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

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Due to the authors’ sometimes exclusive access to Russian documents, scholars have been eagerly awaiting this second book by the Russian-American team after their first monograph, “One Hell of a Gamble”: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964, came out in 1997. Written in the same engaging style as the first book, Khrushchev’s Cold War examines Soviet foreign policy and Soviet-U.S. relations, focusing on crises in Suez (1956), Iraq (1958), Berlin (1958-60 and 1961-1962), the Congo (1960), Laos (1960), and Cuba (1962). The book provides some important new pieces of information, lots of great details on decision making within both the Kremlin and the White House, and a wide-ranging use of Russian and American sources. The book has many strengths but also some weaknesses.

The portrait Fursenko and Naftali paint of Khrushchev differs from those offered by other scholarly experts on Khrushchev, William Taubman, Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, as well from my own picture of Khrushchev. Fursenko and Naftali’s Khrushchev is more of a pragmatist and realist, words they use repeatedly to describe the Soviet leader (49, 58, and 82). In Taubman’s Pulitzer prize-winning biography, Khrushchev: The Man and his Era and in Zubok and Pleshakov’s Gelber prize-winning Inside the Kremlin’s Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev, Khrushchev’s ebullient, earthy, ideologically-inspired, insecure and paradoxically overconfident personality stands out as the guiding influence on his foreign policy (although other factors, such as the international environment, are also taken into account). Fursenko and Naftali start out

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2 William Taubman, Khrushchev: The Man and his Era (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003); and Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, Inside the Kremlin’s Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996). In my own work, focusing on Khrushchev’s policy toward East Germany and Berlin, Khrushchev’s ideological excitement about and commitment to East Germany is very
the book playing up these aspects of Khrushchev's personality as the explanatory influence on his foreign policy, but they then proceed to show Khrushchev to be a pragmatist, responding in a realpolitik way to the international environment time after time. All of these authors recognize that Khrushchev's policies were influenced by both his personality and the international (as well as domestic) environment, but the emphasis is different.

Fursenko and Naftali play down the role of ideology as compared to pragmatism in Khrushchev's foreign policy until 1960 when they suddenly start talking about more of an ideological influence on Khrushchev's policies in the Third World with countries such as the Congo, Cuba, and Laos. After eleven chapters presenting a very pragmatic picture of Khrushchev's foreign policy, suddenly at the start of Chapter 12 on Castro and Lumumba, the authors tell us: “Recent developments had encouraged Khrushchev to pay even more attention to developing ideological allies in the third world.” (292) But in previous chapters, including on the Third World, the authors had barely mentioned ideology. The previous case studies of Soviet policy toward the Third World, focusing on Egypt and Iraq, emphasized Soviet pragmatism. Did Khrushchev suddenly find ideology in 1960? The authors don’t explain. Were there some issues where Khrushchev was more guided by his ideological beliefs and other issues where realpolitik dominated? Fursenko and Naftali don’t tell us, leaving the reader a little confused about their analysis.

*Khrushchev's Cold War* does a fantastic job of showing the reader the perceptions and misperceptions the leaders in the Kremlin and the White House had of each other and what they knew and did not about what the other was up to. Nowhere in the book do Fursenko and Naftali do a better job of taking us inside the tight circle of decision makers in Moscow and Washington than with the Cuban Missile Crisis in Chapter 19. These pages are particularly gripping as Kennedy and his colleagues deliberate on how to respond to the Soviet missiles in Cuba, the Soviets wait anxiously to hear what Kennedy will say in his speech on October 22 (at which Kennedy announced the missiles and a U.S. quarantine of Cuba), Kennedy waits to see whether the Soviets will back down, the Soviets consult about what to do in light of the quarantine, and both increasingly look for a way out of the crisis. Here, also, we learn for the first time that Khrushchev would have given up the missiles in Cuba for just the U.S. pledge not to invade Cuba without the additional U.S. promise to pull missiles out of Turkey. (490)

On Khrushchev's motivations for deploying the missiles in Cuba, however, Fursenko and Naftali vacillate. In “One Hell of a Gamble,” they argued that by deploying missiles in Cuba, Khrushchev aimed to prevent a U.S. invasion of Cuba and also to prevent the Cubans, particularly Aníbal Escalante and Che Guevara, from siding with the Chinese in the Sino-Soviet dispute. In *Khrushchev’s Cold War*, they adopt a much more U.S.-Soviet geopolitical explanation: “Creating a kind of parity between the superpowers in the balance of terror had been Khrushchev’s primary motivation for putting the missiles in Cuba.” (506) Yet at
another point in this recent book, they argue: “[Khrushchev] had taken this risk [of missiles in Cuba] to make future gains in Central Europe [i.e. Berlin] and Southeast Asia more than he had done this to protect Fidel Castro.” (492)

The authors’ discussion of the role of Khrushchev’s aims in Berlin during the Cuban Missile Crisis is rather confusing. They also aren’t clear on whether Khrushchev was trying to deter the U.S. or compel the U.S. by the missiles in Cuba. Khrushchev told a Soviet delegation headed to Cuba in late May to persuade Castro to accept Soviet missiles that the missiles were meant “to scare them [the U.S.], to restrain them [from attacking Cuba].” (436) But then a few pages later Fursenko and Naftali cite a July 1, 1962 Presidium meeting at which Khrushchev supposedly linked the missiles in Cuba to his efforts to get an advantageous settlement in Berlin. (441-443) And several pages after that, in a footnote which should have been in the text, the authors state: “We think it unlikely that Khrushchev had West Berlin in the front of his mind when he decided to put missiles in Cuba during his visit to Bulgaria. Khrushchev’s plans for 1962 were characteristically dynamic. In May the Cuban operation had unfocused goals, reflecting the fact that the operation stemmed from a general impatience with the worldwide balance of power. By July, however, Khrushchev was clearly working out a more specific strategy for a major political offensive in 1962, one that would take final form only after Kennedy turned down Moscow’s last effort at a diplomatic settlement over West Berlin.” (see 611 for note 23 from 446) The analysis in this note is more careful than in the text.

The authors draw attention to their new findings, telling the reader in multiple cases, “until the top secret Kremlin Presidential documents were opened up in 2003, we didn’t know” x or y.” One important theme on which they provide new information concerns nuclear diplomacy. Fursenko and Naftali demonstrate that Khrushchev (erroneously) believed that his nuclear threats to the West over Suez in 1956 (this was previously known, but now we have more details) and Iraq in 1958 (this was not previously known) were the main reasons the West backed down. (134-137, 169-184) This belief led Khrushchev to make nuclear threats during the Berlin Crisis and to deploy missiles in Cuba.

In addition to more inside details of Kremlin decision making during the Cuban Missile Crisis, Khrushchev’s Cold War also provides readers with the first glimpse ever inside Kremlin files on the downing of Francis Gary Powers’ U-2 flight on 1 May 1960 and on the Soviet interrogation of Powers. Fursenko and Naftali again have the readers on the edge of their seats as they go back and forth between the Soviet Union and the U.S. on Powers’ flight, the downing of the flight and the pilot, the American concern about what happened to them, Soviet baiting of the Americans, American assertions that a weather plane was downed, the dramatic Soviet revelation that they had the plane and the living pilot, and then the interrogation and trial of Powers. (260-280) The highpoints of the book are scenes like this where the authors can take the reader inside both the Soviet and U.S. sides

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3 Their note on the source for this information is not to a document but to their own earlier book (p. 182 of “One Hell of a Gamble”), which is rather frustrating.
of a crisis to watch what each side was thinking, assuming about the other, wondering about the other, and then reacting to the other. The narrative style is very effective.

Fursenko and Naftali do a great job of providing detailed tidbits of information to really give the reader a feel for things and to give the reader a sense of the multiple domestic and foreign issues on Khrushchev’s mind at certain moments. For example, in midst of discussing Khrushchev’s concerns about the Hungarian revolution in 1956 and his excitement about Yuri Gagarin’s successful orbit around the earth in 1960, the authors tell us of Khrushchev’s simultaneous worries about the poor state of housing in the Soviet Union and his likely relief that during the huge festivities for Gagarin in May 1960, “none of the balconies filled with onlookers collapsed during the show.” (346) Later in the spring of 1962, Fursenko and Naftali again give the reader a sense of the combined Soviet domestic and international concerns, writing of set-backs in the development of long-range nuclear missiles and in the economy leading Khrushchev to ask minister of defense Rodion Malinovsky to devise a “cheaper shortcut to becoming competitive with the Americans in ICBMs [intercontinental ballistic missiles]. (429-431)

The authors rely on multiple document collections from both the former Soviet Union and the United States for this book. In Moscow, they used files from the Archives of the President of the Russian Federation, the Kremlin Archives (the Presidium protocols, which Fursenko has published in Russian⁴), the Foreign Ministry Archive, the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI—the Central Committee archive), the Central Archive of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), the Archive of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), the Archive of the Main Intelligence Administration of the Russian General Staff (GRU), the unpublished part of Anastas Mikoyan’s memoirs in RGASPI, the Historical Archive and Military Memorial Center of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (AGSRF). In the U.S., the authors used files from the Eisenhower, Kennedy, Nixon and Johnson Libraries, the National Archives, the Library of Congress, the Hoover Institution, and the National Security Archive. They also consulted files at the British National Archives and conducted interviews with former policymakers in the U.S. and Russia.

The most important and controversial part of Fursenko and Naftali’s sourcebase are some of the Russian documents they were able to use. Several of these Russian archives (the Archives of the President of the Russian Federation, as well as the intelligence and military archives) are off-limits to the vast majority of scholars and only accessible to those with special connections, which Fursenko seemingly has (and pictures in the book on Soviet-Cuban relations featuring the KGB station chief in Havana, Aleksandr Alekseyev, Mikoyan, Raul Castro, and Khrushchev from Fursenko’s personal collection hint at this). This is problematic in and of itself, of course, since other scholars cannot assess the documents on

their own to see if they come to the same conclusions that Fursenko and Naftali do. Equally problematic is that apparently only Fursenko could see some of these documents, not Naftali. My understanding is that sometimes Naftali could not even see Fursenko’s notes on documents. Given that Fursenko does not have a good track record on the accuracy of his research, this is grounds for concern.⁵

There are occasional jumps in the narrative that leave the reader behind. Thus, the authors describe in detail in Chapter 13 the civil war in Laos in 1960 and the Soviet and U.S. responses, and then the authors return to Laos suddenly about one hundred pages later announcing the late July 1962 U.S.-Soviet Geneva agreement to neutralize Laos. There is insufficient explanation of the lead-up to the Geneva agreement and insufficient analysis of how the Laos agreement fits in with the picture Fursenko and Naftali paint of Khrushchev preparing for a showdown by deploying missiles in Cuba. (449)

Similarly, in writing about the fall of 1962, the authors suddenly talk about Khrushchev’s “plan for ending the cold war in November.” (462, 464) These are Fursenko and Naftali’s words, not Khrushchev’s and are meant to demonstrate the authors’ view of what Khrushchev was thinking: namely, that if he could successfully deploy the missiles in Cuba without the U.S. finding out, could come up with a plan to have UN troops replace Western troops in West Berlin, and could accomplish a nuclear test ban treaty with the U.S., he would have ended the cold war. It strikes this reader as problematic that the authors use such dramatic words without backing them up with any analysis about how unlikely it was that the West would see these moves as bringing an end to the cold war.

There are several important moments in the cold war that the authors cover only in a cursory and sometimes misleading manner: Khrushchev’s February 1956 secret speech, the Sino-Soviet split, and the building of the Berlin Wall. It may be that Fursenko and Naftali felt that William Taubman had covered Khrushchev’s motivations for and Soviet deliberations about the secret speech so extensively that they did not have much more to add, but they barely cite Taubman here. Furthermore, in a book focusing on Khrushchev’s policies in the cold war, this speech was a crucial moment and the two paragraphs Fursenko and Naftali devote to it are insufficient. (86-87) The authors’ conceptual framework for the book examines the influence of Khrushchev’s personality and the international environment on his policies. How do they think those influences played out in this case? They don’t tell us.

The Sino-Soviet split was a world-altering development during Khrushchev’s time in power. Yet the authors devote no specific attention to this; they mention China here and

⁵ See, for example, the following article which contains many factual errors, multiple omissions of sources, and interpretations without substantial basis: A. A. Fursenko, “Kak Buila Postroenna Berlinskaia Stena,” (“How the Berlin Wall Was Built”), Istoricheskie Zapiski, No. 4 (2001), 73-90. For more on the problem of exclusive access to sources and factual errors in the book, focusing on the Cuban Missile Crisis sections, see Michael Dobbs’ review of the book, “Can’t Verify, Can’t Trust,” The Washington Post, February 1, 2007, C3.  
there connected to a variety of issues. Even though the focus of the book is meant to be on Soviet-U.S. relations, developments in Soviet-Chinese relations had a significant impact on Soviet-U.S. relations and the lack of a specific discussion on this is a weakness of the book.\(^6\) Is it just that the authors have chosen to focus on the U.S. as Khrushchev’s main international interlocutor, or do they think that China was not important to Khrushchev? If so, does that mean, again, that Khrushchev had a more pragmatic approach to international relations than ideological, as the authors argue at many points? They don’t explain.

On yet another important issue of the cold war, the crisis in Berlin and the building of the Berlin Wall, Fursenko and Naftali write in an incomplete, misleading way. They speak of “Khrushchev’s Wall” and “Khrushchev’s iron ring” (374-377, 383-384), completely ignoring the vast amount of evidence, including from Russian documents, about the East German role in pushing the reluctant Soviets into finally acquiescing to their pleas to close the border in Berlin.\(^7\) They simplistically assert that “[t]he decision to build the Berlin Wall was Khrushchev’s alone to make” and that “[h]e therefore bore sole responsibility” for it. (375) Fursenko and Naftali do at least say that the Berlin Wall decision “was in part a reaction to a suggestion from [East German leader Walter] Ulbricht” (374), but their focus on the Soviet political and military decisions obscures the significant role Ulbricht had played in the years leading up to 1961. This role was two-fold: on the one hand, Ulbricht regularly lobbied for closing the border in Berlin and several times initiated policies that the Soviets saw as unilateral efforts to close the border; and on the other hand, Ulbricht maintained a hard-line regime at home (in spite of multiple Soviet requests that he moderate his many policies that led thousands of people to flee the country) that ultimately left the Soviets no choice but to agree to his request to seal off West Berlin if they wanted to avoid the collapse of East Germany.

In multiple places, the book suffers from poor copy editing. For example, although there is a note 57 on p. 378, in the endnotes for that page on p. 601, there is in fact no note 57, but there are two note 60s. In another example, in discussing a key presidium meeting of 20 November 1958 and the role of Mikoyan in restraining Khrushchev on threatening the West over Berlin, the actual note 48 on p. 575 is mistakenly to a document in the British National Archives instead of to the presidium meeting from the Kremlin archives. There are typos in multiple places in the text and the notes.\(^8\) There are also many instances of omission of sources, including p. 214, note 1 (which gives a description related to Mikoyan but no source), p. 428 about Castro and Escalante with Castro reading a translation of an article in the Soviet newspaper *Izvestia* with no source given, and p. 435 about Khrushchev’s instructions to Malinovsky about Soviet missiles in Cuba with no source.

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\(^7\) I cover this subject at length in my book, *Driving the Soviets Up the Wall*.

\(^8\) For example, p. 582, note 6 mistakenly cites Dedlow instead of Pedlow.
In spite of some omissions and errors, *Khrushchev's Cold War* offers a fascinating portrayal of the dynamics of Khrushchev's leadership and of Soviet-U.S. interactions and is written in an often gripping, page-turning way. The combination of new sources, new information, and good writing will likely make this a popular book for classes on the cold war and on the Soviet Union.