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## **Military Exercises and the Dangers of Misunderstandings: the East-West Crisis of the Early 1980s**

**Beatrice Heuser**

### **Abstract**

The East-West Crisis of the Early 1980s demonstrated that one should never overestimate the degree of mutual understanding between two adversarial states. Military and command post exercises, thought to be entirely transparent in their purely defensive purposes by the West, were seen as potential smokescreen for a surprise attack in the East. While the crisis did not lead to war, the fact that it went as far as producing a Soviet nuclear alert in response to a command post exercise points to the inherent dangers of military exercises as crisis-destabilising.

Never, perhaps, in the post-war decades, has the situation in the world been as explosive and hence, more difficult and unfavourable as in the first half of the 1980s.

(Mikhail Gorbachev, February 1986)<sup>1</sup>

### **Assumptions**

International Relations as a discipline of research and study have their roots in the period between the two world wars. The term 'Foreign Affairs' had been around since the eighteenth century, but both the terms 'International Affairs' and 'International Relations' took off after the pan-European catastrophe of the First World War; the use of 'международные отношения' surged from 1941 and again dramatically from the mid-1950s. The study of International Relations is above all 'disaster studies', in the words of the late Donald Cameron Watt in his inaugural lecture as Stevenson Professor of International Relations, given at the London School of Economics in 1983, a year that will concern us very much in this article.<sup>2</sup>

So the study of the subject area really took off in a big way after the second great catastrophe of the Twentieth Century, the Second World War, when the Cold War was taking shape, a war which often enough did turn hot and bloody, but which academics and other researchers on all sides wanted to prevent from turning into World War Three. University departments sprang up, especially, but not only, in the English-speaking world.<sup>3</sup> Libraries have since been filled with literature on the larger subject area; the great majority of works concern, in that order, the Cold War (especially relations between the West and the Soviet Union), the origins of the Second World War, and the Origins of the First World War.

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<sup>1</sup> George H.W. Bush Presidential Library, The President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board: 'The Soviet War Scare Report', (15 Feb. 1990), <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb533-The-Able-Archer-War-Scare-Declassified-PFIAB-Report-Released/> accessed on 31 III 16.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Cameron Watt: *What about the People? Abstraction and Reality in History and the Social Sciences* (London: London School of Economics, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> Google n-gram viewers

One important idea emerged already in 1951, in the work of scholar John Herz, a German-born refugee from Nazi Germany, who was by then teaching at an American university. Herz coined the expression 'security dilemma' in 1950:

The heartbreaking plight in which a bipolarized and atom bomb-blessed world finds itself today is but the extreme manifestation of a dilemma with which human societies have had to grapple since the dawn of history. ... Wherever [an] anarchic society has existed ... there has arisen what may be called the 'security dilemma' of men, or groups, or their leaders. Groups or individuals living in such a constellation must be, and usually are, concerned about their security from being attacked, subjected, dominated, or annihilated by other groups and individuals. Striving to attain security from such attack, they are driven to acquire more and more power in order to escape the impact of the power of others. This, in turn, renders the others more insecure and compels them to prepare for the worst. Since none can ever feel entirely secure in such a world of competing units, power competition ensues, and the vicious circle of security and power accumulation is on.<sup>4</sup>

This concept will also concern us particularly in the present essay.

At a guess, during the Cold War, a very large proportion of the diplomatic and intelligence resources of member states of both the Warsaw Treaty Organisation (WTO) and of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was devoted to tracking, analysing and interpreting the other side. It is an educated guess to say that more resources were never devoted to understanding each other, even if the form it took was most complex, several groups of analysts were involved in this endeavour (from intelligence at its most secret to journalists at its most public) and there was little communications between the groups (even within one country).

There were spies in both camps, but as the Western camp was to a very great degree an open society, despite 'security vettings', especially the West German government's defence sector and through it, NATO, were penetrated to a particularly large extent. This is, to this day, an area difficult to research, but enough evidence has come into the public domain to give examples of what was going on. In 1974, West German Chancellor Willy Brandt had to resign from office after it was established that one of his closest aides, Günter Guillaume, was a GDR agent. Or, to give another example, within NATO Headquarters, a German official by the name of Rainer Rupp (code name Topaz) in throughout the 1980s was able to transmit Top Secret NATO documents to East German intelligence (and, presumably, via East Berlin to Moscow).<sup>5</sup>

By the early 1980s, we had entered an era where at least in the West there was growing consensus not only in academia but also in government circles that Confidence and Security Building Measures – an outcome of the Helsinki Process, or the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe – were vital to prevent accidents or miscalculations which might quite unintentionally lead to war with the Warsaw Pact. Ironically, thus, the existence of some of these spies was known by intelligence at least in some NATO member states, and instead of coming

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<sup>4</sup> John Herz: 'Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma', *World Politics* Vol. 2, No. 2 (1950), p. 157.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin B. Fischer: 'The 1980s Soviet War Scare: New Evidence from East German Archives', *Intelligence and National Security* Vol. 14, No. 3 (1999), pp. 186–197; on the role of East German intelligence in this context, see also Bernd Schaefer, Nate Jones, Benjamin B. Fischer: 'Forecasting Nuclear War: Stasi/KGB Intelligence Cooperation under Project RYaN' online at the Nuclear Proliferation International History Project, Wilson Center (November, 2014), see <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/forecasting-nuclear-war> (accessed on 24 IX 2016).

down on them at the time, it was apparently decided to leave them in place to allow the East to see that the West was not posing a military threat and was indeed preparing only its own defence against attacks.<sup>6</sup>

### **Controlled and Uncontrolled Messaging**

Here was the logic: Top Secret documents in NATO leaked through such spies to the intelligence gatherers of the WTO member states were thought in the West to have more credence in the East than public communiqués. Or, as one former senior British civil servant with a career in the defence and intelligence sector put it to me: ‘We assumed they [leaders of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact] had almost real-time intelligence of what we were doing.’ This, it was thought in the West, would avoid misunderstandings of Western intentions; surely, Moscow must know that these ruled out any attack on WTO territory, and anything that might risk initiating World War III.

There were two problems with this. One was that the Western counter-intelligence organisations did not necessarily know about all Eastern agents working in the West. The other was that they did not know all material that was passed to the East, or with what accompanying interpretation it might be presented either by the agents, or by the analysts in East Berlin or Moscow. Perhaps only parts of documents were passed on, out of context. Or documents were interpreted in ways Westerners did not imagine, notwithstanding the extensive knowledge they thought they had of how the Soviet (and East German) minds worked.<sup>7</sup>

### **Military Exercises**

Serious problems, it seems, arose from mutual misunderstandings in two contexts: one, interpretations put on the motivations whenever new (especially nuclear) weapons systems were deployed; and two, the contexts of military exercises. The latter were not unconnected to the former, of course, as exercises would be adapted to new weapons systems.

Military exercises serve a variety of purposes: to deter attack by signalling to an adversary that one is not a push-over and that an attack might well not succeed; to reassure one’s own side in the same way; to train the use of equipment; to train standard operational procedures; to train adaptation to unforeseen situations; and many things besides. For this reason, both NATO and the WTO, and individual member-states of both alliances, singly or jointly with neighbours, staged exercises throughout the Cold War on various levels, from small-unit or tactical exercises up to exercises involving tens of thousands of military personnel. The largest of these, on NATO’s side, in the 1980s were the annual AUTUMN FORGE exercises. In fact, AUTUMN FORGE was the capstone name for a cluster of exercises ranging from large-scale troop exercises (the largest of which was REFORGER) to exercises by local smaller formations and small command-post exercises. On the side of the WTO, the largest exercises were not that regular. They included SOJUS 81 (March-April 1981), and SOJUS 83 (end May-beginning of June 1983).

Not necessarily involving many servicemen and –women, but of considerable political importance were command post exercises that might involve civil staff officers and servants at the highest levels, and sometimes even active politicians. For example, the AUTUMN FORGE

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<sup>6</sup> Vojtech Mastny, Sven G. Holtsmark, Andreas Wenger (eds): *War plans and alliances in the Cold War: threat perceptions in the East and West* (London : Routledge, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Len Scott: ‘Intelligence and the Risk of Nuclear War: Able Archer-83 Revisited’, *Intelligence and National Security* Vol. 26 No. 6 (2011), pp. 759–777.

series contained an annual small command-post exercise named ABLE ARCHER. This was designed to rehearse procedures for consultation and action in case nuclear release became an issue in an escalating war resulting from a WTO attack that could not be contained by conventional forces. Much more important from the point of view of intra-alliance politics was NATO's biennial WINTEX series, in which select local governments in NATO member states were involved and parts of government up to the highest national level, and beyond, to the North Atlantic Council. Occasionally, during parts of such exercises, real politicians would join in.<sup>8</sup> Again, through the involvement of extensive numbers of people, despite the ubiquitous labels marking out these exercises Top Secret, the assumption was that the scenario (*always* involving an attack by the WTO and *always* ending with nuclear use and an armistice, never involving transgression by NATO forces onto WTO member state territory) evolution of the exercise was communicated to Moscow. Western planners felt confident that Moscow could not misunderstand Western intentions, which, simply put, were to deter any attack, by signalling that the West would defend itself, and if necessary use nuclear weapons rather than surrender.

### The last Peak of the Cold War

Nevertheless, leading WTO military figures were genuinely concerned about Western intentions, and their concerns focused on two issues. One was the modernisation of NATO's nuclear weapons that were stationed in Europe in late 1983 after heated debates in the preceding years. Ironically, this stationing of the 'Euromissiles'<sup>9</sup> was seen by NATO leaders partly as an attempt to offset Soviet SS-20 («Пионер») missiles that had been deployed from 1980, with a view to persuading the USSR to agree either not to deploy the SS20 in return for NATO ministers cancelling the Euromissile deployment, or for both sides to their respective missiles, the SS-20, and NATO's Euromissiles (the so-called 'dual track decision' of NATO ministers on 13 December 1979).<sup>10</sup> Also ironically, between 1979 and 1983, while agreeing to deploy the new 572 Euromissiles (with one warhead each), NATO ministers also decided to scrap 1400 other nuclear warheads, and overall net reductions of what was referred to as (European) Theatre Nuclear Forces (i.e. nuclear weapons that would be launched from Europe).

The story of the last peak of the Cold War, the period from December 1979 until Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachëv came to power in 1985, is sufficiently well known for us not to have to go through all its details, phases, and events here.<sup>11</sup> The period of détente which had allowed the conclusion of the second Strategic Arms Limitation Talks with the SALT II agreement had come to an end, which can be measured by non-ratification of this agreement. The West was highly perturbed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which to some Western observers seemed like a first step of Soviet expansionism in the area, coinciding worryingly with the Islamic Revolution in Iran the stabilisation of which into a new state was not yet certain. Would the USSR intervene, and more successfully than the US? Would the USSR try to seize control of Middle Eastern oil-rich states?

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<sup>8</sup> The British documentation on these exercises, for example WINTEX [19]83 is now freely available for anybody to consult, under the 30-years' rule, in the British National Archives, see e.g. CAB 130/1249.

<sup>9</sup> These consisted of Cruise Missiles and Pershing II ballistic missiles.

<sup>10</sup> See the NATO communiqués of December 1979 [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_27042.htm?selectedLocale=en](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_27042.htm?selectedLocale=en) and December 1980 [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_23047.htm?selectedLocale=en](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_23047.htm?selectedLocale=en) accessed on 18 IX 2016.

<sup>11</sup> For studies of this period from several angles, see Leopoldo Nuti (ed): *The Crisis of Détente in Europe: From Helsinki to Gorbachev, 1975-1985* (London: Routledge, 2008).

In January 1981 Ronald Reagan became the new President of the USA. His personal style made Moscow very uneasy – he spoke of the USSR as ‘an evil force’ and in his first State of the Union speech announced a programme for a military build-up. Relations between East and West became increasingly tense.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it seems that Soviet (and East German) military leaders took the possibility seriously that NATO might be using these new Euromissiles missiles to stage a surprise attack on WTO territory, possibly in the context of an exercise, as we shall see. Initially, as the dual track decision had aimed at, arms control negotiations got under way between NATO and the USSR to stop the Euromissile deployment and to withdraw the Soviet SS20s. But East-West relations continued to deteriorate, and both sides vilified each other in public statements. Reagan called the USSR an ‘empire of evil’, Soviet spokesmen talked about the ‘madness’ and ‘criminality’ of Reagan and his advisers. The peace movements that had sprung up on several West European countries in the 1950s and after a lull from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, i.e. during the period of détente, had become very active again in their antagonism to the Euromissile deployment and joined in the chorus of recriminations on the Soviet side, out of the sincere conviction that the situation could degenerate into a world-ending war, no doubt, but also supported by funding from the Eastern Bloc. In general, they seemed surprisingly unconcerned about Soviet missiles stationed in Eastern Europe.<sup>13</sup>

Arms control talks to eliminate the missiles on both sides broke down in 1983, and the Euromissiles were actually deployed from December that year. It was only from March 1984, when British intelligence alerted the British government to this, and the British government in turn took up the matter with the US Administration, that London and Washington gradually ceased to dismiss all they heard from the Soviet leaders and media as mere propaganda. The British and American governments began to take seriously the possibility that some Soviet leaders – mainly the military – were genuinely worried about a surprise attack by NATO.<sup>14</sup> They had previously dismissed all signs of such Soviet concerns as routine propaganda battles consistent with the long-standing struggle between Communism and Western Liberal Democracy to win international public opinion over to their side.

Yet according to retrospective US intelligence assessments, the world came close to nuclear war when certain men in the Soviet military command chain wondered, in November 1983, whether the command-post exercise ABLE ARCHER, as in previous years a small part of the larger AUTUMN FORGE exercise actually constituted a disguise for a surprise nuclear attack by NATO on the Warsaw Pact.<sup>15</sup> The evidence for this is that parts of the WTO’s military apparatus went

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<sup>12</sup> Beth A. Fischer: *The Reagan Reversal of Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Michael Ploetz: *Ferngelenkte Friedensbewegung? DDR und UdSSR im Kampf gegen den NATO-Doppelbeschluss* (Münster: LIT-Verlag, 2004)

<sup>14</sup> <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb533-The-Able-Archer-War-Scare-Declassified-PFIAB-Report-Released/> accessed on 18 IX 2016. For studies of intelligence failure during this period, see also Don Oberdorfer: *The Turn: from the Cold War to a New Era – the US and the Soviet Union, 1983-1990* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1991); Peter Vincent: *War Scare: Russia and America on the Nuclear Brink* (Westport, Ct.: Praeger, 1999); John Prados: ‘The War Scare of 1983’, in: Robert Cowley (ed.): *The Cold War: A Military History* (New York: Random House, 2005), pp. 438-454.

<sup>15</sup> See Able Archer Sourcebook, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nukevault/ablearcher/>. For perhaps the best summary of the state of research on this issue, see Klaas Voß: ‘Die Enden der Parabel Die Nuklearwaffenübung »Able Archer« im Krisenjahr 1983’, Special Issue of *Mittelweg* No. 36 (HIS, Dec. 2014/Jan. 2015), pp. 73-92.



onto alert, but in the end actual war by misunderstanding was averted.<sup>16</sup> But even if war was averted, the shocking fact remains – and this is the central point made by this article – that misunderstandings could ever allow a misperceptions to arise that *might* have led to war, despite all the mutual knowledge, analysis, espionage and other forms of communication.

It cannot be stressed enough how much of a surprise this was to the British and American security communities. Already in 1949 the governments represented in NATO had agreed that the only purposes of NATO strategy could be to deter an attack by the Soviet Union and its satellite states, or to defend NATO, should such an attack occur after all.<sup>17</sup> The peace movements if anything testified to the fact that the very idea of a NATO attack on the WTO was utterly incompatible with Western values and indeed Western fears of nuclear war.<sup>18</sup> It seems that the West- and America-experts in the USSR and leading Soviet diplomats understood this, but they were clearly not believed by leading military figures.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, unlike WINTEX, ABLE ARCHER was not an exercise that left any room for play-acting and actual decisions to be discussed or made. It was a mere procedural exercise in which participants (re-)acquainted themselves with NATO procedures for consultation and decision-making and ultimately for the readying and release of nuclear weapons. Indeed, East German military intelligence was quite aware of this, and reported calmly:

Today is the beginning of the strategic C[ommand] P[ost] E[xercise] of NATO Supreme Command Europe ABLE ARCHER 83. ... The CPE constitutes the end of the NATO autumn exercise series AUTUMN FORGE 83 and serves to train the leading commanders and staffs in matters of planning, organisation, and execution of operations with selective and massive nuclear use.

While East German military intelligence did remark that launch of Euromissiles were integrated into the exercise, the tenor of the reporting throughout the exercise shows no sign that German observers spotted anything unusual or worrying.<sup>20</sup> At most, some new patterns of communications were trained and exercised for the first time during Able Archer 83.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, given that the Euromissile deployment only began *after* the ABLE ARCHER exercise of November 1983, it made no sense to fear that the exercise could involve the launching of these missiles.

### **The Role of Military and Command Post Exercises**

In the following, I shall furnish evidence of what important role exercises played in this dangerous period, for it was not only ABLE ARCHER that leant itself to misunderstanding, it seems, despite the confidence both sides had in knowing so much about one another. The

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<sup>16</sup> 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* Vol. 7 (2011), pp. 253–274,

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.nato.int/docu/stratdoc/eng/a491019a.pdf>, accessed on 18 IX 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Philip Sabin: *The Third World War Scare in Britain: A Critical Analysis* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986).

<sup>19</sup> On the hawks and doves in Moscow, see Beatrice Heuser: 'The Soviet response to the Euromissile crisis, 1982-83', in Nuti (ed): *The Crisis of Détente in Europe*, pp. 137-149.

<sup>20</sup> Germany, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg (henceforth BAMA), DVW 1/32672/b Aufklärungsmeldungen der NVA (Vertrauliche Verschlusssachen VVS)

<sup>21</sup> Nate Jones: 'The Vicious Circle of Intelligence', in Schaefer, Jones & Fischer: 'Forecasting Nuclear War', [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/forecasting-nuclear-war#\\_ftn29](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/forecasting-nuclear-war#_ftn29) (accessed on 24 IX 2016).



following examples are drawn from Top Secret speeches made at meetings of various bodies of the WTO at the time, all of which point to NATO's exercises as having been extremely worrying to WTO military leaders. This particular quality of the documents – which were *not* made for a large public or for propaganda purposes – suggests that these were sincerely held beliefs, at the highest level of WTO military, and must therefore be taken more seriously than anything designed for public consumption in the propaganda battles of the Cold War.

After Ronald Reagan had assumed the US Presidency, Army General Anatoly Ivanovich Gribkov, Chief of Staff of the Soviet Army, told his colleagues on the Military Council of the WTO 'that the military political situation in the world is characterised by increasing aggressiveness of the political course set by the new US government und the NATO leadership.' Gribkov spoke of an 'increase in the preparations for war and especially in the arms race' on the part of the 'American and NATO leaderships'.<sup>22</sup> He pointed particularly to the NATO exercises WINTEX and AUTUMN FORGE as evidence for this. At the same meeting, Marshal Viktor Georgiyevich Kulikov, commander-in-chief of the WTO (1977-1989) spoke particularly about

[T]he growing aggressiveness of the Bundeswehr, the main striking force of NATO. Marshal of the Soviet Union Moskalenko underlined that the USSR had been taken by surprise in 1941 by the Fascist Army, because it had not estimated the enemy correctly. Therefore it was necessary to intensify intelligence efforts and not to admit an underestimation of the Bundeswehr.<sup>23</sup>

This is one of many references we find to the Soviet trauma of 1941, the surprise attack by the USSR's ally of 1939, Germany. This trauma was thus strongly present in these key Soviet military leaders' interpretation of their NATO adversaries' actions, but had nothing to do with what NATO actually did or said. In September 1982, the Chiefs of the General Staffs of the Armed Forces of the members of the WTO met in Minsk under the chairmanship of the Chief of Staff of the Soviet Armed Forces, and First Deputy Minister of Defence of the USSR, Marshall Nikolai Vasilyevich Ogarkov.<sup>24</sup> Ogarkov again echoed the trauma of 1941:

The international situation is currently very serious and extremely complicated. It is only comparable with the situation in the 1930s, shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War. The beginning of the Reagan Presidency calls to mind the Fascist seizure of power. ... The Reagan Administration has openly started to prepare for war. ... Figuratively spoken, the USA have already declared war on us, the Soviet Union and some other states of the Warsaw Treaty. In different areas, we are already fighting. ... One must not overlook the currently existing danger of war. ... The current danger of war is as great as never before because the leading circles of Imperialism are unpredictable. Many do not want to understand this. In 1941, too, there were not a few who warned of the war, and many who did not believe in a war. Because the danger of war was not realistically estimated, we had to make many sacrifices.<sup>25</sup>

11-13 January 1983: WTO defence ministers meeting in Prague; Kulikov, addressing the meeting, sounded shriller. He concluded from NATO's military measures

that the state of NATO's armed forces, their education, the extension of the theatres of war will allow the leaders of the [NATO] Bloc to initiate an attack against the member states of the Warsaw Treaty practically without carrying out major preparatory

<sup>22</sup> BAMA, DVW 1/71086, 23rd meeting of the Military Council of the WTO in Sofia, 21-23 April 1981, p. 18f.

<sup>23</sup> BAMA, DVW 1/71086, 23rd Meeting of the Military Council, pp. 40-45.

<sup>24</sup> BAMA, DVW 1/114494,

<sup>25</sup> BAMA, DVW 1/114494, pp. 119f, 122.

measures, *under the cloak of large-scale exercises which are conducted annually to work through different variants of the initiation and conduct of war* [my Italics].

The war strength of NATO will increase in the coming years. This is witnessed by the increase in military budgets and the extent of preparations for war.<sup>26</sup>

The ministers concluded that counter-measures were required to restore the military balance, and that these should take the form of new deployments of Soviet INF.<sup>27</sup>

In 23 March 1983, President Ronald Reagan publicises plans for a Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), or Star Wars, which conveyed the impression to the Moscow hawks that this, again, was a measure which would facilitate a surprise attack on the USSR. From 30 May to 9 June 1983, the joint WTO SOYUZ-83 exercise took place that had as its scenario the occupation of Denmark, the FRG, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France by the 35th–40th day of the war. Unlike NATO, where the restoration of the status quo ante and the establishment of an armistice was the only agreed exercise aim, the WTO had no qualms about stating as war aims the occupation of the territory of the opposing camp. In this context Marshal Kulikov stressed the need for a standing-start capacity to answer NATO aggression, without a period of mobilization, as had previously been planned.<sup>28</sup>

American-led naval exercise in the Pacific and Far East in the spring and summer of 1983 (FLEETEX 83, and GLOBAL SHIELD 83) were designed to signal US strength to the Soviet leaders, and clearly made some extremely nervous. The KAL 007 incident of 31 August/1 September 1983 must be seen in this context: a Korean airliner with 269 passengers plus crew that strayed into Soviet air space was shot down by Soviet air defences.<sup>29</sup>

On 8 September US Secretary of State met his Soviet counterpart, Andrei Andreyevich Gromyko, in Madrid, a tense, unfriendly meeting, in which both sides threatened to walk out on each other. Gromyko, who had occupied the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs in the USSR since 1957 and had lived through the ups and downs of East-West relations, told Schultz that the global situation was 'now slipping toward a very dangerous precipice' and warned of a nuclear catastrophe, which both countries should work together to avoid.<sup>30</sup>

What was said behind closed doors in confidential, secret and top secret meetings resonated in the public perceptions. In 1983, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty conducted a survey among Soviet citizens travelling to the West, with the question asked: 'There has been a lot written recently in both East and West on the danger of nuclear war. Do you feel that the danger of war is greater now than a few years ago?' to which the replies of 1,928 respondents broke down as follows for 1983 overall:

Greater danger now: 56 %

No greater danger: 20 %

Don't know: 24 %

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<sup>26</sup> BAMA, DVW 1/71040, Kulikov Speech Jan. 1983, p.242.

<sup>27</sup> BAMA, DVW 1/71040, conclusions.

<sup>28</sup> BAMA, DVH 7/45650, pp. 109-148 „Auswertung der gemeinsamen operativ-strategischen KSÜ SOJUS-83' of 30 May-9 June 1983.

<sup>29</sup> Seymour M. Hersh: *The Target Is Destroyed: What Really Happened to Flight 007 and What America Knew About It* (New York: Random House, 1986).

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Oberdorfer: *The Turn*, p.61.

During September to November 1983, the percentage of replies professing greater fear of nuclear war (with 522 respondents) rose to 66 %.<sup>31</sup> And in September 1983, leading scientists from the USA and the USSR felt sufficiently worried to talk to each other, on a satellite-transmitted TV show, to express to a larger public on both continents their fears of nuclear war and its consequences.<sup>32</sup>

A special meeting of the Military council of the WTO was summoned by Kulikov in Berlin for 20 October 1983 to discuss the imminent Euromissile deployment further. There the decision was taken, 'in the interest of peace and security, to use all available means to prevent the [achievement] of military superiority by NATO.' This decision was endorsed by the regular Military Council meeting at Lvov, in the days of 26-29 October 1983.<sup>33</sup> Again, Kulikov drew attention to the growing threat of war emanating from NATO. At this meeting the GDR representative, General F. Streletz, said:

It is becoming ever more apparent that the most aggressive imperialist circles of the USA and NATO are escalating their peace-endangering course ever more dangerously. They are pushing up the spiral of armament up and up, are beginning the planned deployment of the nuclear first-strike weapons agreed by NATO in Brussels, ... This ever-sharper course of aggression is particularly apparent in the large-scale exercises of NATO's armed forces in this year's AUTUMN FORGE exercise series, which includes the practice of a limited nuclear war in Europe. It is apparent to all the world that the Reagan Administration is clinging to the policy of changing the near-equilibrium of the militaries [of East and West].<sup>34</sup>

In keeping with this assessment, AUTUMN FORGE and its component exercises were watched with great attention, and that there was great nervousness among the Soviet leadership and its intelligence gatherers. More still, as noted above, that they were close to putting their own country on war footing in something that might have become World War III by misunderstanding.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusions

Quoting these comments gleaned from Top Secret WTO documents is not to suggest that the exercises conducted by both sides were *the* most important or main cause of the deterioration of East-West relations in the early 1980s, after a better period of détente. My intention is, however, to draw attention to the importance of exercises in the context of tense inter-state relations, and to show how they can lend themselves to misinterpretations. This was clearly the case in the early 1980s, even though NATO and the WTO largely played by the rules that had wisely been established by the Conference of Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), which included notifying each other in advance of planned exercises and their scope, if more than 9000 service personnel were to participate.

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<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Tague: 'Soviet War Propaganda Generates Fear among the Population', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Paper* 61/84 (6 Feb. 1984), p.7.

<sup>32</sup> Spacebridge: 'World after Nuclear War, 1983', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVU0dpoDOb8> (accessed on 24 IX 2016).

<sup>33</sup> BAMA, DVW 1/71091, Protocoll of the 28th Meeting of the Military Council of the WTO at Lvov, 26-29 Oct. 1983, p.2.

<sup>34</sup> BAMA, DVW 1/71091, esp. pp. 51, 70, 73f.

<sup>35</sup> For some interviews with eyewitnesses on the Soviet side, see the TV documentary 'The Brink of Apocalypse' (Discovery Channel/Channel 4, 2007/2008)

Indeed, Dima Adamsky has shown very convincingly that while NATO's exercises aimed at deterrence, there comes a point when measures adopted to deter an adversary assume so threatening a guise that they can be seen as threatening. He has thus transposed the classic 'security dilemma' into the subject area of military exercises, talking about a 'tipping point' that may be difficult to pinpoint, but that should be kept in mind by exercise planners.<sup>36</sup>

We began with noting that leading Western officials assumed that the USSR/WTO had 'virtually real time intelligence' about NATO exercises. That can largely be confirmed from the documents. Nevertheless, this mass of information comprehensively passed to the East was still thoroughly misunderstood by key Soviet/WTO military leaders. Whether or not the NATO Command Staff Exercise ABLE ARCHER 83 nearly led to nuclear war, this is a dramatic lesson in communication failure which should make us very much less optimistic about our ability to communicate with each other. It is a warning that we should be careful not to turn deterrent measures – including military exercises – into something that might result in grave misperceptions and accidents.

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<sup>36</sup> Dimitry Adamsky: 'The 1983 Nuclear Crisis – Lessons for Deterrence Theory and Practice' in *Journal of Strategic Studies* Vol. 36 No. 1 (2013), pp. 4-41.