

The Cold War in the Classroom Week 3

Cold War Fellowship Report

Jessica Reinisch, 16th February 2017

Flash points and near misses: why didn't the Cold War ever turn into a 'hot' one?

This week our teachers read up on a still relatively little-known Cold War incident, a routine NATO military exercise named 'Able Archer 83' that took place in Western Europe in November 1983. The simulation was so realistic that it convinced some Soviet officials that the West was preparing for a nuclear strike. We asked our group to read excerpts from the recently declassified [Able Archer report](#), along with a [Guardian article](#) about the declassification and a chapter by Paul Level on Cold War arms control. If they wanted to read more, there was also an article by Arnav Manchanda and the [HA podcasts](#) on other Cold War crises. The group discussed the significance of 'near-misses' such as Able Archer 83 in the history of the Cold War, and wrote some very thoughtful and imaginative pieces on how they could be taught in the classroom.

Key points emerging in the discussion about the history were...

Thinking about the role of Able Archer in histories of the Cold War got many of our teachers fired up.

- "Was Operation Able Archer responsible for bringing the world closer to nuclear war than the Cuban Missile Crisis? New information has given us greater understanding of a crisis which started as a game but nearly ended in disaster; Operation Able Archer. Not only did this crisis nearly cause a nuclear war, but it also contributed to the end of the Cold War."
- "It demonstrated how superficial the so-called achievements of détente had been."
- "Able Archer shows the non-proliferation treaties and agreements during the Cold War actually, in practice, held little real underlying meaning."

To many of our group, the Able Archer incident highlighted much wider implications and ramifications of the Cold War:

- "The episode struck me as a way into studying the uniqueness of the Cold War in a global setting. The non-event... seems to set a pattern for other events in the Cold War. Throughout the reading I was thinking about a criteria for 'danger' and how within such a long war could students ascertain which events were more dangerous than others. This could be linked to the

personalities of those who had their finger on the button – e.g. Reagan’s aggressive stance against the Soviet Union compared to Nixon’s perhaps.”

- “The issues highlighted by Able Archer, although its detail was unknown at the time, are reflected in the contemporary popular culture. In that year ‘The Hunt for Red October’, by Tom Clancy, was being written to be published in 1984; War Games 1983, a popular film, reflecting the dangers of having inflexible systems for defence which isolate human intervention was being shown. Interestingly it was actually the human element that eventually led to the Able Archer situation being defused. Finally, ‘The Day After’ an American television film first aired on November 20, 1983 and had an impact on Reagan. The role of the media in the Cold War could be an area launched from a study of the incident.”
- “...the best reason for looking at Able Archer is as a means to draw meaningful comparisons between different Cold War crises and thereby deepen students’ understanding of the importance of context in who was willing to confront, compromise and co-operate at different moments during the Cold War, giving depth to their explanations.”
- “...for me it was mainly interesting as a route into thinking about significance. The idea that confrontation in the Cold War had shifted from being very public in the 1950s and 60s (Berlin, Korea, Cuba etc.), to being so secret in the 1980s that one side weren't even aware that there was a potential conflict, must tell us something. Equally, that this crisis has gone largely unnoticed in many histories of the Cold War also made me think about the public nature of diplomacy in the Cold War, and how this interacts with the writing of history.”

Many in our group were in no doubt about the merits of teaching students about a ‘non-event’, a nuclear strike that didn’t happen:

- “The Able Archer 83 incident could be used as a vehicle to explore a variety of aspects of the Cold War and wider historical concepts.
 - Firstly, it could be used to teach students content, developing knowledge and understanding on the relative failure and impotence of Détente and the various arms limitation talks as suggested by the Lever article, the impact Reagan’s early aggressive stance on Soviet security concerns, the role of intelligence and espionage, Soviet weaknesses and technological backwardness at the time, and the role of NATO in terms of Western defences and Soviet concerns.
 - Secondly, using Able Archer to further develop students’ understanding of second order concepts would be an interesting idea.

- Causation – Why did the Soviet Union feel an increased threat in 1983? Why did the Cold War come to an end? How far were misunderstandings the reasons behind Cold War tensions?
 - Significance – Comparison of the threat posed by various Cold War crises including Able Archer, Cuba, Berlin Airlift, Berlin in 1959-61.
 - Interpretations – Using extracts of the ‘The Soviet War Scare’ source, Deutschland ’83, the Guardian and the Lever article to compare views on the severity of the incident and reasons behind it.
 - Reliability of sources – how reliable is Deutschland ’83 as representation of Cold War tension in 1983?
- Finally, and this may be personal to my own teaching experiences, this period of Cold War history has always been one of the more challenging periods of the conflict to teach/ for my students to remember. Able Archer provides a brilliant reminder to students as to the severity, importance and complexity of Cold War relations and could be an event/ lesson that inspires the intrigue, enthusiasm and reminds of the relevance of studying the Cold War, hopefully keeping motivation high in the final weeks of the course.”
- “Why is it important to teach students about a non-event? ... Because Able Archer is itself an outcome of the Cold War. It stands out as a reminder of the role ideology played throughout the conflict. After the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, you’d be forgiven for thinking the danger of all out nuclear war had passed – yet Able Archer is a demonstration of the danger of ideologically driven decisions, and how important ideology was in bringing the Soviets to the brink of launching a pre-emptive nuclear strike against the United States in 1983.”
- “Why should you teach ‘Able Archer’? To help students to understand the impact of Reagan’s leadership upon Cold War relations and evaluate the Soviet perception of the ‘Evil Empire’ speech; To allow students to explore the relationship between Thatcher and Reagan; To assess its importance to the end of the Cold War; To evaluate the role of intelligence in Cold War relations; To compare its significance to the Cuban Missile Crisis; To explore the role that political suspicion and misunderstanding played throughout the Cold War crises.”
- “A study into the Cold War is extremely difficult due to the unique structural factors at play within it, particularly the presence and impact of nuclear weapons. One inherent danger surrounding its study is that students too often can’t appreciate these factors and thus make anachronistic assumptions about the real risk of nuclear war. This lesson would ensure no student could doubt the reality of fear surrounding the use of nuclear

weapons in the Cold War, and would be immeasurably enriched from its knowledge.”

- “Why students should learn about Able Archer: Never, perhaps, in the postwar decades was the situation in the world as explosive and hence, more difficult and unfavorable, as in the first half of the 1980s.... Was 1983 the year when the world should have ‘held its breath’? I would strongly recommend a comparison of the Cuban Missile Crisis and Able Archer. In 1983, the Russians didn’t feel in control. They felt out manoeuvred by the US and under incredible pressure from Reagan and the West. This led them to make the ‘irrational, rational’ which could have resulted in them launching a pre-emptive strike against the US. What is quite scary about 1983 is the fact that the general populations were in the dark: unlike during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Was Margaret Thatcher the ‘Iron Lady’ or ‘US poodle’?”
- “Why did Operation RYAN lead the Soviets close to nuclear action? Students will find Operation RYAN fascinating. Who would have known that the Soviets would be monitoring the amount of blood donations and the price paid for them as evidence of an imminent nuclear attack. Such was the belief in the ‘fiction’ that intelligence agents in western nations were ordered to find proof. Operation RYAN and how it distorted the Soviet’s view of Able Archer is a great way to bring students into the world of Cold War spies.”

Although the group as a whole was clearly enthused by the subject, was it worth dedicating a whole lesson to it? Some thought it was...

- “Able Archer lends itself perfectly to a one off lesson which would engage students whilst allowing them to understand the very real tensions that existed even in the years approaching the end of the Cold War.”

...while others argued that it could work better as an example or point of comparison in a lesson with a wider remit:

- “Personally, I would struggle to devote a whole lesson to Able Archer as studied in isolation I don’t think it is as powerful as taught in combination. ... As a lesson resource I would combine it with the Doomsday clock charting events during the Cold War and asking students using contemporary sources to place events of the Cold War onto the clock. It would be interesting to ask students to compare Able Archer to events such as the Korean War, Cuban Missile Crisis and ask how close the world did come to a nuclear war, particularly as the clock was 2 minutes to midnight in 1953 (Korean War).”

Impact on teaching?

At the end of the week, it was clear that the teachers saw plenty of ways of putting their new knowledge of the Able Archer incident to use in their classroom teaching.

- “Personally I very much enjoyed the chapter on 'Secret Nuclear Weapons Accidents' in the Hanhimaki & Westad collection, as it was all new to me. I'd probably use it at the stage where I challenge students disbelief that such a thing could happen, or even drop it into the conclusion as a sort of 'does the fact it's not an isolated incident change your inferences or reinforce them in any way' activity.”
- “We always focus on the idea of misunderstandings in the origins of the Cold War; it might be interesting to follow this theme through to the final stages of the CW.”
- “I am keen to continue exploring more about the effects of Able Archer - as I would like to know the validity of my assertion that this event was a cause of the end of the Cold War. This event will certainly feature in my teaching of the 'End of the Cold War' - probably as a linking lesson between Reagan and Gorbachev.”
- “I've really enjoyed looking into Able Archer this week, and have been dropping Operation RYAN into all Cold War conversations I have (surprisingly a lot!). I think it is something I am certainly going to introduce into my A-Level teaching: ... the exam textbook we use for the Cold War in Europe course mentions the shooting down of the Korean Airliner and briefly mentions a NATO exercise that heightened tensions, but I really don't think it does the matter justice. Whilst no major incidents occur, understanding the ideological drive between the two sides at this time, and how it adds to increasing tension at the end of detente are crucial in understanding the path to the end of the Cold War. If nothing else, it continues to assert just how different Gorbachev was compared to his predecessors.”
- “I intend to use the new subject knowledge that I have gained this week to enhance my teaching of the political context of the early 1980s.”
- “I knew very little about Able Archer or Operation Ryan and I have really enjoyed this week's task. What a fascinating set of events. I teach about Thatcher's role in ending the Cold War and I have, in the past, taught the Gorbachev era and the end of the Cold War, but I have never considered this event as influential. Most interesting was the heightening of paranoia amongst the Soviet leadership at this time and Operation RYAN. So interesting. I will definitely use what I have learned this week to add context to the Thatcher period and her relationship with Reagan. I think there is also scope for looking at Able Archer as part of the new GCSE (which covers the

end of the Cold War). Stories such as these can only enhance understanding and increase engagement in the content.”

- “I am keen to build in the doomsday clock into our teaching and think [Able Archer] could form an interesting part of the discussion as we fill in the students in what happened next before finishing the Cold War.”
- “Reading the executive summary alongside the contemporary sources of other nuclear accidents has provided me with even more examples I can use when teaching the Cold War within my classroom. I also appreciated the challenge of planning a lesson that would not normally fit within an ‘exam orientated’ scheme of work and would have to be justified to SLT or a HoD; I feel it fits in well to my thoughts on the last week’s task about teaching beyond the essentials of the specification in order to broaden and deepen students understanding of the period.”

If you like the look of what is going on in the Fellowship, we hope to run more programmes on this and other periods of history. Look out for announcements on the HA website.

References

- [Able Archer report, Executive Summary](#), pp. i-xiii (1990 – National Security Archives)
- “How a NATO war game took the world to brink of nuclear disaster”, [Guardian, 2 November 2013](#)
- Sir Paul Lever, “The Cold War: the golden age of arms control”, *Cold War History*, 2014, Vol.14, No.4, 501-513
- Arnav Manchanda, “When truth is stranger than fiction: the *Able Archer* incident”, *Cold War History*, February 2009, Vol.9, No.1, 111-133. [written before declassification of the Able Archer documents]
- The German-US TV series *Deutschland '83* (2015) is available on [Channel 4 on Demand](#). Episode 7 dramatised the Able Archer incident.
- 'The Secret Nuclear Weapons Accidents, 1966 and 1968', in Jussi M. Hanhimaki and Odd Arne Wested (eds.), *The Cold War: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts* (Oxford, 2003), Chapter 9: Technologies, Weapons and the Arms race, pp. 299-301
- [HA podcast: Michael Shin, 'The Korean War'](#)
- William Stueck, "The Korean War", *Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Vol.1
- [HA podcast: Mark White, 'The Cuban Missile Crisis'](#)
- James G. Hershberg, "The Cuban Missile Crisis", *Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Vol.2