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More Notes from the First Circle

KHRUSHCHEV REMEMBERS: The Last Testament. Translated and edited by Strobe Talbott. Introductions by Edward Crankshaw and Jerrold L. Schecter. Little, Brown. 602 pp. $12.95

By ANTHONY ASTRACHAN

THE FIRST VOLUME of Nikita Khrushchev's memoirs provided a fascinating picture, drawn from the inside, of the Soviet Union and the men who rule it. *Khrushchev Remembers* was a vivid revelation of the mind and character of the man who removed Stalin from the Soviet pantheon and of the way he tried to fit the Soviet Union into the modern world.

The Last Testament is boring by comparison. Khrushchev had few revelations left over, and we are already familiar with the many shapes of the protean peasant who became a shaker of the world. The second volume, unlike the first, says more about foreign relations than domestic affairs, and it is hard to be fascinating about foreign policy if you are simply recollecting, without access to files but with due regard for state secrecy laws. It discourages even an idiosyncratic policy-maker from getting down to the untold causes and effects of policy decisions, the only really interesting side of foreign affairs.

Still, the new volume of memoirs is worth reading, and not only for the specialist. There is the occasional surprise, like Khrushchev's suggestion that Fidel Castro did not want Soviet missiles installed in Cuba in 1962. Khrushchev says Castro came to accept them once he became convinced that the United States was planning a second invasion to make up for the Bay of Pigs—which Khrushchev thought probable.

There is another kind of surprise in Khrushchev's statement that Egypt and the Soviet Union were wrong in "allowing" the Six-Day War to happen in 1967. He says Egypt was wrong to demand the removal of United Nations troops from the border with Israel and to close the Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli shipping. Then he says, "I think the Soviet Union has to bear a large share of the responsibility for what happened. Given our influence with Nasser, given our ability to exert pressure on Egypt, we should have restrained the Egyptians from demonstrating their belligerence . . . I think our military men, more than our diplomats, are to blame. They should never have let the Egyptians force Israel into betting everything it had on a preventive attack." Khrushchev was already out of power in 1967, of course, but it is still fascinating to hear him sound more like the Muscovites who sneered privately at the Arabs than like the official Soviet line that he usually followed.

The Last Testament is also worth reading for comments that are anything but surprises, but gain dimension when made by a certified member of the Soviet elite. On the international level, there is the admission of the desperate Soviet search for superpower equality: Khrushchev says, apropos of his 1959 visit to the United States, "The reason we were proud was that we had finally forced the United States to recognize the necessity of establishing closer contacts with us." The same pride and the same desperate search underlie the current Soviet pursuit of detente with a crippled American president.

Less cosmic, but reflecting the Soviet search for equality, it is not a hypercritical western reporter but the former first secretary of the Communist Party who says, "It's spring now and, as always, there's a vegetable shortage. Cucumbers and tomatoes are terribly expensive. So is ordinary lettuce, which is of very poor quality. There's a new, high-quality lettuce which looks like cabbage (iceberg lettuce), but it's available only to special people. You'd never find it in a peasant market or a grocery store. . . . We still lag seriously behind the capitalist world in food production."

It is not a fastidious foreigner but the irrepressible Nikita Sergeyevich who reports that in his civil war days, students in a political course, quartered in what had been a school for the daughters of nobility, took only two days to make the bathroom unusable. "Why? Because the people in our group didn't know how to use it properly. Instead of sitting on the toilet seat so that people could use it after them, they perched like eagles on top of the toilet and mucked the place up terribly. And after we'd put the bathroom out of commission, we set to work on the park nearby. After a week or so, the park was so disgusting that it was impossible for anyone to walk there."

Khrushchev anticipates that he might be reproached for (Continued on page 4)

ANTHONY ASTRACHAN, a former Moscow correspondent for The Washington Post, writes frequently about Soviet affairs.

Khrushchev

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recounting such tales, but "my answer is that such conditions persisted for a long time. It took decades for the people to advance from their primitive habits." Anyone who uses a public toilet in a Soviet city today knows that this particular advance is not yet completed.

One of the things that makes Khrushchev more attractive than other Soviet memoirists is his ability to confess ignorance.

Sometimes it is ignorance about the outside world, like his admission that when he was preparing for his United States visit, nobody knew what or where Camp David was. Some Soviets feared they would be treated like an early Bolshevik delegation to the West which was invited to a meeting on an island where stray dogs were sent to die. The Soviet Embassy in Washington had to do special research to learn that Camp David was a presidential dacha to which it was an honor to be invited.

Sometimes it is more basic ignorance, like Khrushchev's admission that just after the revolution, "when we saw postcards of ballerinas, we thought they were simply photographs of women wearing indecent costumes." That puts a cutting edge on his boast that he ordered that ballerina Maya Plisetskaya be allowed to perform abroad so that the world could see one of the glories of Soviet ballet.

Khrushchev also apologizes to physicist Pyotr Kapitsa for not allowing him to go abroad for fear he might talk too much about Soviet nuclear weapons, and notes that he did go under Khrushchev's successors. His story of his dealings with Andrei Sakharov over Sakharov's desire to end nuclear tests generally agrees with Sakharov's version.

Khrushchev likes to talk about controversial figures from the world of Soviet culture, but he prefers the safer controversies. He praises poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, for instance, and sculptor Ernst Neizvestny, with whom he once engaged in a famous public argument over abstract art. He admits that he never read *Dr. Zhivago* and shrugs off responsibility for the "administrative measures" that prevented Pasternak from accepting his Nobel Prize.

Khrushchev mentions Solzhenitsyn only once—not for *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, whose publication Khrushchev ordered, but to denigrate "Matryona's Home," the story of a righteous peasant woman that many readers consider the best of Solzhenitsyn's short pieces. It is a pity that the editors did not mention that in 1970 Khrushchev told Pyotr Yakir, then still a dissident leader, that Solzhenitsyn "did not get the Nobel Prize for nothing." After reading *The First Circle* Khrushchev said, "In this, he told it like it was." That recognition of Solzhenitsyn, like many things in the Khrushchev memoirs, shows that Khrushchev was a person of more honesty and common sense than many other Soviet leaders have appeared to be.

More the pity then that Khrushchev leaves out so much—the story of his fall, the full story of the anti-Party group and the rise and fall of Marshal Zhukov, the meaningful details of the Cuban missile crisis and the quarrel with China.

A pity too that Time Inc. and Little, Brown had to publish each volume the moment the material became available. Strobe Talbott did a good job of translating and creating reasonable order out of a hodgepodge of tape recordings, but the second volume overlaps the first in many places and 300,000 words are still unpublished. They presumably contain uninteresting material and duplications. Now that 180 hours of tape recordings have been deposited at the Columbia University library (with voiceprints proving the once-disputed authenticity of the memoirs beyond any reasonable doubt), scholars may ultimately produce an integrated version. For the lay reader, such a primary source needs a chapter-by-chapter explanation of the context of the events Khrushchev describes and the differences between his recollections and other versions of the same events. Footnotes are not enough. □