

The Supreme Court Of The Soviet Union

Prosecution Vs Stanislav Petrov

Topic Overview

On the night of September 26, 1983, at the peak of Cold War tensions, the Soviet Union's nuclear early-warning system "Oko" detected and reported the launch of a number of US intercontinental ballistic missiles. Stanislav Petrov, a lieutenant colonel in the Soviet Air Defence Forces, was the duty officer responsible for evaluating these warnings. Soviet military protocol demanded that if such an attack was confirmed, Petrov must report it as genuine, and this would trigger a retaliatory nuclear strike immediately. This system relied heavily on speed and provided hardly any time for deliberation, and Petrov would need to act within minutes due to the doctrine of launch-on-warning, meaning if the system reported an incoming nuclear attack, the USSR's response would be almost instant. The Oko satellite system had picked up a sequence of missile launches after midnight: a single incoming US missile, followed seconds later by four more. That sequence, if genuine, would represent the initial phase of a US nuclear strike. However, Petrov determined that the alert was a false alarm due to the low number of missiles detected (hundreds of missiles would be launched in an actual US missile attack, not several), the lack of confirmation from ground-based radars, and his awareness of the system's recent technical issues and unreliability. Petrov recognized the detection as a false alarm, preventing immediate escalation. Following investigations determined that the alerts had been triggered by the reflection of the sun off clouds, which the system's sensors mistakenly interpreted as missile launches. While his actions very likely averted nuclear war, it was also a direct breach of Soviet military procedure. By overstepping his boundaries by disregarding automated system warnings, his actions could have allowed an actual attack to succeed without being counterattacked, which goes against his duty of adhering to military protocol strictly, which is essential in national defense. On the other hand, the signal then was not sufficient to cross the threshold for confirmation of an attack, and he states that his actions were based on sound judgment and situational awareness, in the sense that if he obeyed blindly, it would have resulted in the death of hundreds of millions in a retaliatory strike and caused irreparable harm. This case pushes the court to weigh military compliance against human judgment in situations of life and death. The trial will thus deliberate on whether Stanislav Petrov's violation of protocol will be accounted as a departure from duty or an act of courage that preserved world stability.

Timeline

1. Late 1970s - Early 1980s: Escalating Cold War Tensions
 - a. After WWII, tensions between the USA and the USSR kept on steadily growing, with numerous events like the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as the Truman Doctrine, increasing mistrust between the two political powers. By the 1970s, the USA was far ahead in satellite-based early missile warning systems, and with the USSR's suspicion of a US missile attack, they raced to catch up, since the USSR relied only on ground-based radars to detect missile launches, which could only detect missiles once they were already above the horizon, leaving them with 15-20 minutes of warning time.
2. 1982-1983: "Oko," the satellite-based early warning system in the USSR
 - a. In 1982-1983, the USSR had finalized and completed the Oko early-warning system after spending years and billions to create it, designing it to detect US missile launches well ahead of time. It was still considered new and unreliable at the time, only being declared operational and fully active a year before. It was placed in highly elliptical Molniya orbits (oval-shaped satellite orbits), providing spacious coverage of certain regions, with 4-9 satellites providing partial coverage of US missile fields.
3. September 26th, 1983: The 1983 Soviet Nuclear False Alarm Incident (Petrov Incident)
 - a. On September 26th, 1983, Stanislav Petrov, a lieutenant colonel, was assigned to analyze satellite missile reports of US missiles at the Oko early-warning system at midnight, when the system reported 1 US missile launch, then four more. Instead of following protocol to launch a retaliatory strike and confirm an attack, Petrov judged it to be a false alarm due to the low number of missiles, the lack of confirmation from ground-based radars, and the system's unreliability and recorded it as a false alarm.
4. September 27th, 1983: Further interrogation and investigation
 - a. The day after the incident, Petrov was interrogated and investigated by higher official authorities to know why he disobeyed commands. After explaining his view on the incident and after confirming that the warnings were false due to sunlight reflecting off clouds, which caused the infrared sensors (which detect the heat of missile launches) of the system to misread it, Petrov was reassigned quietly until after the trial.

Charges

Charge No.1: Violation of Soviet Military Procedure

This charge is applicable if the accused has deliberately, and while fully aware of such protocols existing and of all of the details pertaining to the incident at hand, conducted an action that clearly contradicts official soviet military procedure.

Charge No. 2: Treason

This charge is applicable if the accused has deliberately, while fully appreciative of his or her actions, conducted an action at the expense of the state or to recklessly and purposely endanger the state and its leadership.

Guiding Questions

- a. Was Petrov's decision based on concrete evidence and rational caution, or was he influenced by uncertainty and depended on luck?
- b. Considering the US was ahead in missile warning system technology, and the Oko warning system was the newest system and first line of detection for US missiles in the USSR, then isn't it more dependable to listen to scientific technology rather than Petrov's opinion?
- c. How did Petrov's discretion prevent an irreversible nuclear war based on a false alarm?
- d. Would Petrov's actions be justified as defending the Soviet people from danger of a retaliation attack, even if that meant not directly following protocol?