

The Guardian view on Stanislav Petrov: an unsung hero

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Editorial

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It takes about half an hour for a nuclear missile to travel between the population centres of Russia and the US, its warheads freighted with the end of the civilised world. At the height of the cold war, when detection systems were less sophisticated than today, there would have been as little as 15 minutes for the other side to react in. On a couple of occasions the world brushed past such a catastrophe – once in 1962 at the height of the Cuban missile crisis, when a captured Russian double agent, Oleg Penkovsky, gave [Gervase Cowell](#), his Secret Intelligence Service handler at the British embassy in Moscow, the agreed signal that a nuclear attack was under way. Cowell, experienced and crafty, decided that his agent had been arrested and did not pass [the message](#) on to his superiors. Had he done so, the ambassador would have had to ring London and someone there would have had to make the fatal decision under terrible pressure of time.



The other hero whose name is known to history was the Russian colonel Stanislav Petrov, the news of whose death has just reached the west. In September 1983, at a time when the Soviet military really believed that Ronald Reagan might launch a nuclear assault, Col Petrov was the only officer on duty at a control centre for the Soviet early warning satellites when the computers told him that first one, and then five more, missiles had been launched from the US towards [Russia](#). He decided on his own authority that these were false alarms: if there was to be a first strike, he reasoned, it would have more than five missiles. So he warned no one. An accidental Armageddon was averted. We can't know whether anyone higher up the chain of command would have made the same judgment – with less time, and under even more pressure – but both stories show that it's not just discipline that keeps nuclear weapons under control. Judgment and well-timed insubordination have sometimes saved us, too.