Mikhail Gorbachev and the end of the Cold War

Decisions on Strategic Defense and Biological Weapons, 1985-1991

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The Dead Hand: The Untold Story of the Cold War Arms Race and Its Dangerous Legacy (New York: Doubleday, 2009)
The author

The White House, 1984

Arzamas-16, 1999

Moscow, 2006
A true story

Institute of Theoretical and Experimental Physics, Moscow

“Significant” amount of highly-enriched uranium on site

U.S. sponsored upgrades, November 1996-January 1998:

- Alarm communications
- Non-destructive assay instruments
- Accounting system, bar-code inventory
- Guard training
A true story

August-September, 1998

Russia defaults on debts, devalues the ruble.

Bank Menatep, Moscow

Engling cable to Washington:

The guard forces at the institutes are paralyzed, with wages unpaid two to four months, absenteeism, lack of winter clothing, heat and food. “Time is of the essence.”
The Katayev papers

- Vitaly Katayev, former professional staff member, Defense Department, Central Committee, 1974-1991
- Previously, aviation and rocket designer
- More than 10,000 pages of internal Kremlin documents on the Cold War arms race
Vitaly Katayev

Omsk Aviation-Technical College, 1959

Courtesy Ksenia Kostrova
Vitaly Katayev

Dnipropetrovsk, Yuzhnoe Design Bureau, Early 1970s

Courtesy Ksenia Kostrova
Vitaly Katayev

Moscow, The Central Committee, 1980s

Courtesy Ksenia Kostrova
Vitaly Katayev

“A man who lived by his pencil.”

A drawing on modular missiles.
Gorbachev and Reagan
Strategic Defense Initiative

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release March 23, 1983

ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT TO THE NATION
The Oval Office

8:02 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: My fellow Americans, thank you for sharing your time with me tonight.

The subject I want to discuss with you, peace and national security, is both timely and important. Timely, because I’ve reached a decision which offers a new hope for our children in the Twenty-First Century, a decision I’ll tell you about in a few minutes. And important because there’s a very big decision that you must make for yourselves.

I think we are. Indeed, we must. After careful consultation with my advisors, including the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I believe there is a way. Let me share with you a vision of the future which offers hope. It is that we embark on a program to counter the awesome Soviet missile threat with measures that are defensive. Let us turn to the very strengths in technology that spawned our great industrial base, and that have given us the quality of life we enjoy today.
In Moscow, doubts

“The system would clearly be unable to ‘render nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete’…”

--The Soviet Scientists Committee for the Defense of Peace Against Nuclear Threat.

Yevgeny P. Velikhov
The Soviet threat

"There is also growing concern over a potential Soviet breakout from the ABM Treaty."

NSDD 119, Jan. 6, 1984

"The Soviets have for a long time been doing advanced research on their version of SDI. They’re doing so well, our experts say they may be able to put an advanced technology defense system in space by the end of the century."

President’s radio address, Oct. 1985

"Further, the Soviet Union has had a massive effort underway for fifteen years; using some of their finest technical talent to develop just such advanced defenses as the SDI."

Science Advisor George “Jay” Keyworth, Feb. 7, 1985
“In view of the increasingly tense international situation and the American administration’s persistence in striving to gain military superiority over the Soviet Union, the Center is making military strategy the top priority in residencies’ work.”

--KGB to agents abroad
February 22, 1985

What the KGB feared the most was to underestimate the seriousness of the threat, so they overestimated it.
--Katayev
Gorbachev, 54, was the youngest member of the Politburo by a full five years, and 13 years younger than the average age of the voting membership.
A Soviet ‘Star Wars’?
An asymmetric response?

In Katayev’s records, a plan to put 38 warheads on one SS-18 missile.
SDI did not bankrupt the Soviet Union. Had Brezhnev been in power—and built a Soviet response—then it might have.

But Gorbachev did not build it.
Gorbachev: a new direction

Reykjavik, October 1986
February 7, 1987

**The Soviet threat**

Velikhov proposal: invite American scientists and journalists to Sary Shagan to “demonstrate the false nature of the official American claims.”

Hardliners immediately object: the lasers are outdated. Americans won’t believe it.
Feb. 12, 1987

Central Committee rejects Velikhov proposal, but—

July 8, 1989

Two years later, Velikhov takes Americans to Sary Shagan.

“It was sort of a relic,” said Frank von Hippel of Princeton
Underside of the arms race
"If somebody uses germs on us, we’ll nuke ’em."

Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention

- Signed, 1972
- Entry into force, 1975

On the day he signed it, Nixon privately told Kissinger it was a “silly biological warfare thing which doesn’t mean anything,” and the next day, speaking to Treasury Secretary John Connally, he called it “that jackass treaty on biological warfare.”
Brezhnev authorized a new, illicit program to research and build germ weapons
Experiments in genetic engineering to create new pathogens that would be unstoppable.
Stepnogorsk

Kazakhstan

Capable of producing 300 tons of weaponized anthrax in 8 months once the order given from Moscow.
Soviet germ warfare

**Known agents for research:**

- Anthrax
- Smallpox
- Plague
- Tularemia

**Unknowns:**

- Targets: China, or the United States?
- Delivery: planes, cruise missiles, or ICBMs?
- Military doctrine or concept of use
What did he know, when did he know it—and why didn't he act?
In Gorbachev’s time

July 27, 1989

Yuri Kalinin, head of Biopreparat, tells a Politburo commission, BW is poor man’s atom bomb:

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Notes taken by Vitaly Katayev
A Soviet defector, to Britain

October, 1989

The Institute of Ultra-Pure Bio preparations

Vladimir Pasechnik
"In accordance with your instructions, I report on the question of biological weapons."

Lev Zaikov, May 1990
Coverup

June 8, 1990

Thatcher: “We have information that in your country work is underway on biological weapons, which naturally causes us grave concern.”

Gorbachev: “Apparently, we have facilities working in this field, but not quite in this direction.”
Coverup

March 15, 1991

Baker: *There is a colossal Soviet biological warfare program...*

Gorbachev: *Maybe all this is fantasy?*

Baker: *No, we don’t think so.*
Gorbachev

Possible explanations on BW:

• Didn’t know full details
• Was told US still had a program*
• Military promised shutdown, but did not
• Waning power after 1989
• Prisoner of his own image
• BW establishment too strong; didn’t want to confront
• He had higher priorities—nuclear
• Military wanted a strategic reserve
• Gorbachev wanted something in back-pocket to counter SDI

* Still unanswered: did US spread disinformation on BW to Moscow?
Gorbachev

A broader view

1. Brought Cold War to a close, Soviet Union to an end
2. Reversed strategic nuclear arms race
3. Allowed/enabled Europe ‘whole and free’
4. Withdrew from Afghan/abandoned Brezhnev doctrine
5. Instilled openness, *glasnost*, in closed system
6. Failed at economic reform
7. Failed to see centrifugal forces/national aspirations
8. Failed to stop bioweapons work
The End