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

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A lexandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali’s new book *Khrushchev’s Cold War* follows on from their formidable international history of the Cuban Missile Crisis, *One Hell of a Gamble*. Like this earlier work, *Khrushchev’s Cold War* is based upon new archival documentation its authors have managed to obtain from Soviet and other sources, and like it as well it bodes to become our standard history of the subject. Fursenko and Naftali transform the massive amount of raw data they have uncovered into an accessible and compelling history of Nikita Khrushchev and the new kind of Cold War he learned to wage. Below, I offer a couple methodological criticisms of their new book, but these should not detract from this major historical achievement.

*Khrushchev’s Cold War* answers so many important questions that a full discussion of all of them would require a full-length article, perhaps even a small book. Fursenko and Naftali have pretty much demolished whatever remained of the ‘totalitarian’ model of Soviet decision-making, showing how Khrushchev had continually to contend with internal political opposition to his foreign policies, a process that ultimately resulted in his peaceful removal from office. They add to our understanding of the Soviet effort to wage the Cold War in the Third World, highlighting in particular Khrushchev’s willingness to deal with leaders like Nasser and Lumumba who wanted little to do with Soviet-style communism. Their chapter on the 1960 U-2 incident and the ensuing collapse of the Paris summit is first-rate, and I would regard it as now the definitive treatment of this under-studied event. They also have many interesting things to say about Khrushchev’s role in fostering the polarised politics of the modern Middle East. What is more, they contribute to our understanding of various Cold War policies undertaken by many other countries during the late 1950s and early 1960s, including the United States, Great Britain, West Germany, East Germany, France, Iraq, Communist China, Cuba, Hungary, the Congo, Egypt, and others I might have missed. However, I regard the centre of *Khrushchev’s Cold War* to be the story of the Soviet leader’s recognition of and response to the nuclear dilemma and his cooperation with American and other leaders to avoid a thermonuclear third world war. For reasons of space, and aware that I am neglecting other important aspects of the book, I will now focus on this story.

Khrushchev came to power in the thermonuclear age. Like his rival, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, by the time he seized control over the Kremlin the decision to acquire
thermonuclear weaponry had been made. Like Eisenhower, Khrushchev fairly quickly reached the conclusion that a war waged with such bombs would be effectively suicidal, and in so doing he collided with more militaristic subordinates who believed that it must be possible to fight and win a thermonuclear war. But if war was now suicidal, how would it be possible to continue waging the Cold War? The answers Khrushchev came up with were, in a deep sense, identical to those reached by his American adversary.

Khrushchev concluded first that the Soviet Union must adopt a grand strategy of ‘peaceful coexistence’ with the West. This meant that the belief in an ultimate showdown of arms between the forces of socialism and imperialism that had been implicit in the thinking of his predecessor, Stalin, and really in the ideology of Marxism-Leninism (though not, strictly speaking, Marxism) had to be removed from Soviet military and foreign policy in favour of a strategy of competing with the West along fronts that did not raise the spectre of general war. Central to this new strategy was Khrushchev’s decision to spread Soviet socialism throughout the Third World, and to forge alliances with a host of governments in developing nations, even if those governments were not reliably communist.1 During the first decade of the Cold War, Stalin had concentrated his efforts primarily upon hastily building Soviet military power to contend with American superiority and in opposing in the U.S. in major theatres of confrontation, particularly central Europe and east Asia. Of course, Khrushchev did not abandon this strategy entirely, but rather played a much more cautious game whenever a direct conflict with America was possible.

Fursenko and Naftali also argue, in what I think is their best chapter, ‘Grand Design,’ that Khrushchev gravitated in the late 1950s, after the desultory Berlin ultimatum crisis, toward a military strategy of minimum nuclear deterrence and cuts in conventional forces. By excluding “general war as deliberate policy,” the authors write, Khrushchev hoped to defuse the Cold War confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union and redirect Soviet foreign policy squarely toward the Third World. In pursuing this aim Khrushchev was frustrated by the profoundly irresponsible campaign rhetoric of Democratic candidates for the 1960 election, above all John F. Kennedy, whose palpably false claims of Soviet missile superiority persuaded the Soviet leader that the forces of American militarism—or what Eisenhower would soon call the ‘military-industrial complex’—were determined to stoke the fires of Cold War hostility even in the face of thermonuclear war. Reference to the ‘forces of militarism and imperialism’ was a stock phrase in the Soviet rhetorical arsenal, but in this case, as Fursenko and Naftali plainly show, there was truth to the charge.2

1For a sustained treatment of this new policy, see Arne Westad, Global Cold War (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), chapter 2.

2On this point, see Christopher Preble's fine new study, John F. Kennedy and the Missile Gap (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005).
Finally, Khrushchev learned how to manage Cold War confrontation in a thermonuclear age. In the Berlin ultimatum crisis, the Berlin wall crisis, and most dramatically in the Cuban missile crisis, as Fursenko and Naftali demonstrate, Khrushchev evinced a determination both to redress what were, at least to him, clearly inequitable situations in Berlin and Cuba and to prevent the crises he was provoking from leading to war. Khrushchev was under tremendous pressure from his East German allies, the new regime under Castro in Cuba, and also his new rivals for socialist allegiance, China, to stand up to the United States. East Germany was losing thousands of educated workers a month through the open gates of Berlin, Cuba was under a kind of siege by the United States, as was exemplified by the Bay of Pigs fiasco, and China was appealing to socialists in the Third World disillusioned by Khrushchev’s desire for peaceful coexistence and aversion to World War Three. It was up to him to prove to these allies that he could confront the American position in Berlin and Cuba without triggering a nuclear war, and, in the end, that is what he did. By forcefully denouncing the anachronistic presence in West Berlin of western forces and threatening a unilateral termination of their occupation rights there, Khrushchev shifted the terms of engagement enough so that he could risk building a wall in Berlin, and despite its dismal testament to the glories of the workers’ paradise, the Wall did solve the problem that the East Germans decried without necessitating an American response, as a relieved Kennedy administration quietly understood. By deploying missiles to Cuba, and then, a few months later, dismantling them and taking them home, Khrushchev was able to secure an American guarantee to respect Cuban sovereignty and dismantle the Jupiter and Thor missiles in Turkey. Of course, these gambits could have gone wrong and led to World War Three, in which case we would not be so approving of his diplomacy. The point, as Fursenko and Naftali stress, is that Khrushchev understood that the nuclear age demanded, for a nation that was unwilling simply to back down on every issue, a kind of gamesmanship that recognised that confrontation could go only so far and no further. Games require a kind of collaboration with one’s adversary, a common acceptance of certain rules. Luckily, Eisenhower and Khrushchev understood this from the outset, and Kennedy, eventually, did too.

The atomic spy David Greenglass once said that ‘the gamble was that the Russians would get it [the atomic bomb] and everything would turn out to be all right. Which it did for them, but not for me.’ The great irony in this is that getting the bomb, and thus establishing eventually a system of mutual deterrence, spelled in a deep sense the doom of the Soviet Union. The USSR had never known anything but crisis since its founding in 1917. The early civil war, the Stalinist hell, the Great Patriotic War against Germany, and then the Cold War confrontation with the United States—the pursuit of ‘normal’ national goals like peace and prosperity were simply absent from the Soviet experience. Russia had become a garrison state, its citizenry and leadership habituated to permanent crisis. On top of this, the Soviet ideology of socialist revolution rejected, by definition, peaceful coexistence; the point, rather, was to change the world by means of violent action. Khrushchev realised that the advent of the nuclear revolution had not only invalidated this

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objective, but that it also gave the USSR finally the opportunity to focus inwardly on the cultivation of its own domestic economy and the destalinisation of its political culture. I think the most important part of *Khrushchev’s Cold War* is Fursenko and Naftali’s account of how the Soviet leader tried futilely to impose this radical transformation upon his nation. He was foiled repeatedly, however—by American missile-gap alarmism, the resistance of his own military-industrial complex, and, perhaps most decisive, by the deep contradiction between his new vision and the political *Telos* of the Soviet experiment. If the Kremlin was content to coexist with Capitalism, to worry most about cultivating the national power and welfare of the Soviet state, and to play only at the edges of the Cold War, where no industrial proletariat was to be found, what was the reason for the revolution?

In my view, the historical import of Khrushchev’s response to the nuclear revolution is of the very first order. Recognising that the showdown with America was now pointless, Khrushchev set in motion a political logic that could only end in war or defeat for the USSR. Perhaps he truly believed that the Soviet Union could reform itself and outcompete the United States on the latter’s own terms of technological innovation and consumer prosperity, but the doubts Khrushchev and his advisers entertained about this, as Fursenko and Naftali make clear, lead one to wonder whether he really believed it. Certainly, his cynical successor Leonid Brezhnev did not, and the last decades of the Soviet Union reveal a nation playing out a losing hand. Gorbachev and Yeltsin issued the *coup de grâce*.

This, however, is my own conclusion. Fursenko and Naftali do not make these kinds of claims, and this unwillingness to speak to issues beyond the subject at hand is disappointing. The authors are reluctant, as they were in *One Hell of a Gamble*, to elaborate at much length, or even any length, on how their arguments contend with competing works or what they might say about larger historiographical questions. As a few critics of their first book observed, they are writing a very traditional kind of history, one that places responsibility for action and consequence solely on the shoulders of human actors, primarily “great men,” and one that declines to use its narrative openly as a vehicle for making ideological points. For readers tired of modern works of history (including, yes, diplomatic history) that seem to be much more about winning contemporary intellectual debates than about providing an original account of something that happened in the past, this rather unpretentious attitude is a breath of fresh air. But in *Khrushchev’s Cold War* the authors’ aversion to big-picture questions seems forced. The final chapter of the book, ‘Legacy,’ consists of an account of Khrushchev’s ouster from office in 1964 and a few brief and fairly bland concluding remarks; I was genuinely surprised by this. Khrushchev was a central player in two of the most important stories of the second half of the twentieth century: the avoidance of a thermonuclear World War Three and the decline and fall of the Soviet experiment. Yet the authors do not use their last chapter to reflect on these monumental events, or to speculate on what they might say about our larger understanding of international relations and Cold War history, or to contrast their findings with those of other historians, such as David Holloway, Hope Harrison, William Taubman, or Vladislav Zubok.
To make a second criticism, I would also say that the book suffers from an excessively ‘international’ focus. Over the past decade or so, historians of the Cold War have taken advantage of the opening of archives in the Soviet bloc and elsewhere to provide excellent, archive-based accounts of what was happening on ‘the other side of the hill,’ to use Basil Liddell-Hart’s expression. This is all to the good, coming in the wake of a literature that had been necessarily western-centric before the 1990s. However, an historical narrative of the making of foreign policy that shifts back and forth from Moscow, to Washington, then to London, etc., runs a real risk of providing the reader with a top-down picture of events happening simultaneously in several places that was not available to the participants at the time. In other words: one of the essential features of foreign policy during the Cold War, or any other period, is the fact that its practitioners do not know what exactly the other side is doing or thinking, and that therefore to obtain a true understanding of their position, to put oneself in their shoes, it can actually be misleading to read in one paragraph about the thinking of MacMillan and in the next that of Khrushchev. We become privy to insights invisible to the decision-makers of the day.4

There are instances, and here I would quickly point to One Hell of a Gamble, where this kind of top-down international history is so illustrative that it justifies these dangers. Fursenko and Naftali’s study of the Cuban Missile Crisis works on this level for two reasons, in my opinion: first, because both superpowers were concerned with exactly the same problem, namely how to get out of the mess they had made without blowing up the planet; and second, because a central story in One Hell of a Gamble was the back-channel talks between Bobby Kennedy and Georgi Bolshakov, a process that was quite literally ‘international’ and could not be adequately written about otherwise. The nuclear dilemma raised by the missile crisis and the extent to which the two sides were willing to go to escape it both transcended strictly nationalistic foreign-policy making, as the chapter on Cuba in Khrushchev’s Cold War also reveals.

For a book that purports to give us a deep account of Khrushchev and his Cold War foreign policies, though, the lengthy treatments of what was going on in several governments at once often detract from the story, particularly when we move away from direct international crisis. One of the notable features of the Soviet experiment was precisely its leaders’ profound insulation from the rest of the world, and this reality is not conveyed well when the narrative relocates rapidly from Moscow to Bonn to London to Cairo. A major theme of the book is Khrushchev’s growing concern that the world was beginning to pass the USSR by. A more isolated picture of how Khrushchev and his colleagues began dimly to perceive this, by the very nature of international politics largely deaf to the cacophony of different views and policies expressed elsewhere, would have strengthened, not weakened, the book. The discussion of American and British and Egyptian policies, as they appeared to Moscow, is important and necessary, and as already mentioned I regard the authors’ treatment of American nuclear politics to be first-rate. But when we learn simultaneously about the making of these policies, about the motivations and capabilities

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4 For an excellent discussion of this problem, see Robert McMahon, “The study of American Foreign Relations: National History or International History?” Diplomatic History 14 (Fall 1990), pp. 554-64.
of statesmen in Washington and London and Cairo, we obtain a perception of events that was unavailable to Nikita Khrushchev and lose thereby a feel for his predicament.

In the end, these historiographical complaints get trampled by the sheer substance and brilliance of *Khrushchev's Cold War*. The authors have acknowledged the misattribution of some documents, and in my judgment they have not handled the raising of this issue particularly well. As an historian of American foreign policy and of the nuclear age rather than a Soviet specialist I am not qualified to judge the gravity of this problem, but as far as I am able to tell, the error does not appear to represent a serious breach of academic integrity, and it almost certainly does not invalidate the larger thesis of the book. I continue to believe Naftali and Fursenko have written the leading account of Soviet Cold War foreign policy during Khrushchev’s reign, our best historical explanation of the origins of Soviet decline, and, in fact, one of the best books yet written about the history of the Cold War.