

War Scares and (Nearly) the End of the World: The Euromissiles Crisis of 1977–1987

Written by Joshua Woodyatt

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According to historian Randolph Starn, “[t]he word [crisis] comes from the Greek *κρίσις*...meaning discrimination or decision. This was how Thucydides received it.”[1] It is this basic meaning, of crises fundamentally comprising of decisions,[2] that is reflected in the last great nuclear contest of the Cold War: the Euromissiles Crisis of 1977-1987. The Euromissiles Crisis took place within the bipolar superpower conflict of the Cold War, staged between the competing ideologies of capitalism and communism, and their respective proponents: the USA and the USSR. Locked in a constant struggle for ideational and military (particularly nuclear) supremacy, their rivalry first came to a head during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, where increasingly escalatory missile deployments nearly resulted in nuclear war. Having learned from this experience, the two superpowers concluded a series of agreements aiming to preclude future crises, agreeing to outlaw nuclear testing (1963 Nuclear Test Ban Treaty), proliferation (1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty), and even specific weapons systems (with the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and Strategic Arms Limitation Talks [SALT 1] of 1972). The relative calm that followed – dubbed ‘détente’ – continued for almost a decade, however underlying tensions soon resurfaced, and the Euromissiles Crisis marked the decline into nuclear brinkmanship once more.

Commentators such as Gordon Barass contend that the USSR was largely to blame for the crisis, as their 1977 decision to deploy SS-20 missile systems in European Russia arguably triggered the series of escalations that would envelop Europe in crisis over the next decade.[3] This essay will contend, however, that while Soviet deployments did compromise Europe’s strategic balance, the ‘dual-track’ decision taken by NATO in 1979 was responsible for exacerbating these initial tensions to crisis point. Furthermore, their rhetoric and policy, coupled with the ill-considered decision to conduct the ‘Able Archer 83’ joint exercise catalysed the ensuing ‘war scare’ of 1983. Only through the mitigating influences of widespread European peace movements, and an eventual change in Soviet leadership and policy, could the crisis eventually be defused. This not only resulted in a new round of preventative arms control treaties, but also generated the popular momentum that would precipitate the revolutions of 1989 and the subsequent end of the Cold War.

The Crisis Begins – Soviet Missiles in Europe

The Euromissiles Crisis is widely considered to have begun in late 1977, with the decision of the USSR to begin deployment of SS-20 missiles in European Russia. From a Soviet perspective, this was merely routine maintenance; existing SS-4 and SS-5 systems were ageing and increasingly obsolete, and the replacement SS-20 systems would enable the realisation of their long held desire for European escalation dominance.[4] The projected result of this dominance would be an American withdrawal from European affairs, deeming intervention on the continent too great a risk to take in the face of the new missiles.[5] The practical effect of the deployment, however, was exactly the opposite. Rather than ensuring European peace by rendering NATO threats obsolete, and war therefore impossible, the direct consequence of the deployments was the creation of a new nuclear crisis in Europe. This was down to two main factors.

Firstly, European leaders were alarmed at the imbalance created in the regional security dynamic, and feared the implications of Soviet escalation dominance along the Iron Curtain. This fear was highest in the Federal Republic of

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Germany (FRG),[6] who had experienced Soviet expansionism during the Berlin Blockade of 1948-1949, and feared new attempts to forcibly resolve the 'German question' or the status of Berlin. Predictably, therefore, the eminent Western European NATO powers of France and the United Kingdom (UK), were galvanised by the FRG into reaction, with Chancellor Helmut Schmidt's 1977 speech to the International Institute for Strategic Studies prompting the quadripartite Guadeloupe Conference of 1979. [7]

The second consequence of the deployments came as a direct result of this European unrest, in that the US were compelled into intervening on behalf of their NATO allies in order to steady the security imbalance that had been created. According to a 1979 State Department memorandum: "The principal concern in the Alliance is that the existing 'gap' in NATO's theatre nuclear capabilities could expose Europe to nuclear intimidation by the Soviets during a crisis." [8]

These concerns were put to US President Jimmy Carter by the West German, British, and French leadership at the Guadeloupe Conference, with their emphasis upon theatre nuclear force (TNF) modernization in response to the SS-20s coalescing into the NATO 'dual-track' decision of December 12th, 1979.[9] Named for the parallel 'tracks' of renewed negotiation coupled with counter-deployments, it was this decision that would ultimately escalate the situation in Europe into a crisis. The 1977 SS-20 deployment, therefore, was an ill-considered decision that catalysed the breakdown of the European strategic balance. Dispelling any 'peace-loving' notions[10] of the USSR by foregoing potential use of the SS-20 as a negotiation tool, and definitively ending détente in the process, the deployment set the scene for the decade of crisis to follow.

The NATO Response

While it is true that the Soviet deployments frayed the strategic balance of Europe, it was NATO's response to these that ultimately escalated the situation into a crisis. This response – the so-called 'dual-track' decision, involving NATO deployment of US intermediate range missiles concurrently with renewed negotiations – was fundamentally flawed, and lay the groundwork for the 1983 'war scare' to follow.

Firstly, the counter-deployment 'track' of the decision only served to provoke conflict between East and West, escalating tensions towards an arms race. While some would contend that the US, at their Allies' behest, had little choice but to parry the Soviet missiles with TNFs of their own, this was not necessarily the case. The FRG was at the forefront of NATO, yet domestic pressure against deployment meant that Chancellor Schmidt saw it as a last resort, favouring negotiation.[11] President Carter, however, firmly believed that counter-deployment was the only viable solution, and this steadfast belief committed NATO to the unwise course of deployment.[12] Soviet leadership saw the proposed missiles – the Pershing II (PII), and the 'Gryphon' Ground Launched Cruise Missile (GLCM) – as a serious threat, and were particularly concerned by the new systems' capacity to hit European Russian targets in five to six minutes.[13] The impunity with which America could act, free from Soviet detection and retaliation, seemed to many in Soviet high command as further incentive for the US to use their TNF systems.

The second 'track' of the NATO decision involved a new round of arms control negotiations with the USSR, using the new American systems as leverage in an effort to reduce intermediate range systems in Europe. While this was a noble idea, it was flawed in practice, and provided a poor check on the arms race that had been created by the deployment 'track.' European pressure on the US to maintain a credible deterrent ran directly against the stated aim of disarmament, and although this 'track' was initially proposed in the hope that SALT III negotiations could take place, it became increasingly apparent after 1979 that no resolution would be found. Not only was NATO insistent on their deterrent capability, but the USSR categorically opposed a "zero option" – US agreement not to deploy PIIs and GLCMs if the USSR removed its European SS-20 presence – since it was perceived that NATO were giving up nothing, yet the USSR was losing out.[14] The Soviets also felt that SS-20 deployments were merely routine, and would not back down from what were simply scheduled upgrades of existing systems. As a result of this inability to find a compromise, any hope of resurrecting détente were lost. With the deployment impasse that had developed between the USSR and NATO, the only practical outcome of the decision was the 'track' of counter-deployment, and this took the strategic environment to crisis point, and a vastly higher possibility of nuclear war than if NATO had done nothing at all.

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The Crisis Itself – The 1983 Able Archer ‘War Scare’

The escalation that came with the ‘dual-track’ decision reached its height during the ‘war-scare’ of 1983. While some hold that a scare only existed due to Soviet hypersensitivity, this was realistically a phenomenon created by the combination of American aggression, and the NATO decision to stage the ‘Able Archer 83’ joint exercise of November 7th-11th.

The critical factor responsible for creating the Able Archer ‘war scare’ was undoubtedly the amplified rhetoric and policy of the newly elected Reagan government. Voted in ahead of one of the architects of ‘dual-track,’ President Carter, Reagan’s presidency (1981-1988) espoused anticommunism and confrontational foreign policy, posing both direct and indirect challenges to the USSR. Shedding ‘containment’ tradition, his support for anticommunist guerrilla forces (including the Carter-era support for the insurgent *Mujahideen* in the Soviet-Afghan War)[15] and reaffirmed commitment to scheduled Euromissile deployment inflamed the already terse European strategic situation. His aggressive stance was summated in a speech before the British House of Commons in 1982, where he stated that:

“freedom and democracy...will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash heap of history as it has left other tyrannies which stifle...freedom...that’s why we must continue our efforts to strengthen NATO...[o]ur military strength is a prerequisite to peace.”[16]

It was unsurprisingly the result of scare tactics such as these that the Soviet Union, fearful of the prospect of NATO engaging its European missile systems, commenced Operation RYaN (*‘Raketo-Yadernoe Napadenie’* or ‘nuclear missile attack’). Established by then-KGB director Yuri Andropov in 1981, its purpose was to root out NATO/US first strike plans, reflecting the fear evident in Soviet Government circles that would play directly into the ‘war scare’ of 1983.[17]

With the USSR in a state of high alert, and poised to counter any NATO strike at a moment’s notice, any perceived threat could have potentially triggered nuclear war. To this end, it was the NATO ‘Able Archer 83’ exercises of November that can be said to have transformed the situation from a strategic crisis to a fully-fledged war scare. Tensions were high within the Soviet defense apparatus, exemplified by the downing of Korean Air flight 007 by a Soviet ‘Flagon’ interceptor on May 30th, after it mistakenly strayed over the Sakhalin Island Military base. While this incident was undeniably the fault of the USSR, it should have signalled to NATO and the US that the Soviets were on edge, and that any potential threat would be fully and unflinchingly acted upon.[18] Set against this clear and present tension, the decision to carry out a joint exercise involving all NATO member states, including state leadership, could conceivably have led to full-scale nuclear war. While ‘Able Archer 83’ stopped short of actual troop deployments or missile preparation, it simulated all of the command and control structures of NATO in a first-strike situation.[19] Previous joint exercises were well known to the USSR, however key differences, and a lack of NATO-USSR communication saw them receive the 1983 exercise as a potential threat of war. Firstly, the NATO strike capacities enabled by the new Pershing II and GLCM systems gave the USSR a mere six minutes[20] to respond to a potential strike, and secondly, NATO had recently changed their operating codes, which meant that the USSR wouldn’t be able to distinguish between an exercise and a strike.[21] While nothing came of the ‘Able Archer 83’ exercise, as the USSR decided against retaliating to what was likely an exercise, it was later recognised by the British Government (and, independently, by the Governments of other NATO member states), that: “We should consider what could be done to remove the danger that, by mis-calculating Western intentions, the Soviet Union would over-react.”[22]

The Able Archer ‘war scare’ of 1983 was, therefore, the foreseeable consequence of the aggressive stances and ill-considered actions taken by both the US and their NATO allies. In this episode it had become clear that the Euromissiles Crisis had gone past the point of resolution, and it would transpire that only extenuating outside influences could resolve the situation.

Resolving the Crisis

With the acceleration of the Euromissiles Crisis from 1977 towards potential nuclear war in 1983, it became evident that neither NATO nor the USSR was realistically able to halt the spiraling political and military situation. Both before

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and during the crisis, European peace movements effectively opposed greater missile deployments, however it was only with the 1985 change in Soviet leadership that a lasting resolution to a decade of Euromissile tension could be found.

Growing out of the anti-nuclear movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the impact of peaceful protest on the decisions NATO took during the crisis was profound. Their first major success, in preventing the deployment of the US 'Neutron Bomb' in 1977, was demonstrative of the power of popular protest, as the pressure exerted on the 'capitalist weapon' (designed to destroy people, but leave property intact) forced Chancellor Schmidt to make a costly political backflip regarding deployment.[23] The announcement of 'dual-track' was met with equally substantial opposition, and the political ramifications of this pressure would contribute to Schmidt's ousting in the leadership spill of 1982. Although some would contend that these movements were controlled by the USSR in order to undermine the West, the extent of their influence was limited in reality, and theories to the contrary tend to overstate the influence of the organs of Soviet security in the West.[24] This is exemplified by one such organisation, the Dutch Interchurch Peace Council, which was instrumental in not only the Neutron Bomb movement, but also anti-Euromissile demonstrations such as the 400,000 strong protest against 'dual-track' in Amsterdam on November 21st, 1981.[25] While these protestors occasionally served Soviet deployment interests, however, they were in no way Soviet sponsored. Not only were they critical of rights abuses, such as the suppression of the Polish Solidarność movement, but they were also in regular contact with Eastern dissident groups, such as the East German League of Protestant Churches, which would later contribute to the popular uprisings of 1989.[26]

While the peace movements applied consistent pressure to European governments throughout the crisis, it was ultimately the 1985 appointment of Mikhail Gorbachev as Soviet General Secretary that would conclude the Euromissiles Crisis. Departing from the zero-sum realism of his predecessors (namely Yuri Andropov, and to a lesser extent Konstantin Chernenko), Gorbachev sought to repair the deep economic problems inherent in the Soviet system, in part by normalising relations with the West. While deeply unpopular with party hardliners, his policies of glasnost ('openness') and perestroika ('restructuring') sought to achieve this, starting with the suspension of SS-20 deployment on April 8th, 1985, and extending to talks in Geneva that November with Western leaders such as Reagan, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. Gorbachev summarised his goal in a public announcement on the eve of the second round of Geneva talks in 1986, calling for; "complete elimination of intermediate-range missiles of the USSR and the USA in the European zone...as a first step toward ridding the European continent of nuclear weapons." [27]

It was with this new spirit of cooperation between East and West that, after a final summit in Reykjavik in October of 1986, a conclusive agreement was reached to put an end to the crisis. The resultant Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty of December 8th, 1987, committed both sides to the elimination of the Euromissiles (codified in the INF as missiles with ranges between 500km and 5,500km),[28] and lay the framework for international disarmament and nuclear regulation that persists to this day.

Conclusion

The Euromissiles Crisis of 1977-1987 was the defining crisis of the late Cold War era. Begun by the USSR, in their ill-conceived SS-20 deployments of 1977, it was progressively accelerated by NATO in the course of their 'dual-track' decision, and reached its nadir during the Able Archer 'war scare' of 1983. If not for the mitigating influence of the European peace movements, and the eventual de-escalation at the hand of Mikhail Gorbachev after 1985, the prospect of nuclear superpower war might finally have been realised. While the Euromissiles are now confined to history, as relics of the Cold War era, their influence on the global political landscape was, and remains, hugely significant. Not only did the popular pressure generated in opposition to the missiles precipitate the Revolutions of 1989, and thereby the end of the European Cold War itself, but the conclusive INF Treaty continues to underpin the politics of international nuclear deterrence to this day, standing as a lasting testament to the triumph of rational decision making in times of crisis.

Notes

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- [1] Randolph Starn, "Historians and "Crisis"," *Past and Present* 52, no.1 (January 1st, 1971): 3, doi: 10.1093/past/52.1.3.
- [2] While it is acknowledged that competing scholarly definitions of 'crisis' exist, this essay will be oriented exclusively around the definition framed by Starn.
- [3] Gordon Barrass, "Able Archer 83: What were the Soviets Thinking?" *Survival* 58, no. 6 (November 21st, 2016): 11, doi: 10.1080/00396338.2016.1257176.
- [4] Gerhard Wettig, "The last Soviet offensive in the Cold War: emergence and development of the campaign against NATO euromissiles, 1979-1983," *Cold War History* 9, no.1 (February 27th, 2009): 83, doi: 10.1080/14682740802638640.
- [5] Ibid.
- [6] Ibid, 85.
- [7] Kristina Spohr Readman, "Conflict and Cooperation in Intra-Alliance Nuclear Politics," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 13, no. 2 (2011): 41, doi: 10.1162/JCWS_a_00137.
- [8] David C. Gompert, *US Department of State TNF Arms Control Objectives/Principles*, memorandum to persons from the NSC, DOD, JCS, ACDA, CIA, and EUR (US Department of State, April 5th, 1979), https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Euromissiles_Reader_PartII_Section%20B.pdf
- [9] Readman, "Conflict and Cooperation in Intra-Alliance Nuclear Politics," 42.
- [10] Wettig, "The last Soviet offensive in the Cold War," 83.
- [11] Readman, "Conflict and Cooperation in Intra-Alliance Nuclear Politics," 47.
- [12] Wettig, "The last Soviet offensive in the Cold War," 86.
- [13] Nate Jones, ed., *Able Archer 83: The Secret History of the NATO Exercise That Almost Triggered Nuclear War* (New York, The New Press, 2016), 60. <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=qNExDQAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>
- [14] Wettig, "The last Soviet offensive in the Cold War," 96.
- [15] Andrew E. Busch and Elizabeth Edwards Spalding, "1983: The 10-Year Anniversary Marks the Beginning of the End of the Cold War," *Policy Review* 66 (1993): 73, <https://search-proquest-com.virtual.anu.edu.au/docview/1300152539?accountid=8330>
- [16] "'The Evil Empire,' President Reagan's Speech to the House of Commons, June 8, 1982," mtholyoke.edu, accessed August 24th, 2017, <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/evilemp.htm>
- [17] Paul Dibb, "The nuclear war scare of 1983: How serious was it?" *Australian Strategic Policy Institute: Special Report* (2013): 4, https://nsarchive.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/sr56_nuclear_war_scare.pdf
- [18] Craig A. Morgan, "The Downing of Korean Air Lines Flight 007," *The Yale Journal of International Law* 11, no.1 (1985): 231, <http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1477&context=yjil>
- [19] Barrass, "Able Archer 83: What Were the Soviets Thinking?" 17.

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[20] Jones, *Able Archer 83: The Secret History of the NATO Exercise That Almost Triggered Nuclear War*, 60.

[21] Arnav Manchanda, “When truth is stranger than fiction: the Able Archer incident,” *Cold War History* 9, no.1 (2009): 122, doi: 10.1080/14682740802490315.

[22] Foreign and Commonwealth Office to Lord President’s Office, Ministry of Defence, Sir Robert Armstrong, and “C,” April 10th, 1984, in *British Documents Confirm UK Alerted US to Danger of Able Archer 83*, ed. Nate Jones, November 4th, 2013, <https://nsarchive.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/document-7.pdf>

[23] Ruud van Dijk, “Prelude to the Euromissile Crisis: The Neutron Bomb Affair, the Netherlands, and the “Defeat of the Strangeloves”,” *Nuclear Proliferation International History Project Working Paper 8*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (Washington DC, August 2015), https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/WP%238-The%20Neutron%20Bomb%20Affair%20%28FINAL%29_4.pdf

[24] Holger Nehring and Benjamin Ziemann, “Do all paths lead to Moscow? The NATO dual-track decision and the peace movement – a critique,” *Cold War History* 12, no.1 (November 4th, 2011): 5, doi: 10.1080/14682745.2011.625160.

[25] Benjamin Ziemann, “A Quantum of Solace? European Peace Movements during the Cold War and their Elective Affinities,” *Archiv Für Sozialgeschichte* 49, (2009): 365, <http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/74457/>

[26] Ibid, 366.

[27] Serge Schemann, “Gorbachev Offers to Scrap A-Arms Within 15 Years,” *The New York Times*, January 16th, 1986, <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/01/16/world/gorbachev-offers-to-scrap-a-arms-within-15-years.html?mcubz=1>

[28] Treaty Between The United States Of America And The Union Of Soviet Socialist Republics On The Elimination Of Their Intermediate-Range And Shorter-Range Missiles, opened for signature December 8th, 1987, entered into force June 1st, 1988.

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