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The Kremlin's Nozdrev

By David Satter

In Nikolai Gogol's 19th century novel, *Dead Souls*, the hero, Pavel Ivanovich Chichikov, visits local landowners to buy up recently deceased serfs whose names are still on the census registry so that he can mortgage them and become a serf owner himself. In the course of this exercise, he meets Nozdrev who agrees to give Chichikov the souls but insists that Chichikov buy his horse. Chichikov, he says, can sell the horse for triple the price. Chichikov suggests that Nozdrev sell it and keep the profit for himself. "I could," Nozdrev says, "but I wanted to do good for you."

I was reminded of Nozdrev's bargain while reading *Khrushchev's Cold War* (Norton, 640 pages, $35), by Aleksandr Fursenko, a Russian historian, and Timothy Naftali, the director of the Kremlin Decision Making Project at the Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia. The similarities between Khrushchev and Nozdrev are remarkable. On September 11, 1961, after threatening to close the allied air, road, and rail corridors to West Berlin, Khrushchev muses on Kennedy's obligations before history. He tells the West German ambassador that if Kennedy would accept Soviet terms, "90 percent of Americans (and not just Americans) would carry him in their arms."

In constructing their portrait of Khrushchev's cold war, Mr. Fursenko and Mr. Naftali describe a world — including, to a degree, the Kremlin leadership — held hostage to the vagaries of Khrushchev's unstable and mercurial personality. As the authors make clear, it was Khrushchev who was the chief disturber of the peace in the world. His idiosyncracies, complexes, and determination to achieve the communist paradise in which he naively believed kept the world in a state of tension from Suez to the Cuban missile crisis.

The authors draw on the previously classified Khrushchev protocols and minutes of the Presidium of the central committee, the top decision making organ of the communist party. These materials, declassified in 2003, present a side of the history of the early Cold War that was long hidden from view: the deliberations of the Kremlin leadership. Khrushchev, after he was removed from office, complained that he had to dictate his memoirs without access to archival materials. "The facts," he said, "can be found in the minutes and protocols of meetings."

Like Nozdrev, Khrushchev was indifferent to the wishes of others. He dreamt of a world in which the position of the communist bloc was solidified, the Soviet people enjoyed an American-style standard of living, the military confrontation between east and west was

over, and the Soviet Union was free to work for the inevitable victory of socialism by steadily gaining allies in the third world.

The problem was that the West had aspirations of its own. Khrushchev believed that in order to force them to cede to the Soviet Union its rightful place in the world, they had to be frightened with the specter of nuclear war.

In a meeting of the presidium on January 8, 1961, Khrushchev explained his philosophy to his Kremlin colleagues. “We should increase the pressure,” he said. “But don’t pour the last drop to make the cup overflow. Be just like a meniscus which, according to the laws of surface tension in liquid is generated in order that the liquid does not pour out past the rim.” The pressure would prevent the Americans from taking advantage of their strategic superiority. “If we don’t have a meniscus,” he said, “we let the enemy live peacefully.”

Khrushchev’s preference for nuclear blackmail dates from the outcome of the Suez Crisis. He wanted the Europeans to accept an immediate ceasefire. The Soviet Union was developing intermediate range missiles that were theoretically capable of hitting London and Paris, but they were not on combat duty in November, 1956. On November 5, the Soviets sent a message to British prime minister Anthony Eden, stating that the Soviet Union nonetheless was “full of determination to crush the aggressor and reestablish peace in the East by using force.” Shortly afterward, Britain and France agreed to a ceasefire. They did so under pressure from the United States. Khrushchev, however, never understood the factors that led Britain and France to halt their intervention in Egypt. He was convinced that his bluff had been successful.

The outcome of the Suez crisis led Khrushchev to try to force the West to accede to Soviet demands over Berlin. In November 1958, Khrushchev announced that the time had come to abrogate the Potsdam agreements governing access to the city. The new policy was short lived because of opposition in the Soviet presidium led by Anastas Mikoyan. But it was resurrected at Khrushchev’s meeting on June 3, 1961 with Kennedy in Vienna.

In Vienna, Khrushchev said he was prepared to sign a peace treaty with East Germany. This would mean the end of special access routes – air, road or rail – for NATO. Kennedy said that he could accept a peace treaty but not the loss of access rights. Khrushchev said that if America tried to exercise those rights after a peace treaty was signed, there would be a military response. He then announced a December 31 deadline for a Berlin settlement, vowing that those who tested Soviet resolve on the Berlin issue would “share the fate of Hitler.”

Kennedy was disturbed by Khrushchev’s threat, but bolstered by intelligence data that showed the Soviet Union’s strategic inferiority. He requested a massive increase from Congress for the defense budget and issued a call up of reserves. When Khrushchev saw that the West was determined not to yield, he decided to solve the problem of the massive flight of East Germans to the West by building the Berlin Wall. In October, he extended

the deadline for an agreement on Berlin, insisting that the purpose of the original ultimatum had been to get the Wall.

Khrushchev, however, had not given up the idea of imposing his will over Berlin and with the emergence of a communist regime in Cuba, he thought he saw a way. The plan was to install 40 nuclear missiles in Cuba, twice the number that, in mid-1962, could reach the United States from the Soviet Union. With the missiles in place, Khrushchev was confident that he could compel the U.S. to accept his terms on Berlin. "Kennedy is waiting to be pushed to the brink – agreement or war," Khrushchev said. "Of course, he will not want war. He will concede. No rational being could not but agree with us."

One of the most fascinating parts of *Khrushchev's Cold War* is Mr. Fursenko and Mr. Naftali's description of the Cuban missile crisis. The Soviets had not only installed long range missiles in Cuba, they had armed Soviet land forces with tactical nuclear weapons and ordered submarines with nuclear-tipped torpedoes to trail the ships carrying the warheads from the Soviet Union to Cuba.

As the authors make clear, Kennedy, in imposing a quarantine, made the right decision. Had the U.S. troops invaded, they might have been attacked with tactical nuclear weapons. By showing determination but leaving the decision to go to war in the hands of the Soviets, Kennedy inspired those forces in the presidium, led by Mikoyan, who saw that the world was staring into the abyss, to press for moderation. In the end, of course, the Soviets backed down.

The conclusion of the Cuban missile crisis led Khrushchev to reevaluate his strategy. He had never wanted war. He wanted to use the threat of war to create a suitable postwar order as he defined it. Once it became clear that the threat would not work, he abandoned his use of pressure tactics and began to seek compromises with the West. Khrushchev publicly called off the threat of a new ultimatum on Berlin. He also agreed to a partial test ban. The result was the start of a détente in the Cold War that was to continue in one form or another for the next 28 years.

The intriguing, well-researched story told by Mr. Fursenko and Mr. Naftali is a welcome edition to the literature of the Cold War. Unfortunately, it can also be taken as an object lesson in how reckless a weak power can behave once it is in possession of nuclear weapons. For all his aggressiveness, Khrushchev never hated the West. He merely wanted a relationship with the capitalists in which he was dominant. The danger today is that such relative moderation is not typical of some of the new candidates for nuclear power that may be tempted to follow Khrushchev's example.

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