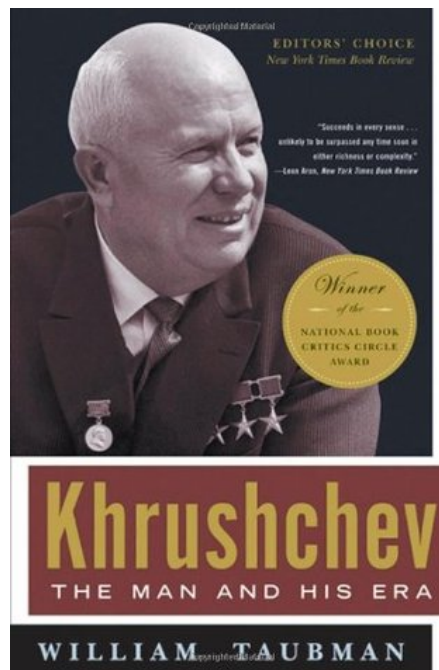




Khrushchev: The Man and His Era

William Taubman

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The definitive biography of the mercurial Soviet leader who succeeded and denounced Stalin. Nikita Khrushchev was one of the most complex and important political figures of the twentieth century. Ruler of the Soviet Union during the first decade after Stalin's death, Khrushchev left a contradictory stamp on his country and on the world. His life and career mirror the Soviet experience: revolution, civil war, famine, collectivization, industrialization, terror, world war, cold war, Stalinism, post-Stalinism. Complicit in terrible Stalinist crimes, Khrushchev nevertheless retained his humanity: his daring attempt to reform communism prepared the ground for its eventual collapse; and his awkward efforts to ease the cold war triggered its most dangerous crises.

This is the first comprehensive biography of Khrushchev and the first of any Soviet leader to reflect the full range of sources that have become available since the USSR collapsed. Combining a page-turning historical narrative with penetrating political and psychological analysis, this book brims with the life and excitement of a man whose story personified his era.

Khrushchev: The Man and His Era Details

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From Reader Review Khrushchev: The Man and His Era for online ebook

Andrew Myers says

Probably one of the best biographies I've ever read. Great author, really knows how to weave it all together.

John says

After p. 180

I am not sure that I can read much more of this book. To be sure Taubman's book is a splendid example of the biographer's art and craft, fully deserving of the acclaim and prizes, including the Pulitzer, that various critics bestowed, etc., etc. It's just that the subject is so very uninteresting.

I have read tens of biographies of Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky, and Bukharin, among the many Old Bolsheviks whose fascinating lives are told and documented in wonderfully engaging and powerful books.

I was entirely surprised that K's life could have been so dull. This is NOT to say that his life was uneventful, because it was. It is to say, however, that the biography of one of Stalin's creatures, whom he advanced as he liquidated the old Bolsheviks and with them the Bolshevik Party and state, is singularly one dimensional. That dimension, of course, was the gamesmanship of survival, of remaining one of Stalin's pets. Not altogether a challenge for the likes of K. - on the whole a singularly vacuous man, who could tell himself anything and believe whatever thoughts he concocted, who lived a life entirely untroubled by conscience. He was, of course, pruitanical, berating drunkards and the unfaithful, while he calmly signed the death warrants of hundreds to thousands. Just the sort of man, the uneducated, unreflecting, rather stupid, submissive and entirely sincere nullities that Stalin placed and kept in power.

Of course, I understand that K. initiated and drove the de-Stalinization of the USSR - such as it was, so it might be that I skim over the pages of his biography that narrate his life before Stalin's death and skip the years between 1953 and 1956 altogether. We'll see.

But none of this is Taubman's fault. I'm just wondering how he could summon the energy to write such a wonderful book of such a shallow, self-aggrandizing, narcissistically inflated, vapid but cunning non-entity.

I couldn't read another page - for now. Something apart from this book will have to prompt me to pick it up again. Maybe Lawrence Friedmans' "Kennedy's Wars."

John Taylor says

Excellent book. Fascinating insights about the man and Russia. Khrushchev was born in 1894 and he was an eye witness to the Bolshevik Revolution, the two world wars, the cold war, the crisis in Berlin and the crisis in Cuba. A man of bluster, energy and high hopes for the communist dream, he helped bring the USSR down when he condemned Stalin, after his death, for the atrocities and false imprisonments of millions he suspected of standing in his way. Damage to the image of Stalin was something communism could not face and survive, especially when the system went bankrupt and agriculture and the economy were in tatters. William Taubman paints an in depth portrait of the Soviet Union and Khrushchev's achievements and failures. Surely this is a must read for everyone.

Aaron Million says

Exhaustively researched biography about an almost-forgotten leader of Russia's past. Taubman really has command of his material throughout the book; the copious notes section at the back is almost another book in itself. When considering how secretive, paranoid, and suspicious Russia is of any Westerner, it is somewhat of a miracle that Taubman was able to locate as many sources of research as he did, and get quite a few people to agree to on-the-record interviews.

The book starts out with Khrushchev's ouster as Soviet Premier in October 1964. It then goes back to his birth in 1894. The book gets better as it goes on; early on in Khrushchev's life there was really nothing out of the ordinary to speak of. It becomes necessarily grim during the chapters focusing on the period from the Revolution in 1917 up until Khrushchev is able to eventually assume power after Stalin's death in 1953. It is appalling and immensely sad to read about thousands and thousands of innocent people being arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and executed all for no reason other than Stalin wanted them dead. Khrushchev was really no better than any of his colleagues during this timeframe - signing off on whatever documents needed to be signed off on in an effort to save themselves from Stalin's wrath.

Taubman is especially good in relating Khrushchev's rise to power in the 1950s, his mismanaged foreign relations - especially with the U.S. and China, and the many reasons behind his ultimate removal from power. The chapters on his relations with Kennedy, and then the Cuban missile crisis are especially good.

I would give this book four stars instead of three except for the following: 1) I thought that Taubman probably could have dispensed with some of the minutiae of Khrushchev's early life, 2) there are several typos throughout the book, 3) Taubman never mentions the death of Khrushchev's mother - I would think that would merit a few sentences somewhere, and 4) he really does not talk much at all about Khrushchev's relationship with his third (and by far the longest and most important) wife Nina.

Maximilian Gerboc says

As far as biographies go, you won't find one more well-written and we'll-researched than this one. Khrushchev was a fascinating character, and by focusing on his person and psychological state, Taubman paints a true portrait of an extremely complex historical figure in the context of the turbulent events surrounding his life, some of which he caused himself. This biography manages to fit in an immense amount of information while keeping the story moving and the reader, even one like me who knows generally how things turn out, on the edge of their seat.

John Melvin says

Good

This book provides a sense not only of who Khrushchev was but also of the history of the Soviet Union, it's system and other leaders.

Jerome says

A vivid, lively and readable biography of Khrushchev, a man known for his colorful, crude, and seemingly un-statesmanlike conduct. Taubman provides a good deal of insight into the man's interesting personality, and the various traits that made him both obviously human and also rather repellant. The Soviet style of government can be understood in two different ways---authoritarian and centralized (Lenin and Stalin), with a strong and colorful leader at the top, and as a more corporate, Politburo-oriented system occupied by gray, listless old men that conformed to the drab and cautious culture of collective leadership. Khrushchev seems to be somewhere in the middle between these two extremes, if they can be called that.

Taubman's Khrushchev is quite an interesting portrait: a hardscrabble industrial worker who seemed to have no natural talent, raised in a simple hut with dirt floor, with a compassion for humanity and a sincere desire to serve his country as he saw it. While he proved to be a skilled politician and easy to underestimate, his insecurity, over-the-top mannerisms, self-righteousness and inferiority complex made him quite suspect to the rest of the Party's gray functionaries. He survived Stalin's reign by playing the fool and getting everyone to underestimate him, then began his tenure as head of the Party by ousting Malenkov, foiling a coup attempt with Marshal Zhukov's assistance, and working hard to bring down the mythical image of Stalin (who Taubman calls Khrushchev's "mentor and tormentor"), as well as reducing the powers of the secret police, a feat coupled with his rather bold arrest and execution of the feared Beria, which revealed a cunning nobody had noticed before. He had a complicated relationship with Soviet intellectuals, assisting Solzhenitsyn in his work while blasting the work of Pasternak.

Khrushchev had no doubts about the communist system, yet favored a policy of peaceful co-existence, although his preference for this was tested during the U-2 incident, his reluctant approval of the construction of the Berlin Wall, and his deployment of nuclear missiles to Cuba without any real backup plan, something his political opponents were soon able to use against him (likewise, his support for nuclear forces at the expense of conventional forces cost him the support of the army establishment). He often seemed to adopt policies without fully weighing their implications, while his personality was erratic, over the top, coarse, boorish and bungling. Like Stalin before him, he had little respect for other communist statesmen, especially Mao (who considered Khrushchev a backward hick), providing another convenient club for Khrushchev's enemies, and soon enough he fell from power (Taubman's treatment of Khrushchev's fall seems just a little thin and inadequate, however).

Khrushchev, Taubman writes, "might have made a better manager or engineer than a political leader. Although his native gifts sustained him during his rise to the top, they failed him when he was there. Yet they surely would have sufficed had he pursued his original dream of becoming an industrial engineer. Along the way, he would have received the higher education he craved and felt more confident, less driven to play the very role he was determined to transcend, that of a simple peasant muzhik whom even a paranoid Stalin could trust." Khrushchev's lack of a formal education would be one of his biggest regrets.

An accessible, well-written, well-researched and well-paced biography of an interesting and complex figure who seemed to have let power trump common sense, and whose erratic behavior, self-deception, and impulsiveness seemed to disqualify him as a statesman. Taubman relies heavily on psychoanalysis, so much of his portrait may be speculative, but Taubman's Khrushchev is quite compelling compared to the colorless functionaries that came after him, and his portrait of the man never fails to fascinate or amuse.

Joe says

For many of us "Russian common-man" Nikita Khrushchev was the first "human face" of Soviet leadership

– Lenin a grainy figure from newsreels or a corpse on display in a tomb; Josef Stalin a phantom figure seen with FDR and Churchill in pictures. In one news-clip breath Khrushchev was grinning gap-toothed from one jug-ear to the other, and in the next moment slamming his shoe down on his desk at the UN. To label Mr. Khrushchev mercurial is an understatement. He was a bundle of insecurities; who far too often acted before thinking, rashly believing hubris was the antidote for any confrontation. Khrushchev was the proverbial bull who traveled with his own china shop, yet he could also be as contrite as a small child – this Jekyll and Hyde personality a dangerous combination during the Cold War.

This “Soviet-style” rags-to-riches story of Khrushchev’s life and times is presented here in detail and is in a word – compelling. The author combines anecdotes, first-hand accounts and the historical record; providing analysis when appropriate – including highlighting contemporaneous newsreel footage which I found fascinating. Many of the chapters begin with a summary before detailing the topic at hand – something this reader found invaluable. This is a “cradle to grave biography” in the best sense of the term.

Some highlights. Considered a blustering, uneducated, stumpy “peasant”, Khrushchev somehow not only survived Stalin’s purges, but succeeded him as head of the Soviet Union, besting the likes of Beria – head of the nefarious KGB - and General Zhukov – the Russian military victor of World War II. This is a story in and of itself, dispelling any thoughts that Khrushchev was “simple” or “dumb”.

Khrushchev was much closer to Stalin than at least this reader knew – the relationship between the two men complicated and one that haunted Khrushchev continually after Stalin’s death in 1953. (He was not alone – Stalin cast a very long and enduring historic shadow, haunting communists and capitalists alike.) In 1956, once in power, Khrushchev delivered his “secret speech”, blasting Stalin and denouncing his –ism.

Initiating the Berlin crisis, Khrushchev then seemed to be led into the building of the infamous “Wall” by East German General Secretary Walter Ulbricht. Khrushchev intimidated JFK at Vienna in 1961 and then riding this wave of adrenaline, brought the world to the brink of nuclear destruction during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 – this covered in detail here. During the late 1950’s and early 1960’s his word was literally law in the USSR, affecting millions of his citizens, while driving global events, as world leaders such as Eisenhower, JFK, Macmillan, De Gaulle and Mao scrambled in reaction to Khrushchev’s “mood swings”.

All this and much more is covered here. Highly recommended.

Joshua Treviño says

It seems ungenerous to criticize William Taubman's "Khrushchev," not least because it's about the only Khrushchev biography in English to speak of. Still, it is important to explore what this book is not: it is not a portrait of Soviet life; it is not an exploration of Communism (though there's plenty of information on that topic); and it is not, alas, a particularly great straight biography of Nikita Khrushchev. The book is disappointingly thin in sections where one hopes it will be rich with hitherto-unknown detail -- particularly in Khrushchev's war years as the supremo in Soviet Ukraine. Those "war years" lasted beyond the expulsion of the Nazis in 1944, well into the 1950s as the western Ukraine was suppressed and cleared of its nationalist insurgency. This was almost certainly the most brutal and, indeed, Stalinist period of Khrushchev's long career; and so it deserves more attention than it gets in Taubman's book.

The true value of this work -- and where Taubman truly excels -- is in its exploration of the psychological contradiction of Khrushchev's life. The Soviet premier was not, as he was described during the Cuban Missile Crisis, a "madman." Nor was he an intrinsically good man. The fall of Khrushchev was the fall of a

man who rose beyond his capacity, and worse, knew it. Taubman's work is best described -- and best read -- as a character study in that vein. After a disappointing first half, the book finally comes alive as we see the peasant-minded Communist (wily enough to become leader, but not to lead) blunder through the 1957-1964 period, alienating nearly everyone save those who loved him. At its end is where this book crosses into compelling territory, where, in mere pages, we see a despondent Khrushchev in exile. A visitor asks him what he regrets. "I am up to my elbows in blood," the deposed and weary premier replies.

Indeed, he was. This book gets four stars for, at its end, delivering powerful details like this. It is denied five because the definitive biography of Nikita Khrushchev has yet to be written.

Owain says

The book was okay but I could have done without the blatant political bias and journalistic spin. The most interesting facts for me was that Krushchev spent his younger life working in coal mines in a place called Yuzovka which was named after a Welsh Capitalist by the name of Hughes (Y is exchanged for H in Russian apparently) a region that has long been ethnically Russian, like the Crimea, and is now known as Donetsk-as in the People's Republic of Donestk- where a lot of the fighting has been centred on in Ukraine. A little bit of useless information that will no-doubt stay in my head for a long time as such titbits tend to do.

The main gripe I have with this book is how it over-emphasises relatively minor facts and leaves out many important features. Kruschhev's role as a military commander in World War Two for example; Krushchev commanded the forces at the Battle of Stalingrad. The most pivotal battle on the most important front in the history of the largest war there's ever been and the book is sorely lacking in detail about the heroic stand against fascism and Krushchev's role in it as military commander.

The book does explain the 'Cuban Missile Crises' in quite some depth (with a huge bias obviously) although I think it sounds like more of a success for the USSR than the author makes it out to be but I think I need a Cuban perspective on the situation.

All in all the book has quite a lot of information about Krushchev's life, the main political consequences being the 'de-Stalinisation' period something which I favour but I think Krushchev went about it in an illogical way. He should have taken the time to introduce better ways of providing democratic centralism throughout the whole institution of government in the USSR, including his own authority. I don't think he should have sat above the democratic process in such a way that he did, meddling around in affairs that should have been solved by others. He was quite a contradictory person although was obviously very good at certain things, I would have said his best position would have been as an industrial or agricultural manager or as a military general, all of which he showed a good talent for throughout his career, not as a head of state.

Annette says

This book provides a very interesting portrait of a world leader I vaguely remember. Taubman provides insights into Khrushchev's behavior and personality that helped me make sense of his place in the history of the Soviet Union. Khrushchev was both a product of his times and a "tablesetter" for some of the developments that came after him. I was rather disappointed, however, that the book does not contain a detailed account of the coup that ousted Khrushchev. Other than that, this is a very comprehensive look at Khrushchev's life.

Steve Kettmann says

My review published in the San Francisco Chronicle in 2003:

A foul mouth that shaped history

Reviewed by Steve Kettmann

Sunday, April 27, 2003

Khrushchev

The Man and His Era

By William Taubman

NORTON; 768 Pages; \$35

Short, fat and crude, Nikita Khrushchev was an enigma to President Kennedy and his advisers during the tense days of the Cuban missile crisis and remains an enigma to this day.

If William Taubman never really comes to terms with that enigma in this faultlessly researched biography, "Khrushchev: The Man and His Era," that should serve mostly to underscore the complexity of Khrushchev's character.

He was a boor and a bully, volatile and often red-faced, given to strange look-at-me theatrics such as pulling off his shoe at the United Nations and banging it on the table. He was a peasant and metalworker with a peasant's immovable stubborn side and an undying love of scatological jokes. He lied to himself and others about his involvement in Stalin's epic crimes. He let power go to his head and made many rash decisions as undisputed Soviet leader -- most momentously, challenging Kennedy with nuclear-tipped missiles deployed in Cuba, all without much of a plan about what to do if the United States forcefully objected.

Another side of Khrushchev comes through in these pages, too, that of a man who, whatever else his many faults, was not a cynic. Until very late in his life, after he'd been ousted and erased from Soviet public life, he genuinely believed in the promise of socialism. He even seemed to believe at some level that the radical schemes he cooked up to boost agricultural production might actually work and that the socialist world really might outstrip the West in meeting the needs of its people.

That core of genuine belief might not sound like much, except that it sets Khrushchev apart from every other post-Lenin Soviet leader except Mikhail Gorbachev. In fact, Gorbachev cited Khrushchev as his inspiration when he mounted his radical program of glasnost and perestroika, which ushered to a close both the Cold War and the Soviet experiment. Khrushchev was guilty of many failures, but he somehow summoned the courage to condemn Stalin and Stalinism -- "an atmosphere of lawlessness and arbitrariness" -- at the historic Twentieth Party Congress in 1956.

"Gorbachev . . . reached political maturity during the Khrushchev era and remembered its openness and optimism with nostalgia," Taubman writes. "Although he rose rapidly under Khrushchev's successor . . . he regarded 'Brezhnevism [as:] nothing but a conservative reaction against Khrushchev's attempt at reforming. .

. 'Gorbachev's own generation, he added, 'considered itself 'children of the Twentieth Congress' and regarded the task of renewing what Khrushchev had begun as 'our obligation.' "

Oddly, Taubman develops this theme only as a kind of postscript, near the end of the book, and never seems quite sure how seriously to take Khrushchev's better impulses. That is, he never offers a decisive picture of how he sees his legacy or how we ought to see it.

Taubman often explains that Khrushchev was a mystery, especially to educated people who weren't in a good position to fathom the psychological terrain of so poorly educated and provincial a man who nevertheless rose to remarkable power in the world. Yet, for reasons that are not clear, Taubman sometimes breaks from his normal tone of neutral, meticulously informed scholar to offer psychological insights that seem like overreaching.

That's true whether he's citing Freud on a child who is the favorite of his mother, early in the book, or remarking about Khrushchev's 70th birthday, shortly before his ouster from power:

"Khrushchev was worn out, both, one suspects, from craving the daylong acclaim and from being mortified by it. For him the two feelings were probably more or less in balance."

The best parts of the book are the sections dealing with U.S.-Soviet relations and, in particular, the tense days of October 1962, when Khrushchev deployed the missiles in Cuba and brought the world closer to all-out nuclear war than it has ever been. Taubman's scholarship is excellent, and he offers so many remarkable details that the episode gains a haunting, vivid quality.

For example, the Soviets opted to deploy not only 36 medium-range missiles and 24 intermediate-range missiles but also an elaborate array of surface-to-air missiles to protect the missile launchers and a squadron of bombers including six fitted for nuclear weapons. The Kremlin planned to send 50,874 men to Cuba, including bakers, mechanics and doctors, but reduced the number to 45,234 -- 41,902 of whom were actually deployed. Khrushchev's failure in believing he could mobilize such a force and have it fully operational without U.S. detection must count as one of the all-time historical errors in judgment.

World war was averted during those tense days, but as Taubman makes clear from his close look at Khrushchev's state of mind, it could easily not have been. That's a reminder that should never be forgotten: Even momentous decisions on going to war and risking huge numbers of lives are often made on the basis of flimsy assumptions and only minimal consideration of the likely consequences of confrontation.

Steve Kettmann lives in Berlin and reviews for The Chronicle.

This article appeared on page M - 3 of the San Francisco Chronicle

Read more: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article...>

Seth J. Vogelmann says

A bit tedious but a good overview of the man and his complexities.

Lehtomaki says

Biography

Frederic says

Interesting and informative biography of the Boogiemann of my childhood and early adolescence which, mirabile dictu, clearly illustrates that he was just another woefully flawed human being whose virtues may or may not exculpate his complicity in Stalin's Terror.

Frank Stein says

It's debatable whether or not Nikita Khrushchev ever banged his shoe at the United Nations Assembly in 1960. There are photos of him pounding the lectern with his fists, and reports of him waving the shoe, but some say he never smacked it down. The irony, as William Taubman points out in this Pulitzer Prize winning biography, is that the young Khrushchev was tormented by his lack of shoes as a child, and that the moment that came to define him in the history as a rustic vulgarian, also demonstrated to Khrushchev just how far he had come from his roots. Waving a real shoe at the UN! How high he had risen!

Khrushchev was the energetic son of a poor peasant family on the Russian border with Ukraine, who moved southwest into the Donbas region to find metalwork around the coal mines. In his early years, Khrushchev wished nothing more than to be a middle-class mechanical engineer, and for his whole life he was never so happy as when he was overlooking mechanical blueprints. Though he could hardly spell, he always claimed his wish was to spend more time on his mechanical and cultural education and less in politics. But at the new technical schools founded after the Russian Revolution, he focused his efforts on running Communist Party cells and rising in the party ranks, and eventually caught Stalin's eye. He ran the Moscow Party when the famous Moscow subways were built, and supervised the political front on the Ukraine in World War II. Despite his success, his uneducated, bumptious manner meant he was regarded as a joke in the Soviet Union and in the West.

Yet after Stalin's death, this country bumpkin outmaneuvered his opponents Beria, Malenkov, Molotov, and Zhukov to cement his total power. The seeming impossibility of Khrushchev running the country meant that, in the vicious world of Soviet politics, people felt safe in allying with them, until he overcame them one by one. To illustrate his surprising success, Khrushchev often told the sad Ukrainian story of Pinya, who was chosen to lead a prison escape by other inmates, because they thought he would get shot first as they ran. Although Pinya was the dimmest and the smallest of the group, he bravely took up the challenge. "That little Pinya - that's me," Khrushchev said with all too much self-knowledge.

As the Soviet leader, Khrushchev denounced Stalin and opened up the gulags, but also crushed a democratic movement in Prague in 1956 and jailed and silenced his critics at home. He came up with the absurd "Virgin Lands" campaign to start a new agricultural frontier in central Russia, but also convinced his engineers to place ICBM missiles in silos against their inclinations. He antagonized opponents with his talk of pumping out missiles like sausages (when he had none), but also traveled across the globe on goodwill tours, while previous Soviet leaders had barely left the country.

Khrushchev, obviously, was a man of contradictions, with much blood on his hands but many successes to

celebrate. As he himself said in 1964 when Leonid Brezhnev and others overthrew him during a two-day Politburo meeting, the very fact that they could yell at him and send him off without killing him was his greatest success. He had reined the Soviet Union away from the worst excesses of the Stalin years.

This book was at its best when it detailed Khrushchev's early life and rise, but after Khrushchev reaches the pinnacle, the author feels compelled to report every jot and tittle of his speeches and doings. This would have been an amazing work if it had been 200 pages shorter. Nonetheless, the author is right that Khrushchev had one of the strangest and most amazing lives of the 20th century, and it deserves to be better known.

Antonio Nunez says

Khrushchev spent all his life trying to get out of the Vozhd's shadow. Stalin made him what he was, and, until the end of his life, he ran from his legacy, while at the same time continuing to indulge in many of its ways. For a very long time Khrushchev has been a walk-on character in the Stalin biographies (particularly egregiously in Volkogonov's "Autopsy of an Empire", where everyone after Stalin is a let-down). Stalin was so exceptional (and I'm not saying this as praise: rather the opposite) that everyone (including such extraordinary characters as Zhukov, Kaganovich, Bukharin, Beria, Kirov and also Khrushchev) ends up looking pale by comparison.

Taubman's biography does justice to its subject. It emphasizes his duality: an ignorant man who prized culture and loved to deal with artists, but could never do so without alienating them; a true man of the people (the only real manual worker to have become leader of the USSR), with simple tastes, who was yet devious beyond measure; an exceptionally intelligent person who achieved the greatest power, but who probably would have been happier as a manager of a manufacturing concern; a warm man in public, who was yet extremely distant from his family, although he loved them deeply; a man who was a teetotaler who however was perceived as a drunk; a negotiator who wanted to end the Cold War, who did much more than anyone else to almost bring about nuclear apocalypse; a loyal Party man who ended up almost dismantling the Party and betraying its rules. One could go on, and on, because nothing about Khrushchev was simple.

Although Taubman doesn't say so, Khrushchev's strategy was similar to that used by other figures who managed to survive terrible masters. Robert Graves's Emperor Claudius comes to mind: according to Suetonius, he survived the madness of Caligula and the bloodshed of Tiberius by pretending to be a fool, a drunk and a cripple. Like Claudius, Khrushchev survived Stalin's various Terrors by disguising his ambition and playing the buffoon endlessly: by appearing useful but harmless, in short. But, like Claudius, the abilities that led him to supreme power, deserted him once he achieved his goal: Claudius was easily destroyed by his cunning niece Agrippina the Younger, and her psychopath son, Nero. Similarly, Khrushchev, after having disposed of such tough customers as Beria, Malenkov, Bulganin and Molotov, was brought down by a second-rater, Leonid Brezhnev, in a singularly inept coup that probably could have been easily dismantled if Khrushchev had had his eye on the ball. Many of these leaders were grotesques (particularly Malenkov and Beria), and Taubman does a sterling job at presenting them like real human beings, which they also were.

The story Taubman tells is exceptional, and he tells it supremely well. One feels like another guest at Khrushchev's dachas, or a fly-on-the-wall at yet another Politburo meeting. The cast of secondary characters is fascinating, including, on the American side, Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson, and key establishment types such as the Dulles brothers, Averell Harriman, Adlai Stevenson and Bobby Kennedy. Interesting Brits, notably Harold Macmillan, make their appearances, as do Conrad Adenauer, Mao Ze Dong, Zhou En Lai, Josip Broz Tito, Fidel Castro, Pandit Nehru, Sukarno, Charles de Gaulle and Walter Ulbricht. That was a time when giants walked the earth, and this is truly the story of The Man and his Era, like the dustjacket says. I was particularly interested in Andropov's role in the publication of the Khrushchev memoirs in the US: apparently, as KGB chief, he could have stopped it because Khrushchev's contact was actually a

KGB mole, but didn't, because he wasn't just a simple spymaster but also a complex character.

All the key episodes (like the infamous shoe-banging at the United Nations, the Cuban missile crisis, the several Berlin crises, the Hungary invasion, the secret speech at the end of the XX Party Congress, the launching of Sputnik and the Pasternak Nobel Prize) are told in just the right length, with all the context required for a non-specialist.

From the book one emerges with the view that Khrushchev was not a demented villain like Stalin and Lenin, nor a useless careerist like Brezhnev. He was rather like Gorbachev: a true believer who thought that the system he served could survive and would become even stronger if cleansed of the accretions of 35 years of dictatorship. He was also a visionary. He understood the change in the role of armies as a consequence of nuclear and high-tech weapons (he knew that large standing armies would be unnecessary and even counter-productive in the new world). He saw that the so-called Third World was the next frontier for the Cold War. He realized the USSR would have to live with Chinese and Yugoslav socialism, and that this would not necessarily weaken Moscow's power in the long term. He realized that Mao's China meant that a rapprochement with the USA was necessary in order to maintain his country's status (if Khrushchev hadn't been overthrown and Kennedy hadn't been killed, it's quite possible Nixon's entente with Mao would never have happened, because it would have been pre-empted by a new Soviet-American understanding). His moving the missiles into Cuba was actually no different from the US having missiles in other countries bordering the USSR, such as Turkey. He understood that Stalinism was an illness, which he tried to cure, although he failed to notice that, to a large extent, Stalinism was encoded in the Leninist DNA, and couldn't be done away with without losing Leninism as well.

He did many evil things. He was instrumental in collectivising the Ukraine, causing the worst famine in history after Mao's great leap forward. He led the purges in Ukraine in the 1930's, although he tried to protect the local culture and language from his own onslaught. He was instrumental in saving Stalingrad from the Germans, at a terrible cost. He persecuted religion in the USSR like even Stalin hadn't dared. He was a reckless gambler, and he sometimes lost sight of his bets.

Yet he was courageous and, on the whole, likeable. He was probably the nicest guy that worked for Stalin, which may not be saying a lot, but it's better than being called the worst of them all (and there's plenty of competition for that spot). Judged against these (admittedly low) standards, Khrushchev didn't do too badly. Taubman's book will do much to give him the place he deserves in the history of the last century.

Shawn says

I really enjoyed this biography. He was an odd willy chap to say the least. Starts with him growing up and working in the mines, and receiving the equivalent of a fourth grade education. Up through Stalin, WWII, Stalin's death, his rise and fall.

A lot seemed to be glossed over, but at 908 pages, one could not cover all, in detail. He somehow survived Stalin, and was continually underestimated, and thought dull, which he worked to his advantage. He was briefly a Trotsky follower, and may be the only Trotsky guy that Stalin let live. He had to have signed the death warrant for millions of people, but denies knowing that they were innocent at the time. He lived through WWII, and took over as Ukrainian head. He always seemed to have agriculture on his mind. Though what his contribution was to the massive famine that collectivism brought seems to be glossed over also.

After Stalin's death, his Machiavellian brilliance came out, when he, and some allies quickly deposed of Beria, Stalin's head NKVD. Who thought he was Stalin's successor. Beria, was made out to be as evil as

Stalin, and how Khrushchev and his allies got rid of him, took him to a basement and had him shot is interesting. Khrushchev then worked on disposing his allies, (not killing them like Stalin, just moving them), and consolidating power. His speech at the 20th congress condemning Stalin's cult of personality is very interesting, and how he wanted to open socialism up and expose Stalin's crimes, with taking very little responsibility himself in those crimes was neat trick. How could he claim, "Not to know" is of course self-delusion. But he also stated, and asked people, if Stalin told you to do something, when he was alive, would you have said no? I think I would have peed my pants and intermediately done it myself.

Once in power he is full of contraindication. He wanted to open up the system, and make things more free, but crushed the Hungarian uprising. Though he seemed confused at what to do at the time, and may have actually been taking advice from Tito and of all people Mao. He boasted about how he could destroy America and Americas allies with his nukes, but at the end he had only about 4 ICBMs, which if launched, might have headed in the general direction of the U.S.

He seemed to revel in Agriculture, and boasted he could overtake the US in agricultural output in years. He slashed the Military conventional budget, saying that it was a waste of money, and that with Nukes a war would not happen anyway, so what was the point. This pissed off quite a few people who had a hand in overthrowing him later. The fact that he unilaterally cut millions of troops, I thought was also of interest.

The Cuban missile crisis, was mostly his fault. He somehow thought he could get missiles there without US knowing, and if they knew they would not do anything about it. It was a good thing he was Russia's leader at the time, instead of others or the outcome would have been different. However the outcome, made him look bad at home and led to his downfall.

His visits to America were entertaining to read about.

In the end he had isolated himself, and had nothing but yes men around him. His rantings had gotten embarrassing. He tried to put his hands in too many things, and change too much. Opening up Stalin's crimes made the Russian people question the government itself, which led to many strikes.

When he was ousted he went peacefully, in retirement. Went into a depression. However he started to write his memoirs, which the current leadership did not want published, but he told them to go to hell. Of note Yuri Andropov, the head of the KGB at the time, turned somewhat of a blind eye towards it, because he was fighting the re-Stalinization that Brezhnev was trying to reinstall. The manuscripts and tapes had to be smuggled out and hidden, with his knowledge. Somewhat of a turn of events.

His death was uncelebrated there in the USSR. And Khrushchev was thought of an embarrassment. However after his death, Brezhnev brought about a complete stagnation of the Russian economy. It was not until Gorbachev's glasnost before he was mentioned again. Khrushchev had brought about a generation of Soviets, that though socialism could be opened up, and that the crimes of Stalin should be exposed. However both Khrushchev and Gorbachev overestimated the Russians people's allegiance to socialism, and it fell.

In the end the two leaders of the 20th century that did not get a negative review from Russian people were Czar Nicholas and Khrushchev, (who broke even.)

A really interesting read, about a very contradictory man. Who used peoples underestimation about him, to gain power. I would highly recommend it.

Czarny Pies says

Cette biographie a bien merite son prix Pulitzer. Il est base sur des recherches approfondies et presente un analyse nuance de ce courageux chef Sovietique qui a mis fin aux pires abus de Stalinisme et qui a essaye d'ouvrir un dialogue avec les pays de l'ouest. Essentiellement le lecteur trouve un communiste pur et dur qui voulait le communisme soit humaine et qui etait convaincu que c'etait.

Khrushchev a été une masse de contradictions. Ses études ont fini dans ses années adolescentes mais il a toujours attache une grande valeur a l'instruction et il a pousse son fils a faire un doctorat en physique. Il croyait fermement a l'Importance de la litterature a condition bien entendu qu'elle etait au service de la cause de l'etat communiste. Pour survivre il a fidelement rempli ses quotas de denonciations et d'envois aux Goulag. Une fois chef du pays, il a libéré les prisonniers et fermé les Goulags.

S'il était un homme de bonne volonté, Khrushchev était aussi un produit du systeme communiste; c'est à dire il etait d'une ignorance colossale et completement depourvu des convenances sociales qui prevallait dans nos pays de l'ouest. Il a surestimé ses connaissances surtout dans le domaine agricole ce qui lui poussé a trop mise sur la culture de maïs.

Malgre tous ses fautes, le bilan de la carriere de Khrushchev est positif. Il a mis fin a un épouvantable reigne de terreur et il a fait les premieres pas vers un rapprochement. Grace à sa bonhomie, le public occidental a decide qu'un dialogue avec l'URSS etait possible et souhaitable.

David Sigurdsson says

Fabulous!
