



***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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Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali unwittingly became virtual celebrities of the blogosphere when the controversial White House political strategist Karl Rove stepped off Air Force One holding a copy of *Khrushchev's Cold War*. After newspapers published a photograph of Rove carrying the book in his hands on 20 March 2007, bloggers wanted to know: why was Rove, who is facing a possible congressional subpoena, reading up on the shoe-banging leader of the now-defunct "evil empire"? What interest could he have in a buffoonish but powerful leader whose reckless adventurism nearly brought the world to cataclysmic ruin?<sup>1</sup>

Of course we can only speculate about what inspired Rove's interest in the impulsive Soviet leader. Khrushchev himself has been subjected to endless speculation, both during his life and after. Perhaps more than any other Kremlin boss, he embodied Winston Churchill's famous characterization of Russia: "a riddle, wrapped in a

mystery, inside an enigma." After all, Khrushchev was the same man who initiated the "thaw" and liberalized Soviet society but sent the Red Army into Hungary; who stood side-by-side with Stalin during the Great Terror but exposed and decried the evils of Stalinism; who spoke earnestly about the need to abolish atomic weapons but presided over the biggest nuclear explosion in history; and who promised peaceful coexistence, but practiced a reckless form of brinksmanship that nearly provoked thermonuclear war.

In seeking to make sense of this complex and puzzling man's foreign policy, the authors hearken back to Churchill, who, in the same radio broadcast that featured the famous "enigma" quote, perceived a key to understanding the actions of Russia: "That key is

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<sup>1</sup> The photograph was taken by the Associated Press's Pablo Martinez Monsivais. The picture accompanied numerous articles about Rove, including an AP article by David Espo: "Showdown Looms in Attorney Firings Probe," *Boston Globe*, 21 March 2007, available at [http://www.boston.com/news/nation/washington/articles/2007/03/21/bush\\_warns\\_dems\\_to\\_take\\_offer\\_in\\_firings/](http://www.boston.com/news/nation/washington/articles/2007/03/21/bush_warns_dems_to_take_offer_in_firings/) (5 April 2007).

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Russian national interest." To Fursenko and Naftali, Khrushchev's seemingly erratic and impulsive foreign policy contained within it a perceptible internal logic: it was animated by realistic calculations of power and interest.

Above all else, Khrushchev was motivated by a candid appreciation of Soviet vulnerability. He recognized that the USSR lagged far behind the United States in the strategic arms race and he believed the West held the initiative in the contest for allies and markets in the Third World. If Khrushchev's policies appeared erratic and unpredictable, they did so because Khrushchev was almost desperate to prove that his country could stand on equal footing with the West. Desperate times, it appeared, demanded desperate measures. Khrushchev's brinkmanship – which provoked dangerous crises over Berlin and Cuba – stemmed from his belief that only by threatening war, could he compel the west to make peace.

The authors also reveal that Khrushchev's foreign policy was shaped by his country's peculiar form of domestic politics. Khrushchev may have masterminded the most confrontational policies directed at the United States, but he did not govern unchallenged as Stalin had. He needed to build consensus within the Soviet leadership, and on more than one occasion, he needed to ward off serious challenges to his position. As often as not, his colleagues in the presidium, especially Anastas Mikoyan, pushed him to tone down his more aggressive positions.

In short, Fursenko and Naftali suggest that it was the interplay between domestic politics and *realpolitik* that governed Khrushchev's Cold War. They present Khrushchev neither as a romantic ideologue, nor as a schizophrenic menace – as he has often appeared in earlier accounts. Rather, they portray him as a political realist, driven by pragmatic concerns about his country's national interests and his own political future. They paint a balanced and complex portrait of Khrushchev – one that is neither over laden with Cold War orthodoxy, nor unduly apologetic.

*Khrushchev's Cold War* is decidedly more analytical than the authors' previous collaborative work – *One Hell of a Gamble*, their remarkable account of the Cuban Missile Crisis – and it is thus more compelling and important. Carefully integrating perspectives from both east and west, the book is much more than a history of Khrushchev's foreign policy. It is one of the most authoritative and sophisticated narratives of international relations during the early Cold War. It represents brilliant international history. Exhaustively researched, the book is well informed by a wide-range of previously inaccessible sources from both communist and western archives. Rich in detail, it is also beautifully written: an engrossing page-turner that moves effortlessly from Moscow to Washington, Berlin to Havana, Cairo to Leopoldville, Vientiane to Baghdad. It is an extraordinary achievement.

The authors lead us through the maze of perceptions and misperceptions that propelled the Cold War through crisis after crisis during Khrushchev's reign. Along the way, they explore the issues that prevented a meaningful relaxation of tensions from developing in

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the decade and a half following the death of Joseph Stalin. Fursenko and Naftali suggest that Khrushchev's appeal for "peaceful coexistence" was more than mere rhetoric or propaganda – as most U.S. officials believed at the time. "Khrushchev was different," they write, in sincerely seeking disarmament. (255) "Underneath the bluster was a leader who hoped for a diplomatic settlement." (223)

Khrushchev's pursuit of *détente* peaked in 1959-1960, after he returned from an unprecedented tour of the United States. Announcing his belief that President Eisenhower "sincerely wishes to see the end of the cold war," Khrushchev worked earnestly to demilitarize the Cold War. He felt that the time was ripe because the Soviet Union had just acquired the ability to launch a nuclear missile attack on the United States, which provided for a form of "minimum deterrence." (243) The authors argue that President Eisenhower was "on the same wavelength" as Khrushchev, and shared his determination to eliminate or reduce nuclear arsenals – a conclusion which some historians of Eisenhower's presidency, including myself, might dispute. In any event, Khrushchev's pursuit of *détente* foundered on the missile gap and U-2 crises at the end of the 1960s – events that he blamed on the militarists who controlled American foreign policy. By the time of John F. Kennedy's election, Khrushchev had decided on a more confrontational approach, ironically at the moment the new president began exploring avenues for East-West cooperation. It would not be until after the Cuban Missile Crisis that leaders from the two superpowers would make progress on disarmament by signing the Limited Test Ban Treaty in 1963.

The authors' treatment of the Third World is particularly notable. The field of Cold War history has been divided between those who take a Eurocentric view of the conflict, and those who take a global perspective by stressing the importance of the Third World. All too rarely the two sides come together. Fursenko and Naftali rightly explore the intersection between the Cold War in Europe and the Cold War in the Third World, showing how developments in one area had dramatic consequences in the other.

Khrushchev, for example, learned precisely the wrong lesson from a crisis that erupted over Iraq in 1958. After a military coup overthrew the pro-western Hashemite dynasty – which had ruled Iraq as a virtual proxy of the British empire since the 1920s – the Americans and British seriously contemplated military action to force "regime change" in Iraq. Khrushchev believed that he had compelled his American and British adversaries to scrap these invasion plans by threatening a wider war. In fact, Fursenko and Naftali show, Khrushchev's threats had virtually no impact on American and British decision making during the Iraq crisis. They dismissed Khrushchev's threats as mere bluffs and opted not to invade for other reasons. But Khrushchev was emboldened nevertheless. He concluded that his brinkmanship worked, and it was this confidence that led him to initiate the first Berlin crisis in 1958.

The book also includes fresh revelations and interpretations of Cold War confrontations in such areas as Egypt, Cuba, Congo, and Laos. Whereas American leaders saw the Kremlin's hidden hand behind the crises that erupted in these and other parts of the world, the

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authors argue that “in the third world Khrushchev had rarely been the initiator of conflicts. More often than not the Soviets had reacted to opportunities.” (360) Fursenko and Naftali suggest that in fact Khrushchev was often reluctant to get involved in Third World conflicts. When he did interfere, he did so cautiously – or at least more cautiously than western observers supposed. Only once did Khrushchev deliberately foment unrest in the developing world; in the middle of the second Berlin crisis of 1961, he ordered the KGB to create a “hotbed of unrest” in Latin America to weaken U.S. resolve over Berlin. (379) Overall, *Khrushchev's Cold War* confirms the view of those diplomatic historians who have argued that the United States misinterpreted and exaggerated the Soviet threat in the Third World. Moreover, the authors point out: “it was the democratic West and not the Soviet Union that considered the use of political assassination as a means of increasing its influence in the third world.” (314)

Although *Khrushchev's Cold War* brilliantly integrates a wide-array of factors that shaped Cold War international relations – intelligence, military strength, personalities, perceptions, and domestic politics – it is strangely silent on one of the most defining features of the Cold War competition: ideology. Khrushchev may have been a realist, but he was at the same time an ideologue. We are left wondering what impact Khrushchev's seemingly heartfelt commitment to communism had on his approach to international relations. By placing *realpolitik* and domestic politics at the heart of their interpretation of Khrushchev, Fursenko and Naftali offer an important corrective to those who have attributed too much to ideology, but one wonders if the authors went too far the other way, missing an opportunity to advance our understandings of the impact of ideology on Cold War politics.

The book's achievement is also dampened by controversy surrounding the authors' sources and methods. Some historians are made uneasy by the authors' privileged access to Russian archives: certain archival sources used in the book have been available only to the authors and cannot be subjected to verification or cross-examination by other scholars. Michael Dobbs brought widespread attention to such concerns by publishing a brutal critique in the *Washington Post* – an unsparing and overblown review that warrants special mention here. Dobbs alleged that scholars can neither trust nor verify Fursenko's and Naftali's conclusions because of their privileged access to sources, which he implied came with strings attached. This charge needs qualification. While Fursenko and Naftali did indeed have privileged access to some sources – an unfortunate state of affairs – the vast majority of the sources used in *Khrushchev's Cold War* are open and readily available.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A careful analysis of the book's footnotes reveals that, although the closed presidential archives provided useful insights on a few key issues, most of the authors' interpretive conclusions are based on documents from the Soviet Foreign Ministry Archive and from the so-called “Malin Notes” – which are open to other researchers – not to mention other archives and document collections from the United States, Britain, and France. Of a total of 1735 footnotes, only a small percentage refer to sources closed to other scholars.

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Dobbs's more worrisome assertion concerned what he called "glaring" factual errors in the authors' two collaborative books: *Khrushchev's Cold War* and *One Hell of a Gamble*. The books are "marred by sloppy research," Dobbs charged, before turning to his damning conclusion: "The errors are so numerous that it becomes difficult to have much confidence in the authors' uncheckable citation from Soviet archival documents that remain closed to other scholars."<sup>3</sup>

Dobbs went too far in leveling these serious allegations. He identified five errors, each of which pertains to the Cuban Missile Crisis (the subject of Dobbs' current research). One relates to the military rank of an American pilot who was shot down during the crisis. Fursenko and Naftali got it wrong in both books, Dobbs pointed out – a lamentable oversight, but hardly one that changes our understanding of those terrible thirteen days in October 1962. Dobbs also alleged that the authors confused the date of a note sent to Moscow during the crisis, but the purported error is neither calamitous nor indisputable. Fursenko and Naftali write that an American diplomatic note about submarine identification procedures was sent to Moscow on October 23<sup>rd</sup>. This is a reasonable conclusion to draw from the documentary record, for at an "ExComm" meeting on October 24<sup>th</sup> a State Department official repeatedly told President Kennedy that he sent the message to the Soviets "last night."<sup>4</sup> If there is good reason to doubt this source, Dobbs does not tell us. One of the other inaccuracies identified by Dobbs relates to Soviet ships and submarines that were carrying weapons to Cuba – a confusion that results more from the fragmentary and contradictory nature of the source material than from alleged sloppiness on the part of the authors.<sup>5</sup>

The one significant error identified by Dobbs pertains to a misquote from a Soviet presidium meeting during the midst of the crisis, on October 22<sup>nd</sup>. Fursenko and Naftali write that Anastas Mikoyan confronted Khrushchev at the meeting and "pleaded for moderation." According to the authors, Mikoyan wondered aloud whether Khrushchev's instructions to Soviet commanders in Cuba might "mean the start of a thermonuclear war." (472) Dobbs corrected the authors: it was Khrushchev, not Mikoyan, who expressed concern that his instructions might provoke a nuclear war. This is an especially regrettable slip-up since Mikoyan is such an important figure in *Khrushchev's Cold War*, a voice of restraint and caution during some of the most tense moments of the 1950s and 1960s. Yet this mistake – however unfortunate – does not really undermine the authors' overall judgments about either Khrushchev or Mikoyan. Their analysis does not hinge on the

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Dobbs, "Can't Verify, Can't Trust," *Washington Post*, 1 February 2007.  
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/31/AR2007013102105.html>.

<sup>4</sup> See *Khrushchev's Cold War*, pg. 481; and the comments by U. Alexis Johnson in Philip Zelikow and Ernest May, eds., *Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy, The Great Crisis* (New York: Norton, 2001), vol. 3, p. 192.

<sup>5</sup> Identifying the ships required meshing U.S. Navy tracking information on the submarines (which use NATO designators) with less reliable and fragmentary information from the Soviet side. See *Khrushchev's Cold War*, pgs. 614-15, note 37.

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transposed quotation. It is conceivable that closer scrutiny could reveal other errors in the book, but absent such evidence scholars should not take Dobbs's overblown criticism too seriously.

In any event, if we are truly to understand the puzzle that was Khrushchev, we will need to get beyond quibbling over details and engage in spirited debate over larger interpretive questions about the meaning and significance of Khrushchev's foreign policy. On this score, anyone who has tried to make sense of Khrushchev can appreciate the enormous contribution that Fursenko and Naftali have made with *Khrushchev's Cold War*.

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