



***Khrushchev's Cold War:
The Inside Story of an American Adversary***
Roundtable Review

Reviewed Works:

Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali. *Khrushchev's Cold War: The Inside Story of an American Adversary.* New York: W.W. Norton, February 2006 (hardcover, ISBN: 0-393-05809-3); October 2007 (paperback, ISBN: 978-0-393-33072-4).

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Review by Vladislav Zubok, Temple University

The book is a *tour de force* of Cold War diplomatic history, wonderfully written, rich in detail, with marvelous descriptions of places, circumstances, and protagonists. Fursenko and Naftali managed to write a book that is even better researched than their previous one, *One Hell of a Gamble*. The book is broader in scope, describing all the main international developments of the Cold War during Khrushchev's rise to power and ending with his fall. The book gives the reader the real tissue of international relations, with its nuts-and-bolts, perceptions and misperceptions ("perception is a king in foreign policy"), intelligence coups and failures, references to military, economic, and even cultural developments, and a host of the valuable trivia that historians cherish.

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The book benefited from Aleksandr Fursenko's exceptionally good access to the ex-Soviet archives, and from his energetic search for new documentation. The authors used numerous documents from the archives of the FSB (successor to the KGB), GRU (military intelligence), and Foreign Ministry. The most important new archives are the minutes of the Presidium of the CC CPSU (made by Vladimir Malin, head of the General Department of the CC apparatus), stenographic reports of the Presidium discussions, and additional materials from the Presidium's protocols. Fursenko and Naftali did a great job triangulating and checking these new sources with Western materials, and filled up numerous "blank pages" in the Kremlin decision-making record with the help of the published and unpublished memoirs by the Soviet leaders as well as some interviews.

The Presidium materials (most of the protocols, minutes, steno, and attached documents) have been published in two volumes (the third is forthcoming) by Fursenko in Russia (edition ROSSPEN). Yet, numerous other sources they use in the book to reconstruct events and discussions remain off limits. This puts the authors in the enviable position: they can argue with historiography, but historiography cannot argue back. It is especially the case of the Kremlin debates and who said what. The book, because it was written for a broad audience, quotes those debates at length. Yet, many of them are reconstructions, from Malin's notes or other sources that are inaccessible for the rest of us. In describing

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the Presidium debate on October 22, 1962, the authors quote from the notes of Ivan Serov, head of the GRU, taken at the meeting. These notes came from the GRU archives. The main points of the debates on the use of nuclear weapons and on Mikoyan's special stand apparently came from these notes. Yet, until we see them, it is hard to evaluate the authors' interpretation of this Presidium meeting.

Unfortunately, there is no section in the book that evaluates the sources and the authors' methodology of dealing with them – an essential element for any monograph, but especially required for this book which was researched and written in such an “unusual” manner.

The reader will not get much from the book about Khrushchev's background. The impact of the Russian revolution, Bolshevik anti-imperialist ideology of world revolution (Khrushchev was briefly a Trotskyite), Stalinism, and Great Patriotic War on Khrushchev is barely mentioned (one page in the Introduction); the war experience is not mentioned at all. Apparently, the authors decided to ignore the background because of other authoritative publications (they refer to William Taubman's masterful biography). Yet, in my view, they could have referred to Khrushchev's life and background more in describing and explaining his foreign policy motives and “lessons.”

The book does not dwell much on the three years (1953-55) when Khrushchev learned the ropes of foreign policy and security policy. Some of the brief contentions are dubious (e.g. the one that “the protection of East Germany was not the organizing principle of the Kremlin's German strategy” under Stalin (26). In my research, I came to the opposite conclusion. In this instance, as some others, the authors prefer to make “authoritative” statements rather than recognizing the remaining ambiguity and the room for different interpretations.

It has been long a mystery for the West as to why Soviet international behavior, relatively moderate and cautious in 1953-56, later shifted to such a dangerous militant track. The book's answer is clear: Khrushchev's personality. The book relies heavily on Taubman's reconstruction of Khrushchev, and supports Taubman's conclusions. Khrushchev's underdog identity and his fear of retreat before the predominant U.S. forces made him a fervent promoter of the movements of national liberation around the world. The impact of revolutionary Marxist-Leninist ideology is not discussed systematically in the book, but its materials convincingly speak about it. Remarkable ideological optimism co-existed in Khrushchev's mind and soul with the fear of losing the battle with the “imperialists.” Khrushchev's infamous ad-libbing and “hare-brained schemes” come off strongly in the book. Even after Taubman's biography, the details of Khrushchev's behavior in this book leaves one dumbfounded by the degree of his imprudence, impatience, and sometimes ignorance.

The consequences of Khrushchev's misjudgments, the authors argue, could have been much more serious for the world's peace, but for the figure of Anastas Mikoyan. He emerges as a second major protagonist after Khrushchev, prudent and experienced. At

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almost every dangerous point, when Khrushchev's impetuosity and ignorance produced an international crisis, Mikoyan was there, like a guardian angel, to "save the world." It seems especially true during the key Presidium discussions in November 1958 and in October-November, 1962. The pages on the origins of the Berlin ultimatum of November 27, 1958) read like a political novel. In my opinion, the authors push it a trifle too much, when they claim that Mikoyan plotted and fought against Khrushchev's decision to destroy the Potsdam framework of talks on Berlin. The authors' source is Mikoyan's memoirs and his unpublished dictations (parts of them are available in the Volkogonov Papers), and the nature of this source speaks for itself. Still, crucially, Malin's notes and the stenographic reports of the Presidium discussions support the generally moderating and positive contribution of Mikoyan to Soviet Cold War policies.

The main contribution of the book concerns the history of the great crises of the Cold War: Suez, Berlin, and the Cuban Missile Crisis. The authors confirm what scholars only suspected earlier: Khrushchev profoundly misperceived the motives for the U.S. restraint in the Middle East in 1956-58. Not only during the British-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt, but also during the Iraqi crisis of 1958, the USSR lacked any power-projection capability to help the "national-liberation regimes" in Egypt, Syria, and then Iraq. Khrushchev's cuts to the navy only made this problem more painful, and Soviet missiles were still not deployed (as British and presumably U.S. intelligence knew). As a result, however, when the Western powers withdrew from Egypt, and in 1958 from Lebanon and Jordan, Khrushchev interpreted this as a success of a Soviet nuclear bluff. The chapter on the Iraq crisis, incidentally, brings a major historiographical revelation. It shows how Khrushchev's perceptions veered dangerously apart from the reality and the motives behind Western policies.

The Suez crisis was the first time when Khrushchev's personal intervention, his impatience and rudeness, began to change the "moderate" outlook of Soviet foreign policy. His insecurity, the authors argue, peaked in October 1956, when he feared "losing" both Hungary and Egypt (130). In October-November 1958, the same combination of impatience, insecurity, and impetuosity, made Khrushchev pose the Berlin ultimatum to the Western powers.

Among the explanations for Khrushchev's brinkmanship in 1958-62, Fursenko and Naftali privilege one: his grand scheme of achieving a détente and saving Soviet resources for the rapid construction of the communist "paradise." They add to the known evidence on Khrushchev's belief, after his trip to the United States, that he was on the way towards this goal. This grand scheme, in the opinion of the authors, began to flounder right away, as the contrast between American and Soviet economic performance became apparent to Khrushchev himself. Fursenko and Naftali do not use the new literature (Russian and Western) on Khrushchev's domestic reforms and their failure. Yet, their attention to the Soviet domestic context as a major factor explaining Khrushchev's foreign policy zigzags is laudable.

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The authors argue that Khrushchev's grand design logically explained his behavior after the downing of the U-2; if the Americans learned about Soviet military weakness (including the decision not to reach strategic parity with the U.S.), then they would refuse to make any concessions, especially in West Berlin. The double threat of GDR weakness and West German assertiveness, Fursenko and Naftali argue, triggered Khrushchev's ultimatum in the first place. Still, for all their attempts to reconstruct Khrushchev's logic, the authors come back to the lack of it. The whole affair was his improvisation. No great scheme obligated Khrushchev to behave like a brute at the Paris summit; it was rather his impossible personality. Radical shifts in Soviet behavior cannot be traced in Soviet archives, and the authors just have to surmise: "something happened" in Khrushchev's head.

Fursenko and Naftali state that the most dangerous phase of the Cold War began on May 26, 1961, when Khrushchev announced to the quiescent Presidium his decision to bluff JFK into concessions on the Berlin issue. Soviet intelligence and the Bolshakov channel to Robert Kennedy (the authors got extraordinary sources on both, including the GRU summary of RFK-Bolshakov meetings), ironically, egged Khrushchev into the ever-militant posture. Kennedy's perceived political weakness and the complex nature of the U.S. politics did not make him patient; rather they made him impatient, even mad. On June 21, after the intelligence came to the Kremlin that JFK and NATO had geared up for a protracted Berlin crisis, Khrushchev decided to encircle West Berlin with the Wall. "The decision to build the Berlin Wall was Khrushchev's alone to make," they state (375), and refer to Khrushchev's "authoritarian blindness." Still, I would side with the meticulous reconstruction and argument by Hope Harrison; she convincingly argues that Ulbricht boxed Khrushchev into taking this decision, and Fursenko and Naftali do not produce any "smoking gun" evidence to contradict this.

The book recapitulates in a smaller space the saga of the Cuban revolution and the Soviet growing involvement in it. Even here, the authors manage to produce new significant evidence in addition to *One Hell of a Gamble*, which includes the notes of GRU chief Ivan Serov at the Presidium, materials on the deployment of Soviet submarines near Cuba, and interviews with knowledgeable persons, including Raul Castro's wife. The description of the Presidium's meeting on October 22, as I have already mentioned, represents a major addition to the material presented in *One Hell of a Gamble*. It shows, in particular, that "Khrushchev was not prepared to concede the point on using tactical nuclear weapons," in case of an American attack on Cuba. (472). The material gives the impression that, but for Mikoyan's objection, the military might have obtained the directive to use "Luna" missiles, armed with nuclear warheads. This returns us to the old debate about how dangerous was the crisis, and how close it brought the world to nuclear war.

The last pages of the book contain some controversial assertions. According to Fursenko and Naftali, the observers of Khrushchev, this impetuous and erratic man, "generally missed the strategist within," ...and.... "For all the bluster, there was a consistency of goals." The Brezhnev leadership "set aside Khrushchev's complex strategy for reshaping the Cold

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War and concentrated on accumulating more strategic weapons.” (540). A complex strategy? In my opinion, it was more a reckless gambling. The authors give too much credibility (like so many authors in the past) to the thesis of “missed opportunity” before Khrushchev’s ouster. True, in the spring 1964 there was a “sea change in Soviet foreign policy,” as Khrushchev finally began to treat Kennedy as a partner, not as a bluff target. Yet, he also changed his tactics with Eisenhower in 1958-60. On the German question, Khrushchev might have had a vision of Rapallo (525), but there is no evidence whatsoever that he was prepared to sacrifice the interests of the GDR. On the contrary, the Wall made the Soviet negotiating positions much stronger. Certainly, until Brandt’s Ostpolitik, there was no chance for any kind of Soviet-West German “special relations.”

There is a tendency to pair Khrushchev off with Gorbachev as the two most preferred partners of the West during the Cold War, because they were reform-minded, and therefore better than the conservative, rigid figures. I think that in case of Khrushchev, nothing can be further from reality. Neither the U.S. leaders, nor the Soviet leadership ever regretted Khrushchev’s removal. The authors themselves recognize that Khrushchev’s brinkmanship left a long and ominous cloud on U.S.-Soviet relations. There should be no obfuscation of this fact. Khrushchev was a dangerous revisionist in international affairs, not the adversary the Americans should miss.

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