

## Teacher Fellowship Programme 2017: The Cold War in the Classroom



Historical Association

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**Jim Attridge**

**Teacher Fellow Resource: Operation Able Archer**

## TEACHER NOTES

### Operation Able Archer in the classroom

What if an event that you've never heard of was nearly responsible for causing World War 3, and might have also led to the end of the Cold War?

Operation Able Archer might have started as a NATO training exercise in 1983, but recently, declassified information has shown that the USSR misinterpreted the military drills and were ready to launch nuclear missiles against the USA and other NATO powers. In all likelihood, the world was closer to nuclear war in 1983 than during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. It is time to take a closer look at the 'peak' of the Cold War.

In addition, does this new information shed greater light on the sudden improvement in US–Soviet relations after 1983 (NB: Reagan and Andropov were *Time Magazine's* joint 'Men of the Year' in 1983!) and the relatively abrupt end of the Cold War?

Operation Able Archer is not on any Key Stage 4/5 exam specifications – yet! But we still think there are very strong reasons for considering teaching it in your Cold War programme.

First of all, and most importantly, it is a significant, interesting and extremely dramatic piece of history. The resources related to this topic, produced by Jim Attridge in conjunction with the HATFP, will introduce your students (Key Stage 4/5) to a previously unknown event, which they will use to develop their comprehension of 'significance', recap the other 'causes of the end of the Cold War' and develop common exam skills.

There is also good research evidence that suggests that teaching students beyond the strict parameters of the test is actually very effective in improving performance in tests and exams. What's more, there is also good evidence that 'teaching to the test' is often not the most effective practice. A recent article based on US studies drew the following interesting conclusions:

*Another common school practice, particularly in response to accountability, is to explicitly prepare students for state tests. Of course, test preparation can range from teaching the content likely to be tested all the way to teaching explicit test-taking strategies (e.g., write longer essays because those get you more points). Obviously, the latter is not going to improve students' actual learning, but the former might. In any case, test preparation seems to be quite common, but there's less evidence than you might think that it actually helps. For instance:*

- A [\*study of the ACT\*](#) (which is administered statewide) in Illinois found that test strategies and item practice did not improve student performance, but coursework did.

- An [\*earlier study\*](#) in Illinois found that students exposed to more authentic intellectual work saw greater gains on the standardised tests than those not exposed to this content.
- In the [\*Measures of Effective Teaching Project\*](#), students were surveyed about many dimensions of the instruction they received, and these were correlated with their teachers' value-added estimates. Survey items focusing on test preparation activities were much more weakly related to student achievement gains than items focusing on instructional quality.
- Research doesn't even indicate that direct test preparation strategies, such as those for the ACT or SAT, are particularly effective, with actual student gains far lower than advertised by the test preparation companies.

*In short, there's really not great evidence that test preparation works.*

From The Don't Do It Depository by Professor Morgan Polikoff of USC:  
<https://www.future-ed.org/work/the-dont-do-it-depository/>

With this in mind, this resource on Able Archer is designed to help teachers who are keen to get their students to *go the extra mile* in developing their understanding of the Cold War. It is designed to be a flexible resource, suitable for adapting or incorporating into lessons at Key Stage 4 or Key Stage 5. It could be used with various aims:

- 1) To raise awareness of Operation Able Archer 83.
- 2) To provide teachers with a variety of source material which you can use to develop interpretation skills.
- 3) To interpret whether Able Archer 83 genuinely brought the world close to nuclear war.
- 4) To support revision (A-Level or GCSE) by using Operation Able Archer to compare with the Cuban Missile Crisis, and other reasons for the end of the Cold War.

When to teach this lesson:

The final decision is yours, but I suggest that you teach it after the whole Cold War unit has been finished; use this lesson to reconsider the end of the Cold War.

## **Teacher guidance notes on the resource: slide by slide**

### **Slide 1**

This slide is intended to be displayed as the students enter the classroom; it acts as a focal point and immediately helps them to recap the topics they have previously studied. It is based on the assumption of some prior knowledge of those events. The choices of topics are a simple reminder of the various Cold War crises that students are likely to have encountered. It is designed to establish an introduction to Able Archer.

Clearly, if these events are not part of your course, you may wish to remove them from the presentation. Alternatively, even if they are not part of the course, or if students' knowledge is weak on these events, this could be used as an opportunity to recap and reinforce students' knowledge.

### **Slide 2**

The title – feel free to rephrase the title and insert your own learning objective.

### **Slide 3**

This slide sets out the key question for the investigation. The task is intended to encourage your students to re-evaluate the impact of events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Truman Doctrine, the Vietnam War, the Berlin Crisis and the Prague Spring. At this stage, they do not need to know too much about Able Archer in order to complete the 'recap task'. Gorbachev's quote provides ample opportunities to explore the various crises and consider the issue of 'significance'.

A possible 'stretch' task would be to complete a 'crisis graph' covering all of the main events (similar to Slide 25), if you are not going to do Part 2.

Some students might not know anything about the early 1980s at this point, so this task is designed to build up a hierarchy in students' minds of the seriousness of previous crises. This, in turn, will help them to evaluate the seriousness of Able Archer as they do investigate it. In lessons, you should encourage students to keep asking themselves how Able Archer matches up to these previous crises. In a nutshell, Gorbachev's view is up against some serious competition – exactly how serious is that competition?

### **Slide 4**

This slide provides some background to the events leading up to 1983, and considers the precursors to Able Archer. See Slide 11 for more details. You could simply hand out the notes (Slide 11) or use them as an aide-memoire for a presentation. You could even ask students to read the text and then explain the bullets on this slide.

There are documentaries available on YouTube if you want to extend the introduction any more.

## Slide 5

This slide clarifies the controversy, and is your opportunity to ensure that everyone understands the potential counter-argument, i.e. that the USSR was purposefully overreacting in order to gain international sympathy and/or to portray the USA as hostile aggressors.

*NB: The students don't need to know this yet, but the USSR were possibly overreacting because the USA had been placing new missiles in Europe, and if the Soviets succeeded in convincing the rest of the world that NATO was about to attack (or, at the very least, trying to intimidate) the USSR then they would have power to prevent the American missiles being placed in Europe.*

The word 'genuinely' has been emphasised in order to encourage your students to question the reality of such events, and ponder why such scenarios might be exaggerated or overcomplicated by historians and politicians.

## Slide 6

The previous slide established what the controversy was about; now it is time to identify the sources that link to the two arguments.

The aim of Slides 6 and 7 is to clarify the issue and model the ways in which historians address investigations. Please note that Slides 13–15 (in the resource section) contain similar sources; you can swap the sources for others, or use the other sources for extension tasks.

## Slide 7

This provides examples of how historians, having looked at the evidence, reach conclusions.

The aim is that these activities provide a conceptual framework for students to apply to the remaining sources. Encourage students to link the sources to the interpretations, e.g. 'Historian 1 might have used Source A in his research. This is because...'

Students should also be encouraged to find out more about the historians in question and how their own contexts might have shaped their views. For example, they could watch an interview with Nate Jones and see what they can glean about his background and views (<https://www.spymuseum.org/multimedia/spycast/episode/able-archer-83-an-interview-with-nate-jones/>). As author of a bestselling book on the crisis, and also a specialist historian of intelligence, Jones has a particular interest. Similarly, John Lamberton Harper is an academic historian but specialises in US policy, probably taking more of an overview than Jones.

Alternative interpretations are available on Slides 16–18. In addition, there is an alternative activity on Slide 19. Similarly, you could use the sources (Slides 13–15) to encourage the students to formulate their own interpretations (whilst acting as historians!).

## Slide 8

This slide is designed to set up the activity and to be left in full view as the class works on the sources. The mini-plenary could be the basis of discussion.

Use the ten sources (Slides 13–15) to decide whether Able Archer was a genuine threat:

Yes = 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10

No = 1, 2, 3, 7

There are multiple ways in which you could complete this task (c.15 minutes):

- Pairs: Students are given copies of the ten sources and arranged quietly on their own.
- Groups: Arrange the class into groups of ten. Each student is given an enlarged version of a single source. They take it in turns to explain whether they are a 'yes' or 'no', and arrange themselves into two lines. They then discuss the order of importance.

## Slide 9

This slide can be used as a plenary. This investigation has provided an ideal opportunity to explore the concept of 'significance'; our intention is for students to evaluate the importance of Able Archer, using source material and historical interpretations.

The writing frame provides support for students who need help structuring their answer. This piece of writing could easily be linked to exam-specific requirements (especially at Key Stage 5).

## RESOURCE SLIDES

Slide 11: Background information (to be used by the teacher or as a handout)

Slide 12: Key Words definitions

Slides 13–15: Ten sources about Able Archer

Slides 16–18: Five interpretations from historians about Able Archer

Slides 19–20: Historians matrix – overview of the historians used in the interpretations task

*NB: you could remove the contents from the end two columns and use this as an activity*

Slide 21: Alternative 'interpretation task'

## PART 2 (Slides 22–32)

This is purely additional material, which offers a potential extension lesson. It is intended to encourage students to develop their understanding of 'turning points' and 'significance' within the context of the 'end of the Cold War'.

The activities should be self-explanatory. The resources, unless cited, are mainly my own opinions; they have been provided to give your students a head start when considering the significance of AA. You could enlarge a selection of the statements (Slides 30–32) and stick them around the classroom, encouraging your students to incorporate four to five into their arguments.

I hope you enjoy using this material. Please send any comments to Jim Attridge at [MrAttridge@Hotmail.com](mailto:MrAttridge@Hotmail.com) .

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Finally, I fully recommend the HATFP to fellow history teachers; it has been a great experience and has helped to improve my knowledge of this topic as well as providing pedagogical ideas and introducing me to some fantastic people.