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ABC Radio National: Torn Curtain - The Secret History of the Cold War: Episode 1 Transcript

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Tom Morton: Welcome to Hindsight on Radio National, and the first episode of our special series, Torn Curtain, The Secret History of the Cold War. Come with me for a moment to the Berlin Wall, on a crisp, chilly afternoon in the spring of 1990. The sound you're listening to is the sound of Turkish guest workers chipping bits off the wall with the hammers and chisels to sell to tourists.

When I heard that sound I was in Berlin for the ABC, to report on the first stirrings of German reunification. It suddenly struck me then that that clinking of the hammers and chisels was the sound of history itself tiptoeing through that everyday afternoon. Because the Berlin Wall was the most potent symbol of the cold war. It was ideology made visible in steel and concrete, and suddenly it was no more than a souvenir.

Fifteen years on from then, bulldozers and piledrivers have finished the work that those hammers and chisels started. The wall is no more, but the bitter ideological battles of the cold war still haunt our politics and our history like the aching of a phantom limb. So over the next few weeks here on Hindsight, we'll be shining a new light on some of those battles. A whole secret history has emerged from the shadows of the cold war. It's a history pieced together from the Soviet and eastern European archives, from declassified sources in the United States, and from the testimonies of cold war warriors on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Stay with us and you'll hear about Richard Nixon's secret nuclear alert in 1969 when he tried to convince the Soviets that he was about to drop the atomic bomb on North Vietnam. And you'll hear about the Australian physicist who stumbled into the murky world of spies and atomic diplomacy in the late 40s.

But today, in the first episode of Torn Curtain, the most terrifying secret of them all.

[From *The Day After*: … Wanna confirm, is this an exercise? ... Ronald Reagan: Let us pray for the salvation of all of those who live in that totalitarian darkness. … James Buchan: Every Soviet official one met was running around like a chicken without a head, talking in the most ghastly and dire terms of real hot war, of the fighting war, of nuclear war.]

Tom Morton: Conventional wisdom has it that the most dangerous moment of the cold war was the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, when the United States and the Soviet Union came within a hair's breadth of mutually assured Armageddon. But there was another, scarcely less perilous crisis, much closer to the present – the nuclear war we nearly had in 1983.

[From *The Day After*: ... Roger, copy. This is not an exercise! ... Roger, understand. Major Rheinhardt, we have a massive attack against the US at this time. ICBMs. Numerous ICBMs ...
Ronald Reagan: Let us be aware that while they preach the supremacy of the state, they are the focus of evil in the modern world...
James Buchan: ...they were extremely frightened of some kind of large military exercise by NATO in the autumn of '83...]

Tom Morton: Most Australians remember 1983 as the year we won the America's Cup. But as we were basking in the glow of victory and sleeping off our hangovers, half a world away in Europe the last great confrontation of the cold war was moving towards its climax.

Today we tell the extraordinary story of how that confrontation nearly ended in catastrophe. It's a story that was shrouded in secrecy at the time - known only to a handful of politicians, spies and military leaders in east and west.

Paul Dibb: There was a fear in Moscow that the NATO exercise Able Archer in November 1983, which was an exercise which escalated from a conventional conflict with the Soviet Union and Europe to simulated nuclear release; that this exercise was being used, if you like, as a cover for an actual nuclear attack.

[Oleg Gordievsky: The fact was that during the Able Archer, that period of autumn '83 – September, October, November – when the attitude of the Soviet leadership to that idea that America was preparing a sudden nuclear attack outside context of a conflict – that hysteria was very high. And so in a way we were very close to a nuclear conflict.]

Tom Morton: Oleg Gordievsky, the former chief of the KGB stationed in London. Gordievsky defected to Britain in the mid-1980s, but it was only

after the end of the cold war that he spoke publicly about what's come to be known as the 1983 war scare.

According to Gordievsky, the world came closer to the brink of the nuclear abyss in November 1983 than at any time since the Cuba crisis.

To understand just how we got to that point, we need to go back first to the early months of 1981. Ronald Reagan has just become president of the United States, and already he's calling for a crusade for freedom. Negotiation and dialogue with the Soviets are out. Confrontation is back; and détente is dead.

[Archived recording of Ronald Reagan: They're squealing like they're sitting on a sharp nail, simply because we, now, are showing the will that we're not going to let them get to the point of dominance where they can some day issue to the free world an ultimatum of 'surrender or die'. And they don't like that.]

Jack F Matlock Jr: You know, Reagan had looked at the détente period of the 1970s as having been a one-way street – to the Soviet advantage. And he felt he had to balance things a bit before he could go in to effective negotiation. He was feeling that the United States at that point was too week to negotiate directly at that time. It was significant to Reagan psychologically, because as long as he felt weak, he felt that he really was not strong enough to go to the negotiating table effectively.

Tom Morton: Jack F Matlock Jr, principal adviser to Ronald Reagan on the Soviet Union, and later, US ambassador to Moscow.

Jack F Matlock Jr: They were supporting insurgencies in Africa and Latin America; and then of course they had invaded Afghanistan. That was the big one, before Reagan came to office. And then when they deployed the SS20s, the intermediate range missiles in Europe, it tended to upset what had been declared as a balance before.

[Archive Recording: The American Defense Secretary Mr Weinberger, at his first news conference at the Pentagon, has sounded the bugle call this way: 'It is essential that we commence now, I think, on a very definite goal of substantially increasing the strength of America and out ability to respond to situations that may occur simultaneously in different parts of the world. And that's essentially what I have in mind when I say it's time to re-arm America.']

James Hershberg: Ronald Reagan promised to counter what he called the unilateral disarmament of America during the 1970s. So when Reagan came into office in early 1981, there was not only calls to build up military

forces, but also much more scepticism for his arms control and also a lot more loose talk on the part of some Reagan administration incoming officials about the possibility of fighting and even winning-or 'prevailing', in the terms of the military document that was released (leaked) to the press in 1982-prevailing in a nuclear war with the Soviet Union.

Tom Morton: James Hershberg, founding director of the cold war International History Project, and now associate professor at George Washington University.

One of Ronald Reagan's first actions as president was to bring in a massive boost in defence spending. The United States began the largest peacetime military build-up in its history. President Reagan and his key advisers argued that America was failing to keep pace with the Soviet Union.

[Archived Recording of Caspar Weinberger: One of our highest priorities has to be the modernisation of our strategic nuclear forces, and to restore our nuclear deterrents. For the deterrents to continue to be successful in the future, we have to work to offset the Soviet military build-up and restore the nuclear balance. I refer to them as these terrible equations that we have to work with and re-cast every day.]

Tom Morton: Caspar Weinberger, Ronald Reagan's first secretary of defence. Weinberger, and other key officials such as Richard Perle, argued that unless drastic action was taken, a window of vulnerability would open in the mid-1980s. At that point the Soviets would achieve overwhelming military superiority – a position of such strength that they could bring the United States to its knees.

[Archived recording of Caspar Weinberger: The United States must restore that nuclear dominance and if we fail to do so, the Soviet Union could, within a few years, be in a position to threaten us; blackmail our allies, or even launch a nuclear attack with the assurance that we would not be capable of responding in a way that would constitute effective deterrence. ... It's enough to make you wonder, sometimes, if you're on the right planet.]

Raymond Garthoff: The Soviet Union – Soviet leaders – had of course contributed to the fact that there would be a time of tension, but Reagan was also inclined, for political reasons – I'm not saying he didn't believe it – to overstate Soviet superiority.

Tom Morton: One man who spent a lot of the cold war studying the Soviet military is Raymond Garthoff. In the late 50s he worked for the CIA preparing national intelligence estimates-top-secret evaluations of

Soviet military strength. He was an adviser to President Kennedy during the Cuba crisis. So I asked Raymond Garthoff, was the doomsday scenario of Soviet military superiority, which Caspar Weinberger and Ronald Reagan talked about in the early 80s, a realistic one?

Raymond Garthoff: Well, you described it very well. It wasn't realistic at all. In fact the United States was moving forward with programs which greatly increased our own counterforce capability, and the Scowcroft Commission, by 1983, had also, even in the Reagan administration, had reached the conclusion that the so-called window of vulnerability wasn't there. And that it was clearly exaggerated with respect to the prognoses of Soviet superiority.

[Archived recording of Caspar Weinberger: Military strength is most successful if it's never used, and if we're to avoid that use of force, we have to be prepared to use it and use it successfully. And in doing so, we're confronted with an age-old and fundamental paradox: to ensure the peace we must be prepared for war...]

Tom Morton: Caspar Weinberger, speaking at the National Press Club in Canberra in 1982. Earlier that year, Weinberger had declared that the United States must be prepared to fight and win a nuclear war against the Soviets. But a top secret Defense Department document spelled out America's new nuclear policy:

Should deterrents fail and strategic nuclear war with the USSR occur, the United States must prevail and be able to force the Soviet Union to seek earliest termination of hostilities on terms favourable to the United States.

James Hershberg: There was talk about a nuclear warning shot, there was talk about a need to build civilian shelters for nuclear war – so in general all this rhetoric started heating up quite a bit, and there was also a much more gung-ho attitude in Washington about supporting anti-Soviet and anti-communist forces around the world. So in general, Moscow perceived accurately a more aggressive posture in Washington when Reagan came into office.

Tom Morton: Take the M out of M-A-D and let's all make a bomb. When the British pop group Heaven 17 wrote the chorus to that 1981 release, they didn't know that Caspar Weinberger would soon be following their advice. Weinberger revoked the doctrine of MAD-mutually assured destruction – a doctrine which had kept the nuclear peace for a generation.

Raymond Garthoff: Military establishments are always inclined to see an objective victory if war should come. But to treat it in the way that many figures in the Reagan administration, and particularly Cap Weinberger,

did, was clearly, again, building more of a sense of danger and crisis than was at all warranted. And this underlay the buildup of forces, but it also had the effect of alarming the Soviets, who were aware that they did have superiority and were not about to achieve it, and that they could only therefore judge that the United States was doing this in order to provide a greater superiority to itself – and that that, in turn, was exceedingly dangerous from their standpoint.

Tom Morton: In the corridors of the Kremlin, voices were being raised which were no less hawk-like than those issuing from the Pentagon. Here's what the Soviet military's chief of staff, Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, told his counterparts in the Warsaw Pact in September 1982:

[translation]: The US has in effect already declared war on us. The material preparations for war, as shown also by the current manoeuvres of the NATO states, are no game but deadly serious. The danger of war has never been so great.

From the late 1970s Marshal Ogarkov had argued that the Soviet Union should be prepared to strike first with nuclear weapons if war seemed unavoidable. Ogarkov's views were regarded as extreme by more moderate elements in the Kremlin. But in 1981 a special intelligence operation code-named Operation RYAN was set up by the KGB chief, Uri Andropov, to look for signs that the United States or its allies were preparing for war.

Raymond Garthoff: Indeed, in the beginning of 1981 the Soviet intelligence services instituted a special state of warning to be on the alert for a possible western initiation of war at any time. That seems preposterous to us but it didn't to Soviet leaders, and particularly that wing of the Soviet leadership at the time that was most alarmed and concerned about the United States' actions and most inclined to interpret our actions as not only unwarranted, but as deriving from a hostile intention.

'KGB Centre pushes Operation RYAN - February 1983'. (Excerpt from KGB cable translated by Oleg Gordievsky): Top Secret. Copy Number 1. London. Comrade Yermakov. Strictly Personal. Permanent operational assignment to uncover NATO preparations for a nuclear missile attack on the USSR. In view of the growing urgency of the task of discovering any preparations by the adversary for a nuclear missile attack (RYAN), on the USSR, we are sending you a permanently operative assignment (POA) and briefing on this question.

The objective of the assignment is to see that the residentura work systematically to uncover any plans in preparation by the main adversity, the United States, for RYAN, and to organise a continual watch to be kept

for indications of a decision being taken to use nuclear weapons against the USSR or immediate preparations being made for a nuclear missile attack.

Oleg Gordievsky: The first point I would like to make is that Australia was on the list of the countries which were supposed to be watched by the KGB. As well from the KGB were supposed to send each fortnight a report about the preparation to a sudden nuclear attack on the Soviet Union. So in the '82, '83, '84, the KGB in Canberra and in Sydney was watching the so-called preparation-preparation to a nuclear war.

Tom Morton: Oleg Gordievsky, former KGB chief in London, in an interview recorded especially for this series by ABC TV's Andrew Fowler.

By 1983 all of the Soviets' anxieties were focused on Germany. For four years the Soviets and the United States had been playing a game of nuclear poker. At stake were hundreds of new missiles – missiles which NATO was planning to deploy in West Germany in the autumn of 1983.

This new generation of nuclear armed, medium-range missiles would be able to reach targets in the Soviet Union in eight minutes. Now naturally enough, the Soviets were distinctly nervous about the arrival of these missiles in West Germany. But NATO claimed it was simply playing catch-up – matching a new fleet of Soviet missiles aimed at Europe, the SS20s.

In the 1970s and 80s James Buchan was correspondent for the Financial Times in Bonn-closely following the controversy surrounding the deployment of the Euromissiles:

James Buchan: In the course of the 1970s the Soviets started deploying a medium-range missile which NATO called the SS20, which was capable of hitting targets all over western Europe but not reaching the United States. And the purpose of this weapon, as became very clear at the end of the 70s and the beginning the 80s, was to detach western Europe from the US and eventually to clear the Americans out of the European continent.

Tom Morton: How would it do that?

James Buchan: By so encouraging dissension and splitting public opinion in West Germany – which was the most sensitive and the most vulnerable country in the western alliance – which would then reject any counter-deployments by the United States and drift into neutrality.

[Reading from *Heart's Journey in Winter*: In 1983 I knew these would be the capital events of my life. I couldn't know that the missiles deployed in

West Germany that November would be the final shots of the last action of the Cold war. The Germans, who had rebuilt cities turned to rubble by British and American bombers in the second world war, knew that they had most to lose from any deterioration in the balance of terror between the two great powers. Both Germanys were military camps overflowing with armed men of all nationalities, bristling with nuclear weapons, churned up by tank manoeuvres, deafened by low-flying fighter aircraft.]

Tom Morton: From James Buchan's novel, *Heart's Journey in Winter*, a spy thriller set in Germany during the war scare of 1983.

[Reading: The rivalry between the two great powers which transferred from the real continent to the cities and fields onto battle fields of the imagination. Ideology, though this had become degenerate by 1983, subversion – and the accumulation of nuclear weapons whose power to terrify and persuade depended not on their detonation, for that was too terrible even for the game at issue, but on their value as entries, as my father wrote in the 1960s, in some imaginary ledger of terror and might.

The chief theatre of this mental war was Germany.

[archived recording: **Bernd Schaefer** : It was a desire for peace and extreme fear of war ...

Petra Kelly: Germany is the only country which gets Pershing 2s and you must ask the question why, of all places only Germany? Why is it not shared with all the other countries? ...

Bernd Schaefer : I think the Germans – or most of the Germans – realised for the first time that nuclear war might come to their territory ...

Petra Kelly: There is a certain creative fear in people. Not fear that you manipulate, but fear that Germany, which this already filled to the brim, east and west, by nuclear weapons, by chemical weapons, by conventional weapons – has an overkill on both sides of forty times – begins to say, why any more, what is this? For what reason?]

Tom Morton: Petra Kelly, one of the leading figures in the West German peace movement, in a rare archival interview with Harry Kreisler at the University of California, Berkeley. It's part of their series, *Conversations with History*.

[Archived recording: **Petra Kelly**: And Germany is, of course, in the position where many people don't want any other war to start again on German soil, so there was a strong appeal by old people, elderly people, supporting us; and a strong appeal by many occupational groups – doctors,

lawyers, scientists, professors, academic people, which also make up a big part of the Green party – and people begin questioning, why in fact do they have no say over these decisions?]

Tom Morton: What Petra Kelly called 'creative fear' took hundreds of thousands of Germans on to the streets in the early 1980s. In 1979 the key NATO allies had moved to counter the Soviet SS20s with missiles of their own. NATO declared that it would deploy American Cruise and Pershing missiles in Germany by the end of 1983-unless the Soviets removed their SS20s. But what the NATO leaders hadn't bargained for was a revolt from their own populations.

James Buchan: What the deployment of Cruise and Pershings gave them was a mass movement – millions strong – and mass movements always claim to be millions strong, but in the big, popular demonstrations in the autumn of '83 there were millions of people going out on to the streets to demonstrate against the Pershings.

[archive recording of protest: …the whole bloody, grotesque, barbarous carnival is still there on the road! I'm ready! It's getting darker in Europe. The night starts drawing in! Time is not on our side!]

Tom Morton: That was English historian, EP Thompson, founder of the European Movement for Nuclear Disarmament, speaking in London to an estimated quarter of a million campaigners for nuclear disarmament.

If the Soviets had set out to sow dissension in Europe, by early 1983 they'd certainly succeeded. The campaign against Cruise and Pershing had spread to Britain. Meanwhile, in West Germany, the Social Democrat government had collapsed, deeply divided over the whole issue. Public opinion in Germany was split 50-50 on whether or not the deployments should go ahead. But there was one question which Germany's allies in Washington found perplexing. The Germans seemed a whole lot more frightened of the NATO missiles which were supposed to protect them than the Soviet missiles aimed at them.

Jack F Matlock Jr: The argument we kept making was that, you know, we don't like them either. But unless we show the Soviets that we can counter the SS20s, we won't get rid of them, and they're in a position to hold Europe hostage. Because the SS20 – each of them had three warheads, highly accurate, and they could hit every NATO capital on the continent of Europe within about four minutes.

[Archived recording of Caspar Weinberger: The United States must restore that nuclear balance, and if we fail to do so, the Soviet could, within a few years, be in a position to threaten us – blackmail our allies, or

even launch a nuclear attack – with the assurance that we would not be capable of responding in a way that would constitute effective deterrent.]

[Archived recording **Gert Bastian**: This argument that we can be blackmailed if we give not a new answer to the SS20 on the other side is completely wrong. We cannot be blackmailed. We have enough weapons now existing. We have the potentials of the French nuclear power [unclear], of the United Kingdom, of the United States – we have three nuclear armed countries in the Western Alliance and [unclear] Soviet Union nuclear power, and there is no possibility for the Soviets to blackmail a non-nuclear armed country in Europe – the Netherlands or the Germans or the Belgians or the Scandinavian countries – how could you work such a blackmailing? I couldn't see it.]

Tom Morton: General Gert Bastian. Bastian was commander of the 12th Panzer division of the German Bundeswehr, but he resigned his commission in protest over the plans to deploy Cruise and Pershing. Together with Petra Kelly, Bastian became an important spokesperson for the West German peace movement.

Gert Bastian: It is impossible to think that the Soviets can say, if Germany is not willing to leave the NATO we will destroy Frankfurt or Hamburg with SS20 missiles. I think it's crazy to come to such a...

Petra Kelly: I think, in fact, we're being blackmailed by the United States in an opposite… I think nuclear blackmail does exist – not in your case – when the United States says, we're going to forfeit Hamburg and perhaps Frankfurt because we don't want to forfeit New York, we scream and say we don't want to be the sacrifices because you don't use your intercontinental potential. So the whole idea of deterrence is an idea of keeping people hostages on both sides. In fact we are hostages. And people begin questioning why in fact do they have no say over these decisions.]

[Reading from *Heart's Journey in Winter*: Two women stood with their backs to the kitchen sink. One was Caroline Bachard, the wife of the British head of Chancellery. The other woman had a strikingly slim waist. She had her eyes down and her hand out. 'Hi, I'm Polina.'
'How d'you do? Richard Fisher.' I shook her cold hand.
'You're with MI6, right?'
'You must be joking.'
Polina pinched my right sleeve, took the bottle of wine, put it to her mouth and drank. She handed the bottle back to me and said, 'So what are you doing here?'
I said that for thirty-five years Britain, France and the United States had been fighting the Soviets, and one another, for control of West German

public opinion. Suddenly it was as if a shell had burst overhead and exposed this dreary struggle to blinding light. I went on a bit about Pershings and SS20s; missile throw weights and explosive yield. I said we were now in the midst of a pitched engagement, the first since Cuba in 1962. The Soviets would again be beaten. But I just wished...
'I meant *here*, Lennestrasse 43.]

Bernd Schaefer: I think most of the Germans realised for the first time that nuclear war might come to their territory. As long as there was this American nuclear umbrella far in the distance with the threat of massive retaliation in case of an outbreak of war in Europe, the Germans felt more secure. They thought the United States was willing to risk its own fate in order to save West Germany from being overrun by the Soviets, or to be more precise, the city of Berlin from falling into Soviet hands. And of course this strategy was not all that popular in the United States, and of course in the United States there were a lot of voices saying "Why should we risk our territory and our country for the sake of West Germany or Berlin, if we have the chance to limit it to the European theatre of war in case there would be an escalation."

Tom Morton: Bernd Schaefer, senior fellow with the German Historical Institute in Washington. As one British politician once put it, the NATO alliance was all about keeping the Americans in, the Germans down, and the Russians out. In the late 1970s, West German chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, had grown increasingly concerned that the Americans were taking their eyes off the European ball. The US was preoccupied with covert wars against the Soviets in Africa, Central America and Afghanistan. And they didn't seem overly concerned, at least to begin with, about the Soviet SS20s pointed at Europe.

Schmidt saw the deployment of Cruise and Pershing as a way of getting the Americans to recommit to the defence of Europe. What Schmidt failed to see was that the new missiles changed the rules of engagement between the superpowers. Now the United States could fight a nuclear war in Europe by remote control, without a single missile being fired from the American mainland.

Bernd Schaefer: Actually I think it increased the risks for the Europeans. This aggravated the tension between the United States and Germany and other parts of western Europe to quite some extent, and the Soviets tried to exploit it and then the Germans indeed became very anxious – what the Americans call Germans' Angst – -that the nuclear war might actually annihilate Germany and German territory.

[Archived recording **Gert Bastian**: In my opinion, these two weapons, Pershing and Cruise, are significant for the change in the nuclear strategy.

In former time nuclear weapons have been only available to prevent war. They were effective deterrents with their revenge potential, and nobody could fire the first hit without the risk to be killed. But with these new weapons, which are more accurate and more precise and with the very short fly and warning time – this makes a new situation for the European allies of the United States, I think. The entrance in a nuclear war is much more easier when such weapons are available.]

Tom Morton: General Gert Bastian, talking to Harry Kreisler in the series *Conversations with History*.

Vojtech Mastny: The Soviets themselves, they did not see themselves as having developed their own SS20s as a threatening weapon. They just did it because they could do it. They were in a position to build this sort of weapon, so they did it without really thinking that much of what the consequences might be.

Tom Morton: Vojtech Mastny, coor dinator of the Parallel History Project. the project is an ambitious attempt to tell the story of the cold war from both sides of the Iron Curtain, using the material from the Soviet and eastern European archives and from declassified NATO sources.

Vojtech Mastny: And when the consequence was the western decision to build the same sort of missiles to match the Soviet ones and checkmate their possible use, then the Soviets were surprised and annoyed, and in fact threatened.

Bernd Schaefer: The Soviets played quite stupid propaganda again to use the peace movement against the western alliance, because they thought they could split Europe from the United States by actually supporting the peace movement and avoiding the deployment without having to make any Soviet concessions. Some people today make the argument that what we knew all along that basically they are Soviet dupes and it's all actually directed by the Soviet Union. But that's quite ridiculous and in quantitative terms it was such a massive movement that the Soviet interests which were expressed by a very few people in the movement really were not the most decisive ones.

Tom Morton: In early 1983 air raid sirens [like these] weren't an uncommon sound in West Germany. I used to hear them regularly at breakfast time in the sleepy university town where I was a student. Close by was a large American military base, and up in the woods behind the town, a key NATO communications centre. Well, like most of the locals, when I heard the sound, I'd just assume it was another exercise and go back to my coffee and the newspaper. The news from Geneva wasn't promising. The Soviets and the Americans were locked in arms

negotiations. The Soviets were refusing to scrap their SS20s and NATO was preparing to deploy Cruise and Pershing in the autumn. Both sides were fighting a war of nerves on the battlefield of the imagination.

Then, in early March, Ronald Reagan gave a speech at an Evangelical convention in Florida:

[Archived recording of Ronald Reagan: Let us pray for the salvation of all those who live in that totalitarian darkness. Pray they will discover the joy of knowing God. But until they do, let us be aware that while they preach the supremacy of the state, declare its omnipotence over individual man and predict its eventual domination of all peoples on the earth, they are the focus of evil in the modern world.]

Oleg Gordievsky: The ideologically aggressive speeches by Reagan, secretary of state Schultz and other members of that Reagan administration frightened the Soviet government immensely, because they believed, for example, Nixon was not dangerous because he didn't make strong ideological attacks on the Soviet Union. That's why it was easy to sign agreements of all kinds with Nixon. But they were frightened by Reagan in the beginning, and that's why they took Reagan very, very seriously as a potentially aggressive president who could unleash a nuclear war just because he had the idea to destroy the communist system.

Tom Morton: Former KGB London chief, Oleg Gordievsky. Just three weeks after Ronald Reagan had called the Soviet Union an 'evil empire', he gave another speech which frightened the Soviets even more:

[Archived recording of Ronald Reagan: What if free people could live secure in the knowledge that their security did not rest upon the threat of instant US retaliation to deter a Soviet attack, that we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies. Let me share with you a vision of the future which augurs hope. It is that we embark on a program to counter the awesome Soviet missile threat with measures that are defensive.]

Vojtech Mastny: Then of course there came the 'Star Wars' speech by Reagan, which introduced a new strategy.

[Archived recording of Ronald Reagan: Some say it will bring war to the heavens, but its purpose is to deter war in the heavens and on earth.]

Oleg Gordievsky: And the Russians believed that it was possible for the United States to create that defence in space against nuclear missiles in a relatively short time – like they prepared the flight to the moon, the landing on the moon, in a historically short time...

Vojtech Mastny: It was interpreted by some on the Soviet side as an attempt to put the United States into a position of being able to create the first strike, that would cripple the Soviet Union and thereby win a major war.

James Buchan: I paid a visit to Moscow in the summer of that year and it was a time when Andropov was still theoretically general secretary of the Communist party but was dying. And every Soviet official one met was running around like a chicken without a head – sometimes talking in conciliatory terms and sometimes talking in the most ghastly and dire terms of real hot war – of fighting war, of nuclear war.

Tom Morton: So that was the summer of 1983…

James Buchan: Yes.

Tom Morton: So then they were really talking about it then, when you were in Moscow.

James Buchan: Yes, yes.

Tom Morton: They believed that it was a real possibility…

James Buchan: Yes, and they were extremely frightened of some kind of large military exercise by NATO in the autumn of '83, after the Bundestag had approved the missile deployments.

[**Archived recording:** A vote for deployment came after 26 hours of debate – two days of often impassioned and emotional argument-even though the result, given Chancellor Kohl's assured majority, was not in doubt. The decision is the signal for the United States to start moving the first batch of Pershing II missiles to West Germany. Reports in Bonn indicate that parts may be flown in as early as tomorrow…]

James Buchan: I was sitting outside the Bundestag after the key debate at which the West German parliament decided to accept the deployment of Pershing II missiles. I was sitting on a bench outside the Bundestag. And it occurred to me then that this was a historic event; that I could see the end of the Cold war unfolding before me. I wasn't sure who had won it, but I could see who had lost it. We had a loser and that was the Soviet Union.

[Reading from *Heart's Journey in Winter* ... . So, how does it end?
'Richard, please don't.'
The birds started, which filled me with sadness.
'I mean, the missiles.'
'Oh, yes.'

'What about the Soviets …?'
'What about the Soviets?'
'They could go to war.'
'Why would they do that? The war has been fought. They lost. This is their last shot. they've got nothing else except a rebellion in Afghanistan they can't put down, and a population they can't feed.' 'Please, Polina…']

Tom Morton: As the Pershing II missiles were being flown in to bases in West Germany, the Russians walked out of the arms talks in Geneva. Within days, NATO began a major military exercise code-named Able Archer. Normally such exercises would have been routine, but the build-up of tension during 1983 had now reached its crescendo and Moscow's nerves were stretched to breaking point.

Professor Paul Dibb, former director of the Joint Intelligence Organisation in Canberra, and a specialist on the Soviet Union:

Paul Dibb: There was a fear in Moscow that the NATO exercise Able Archer in November 1983, which was an exercise which escalated from a conventional conflict with the Soviet Union in Europe to simulated nuclear release – that this exercise was being used, if you like, as a cover for an actual nuclear attack.

[Reading from: *Heart's Journey in Winter*: I've just had a call from General Guthrie in Meindela, to confirm to me, as a courtesy, that the RYAN army has successfully deployed onto launch on warning. Do you know what that means, Richard?]

Vojtech Mastny: A simulation of release of nuclear weapons entailed the use of encrypted codes, so we can assume that the Soviets, being unable to figure out what these codes meant, did not throw out the possibility that it might be the real thing.

James Hershberg: And of course keep in mind that this was a stake in the Cold war where there were hundreds of thousands of NATO and Warsaw Pact forces lined up on both sides of the Iron Curtain down the heart of Germany and down the heart of central Europe.

[Reading from *Heart's Journey in Winter*: It reminded me that the armed forces had not attempted, let alone completed a manoeuvre since 1948. And never with nuclear weapons.]

Oleg Gordievsky: The Russians, [unclear] that military people took it as a sign of the…indeed, you see, they're preparing an attack on us!

James Hershberg: The Soviets really thought World War III was about to happen.

Paul Dibb: the Soviets were reacting to hair-trigger alert in reaction to the NATO exercise, Able Archer.

Oleg Gordievsky: And the military commanders, including people sitting at the-ready to launch a nuclear missile-they were very nervous. They were sitting there believing that this might be true. That's why it was so dangerous.

[Roger, copy…this is not an exercise!]

Paul Dibb: And to give you a dramatic example, the group of Soviet airforces in East Germany was forward-loading tactical nuclear weapons on to Sukhoi 17 long-range strike aircraft to strike West Germany.

[Reading from *Heart's Journey in Winter*: We are trying to contain the most dangerous crisis in the war.]

Paul Dibb: They were tactical nuclear weapons to bomb military and other targets just across the border from East Germany in West Germany. Their flight time, 18 minutes.

[Archived recording of Ronald Reagan: Let us pray for the salvation of all of those who live in that totalitarian darkness. Pray they will discover the joy of knowing God. But until they do, let us be aware that while they preach the supremacy of the state, declare its omnipotence over individual man and predict its eventual domination of all peoples on the earth, they are the focus of evil in the modern world.]

[Archived recording of Petra Kelly: Why, of all places, only Germany?]

Tom Morton: We know now, of course, that the cold war ended not with a bang, but with the popping of champagne corks here at the Berlin Wall in 1989. But as today's story shows, it could have ended very differently. Raymond Garthoff experienced the other near-catastrophe of the cold war at first hand, as an adviser to President Kennedy during the Cuba crisis. Garthoff believes that the war scare of 1983 was scarcely less perilous.

Raymond Garthoff: It was a matter of rather – I would say – greater danger than almost any other period in the cold war, if only because the most, shall we say extreme, or hard-line elements in the Soviet intelligence and military leadership might have at some point either misconstrued some developments in the west or chosen to act on the basis

of evaluations that were greatly exaggerated. And that's why I think there was such great danger involved.

Tom Morton The most comprehensive and carefully documented account of the 1983 war scare comes from the CIA.

The CIA declined our request for an interview with CIA historian Benjamin Fischer. But you can find a link to his article, and a wealth of information about our series on the cold war, on the Radio National website.

Now you may be wondering by now – if the Soviets really got that close to pressing the button during the Able Archer exercise in 1983, what was it that stopped them? Well, the ultimate answer to that question lies in the former Soviet military archives in Moscow – archives which are still closed both to Russian and to foreign researchers. But Vojtech Mastny thinks we can draw a tentative conclusion from what we do know from the archives of the former Warsaw Pact allies such as East Germany. The fact that Able Archer didn't end in nuclear holocaust is probably down to some anonymous KGB analysts in Moscow who decided that the evidence that NATO was about to launch a first strike just wasn't strong enough. In other words, it may be that the world was saved by middle management.

Vojtech Mastny: Well, what was different in the Cuban missile crisis is that this was really managed by the top leadership, and in that instance by Kruschev in particular, who was a gambler. So that was what made the Cuban crisis so important and so dangerous. In 1983 they didn't get that far. They didn't get to the upper level. Either there wasn't time to pass it on to the leadership, or they decided that it was not worth it. Or they attached qualifications to it; that it was not certain. In any case, one can assume that fortunately they used their common sense rather than being alarmist or panicking. So that, I think, is encouraging. What is disconcerting is that it may have been a close call, and maybe, well, a crazy guy some place along the line really could have created in a moment havoc.

Scott Sagan: If you look at the history of the cold war you should recognise that nuclear weapons were not controlled by statesmen. They're not controlled by states. They're controlled by military organisations and normal, frail, all-too-human military operators. It seems to me that our successful experience during the cold war blinds us all too often to the dangers that existed at that time.

Paul Dibb: These were serious times. And you know, Tom, if I might just make a comment, that brings us back down to the current times, when we have ministers in the current Howard government who I presume were in short trousers or diapers at the time, proclaiming that the war on terror is

more dangerous than the period you and I are talking about. How can it be? The terrorists, as nasty as they are, and even if they get their hands on some chemical or biological or a limited nuclear capacity – they won't have the capacity with intercontinental ballistic missiles to deliver 12,000 strategic nuclear warheads and take out (and these were our calculations at the time) the total global deaths in the Soviet Union and its allies and in the United States and its allies, putting to one side what the fallout would do to the rest of the world – would have been, in a full-scale nuclear war, 100 million on each side in something like a day or two. That really puts the war on terror into context. As serious as it is at the moment, it is not comparable.

Tom Morton: But isn't the argument that in a sense we had a situation for 45 years where the threat of mutually-assured destruction prevented the use of nuclear weapons and that we're now living in a situation where because there is no longer that balancing of mutually-assured destruction, the possibility of a nuclear weapon being used, for example by a terrorist group, has actually increased.

Paul Dibb: Yes. Look, there's truth in that. Even so, we will not be at full-scale nuclear war. And although mutually-assured destruction worked, we've just been discussing, Tom, that the views on both sides now are we came precious close in '83 to the buttons being pressed.

[Reading from *Heart's Journey in Winter*: 'I haven't got words for it. Nobody has. All I can think of is that shadow that was somehow burned into the steps of the Sumitomo Bank in Hiroshima. Something out of this world, beyond comprehension. Maybe it would come out differently. Maybe even in their favour or…'
Polina came up on her elbow. She said, 'Does the name Edmund Fischer mean anything to you?' 'He's a name to me, that's all.' 'He was one of my professors at Georgetown. Ed used to say that the nuclear arms race, far from being the diabolical enterprise of popular imagination, is an appropriate, even benign form of competition between two great powers. He used to talk like that. The purpose of the cold war is – I guess you should make that was – to save blood, not to spill it, he said. Years from now it will seem as quaint and harmless as the tournaments of medieval chivalry.']

Tom Morton: You've been listening to Hindsight, and the first episode of our series Torn Curtain, the secret history of the cold war. Technical production on today's program was by Judy Rapley.

The original music was composed by Stuart Brown, and readings were by Mark Kilmurry, Rachael Szalay, Tony Macgregor, James Carleton and Andrei Shabunov.

More information related to Episode 1 >
More about the people in Episode 1 >

Additional music:

Heaven 17, Let's All Make a Bomb
Frankie Goes to Hollywood, Two Tribes
Fehlfarben, Militurk
Faust, Exercise with Voices

People

General Gert Bastian
Bastian was commander of the 12th Panzer division of the German Bundeswehr, but resigned his commission in protest over the plans to deploy Cruise and Pershing missiles in West Germany. Bastian became an important spokesperson for the West German peace movement.
>> globetrotter.berkeley.edu/conversations/KellyBastian/kelly-bastian0.html

James Buchan was Bonn correspondent for the Financial Times in 1983 and is the author of *Heart's Journey in Winter* (Harvill Press, 1995).

Paul Dibb is a Professor in the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the ANU and was Director, Joint Intelligence Organisation (1986-88).
>> rspas.anu.edu.au/people/personal/dibbp_sdsc.php

Raymond Garthoff was US Ambassador to Bulgaria; Executive Officer and Senior Advisor to the US Department of State delegation to the SALT I and ABM Treaty negotiations (1969-73), and a senior advisor to President Kennedy in the State Department during the Cuba crisis. He is the author of:
A Journey Through the Cold War: A Memoir of Containment and Coexistence (2001) and *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (1994)

Oleg Gordievsky is a former KGB colonel and chief of the KGB's London bureau who defected to Britain in 1985. He has published a number of books in collaboration with the British historian Christopher Andrew.
>> www.hist.cam.ac.uk/academic_staff/further_details/andrew.html

James Hershberg was founding director of the Cold War International History Project, and now associate professor at George Washington University.
>> www.gwu.edu/~elliott/facultystaff/hershberg.cfm

Petra Kelly was a leading member of the West German peace movement and founding member of the Green Party who served from March 1983 to March 1984 as speaker of the Green Party's parliamentary group.
>> globetrotter.berkeley.edu/conversations/KellyBastian/kelly-bastian0.html

Vojtech Mastny is co-ordinator of the Parallel History Project, Senior Research Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and Senior Fellow at the National Security Archive, both in Washington, D.C.
>> www.isn.ethz.ch/php/

His most recent book, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity*, is the winner of the American Historical Association's 1997 George L. Beer Prize.

Jack F Matlock Jr was principal adviser to Ronald Reagan on the Soviet Union and Europe from 1983-86, and then US ambassador to Moscow. He is the author of *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended* (Random House, 2004).

Bernd Schaefer is a Research Fellow at the German Historical Institute in Washington and a CWIHP Senior Research Scholar. He is the author of American Détente and German Ostpolitik, 1969-1972. Washington D.C., 2003.
>> www.ghi-dc.org/fellow_schafer.html