

# **A History Lesson in the German TV Series *Deutschland 83*: Able Archer and the War Scare of 1983**

Sandro Sylvio WIESENBERG

## Introduction

*Deutschland 83* is a German television series that was first aired in 2015 in Germany as well as in the USA, UK, and many other countries with great success (Oltermann 2016). In 2017, it was also released in Japan on Amazon Prime. The series depicts events from the year 1983, a time when the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union had reached once again an increased level of tension. The main character, a young East German border guard, is sent as spy to West Germany. There he assumes the position of an orderly officer under a general of the West German armed forces who is coordinating an upcoming large-scale NATO exercise. As part of a Soviet-lead operation, the protagonist gathers intelligence about this exercise to find out if it is a disguise for a real attack, as feared by some of the Soviet leaders. The events in the drama culminate when the NATO exercise turns from the simulation of a conventional armed conflict to a simulated nuclear war during its final stage codenamed ‘Able Archer’ and the danger of an escalation between East and West grows.

The plot of *Deutschland 83* revolves around a less-known historical event and it is conceivable that many viewers never have heard of Able Archer before. However, the events related to this military exercise have sparked some controversy among historians as to how close the world was at the brink of a nuclear war at that time. Therefore, this paper has the following two aims. First, it gives an overview over the historical background of *Deutschland 83* with focus on the discussion about the actual NATO exercise named ‘Able Archer 83’. Second, it analyses how these historical events are depicted in the fictional story of the series. On the following pages, the political situation between the United States and the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1980s will be shortly explained before the different views regarding the events of 1983, especially Able Archer 83, will be described in more detail. Then, a closer look at *Deutschland 83* will show in what way historical events are portrayed and how they are integrated into the story.

The early 1980s

In 1983, after a decade of détente between East and West during the 1970s, the Cold War had reached once again a high point of tension, also called a ‘New Cold War’ (Viault 1990: 515). The deterioration of relations between western countries and the Soviet Union began with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 which led to economic sanctions by the United States against the Soviet Union and a boycott of the Moscow 1980 Summer Olympics by many countries from the West. Tensions also increased due to the agreement of NATO states, one part of the so called ‘Double-Track Decision’ of 1979, to station American cruise missiles and Pershing 2 missiles in Western Europe from 1984 in response to the stationing of Soviet missiles in the western Soviet Union (McCauley 2008: xxviii).

In 1981, the new President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, took office and pursued a hard line toward the Soviet Union (Viault 1990: 514). This can be observed in his claims that Moscow had planned to fight and win a nuclear war, or more famously in his speech in March 1983 in which he described the Soviet Union as ‘the focus of evil in the modern world’ and as an ‘evil empire’ (McCauley 2008: xxix). In the same month, President Reagan announced the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), a partly space-based missile defense system which was nicknamed ‘Star Wars’ by the media. Tensions increased even further when in September 1983 a Soviet fighter shot down a South Korean airliner which had strayed into Soviet airspace. All 269 people on board of the civilian airplane were killed and Soviet leaders showed no signs of regrets regarding this incident (McCauley 2008: xxix). During this time of increased tensions, the NATO exercise Able Archer 83 was held.

Able Archer 83 and the differing views about it

Despite the general view shared by historians that the first half of the 1980s was a time of very high tensions between the two superpowers USA and USSR, views about the danger of the events in 1983, especially the danger of a nuclear war posed by the military exercise codenamed Able Archer 83, differed over time. Able Archer 83 was a command post exercise conducted from 7 to 11 November 1983 in which the forces were simulated, involving the commander, the staff, and communications within and

between headquarters. It was the conclusion of a larger months-long series of NATO maneuvers known as 'Autumn Forge 83' and simulated the transition from conventional to nuclear war. According to Jones (2013), the first public exposé of Able Archer 83 was in a 1988 newspaper article entitled 'Brink of World War III: When the World Almost Went to War.' This view on the events, the world being close to another world war, appears to have been the prevalent opinion among historians and journalists since then. This is made clear for example by an article by Scott and Wheeler (2008). The authors argue that 'Soviet leaders became seriously concerned that NATO might be using the exercise to mask preparations for a genuine nuclear attack' and that preparatory measures by the Soviet military during Able Archer 83 went as far as 'nuclear armed aircraft placed on cockpit alert, intercontinental ballistic missiles moved to a state of combat readiness and SS-20 mobile launchers dispersed around Eastern Europe.'

Others view these events in a different way. Kramer, one of the historians who opposes this interpretation of events, cites a long list of papers which take the same side as the article by Scott and Wheeler (Kramer 2013: 130). He criticizes these studies as being overly sensational and lacking Soviet sources. Furthermore, he notes that they mainly rely on the speculative statements of a KGB officer who was a double agent working for the British Secret Intelligence Service (Kramer 2013: 139). Kramer draws the conclusion that Able Archer 83 was not a crisis at all, and he does so by analyzing Soviet archive material and interviews with witnesses of the past in addition to declassified documents from US intelligence services. He points out that a large part of the Soviet documents of that time is still classified and many involved persons had died before they could be interviewed, but also that the available material suggests that the Soviet leaders did not fear at any time during the fall of 1983 a nuclear attack by the United States (Kramer 2013: 129).

Nate Jones, the director of the Freedom of Information Act Project for the National Security Archive, has compiled the most comprehensive collection about Able Archer 83 to date. This collection includes formerly classified documents from intelligence services of the United States and the Soviet Union, Politburo files, interviews with ex-Soviet generals, and records from other former communist states (Jones 2013). He is aware of the disagreement among historians how dangerous this 'War Scare' really was, but he points out that all of them 'agree that the dearth of available evidence has made conclusions harder to deduce.' One newly declassified CIA document of this

collection concludes that Soviet fears of a US attack were real, but they might have been exaggerated. Other material suggests that Able Archer 83, formerly sometimes regarded as so routine that it could not have alarmed the Soviet leaders, included new elements that made it provocative enough to trigger a nuclear war ‘through miscalculation’ (Jones 2013). Further documents show that Able Archer 83 indeed led to a high level of Soviet military activity which in turn led to US intelligence analyses shortly after the end of the exercise about how much of the Soviet actions were actually understood by the United States. However, a number of documents that have examined Able Archer 83 and its aftermath in great detail are still classified (Jones 2013). Therefore, a final assessment of how dangerous this episode of the Cold War really was remains open.

### The depiction of historical events in *Deutschland 83*

The plot of *Deutschland 83* is fictional but revolves around historical events. These events are not only depicted by retelling, but they feature prominently throughout the series in the form of original news footage on television and radio broadcasts. The very first event we see in the first episode is footage of the speech of US President Ronald Reagan in March 1983 in which he describes the Soviet Union as ‘evil empire’. This speech sets the whole plot of the series in motion and leads to the recruitment of the protagonist as spy for the East German foreign intelligence service.

After the opening credits, we see original footage of a speech by the West German Chancellor Kohl in which he emphasizes the need for the deployment of American Pershing 2 missiles in Western Europe if the Soviet Union is not willing to stop their military build-up, as it was demanded in the Double-Track Decision of the NATO. This is followed by a speech of Erich Honecker, the East German General Secretary and head of state, in which he calls the arms race a suicide of the whole human race if it is not stopped anytime soon. As can be seen from these short sequences and the ones that are shown later, they function as introduction to the political situation between the United States and the Soviet Union and then more specifically to the situation between the two German states.

Furthermore, in this episode appears an issue of the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* that features on its cover page a story with the title ‘Der neue Partner’ (The new partner). In relation to this we see original footage of a meeting between West

German Franz Josef Strauss and Honecker on a TV in a store window (Figure 1). In this meeting, which took place after West Germany had granted the GDR a loan of 1 billion German marks, the two spoke about their views of the recent events, especially the arms race on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Although these scenes are very short and only seen in passing, they are seamlessly integrated into the fictional story as brief history lessons that provide some of the necessary background to better understand the story. Later in the same episode news footage from West German as well as East German news programs shows the ongoing arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union and the increasing verbal confrontation related to it.



Figure 1: Example for the seamless integration of original news footage from 1983 into the story (Source: *Deutschland 83*, episode 2, 0:17:13).

Episode 2 presents at the beginning a summary of the situation at the time. First, the protagonist listens to news on the radio that report about the forthcoming deployment of American missiles throughout Western Europe. Then, original news footage from 1983 is shown on television in which the American Secretary of Defense accuses the Soviet Union of building up a war machinery with the goal of world domination. This is followed by a news report from the East in which the Soviet Union claims to commit itself to a no-first-use policy regarding nuclear weapons. This is positively commented on by an East German reporter. At last, we see a speech of the West German Foreign Minister Genscher in which he expresses his concerns about

the stationing of the American missiles.

Later in this episode, we see for the first time a gathering of peace activists in West Germany as part of the story. This is followed by short news clips on television with original footage of peace demonstrations that took place all over the world. With these examples, the discussions about the missile deployment and the civilian demonstrations against it, world events such as the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union are set into relation to the conflicts between both German states.

This episode also depicts a meeting of NATO generals who discuss the missile deployment in Europe. In this meeting, the viewer learns about a NATO security report that analyses every possible outcome of a military confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. In relation to this report, Able Archer is mentioned for the first time. However, no further explanation is given as to what this term means.

Episode 3 shows a meeting of the NATO member states in Brussels in which the abovementioned report is discussed. During the discussion, the differing opinions of the Americans and Europeans regarding the missile deployment become clear. While the report states that only an easing of tension will lead to a positive outcome in this conflict, the American side insists on the stationing of their missiles and claims that with them the United States could win a war against the Soviet Union. However, the author of the NATO report argues that the usage of the American missiles would lead to a total escalation, namely a nuclear war that would make much of the world uninhabitable.

This episode contains no original footage of the 1980s, except for a radio news program that reports about peace activists in East Berlin who have initiated a hunger strike to protest against the nuclear threat. However, the depiction of the peace movement in the story itself is concentrated on the activities in Bonn, the capital of West Germany. In this episode, we see in detail the discussions and preparations of the peace movement for a human chain that is supposed to encompass all parts of West Germany.

In episode 4, original footage of the 1980s becomes more frequent again, but it is only embedded into rather short scenes where a character watches TV which shows either a news program related to the events in the series or some pop culture program that features music. In one scene, a movie with the title ‘The End of History’, which apparently depicts a nuclear war, is shown in a cinema. The title is fictitious, but it can be assumed that it hints at the movie *The Day After*, which was released in the United States and in Europe in 1983 (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Poster of the fictitious movie ‘The End of History’ in *Deutschland 83* (left) and the German poster of *The Day After* (Source: *Deutschland 83*, episode 5, 0:28:37; Harvey 2015).

In episode 5, original news footage has again a more prominent role and shows the growing tensions between the NATO allies and the Soviet Union regarding the stationing of American medium-range ballistic missiles in Western Europe. Accordingly, tensions in the story rise as well and the viewer learns for the first time about the Soviet-lead operation ‘RYAN’, an intelligence program with the purpose to collect information about plans of a nuclear first strike by the US government. During this operation, East German spies played an important role in gathering intelligence throughout Western Europe. RYAN is the actual name of this program that was initiated by Yuri Andropov in 1980, then chairman of the KGB. In relation to RYAN, the viewer hears again about Able Archer, although at this moment it is still unclear for the characters on the Eastern side as well as the audience what is meant by it.

In this episode, the viewer gets additional glimpses into the political situation of the time through newspapers and magazines that occasionally appear on screen. They always have a connection to the story, for example the title page of a newspaper states

that peace activists were arrested due to blocking barracks. Or we see once again the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* which features an illustration of opposing American and Soviet missiles on its cover page. Later in the same episode, another issue of *Der Spiegel* features a title story about the new and still mysterious disease called AIDS. These newspapers and magazines are only visible on the screen for a very short time, but they are carefully placed throughout the whole series and contribute to the immersion into this time period.

Episode 6 starts off with another depiction of a historical event by the way of a television news program. In this case, the viewer hears about the downing of a civilian South Korean airplane that had strayed into Soviet airspace. This incident functions as one of the key events in this episode to portray the rising tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. Only a few minutes after this scene, more original news footage about the shoot-down is shown. Here, news programs from the West and the East are used and they make clear that both sides have differing views regarding the responsibility for this incident. Towards the end of the episode, a speech of US President Ronald Reagan is shown (again on TV) in which he condemns the ‘Korean airline massacre’ as ‘a crime against humanity’ by the Soviet Union.

At this point in the story of the series, the East German intelligence service has decrypted the abovementioned NATO security report that lays out their plans in case of a military conflict with nuclear weapons. The officer in charge who presents this report to his superiors has deliberately left out essential information that states that the United States will under no circumstances initiate an unprovoked attack on the Soviet Union. Therefore, the report is falsely interpreted by the East Germans and the Soviets as a plan for a nuclear first strike by the NATO.

Episodes 7 and 8 contain almost no original footage and are concentrated on the unfolding events during the final stage of the NATO exercise in which the war simulation turns from a conventional to a nuclear conflict. The original footage in episode 7 depicts the largest peace demonstration of 1983 that took place in October in the West German capital Bonn with about 500,000 participants. Episode 8 contains footage of the US Secretary of Defense emphasizing the deployment of the Pershing 2 missiles, followed by a speech of Honecker who says that this stationing will be answered accordingly by the GDR and the Soviet Union.

The main points of the story of the last two episodes are as follows. When information about the preparations for a preemptive strike by the NATO, attained via

the intelligence gathering operation RYAN, is presented to leaders of the East German intelligence service, doubts about the gathered information are expressed by one of them. However, the view that the NATO is preparing a nuclear attack prevails inside the agency. On the other hand, the protagonist of the series who had gathered this information insists that Able Archer is nothing more than a military exercise, but his attempts to convince his superiors of his findings have no effect. As a result, he exposes his real identity and warns the West German general that the Soviets consider Able Archer a disguise for a real attack, but the general does not believe him. In the end, he flees to East Germany to tell his superiors in person that they are about to make a grave mistake and they finally believe him. So, in the final moments of *Deutschland 83* the protagonist has saved the world from a nuclear war.

### Conclusion

According to many historians, the tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union had reached another high point at the beginning of the 1980s, but especially in the time before and during the NATO command post exercise Able Archer in 1983. Some even say that there was an imminent threat of nuclear war due to the Soviet leaders' misinterpretation of this exercise as a disguise for a real attack. Others have argued that there was no such danger and that it was an overstated assessment by a Soviet double agent. These differing views are mainly a result of the analysis of different sources. Whereas one side mainly relied on Western sources, the other side drew its conclusions to a great extent from Soviet sources. Many formerly classified documents which have become available since 2013 through the work of Nate Jones and the National Security Archive have shed new light on the events of 1983. This material suggests that there was a Soviet fear of a NATO attack and that there might have been a chance of nuclear war through miscalculation. However, there is still a great number of documents not available to the public, so future releases of classified material might add more detail about these events.

The depiction of these events in the television series *Deutschland 83* is remarkable in several ways. It embeds its fictional, albeit somehow realistic, plot about an East German spy in a historical setting which is substantiated by integrating actual news footage from television, radio, and other media of the time. The series is made with great attention to historical details which probably cannot be sufficiently

apprehended in a single viewing since they are often very short. However, with its mix of historical facts and believable story, *Deutschland 83* creates a convincing picture of the tensions between the NATO partners and the Eastern Bloc in general, and to some extent of the relationship of the two German states and their citizens during the 1980s. Most importantly for this analysis, it shows the conflicts regarding the events of the military exercise Able Archer 83 on both sides of the Iron Curtain and how easily the misinterpretation and misuse of gathered intelligence could have led to a disastrous outcome for the whole world. In the end, the story of *Deutschland 83* adopts the view that the events around Able Archer had brought the world to the brink of a nuclear war, similar to the view of some of the abovementioned historians. However, in *Deutschland 83* the ultimate catastrophe is single-handedly averted by the protagonist, a young East German army officer.

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