

Disarmament in the Time of Perestroika: Arms Control and the End of the Soviet Union

Scott Ritter. Atlanta: Clarity Press, 2022

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The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, signed by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev on December 8, 1987, contributed to the end of the Cold War by setting two major precedents: It was the first arms agreement to eliminate entire categories of weapons (ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles of 500 to 5,500 kilometer range), and it mandated a system of intrusive onsite verification of the destruction of the missiles and their launchers, surveillance of the plants where they were produced, and inspection of the bases where they were deployed. The treaty ultimately led to the destruction of 2,692 weapons, including the United States' Pershing II and cruise missiles and the Soviet Union's RSD-16 *Pioner*, better known by its North Atlantic Treaty Organization designation, SS-20.

One of the most demanding elements of the verification regime was the least anticipated. It turned out that the first stage of the two-stage, solid-fueled SS-20 rocket was identical to that of the three-stage, intercontinental-range SS-25. Both were produced at the same factory in Votkinsk, a “closed” military-industrial town in the Udmurt Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, some 1,200km northeast of Moscow. To verify that the factory was not secretly producing the banned SS-20 missiles along with the permitted SS-25 ones, a system of Perimeter Portal Monitoring had to be devised. William Scott Ritter, Jr., a 26-year-old US Marine intelligence officer at the time the INF Treaty was signed, became a member of the inspection team at Votkinsk, and he has written a detailed memoir of the tasks the inspectors faced in the context of the tumultuous changes in the country that brought the Cold War and ultimately the USSR itself to an end.

Ritter's book complements Joseph P. Hanahan's official account, *On-Site Inspections Under the INF Treaty* (1993), which the author cites, and it reflects an alternative to the style of personalized history adopted by Justin Lifflander in his lightly fictionalized *How Not to Become a Spy: A Memoir of Love at the End of the Cold War* (2015). (As an aside, Lifflander, who worked as an employee of the private contractor – a subsidiary of Hughes Aircraft Company – that provided most of the US personnel at Votkinsk, makes a cameo appearance in *Disarmament in the Time of Perestroika*, but Ritter leaves out an important detail: Lifflander fell in love with, and eventually married, his KGB-assigned interpreter/escort and became a Russian citizen.) Although the second subtitle of Ritter's book is “a personal journal,” and the level of day-to-day detail indeed resembles the kind of information drawn from a diary, the author has conducted substantial additional research in primary

and secondary sources. The book's eight chapters alternate between a number of subjects conveyed in different registers: from highly technical discussions of weapons design and verification challenges to summary reviews of the changes in Soviet domestic and foreign policy at the time, and from analyses of controversies within the United States about the merits of arms control and claims of inadequacy of the inspection regime to engaging personal anecdotes about relations with the local Soviet officials, factory workers, and citizens.

Although his own exploits naturally figure prominently in some parts of the narrative, Ritter endeavors to recognize the contributions of many others on the Soviet and US sides. He devotes numerous pages to short biographies of the other US personnel with whom he served – including their military postings, where they went to college and graduate school, and where they learned Russian – and he provides many biographical facts about their Soviet counterparts as well.

Some readers will find the technical details daunting, along with the peculiar ordering principle for the book. Broadly chronological, within each section it jumps back and forward in time in order to fill in background or anticipate future events. The effect can be disconcerting. The book begins, for example, with a prologue on the “missile crisis” – a situation that the US team faced in trying to run the complicated CargoScan radiographic imaging machine to inspect SS-25 missiles exiting the Votkinsk factory. On visual examination Ritter had flagged certain missiles as “anomalous.” The Soviet authorities raised suspicions by refusing to allow the US team to perform the CargoScan inspection on them. This incident took place in early 1990, more than 2 years after the signing of the treaty and well into the second year of its inspection regime. Only much later in the book does the reader learn the significance of the controversy: an issue with the anomalous missiles “so sensitive that the Soviets would risk an international crisis rather than have them subjected to radiographic imaging by CargoScan” (276). Although the issue was indeed consequential, it does not really work to bookend the rest of the story. The details in the prologue are so arcane and technical as to undermine whatever suspense the author sought to generate and then resolve with the revelation that appears some 250 pages later (and will not appear here).

In addition to the technical details and the accounts of personal and bureaucratic difficulties in implementing the inspection regime, the book contains overviews of the Soviet political situation at the time. These will be familiar to anyone who followed the contemporaneous news reports from journalists such as Martin Walker and David Remnick, or who read the later archive-based histories of William Taubman and Stephen Kotkin. Ritter also draws heavily on the memoir-history of Jack Matlock, then-US ambassador to the Soviet Union, whose official visit to Votkinsk the author helped organize. More original and interesting are the reports of the effects of Gorbachev's reforms – *perestroika*, *glasnost*, and the new thinking in foreign policy – on Votkinsk and its citizens. For his insights Ritter credits the team's interpreters' translated digests of local newspaper articles, supplemented by his own reading of the Soviet press and direct observation (of election campaigns and public protests, for example). One would, however, have appreciated more discussion of the role of ethno-nationalist sentiment in Udmurtia, a region whose non-Russian inhabitants represented more than a third of the population, with Udmurts at about 28%. In other regions of the USSR with a strong national identity – for example, Kazakhstan, the site of the Soviet nuclear test range – locals came increasingly to resent the impact of the Soviet military-industrial sector on their economy and environment. Ritter discusses how the decline in military production at Votkinsk and the overall chaos in the economy affected the citizens, but he does not distinguish between the views of Russians and Udmurts.

Ritter's personal recollections offer a good sense of the author's personality. He could appear somewhat self-deprecating – with only two years of college Russian, he found himself making potentially embarrassing mistakes – but he also retained a certain amount of residual Marine bravado sometimes conveyed in a tongue-in-cheek manner. On a mission to keep an important verification

instrument from the attention of US customs agents, for example, he relied on the authority of his uniform and the use of “knife hand gestures, a Marine trait, to make my point” (115–116). Rising to the last-minute challenge to compete in a triathlon with local Soviet athletes, he incurred a deep gash on his foot during the first stage of swimming. He nevertheless continued through the second, cycling stage and through the third and final one: “running in pain was what the Marine Corps did for a living, so I just lowered my head and started forward at a modest clip, my blood-filled right shoe making a discernable ‘splat’ sound with every footfall” (300). The book includes poignant accounts of altruistic behavior on both the US and Soviet sides, in the face of medical emergencies, for example. There are also lighter moments, such as a talent show, and social gatherings that managed to become rather boisterous despite Gorbachev's anti-alcohol campaign, thanks to Ritter's sly workaround: “Diplomatic toasts only” (236).

If readers recognize the name Scott Ritter, it is probably not for his service as an INF Treaty inspector. His Wikipedia entry (at the time of this writing) does not mention it, for example. Instead it describes his role as weapons inspector in Iraq with the United Nations Special Commission; his public rejection of US government claims, used as a pretext for invasion, that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction; his conviction for sex offenses following several police sting operations (the timing of which struck his supporters as politically motivated); his appearances on Fox News; and his support for Russia's propaganda claims regarding its brutal war against Ukraine – for instance, that Russian soldiers' atrocities perpetrated against the civilian population of Bucha were really committed by the Ukrainian police.

Fortunately, this book about his service at the end of the Cold War reflects none of the controversy that has engulfed Ritter more recently. He provides a brief but evenhanded account of the INF Treaty's demise, attended by accusations on both sides of violations after the prescribed period of on-site inspections ended in 2001. The final nail in the coffin was Donald Trump's decision for the United States to withdraw from the treaty on August 2, 2019. Ritter ends his book with the counterfactual speculation that had the inspection regime remained intact, the mutual suspicions that doomed the treaty might have been alleviated. Reminding readers of Zurab Tsereteli's statue of St. George, created to celebrate the INF Treaty and mentioned in the book's introduction, Ritter concludes by stressing the “urgent need to revisit nuclear disarmament and kill the nuclear dragon once and for all” (342).

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