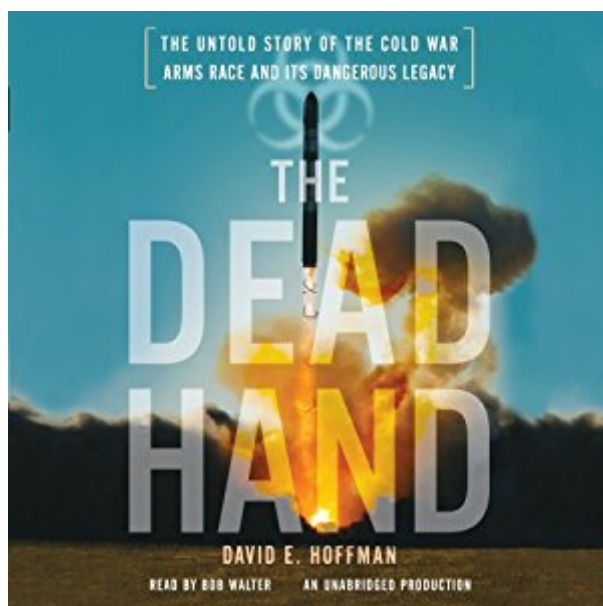


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The Dead Hand: The Untold Story Of The Cold War Arms Race And Its Dangerous Legacy



Synopsis

“A tour de force of investigative history. Steve Coll The Dead Hand is the suspense-filled story of the people who sought to brake the speeding locomotive of the arms race, then rushed to secure the nuclear and biological weapons left behind by the collapse of the Soviet Union—a dangerous legacy that haunts us even today. The Cold War was an epoch of massive overkill. In the last half of the twentieth century the two superpowers had perfected the science of mass destruction and possessed nuclear weapons with the combined power of a million Hiroshimas. What’s more, a Soviet biological warfare machine was ready to produce bacteria and viruses to sicken and kill millions. In The Dead Hand, a thrilling narrative history drawing on new archives and original research and interviews, David E. Hoffman reveals how presidents, scientists, diplomats, soldiers, and spies confronted the danger and changed the course of history. The Dead Hand captures the inside story in both the United States and the Soviet Union, giving us an urgent and intimate account of the last decade of the arms race. With access to secret Kremlin documents, Hoffman chronicles Soviet internal deliberations that have long been hidden. He reveals that weapons designers in 1985 laid a massive “Star Wars” program on the desk of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to compete with President Reagan, but Gorbachev refused to build it. He unmaskes the cover-up of the Soviet biological weapons program. He tells the exclusive story of one Soviet microbiologist’s quest to build a genetically engineered super-germ—it would cause a mild illness, a deceptive recovery, then a second, fatal attack. And he details the frightening history of the Doomsday Machine, known as the Dead Hand, which would launch a retaliatory nuclear strike if the Soviet leaders were wiped out. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the dangers remained. Soon rickety trains were hauling unsecured nuclear warheads across the Russian steppe; tons of highly-enriched uranium and plutonium lay unguarded in warehouses; and microbiologists and bomb designers were scavenging for food to feed their families. The Dead Hand offers fresh and startling insights into Reagan and Gorbachev, the two key figures of the end of the Cold War, and draws colorful, unforgettable portraits of many others who struggled, often valiantly, to save the world from the most terrifying weapons known to man. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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Customer Reviews

Anyone hoping to opine intelligently on Obama's current efforts at nuclear reduction needs to read this book first. It is a deeply researched, well-written look at Reagan and Gorbachev's efforts to eliminate nuclear arms, along with fascinating, newly-discovered material on the Soviet chemical and biological weapons programs. I personally was unaware the extent to which Reagan was devoted to the elimination of all nuclear arms -- he was deeply affected by ABC's *The Day After*, and immediately began to write notes to Soviet leaders in an effort to engage them on nuclear arms issues. Unfortunately, his successor Bush I and his team -- including Cheney -- were distrustful of Gorbachev and set Reagan's efforts back (although Sam Nunn and James Baker were instrumental in securing loose weaponry after the fall of the Soviet Union). The book ends with very practical, timely suggestions for what can be done now to reduce the nuclear threat -- including taking our devices off of "fire-ready" status. I hope our leaders are listening.

I recommend this book to anyone who studies the Cold War. I was fascinated by this book. "Fascinated" is really not the word...amazed, horrified, creepy. Those are words more appropriate to the contents of this work as it relates to the Soviet biological and chemical warfare industry and the efforts to conceal the magnitude of the programs from all countries as well as its own citizens. Somehow, the nuclear aspects of the book pale in comparison to the stuff about germs and gases. How downright weird is that? I suppose it's the diabolical nature of the bio and gas weapons that freak me out, whereas, the nuclear weapons capabilities of the USSR seem more straight forward and somehow more comprehensible. Nukes were far more immediately fatal to us here in America and to our allies. However, the other stuff this criminal regime was planning to use on us was designed to kill the entire population as opposed to destroying our ability to retaliate against them.

I really enjoyed reading this book. The author did a great job of reviewing a lot of sources, including interviews with key players on both the US and Soviet side, and wove many threads together into a thorough, and thoroughly enjoyable story. As noted in some of the editorial reviews, at times it feels like you're reading a spy novel. And at times some of the details - particularly about the Soviet's germ warfare program - sound almost too lurid to be true. Except that everything in this book is impeccably documented - the bibliography takes up about 15% of the book. Roughly the first two thirds of the book are concerned primarily with the 1980s, from the start of the Reagan presidency, through the rise of Gorbachev, and the beginning of co-operation between the two sides on arms reduction, through Gorbachev's decline and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union. The final third deals with the post-Soviet era, through about 2000. I was born in 1975, so the earlier events described in the book were things that were going on as I was growing up. For example, I remember the news reports of the Korean airliner being shot down by the Russians. I remember the German kid who flew a single-engine plane to Red Square in Moscow. I remember that my parents didn't let me watch "The Day After". I remember prime-time news specials describing the "Star Wars" missile defense. But as a kid, I didn't know the real significance of any of this stuff, and of course many of the details were classified at the time. This book covers all that and more, and it's fascinating to go back and read what was going on behind the scenes during my childhood. The author is very balanced in his approach. Reagan comes off surprisingly well, given how he is often portrayed as an imbecile. In this book, he comes across as an idealist, striving for a world without nuclear weapons, yet rather naive about how his strident rhetoric and plans for missile defense were perceived by the paranoid leadership of the Soviet Union, and for a while accelerated the arms race instead of slowing it down. Gorbachev also comes across well, a reformer surrounded by aging dinosaurs in the Communist party and an entrenched military industrial complex. But the author is by no means an apologist for the Soviet Union. There's a section toward the end of the book that sums it up well - a US official is investigating a mothballed Soviet-era biological weapons plant. He had never bought into the whole "evil empire" rhetoric. But staring down into a giant fermenter capable of producing tons of anthrax, meant to be delivered by strategic missiles to wipe out the survivors of a nuclear strike, he realizes he is staring into the face of evil. Lots of fascinating and terrifying stuff. The descriptions of plutonium pits and highly enriched uranium spilling out the windows of poorly guarded warehouses, and being transported on creaky rail cars, or the test-tubes of weaponized plague being found in an empty tin of peas, are of course scary. And the decreased cooperation of Putin-era Russia leaves a lot of unanswered questions. There are still former

bioweapons sites that Russia has never granted access to. The book paints a picture of some of these programs having lives of their own, in spite of the best intentions of the leadership. So who knows what might still be lurking in the shadows. Minor drawbacks were (1) the author has a tendency to jump back and forth between strands of the story, i.e. from nuclear arms reduction talks, to the bioweapons story, in a somewhat distracting way, and (2) the author feels the need to keep reminding us who certain characters are, I guess because an American reader will get confused by all the Russian names. But for example, he keeps reminding us that a certain Gorbachev aide was the one he had a stirring conversation with during a walk in the woods in Canada. But overall - very well written, impeccably researched and documented, and a great read.

David E. Hoffman's *The Dead Hand* reads like equal parts political thriller and science fiction masterpiece, but *The Dead Hand* is the frighteningly real account of the Cold War arms race and its frightening legacy. It's a really informative book with an obvious detail for research and facts, but it feels like it spends most of the time talking about the covert chemical and biological weapons that the Soviet Union had erected during the Cold War. This could simply be a factor of the Soviet archives being opened, rather than a bias towards the former USSR. Hoffman paints an intricate picture of mistrust and then missed opportunities as U.S. and Soviet leaders grapple over weapons systems and the implied threat of nuclear destruction. This fear often proliferated a dangerous system that we are still dealing with today, even though the "Cold War" ended in 1991. The greatest strength is in the Soviet portions. Thanks to the archival records and new interviews, the reader is taken directly into the mind of the chemical/biological weapons program. I don't think we get as strong a look into the mind of U.S. decision makers. The bottom line is that the Cold War mistrust on both sides has left the world with a rather frightening legacy of nuclear weapons and catastrophic destruction.

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