say with absolute certainty whether the Able Archer crisis moved President Reagan to rethink matters and help thaw relations between the Soviet Union and America during the Gorbachev years. Nevertheless, there was general agreement in the colloquium that we should be careful not to downgrade Able Archer to a non-crisis situation. We have to accept the fact that there is much related to this incident that we still don't understand, particularly regarding the Soviet side. Also, the perspectives of secondary actors—including NATO and the Warsaw Pact allies—have not been sufficiently taken into account.

*BCZ: Is the question as to how dangerous Able Archer really was truly decisive in the long run?*

Certainly not in and of itself. One of the main goals of the conference was to contextualize 1983 within the broader spectrum of the Cold War as a whole and to formulate leitmotifs not only for the various crises but for the crisis-management style of that epoch. So we have identified certain areas of focus. Among others were

perceptions and misperceptions, the ambiguous role of the secret services in managing and at the same time intensifying crises as well as the significance of new technologies and strategies supposedly making nuclear war both prosecutable and winnable.

*BCZ: What are the most important findings in these areas?*

We clearly see that perception and the political and military reality frequently have little to do with one another. A classic example of such is the dispute surrounding the »window of vulnerability«—the susceptibility of the United States due to the Soviet Union's supposed nuclear superiority. Another recurring motif was »mirror-imaging,« which entailed seeing one's own behavior and perceptions reflected in the adversary. This applied not only to politicians but also to intelligence agencies, whose political reach needs to be continuously called into question. Just because we, as historians, have as a source, the complex and differentiated analysis of intelligence agencies hardly means that these were of importance for decision-makers of the time. Furthermore, the wealth of intelligence-collection interpretations enabled the political protagonists, when in doubt, to seek out that certain interpretations which agreed with the decision they had already arrived at. In terms of new strategies and technologies, in the early 1980s these were a very important factor in destabilizing relations between the superpowers and can also be seen as helping to foment other crises in the course of the Cold War.

*BCZ: From today's perspective, what can we learn from Able Archer three decades ago?*

Not least of all how dangerous unconfirmed assumptions about the perceptions and intentions of elite leaders at the geopolitical level can be, and that for historians and political scientists the study of perceptions is at least as important as research into the hard facts. It is also remarkable that despite the particularly unfavorable constellation of events in 1983 and the paranoia on both sides there was in fact no catastrophic escalation. Perhaps we tend to get too focused on crises and sometimes neglect to underscore those mechanisms of stability that serve to counteract them. But these are the lessons from 1983 that are relevant to our time.