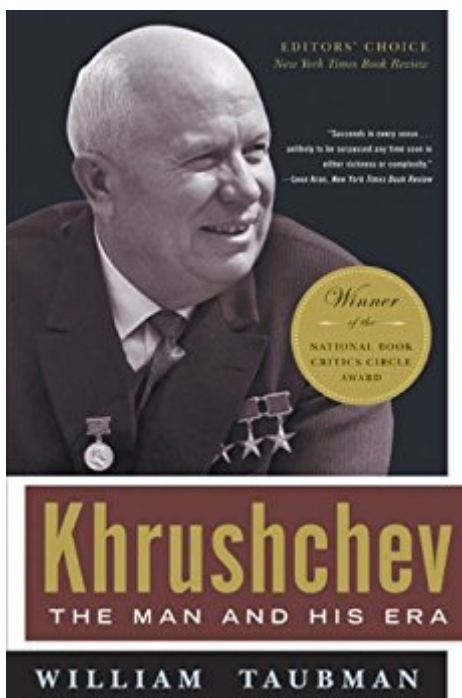


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Khrushchev: The Man And His Era



Synopsis

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award 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.

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Customer Reviews

In Professor Taubman's book Khrushchev emerges as a man rife with contradictions. His rise to power in Stalinist Russia given his humble origins is partly driven by ruthlessness but there is an element of simplicity and almost clownishness that enables him to survive the purges when many of his contemporaries were eliminated. Post Stalin he displayed a ruthless grasp of power politics with a desire to have the USSR take center stage in World affairs. The quality of the research and sources required to delve this deeply into his personality is astounding and goes way beyond the historical narrative of events. As an example the account of the Cuban Missile Crisis from the Soviet point of view and Khrushchev's personal involvement is absolutely fascinating. Overall this is an excellent biography as well as an incredibly detailed view into the inner workings of the Soviet government during the height of the cold war. Highly recommended.

Professor Taubman's magisterial KHRUSHCHEV: THE MAN AND HIS ERA (he waited an additional ten years to explore newly opened archives and to conduct extensive interviews in Russia that resulted in a Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Award) joins John Lewis Gaddis' THE COLD WAR: A NEW HISTORY and WE NOW KNOW: RETHINKING COLD WAR HISTORY in the "must read" pantheon of Cold War books. Open society Americans were at a major disadvantage in dealing with closed society Soviets. Often the Soviets obtained more 'intelligence' from the New York Times than CIA could glean from its limited covert sources. Taubman illustrates this in his account of the Cuban Missile Crisis: * President Kennedy and his Cuban Executive Committee (ExComm) speculated wildly on Khrushchev's strategic thinking behind his 'secret' installation of nuclear weapons in Cuba. Thinking rationally, they presumed that this move was directly linked to Berlin. They also wondered what Khrushchev's fallback plan was, when the U. S. discovered the massive Soviet nuclear and ground troop buildup in Cuba. They would have been astonished to learn that there was no rational strategic plan. Rather: * After Kennedy accepted the Berlin Wall, Khrushchev was convinced "that he could pressure Kennedy again, thus setting the stage for the most explosive Cold War crisis in Cuba;" * Khrushchev was convinced that the U. S. was intent on invading Cuba (Defense Minister Malinovsky told him that the United States could destroy Cuba's armed forces in a few days); * In April, 1962 Khrushchev said to Malinovsky, in regard to Cuba, "What if we throw a hedgehog down Uncle Sam's pants?;" * Khrushchev and Mikoyan were highly sympathetic to the revolutionary spirit of Fidel Castro and, especially, Che Guevara; * When his military advisors stated that it was highly probable that the U. S. would discover that 150 ships were carrying 40,000 troops and a bevy of nuclear weapons to Cuba, Khrushchev brushed this aside.

"Not thinking through was typical of Khrushchev, especially in his last years of power. But although he lacked a contingency plan, he did have a notion: if the Americans discovered Soviet missiles before they were fully operational, surely he could negotiate himself out of the situation. It was his 'near certainty' that Kennedy would not choose war, according to Adzhubei [his son in law], that made it 'relatively safe' to provoke the U. S. president. Nuclear war was a near thing as Khrushchev, faced with a resolute President Kennedy, twisted and turned to salvage a modicum of success from his disastrous Hail Mary. This was one of many examples, especially after Khrushchev survived a July, 1957 coup attempt, of his volatility. In a sense, he became almost like Stalin, though without Stalin's strategic patience or bloody terror. Khrushchev was a survivor of the Stalinist years. Though he may have objected to some of Stalin's actions, he was careful not to anger Stalin. He played a Machiavellian game in which he rose to the top of Stalin's henchmen. After Stalin's death, he managed, within a few years, to eliminate his political enemies and, increasingly, to govern alone. Westerners could assess him as crude and bizarre. He certainly was embarrassed by his lack of formal education (only four years of school and some technical training). He also demonstrated great bluster and bluff. He often threatened nuclear destruction to Western countries when he had, at most, four deliverable nuclear weapons, and these required hours of pre-launch preparation. His claims of Soviet economic development (surpassing the U. S. economy within a few years) in retrospect appear ludicrous. Likewise, his Virgin Lands agricultural initiative, together with other impulsive Lysenko-inspired agricultural schemes, turned out badly. Khrushchev was on stage for a critical period of the Cold War. His ego, bluff, and lack of strategic thinking made him an exasperating opponent for Western Cold War warriors. What was unclear to these warriors was how, cumulatively, Khrushchev's clownish and boorish actions and clear failures (Cuban Missile Crisis, 1960 summit failure, fractured relations with Mao Zedong, food shortages, severe military cuts) led to his ouster in October, 1964. Professor Taubman's astonishing research and fluid writing style provide extraordinary insight into Khrushchev's life from early years as a steel worker, his survival and success under Stalin, and his roller coaster years in the post-Stalin era. I conclude, after reading this book, that Khrushchev was a severely flawed, but not a 'bad,' man. Amidst his bluster was a sense of humanity. I felt sorry for how he was treated during his final years. I appreciate that Gorbachev spoke approvingly of what Khrushchev accomplished in preparing for a national transition from Stalinist days to what Gorbachev inherited. I find it noteworthy that, in a Russian poll over a decade ago, the only 20th century Russian rulers who were viewed positively were Nicholas II (the last czar) and Khrushchev.

What a complex and intriguing person. Khrushchev really tried to do good but had to balance against powerful interests constantly scheming against him. Paints a sympathetic portrait of a powerful and significant figure from the 20th century.

What a fascinating read! I really got to know Khrushchev from this account. I'm giving it four stars because it bogs down at some points, but overall an outstanding read!

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

Nikita Khrushchev was a major figure in 20th century politics, yet unfortunately is not well-known to many modern-day Westerners. Taubman's biography, a real masterpiece of investigation, suspense, and skilled storytelling, fleshes the man out and makes his life palatable. Here is the story of a peasant child grown up into a boorish, inarticulate, clumsy, impulsive man, who through skillful machinations becomes the leader of one of the most powerful countries on Earth. To get there he becomes a pawn/whipping boy to Josef Stalin, one of history's most feared leaders known for executing countless Europeans at will. Upon Stalin's death, Khrushchev takes his position and renounces all that the prior leader stands for, creating shockwaves through the country and a myriad of tensions with other Russian leaders behind the scenes. He steers his country (and continental Europe) through the Cold War, proposes radical reform to his Communist Party, and plays chicken with President Kennedy over nuclear warheads in Cuba. His eventual denouement, spitefully mutinied by his associates, sends him into a bitter retirement and eventual death. This is an extraordinary story, extraordinarily told. Taubman portrays power itself in many forms- liberating, all-encompassing, as an instrument of fear and hope, reform and genocide. The reader gets a clear image of Khrushchev in all his flaws, and he ends up being very human, neurotic about his abilities and the power entrusted to him, dedicated to his country and constantly at war with his ego. Even after completing the book I am not sure if I feel compassionate towards him, but I am certainly understanding of the pressure he must have continuously felt while being Stalin's ultimate Yes Man. The book also succeeds as a work of 20th century European history, as it portrays the crises and the motivations behind them in a quickened yet detailed pace. The writing itself is first-rate; there isn't a dry page in the book. Highest recommendation for anyone with the remotest interest in the man or the times he lived in.

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