

Victor Zorza

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Khrushchev:

Verifying

His Memoirs

The Khrushchev memoirs are full of "evasions, distortions, deliberate omissions, contradictions, downright lies." This is acknowledged in the foreword to the newly published second volume of the memoirs. Yet it was the presence of these in the first volume that gave rise to the suspicion that the book was a forgery when it was published more than three years ago.

One theory was that the book had been produced by the Disinformation Department of the KGB as part of the Kremlin's psychological warfare campaign against the West. The other theory, the foreword recalls, belonged to "one well-known journalist who argued passionately and at length that the whole narrative had been fabricated by a special team of fakers operating within the CIA." His analysis, presented in a series of articles published at the time throughout the world, still feeds some of the continuing doubts about the authenticity of the memoirs.

The argument about the KGB role was supported by such scholars as Professor Leonard Schapiro of the London School of Economics, one of the West's leading authorities on Soviet history. "I cannot imagine Khrushchev saying this, even in private," he wrote, "Let alone for publication abroad."

The view about the CIA role was based in part on similar reasoning. Khrushchev could not possibly have said these things, the argument ran, but the contents of the book seemed calculated to discredit the Soviet regime. They were bound to create difficulties for the Kremlin in ways which would have been of benefit to the United States. The CIA had published anti-Soviet forgeries before, and now the traces again seemed to lead back to its "Department of Dirty Tricks."

Those who challenged the book's authenticity insisted that the publishers should make available for examination the original Russian text and tape-recordings. They refused.

But now, with the publication of the second volume, they have deposited 180 hours of Khrushchev's tapes with Columbia University, which is transcribing and indexing the material in order to make it available for study in the fall. All the tapes have been

Scholars at Columbia, who have so far sampled only random sections of the narrative, have found no significant differences between the published text and the tape recordings. For all practical purposes, the authenticity of the text seems to have been established, even though a full scholarly study remains to be done.

If we are to learn anything from the episode, we have to ask ourselves why some of the experts came to the wrong conclusion when the book was first published. The conspiracy theory of history dies hard. When the expert is faced by a mystery he cannot fathom, he refuses to admit his ignorance. Instead, he collects as many facts as he can find, and uses them to build an involved explanation which cannot fail to impress the layman. From the case of the Khrushchev memoirs, both the expert and the layman ought to learn that the simple explanation is sometimes more accurate than an elaborate analysis.

Khrushchev had been toppled as the ruler of the Soviet Union, his successors consigned him to oblivion, banned all mention of him from the press, and virtually succeeded in making him an "un-person." He determined to get out his own story, dictated his reminiscences, and arranged for their publication in the West. The distortions, omissions, and lies with which his speech was filled in the days of his supremacy, the foreword explains, also fill the book. It is as simple as that.

In the foreword, Edward Crankshaw, himself a well-known journalist, charitably refrains from naming the "well-known journalist" whose elaborate analysis claimed that the book was a CIA forgery. But the matter should not be allowed to rest there.

The old Fleet Street principle that "dog does not eat dog," that newspapers and journalists do not attack each other, ought not to prevail where an error of judgment requires correction. This is especially so in the present case, since the original analysis tracing the Khrushchev memoirs to the CIA seemed so impressive that it was widely commented upon throughout the world, and is still accepted by some people. The journalist in question continues to be regarded as something of an authority on Communist affairs. Difficult as he may find it to make an admission of error which is bound to reflect on the quality of his work, he owes it to his readers to do so.

The fact is that journalists do make mistakes, and it is necessary that from time to time they should admit them, not in passing, not with a coy throw-away phrase, but in a detailed article that would recall the full circumstances of the original error, as this article has done. For the "well-known journalist" whom Edward Crankshaw forbore to name was me.