

Interview with

**VLADIMIR ALEKSANDROVICH KRYUCHKOV**

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O.S. I'd like to begin our conversation with a question about SDI. There are some who believe that Gorbachev, assuming that the Soviet Union was no longer able to compete with the United States in the race for technology, all but used SDI as an excuse to relinquish our position to the United States. Vladimir Aleksandrovich, what did the KGB think of SDI? And what, in your opinion, did Gorbachev need to be told about this issue?

V.K. I don't think Gorbachev really understood the problem of SDI and, perhaps, didn't want to understand. The KGB approached SDI seriously and gave it a great deal of attention. And before drawing any sorts of conclusions about SDI, before reporting these conclusions to the Communist Party Central Committee, the Council of Ministers, and to Gorbachev personally, we in the KGB naturally conducted an exhaustive study of the problem. We did so on the basis of openly available information and materials, as well as completely confidential, secret information of an intelligence nature. It is widely known that in the West there was a great deal of propaganda on this issue. When we combined these two sources of information, we came to the conclusion that the Strategic

Defense Initiative could not, in reality, be implemented, and that the United States was bluffing.

We also came to the conclusion that the United States wanted to drag the Soviet Union into a new arms race and a new round of enormous expenditures beyond our country's resources. Our specialists in the KGB believed that it made sense to redirect our research efforts and find a different way of strengthening our defenses.

O.S. The idea was to take adequate measures against SDI, but in a way that was less expensive than trying to create an analogous program?

V.K. You could say that. These measures did indeed need to be more feasible for us. But regardless, they had to be such that in the event of a military conflict, they would inflict irremediable and intolerable casualties on the U.S. and its allies.

In general, issues related to SDI first received attention in the late '70s and early '80s. And about a year or two after we started serious and careful research of the matter, we came to the conclusion that the United States would also not implement SDI in a way that was realistic. And in this regard, what was critical was not only the tremendous expenditures, but also the understanding on the part of the Americans that SDI could not provide complete protection. It was impossible, in the event of a nuclear conflict, to defend oneself completely against Soviet missiles headed for the United States. And I must mention also that there was an awareness of the horrific consequences of a nuclear war that could destroy both the Soviet Union and the United States.

In the late '80s we were firmly convinced that there was no need to hurry in creating our own SDI, and that the United States wasn't going to build a global SDI system, because it realized such a measure was unsound.

So, to summarize the basic points of our position, one could highlight the following:

- We wouldn't have an SDI program analogous to that of the United States.
- We must find our own way of supporting defense capabilities in the event that SDI is implemented after all.
- The United States would not deploy SDI on the scale as reported, for propaganda purposes, in the Western press.

O.S. And what was Gorbachev's reaction both to SDI and to the evaluation of the KGB specialists? What, in your opinion, was the most important and defining factor in this problem?

V.K. Gorbachev reacted rather sluggishly to everything connected with SDI. We for our part didn't try to get our leaders to accept immediately any sort of reciprocal measures. Gorbachev in general agreed with the evaluations of the KGB. I can even say that the problem of SDI was not really discussed broadly and on a large scale at the higher levels of the Soviet leadership.

O.S. Really? You mean, then, the Politburo didn't hold any special meetings to discuss SDI?

V.K. No, there were no special meetings. That's exactly right. But at the Defense Council meetings where SDI was mentioned, people didn't seem especially concerned. Everything went calmly and smoothly. And over at the KGB we turned out to be right. Even now, as there is renewed talk of a global system for defending the United States from missile strikes, it's worth saying unambiguously that such a system cannot be realized, since a certain percentage of missiles can break through this defense. If even

one nuclear missile of average power, let alone a large number, were to strike U.S. territory, it would be a disaster.

Regarding the idea that Gorbachev used SDI as a pretext for yielding to the United States, I think that one should be skeptical. This is based more on guesswork and speculation than on real facts.

O.S. It didn't seem that way to you?

V.K. Not me personally. Moreover, I'm sure that in reality it didn't happen the way you are saying. There were other reasons why we yielded to the Americans.

In general, I would like to stress again that we were rather calm with regard to SDI. I remember what Andropov thought of it. His reaction was just that – calm.

O.S. Andropov realized that SDI could not be realized?

V.K. I think so, yes.

As to the general level of development in science and technology in the United States, it should be acknowledged that the Americans could have obtained results that were beyond our capabilities.

O.S. Vladimir Aleksandrovich, what alternative plans did you propose with regard to Gorbachev's policy in Eastern Europe in terms of Soviet-American relations? I'm interested in the period beginning in late 1988, when you were already chairman of the KGB, and also 1989.

V.K. Gorbachev didn't have an integrated reform program for our country. I've told you this several times. I also touched on this important issue in my book. Gorbachev was planning to destroy the system that he inherited in 1985. Now, ten years later, I'm even more certain of this.

But I didn't understand Gorbachev and his policy immediately. And even when I was named chairman of the KGB, in the fall of 1988, I saw many things differently than I would a year or two later. Before being named chairman of the KGB, I had access to information about the international scene. When I later obtained greater access to information about the domestic situation in the Soviet Union, I combined the foreign and domestic information and began realizing that we were headed for ruin. I started to have a more objective idea about developments inside the Soviet Union.

O.S. And so what did you propose to Gorbachev? What measures should have been implemented?

V.K. In June 1991, at a closed session of the Supreme Soviet, I told Gromyko that we were headed for collapse. It was about this time that I told Gorbachev bluntly that we were on a collision course and that something had to be done. When we spoke, Gorbachev agreed with me, but this was pure verbiage on his part.

O.S. And before 1991 did you propose anything similar? Some kind of extraordinary measures, for example, in 1989?

V.K. Many times. I told him that steps had to be taken to correct the situation. Gorbachev said that he agreed to such measures. But in the end he took no action, he did nothing. Oleg Igorevich, look at the final result, look at what happened. When Gorbachev was getting ready to sign a new version of the "truncated" Union treaty, on August 20, 1991, this surely meant the end of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev didn't even find the time to let the general public know the nature of the document he was about to sign. And the "leak" about the treaty in the press occurred just a few days before the signing. Gorbachev destroyed the government without consideration for anything.

A serious flaw in our government has always been the fact that the leader has the kind of rights, authority, and opportunity that allow him to manipulate all of society, the whole government, without taking into account the real interests of society and the state. That's the way it was before Gorbachev, during Gorbachev, and after Gorbachev.

O.S. In 1989-90 were you still having a hard time figuring out Gorbachev's intentions, his personality?

V.K. I began attending Politburo meetings at the end of 1988. On the whole, the most pressing domestic and foreign policy issues were discussed at these meetings. And individual Politburo members would express their doubts while posing questions. They would turn to Gorbachev and say: "Mikhail Sergeevich, things may end badly with regard to certain issues, so we need to do something..." Gorbachev's reaction was always the same – "We'll fix it," or "We'll rectify it," or "Everything will stabilize on its own," etc. But in the end, Gorbachev did absolutely nothing. I think some of his advisors and close co-workers played a certain role in what transpired. They brought him to the point where he was terribly demoralized when he himself ceased to be president and the Soviet Union ceased to exist. Among these people, I would name Yakovlev, Shevardnadze, and Medvedev. Incidentally, Medvedev enjoys and is skilled at hiding in the shadows, and his role is often forgotten.

O.S. Do you think that historians have underestimated Vadim Medvedev's role?

V.K. In terms of its negative effect, Medvedev's role has most certainly been underestimated. You see, Medvedev sort of hides behind Yakovlev. And it seems as though his position was softer than Yakovlev's. And perhaps it was in some ways. But, nonetheless, it is impossible to underestimate his personal role.

O.S. Vladimir Aleksandrovich, what can you say about the CIA's influence on the situation in the Soviet Union in the '80s and early '90s? What for you, as one of the chief intelligence specialists, stand out as the basic trends among the CIA's activities?

V.K. With respect to outside influences on the situation in the Soviet Union, my opinion basically comes down to this: the most important causes of the events were internal. Moreover, internal causes of a subjective nature played the most important role. With respect to the view that external factors (Western and American policy and their meddling in our affairs) were decisive in bringing about the collapse of the Soviet Union, this position is seriously flawed, and I don't agree with it.

O.S. What you're saying now is indeed important. You are placing definite emphasis on a general interpretation of events.

V.K. We ourselves are the most important factor. I'd like to demonstrate this at all levels, either in written form or orally. The citizens of today's Russia need to understand that everything depends on them, on their behavior, on what they undertake...

O.S. The role of the United States and the CIA is secondary?

V.K. Yes. Although, in its own way, it is enormous. The United States was always helping those forces that were trying to destroy the Soviet Union. Even now they're helping those who are destroying Russia. The United States provided help in the form of material and human resources. The United States had "agents of influence" in the Soviet Union who in fact occupied a number of key posts in the Soviet leadership. The United States spent enormous sums for these purposes. If, for example, you look at aid from the Soviet Communist Party in a ten-year period (1981-91) to fellow communist countries, it totals about 200 million dollars (that is, an average of about 20 million per

year); the United States spent several billion dollars annually to help movements and parties which they believed were acting in its interests.

O.S. I'd like to take our conversation to another historical plane, one that relates to the events in the Persian Gulf in 1990-91. This is a huge topic and the issues concerning these events are endless. But I'd to ask you about some of them. And I'd like to begin with the following.

There are some who believe that the information Gorbachev was getting from the KGB while these events were happening was too one-sided and deliberately distorted in order to force Gorbachev to take a harder position with regard to U.S. actions in the Persian Gulf. What can you say in this regard?

V.K. The KGB's information about events in the Persian Gulf was objective in content and to the point. I think Saddam Hussein committed a fatal mistake in 1990. His attack on Kuwait wasn't justified from any standpoint. We for our part tried to avert Iraq's attack on Kuwait. The United States played a provocative role in these events, but at present I wouldn't want to disclose all the details of this incident. I'll say only that the United States facilitated the creation of a situation that had very tragic consequences.

O.S. Did the KGB assume that Iraq might attack Kuwait?

V.K. Of course. Everything was headed in that direction. And many people in the world felt this. Unfortunately, our efforts to normalize the situation – Primakov's mission to Baghdad, during which he tried to make Hussein listen to reason – were unsuccessful. We intended to discuss the situation in the Persian Gulf at the highest levels and expressed our deep regrets over Hussein's actions.

O.S. What, in your opinion, was Hussein's main goal in his actions against Kuwait?

V.K. Hussein's goal was to appropriate Kuwait's enormous oil riches. I think Hussein made a serious miscalculation with regard to U.S. resolve and that of its allies to launch a major military campaign against Iraq.

O.S. Do you think that Hussein was counting on a possible rupture in U.S.-Soviet relations over events in the Persian Gulf? Was he trying to play on this in particular?

V.K. Everything was included in his calculations. But Hussein knew our position and knew our negative attitude toward his actions. And when an embargo against Iraq was introduced, we supported it. And that decision was the result of our policy.

O.S. Did you try to exert any personal influence on Hussein?

V.K. Not personally. The Politburo ordered Primakov to handle the matter, and he flew to Iraq. Primakov did everything he could. Hussein's strategy was fatal.

The United States for its part allowed Hussein to get seriously tangled in the situation. They did a good job from a propaganda point of view of. But then they struck Iraq. I repeat what I said about the KGB's information: it was objective and complete.

O.S. Now I'd like to ask you about the events of 1991. Is it true that in the summer of 1991, on the eve of the August events, Gorbachev tried to avoid contact with you?

V.K. We had frequent contact by phone. He was sent information regularly. Gorbachev didn't avoid contact with me. You can't say that I didn't have access to Gorbachev. But as soon as I'd come to him and try to talk about serious matters, he would immediately cut off the conversation on various pretexts. Valery Ivanovich

Boldin and I even worked out entire schemes for the two of us to see Gorbachev at the same time and strike up a serious conversation. We came in to see him, started talking, but when we got to the most serious matters, Gorbachev avoided the conversation under various pretexts. Gorbachev wanted to do things only his own way, and he didn't want to hear anything that might contradict that.

O.S. How did Gorbachev avoid serious conversations with you? How did he manage to slip away every the time?

V.K. You can't imagine, Oleg Igorevich. Gorbachev would say that he understood how serious things were, but you can't be in such a rush to talk about it without exercising your judgment. He'd tell us he'd be free the following evening, and that we'd talk about it then. Gorbachev was evasive to the point of indecency. I'm telling you the absolute truth. Ask Boldin. He'll confirm it.

I'll mention another example. Valery Ivanovich tells Gorbachev that we would like to speak with him for twenty minutes about the destiny of our government, so it cannot wait. Gorbachev answers: "All the more reason not to hurry!" Can you imagine?

In general, Gorbachev played various roles. He had a gift for this. But he had no conscience. Gorbachev and Yeltsin are similar in that way.

O.S. In conclusion, I'd like to ask you one more question in connection with your appointment as chairman of the KGB in October 1988. Some think – some have even written about this in their memoirs – that Yakovlev recommended you for this post. What can you say about that?

V.K. Gorbachev personally suggested that I be named chairman of the KGB. I know that a few months prior to my appointment Gorbachev was planning to "move me

up.” In fact, Yakovlev didn’t object to my candidacy. Gorbachev said to me, “Sasha has no objections.”

O.S. The fact that Yakovlev didn’t object to your candidacy was important for Gorbachev?

V.K. It was probably important.

I didn’t want to be chairman of the KGB. I thought that I would work for a couple years in intelligence and then take some time off. But the most important thing about the fall of 1988 was the fact that I still had not come to a firm opinion about Gorbachev, his policies, his goals, etc. Even on the eve of the August events, there was still some doubt among those of us in the top Soviet leadership about whether or not we were mistaken in our evaluation of Gorbachev. Perhaps we didn’t understand his tactics or hadn’t figured out his strategy. But then, when everything was said and done, no doubts remained.

O.S. Insight came too late?

V.K. Yes. And we, the country’s leaders, cannot be forgiven for coming to this insight too late.