

Post
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Nikita Khrushchev

Nikita Khrushchev thought of himself as a simple son of the Soviet people elevated by circumstances to the leadership of a great nation. He was right, of course. His rags-to-power ascent to the Kremlin, over so many dead bodies—"it wasn't very easy for me," he wrote in his memoirs, "but I did it and I tried to keep a pleasant expression on my face"—was itself an improbable and remarkable achievement. He ruled for a decade after the evil Stalin, ending the terror—this was his greatest contribution—and replacing it with a more humane discipline, attempting to bring to his people some of the material rewards long promised them for their sacrifices, and all the time clinging to the narrow Communist doctrine which he accepted as his compass in an uncharted world. He believed in Communism and thought of it in terms of service to people but as he showed in the crises which studded his rule, he believed finally in power.

For all the fascination of his personality, what necessarily riveted American attention upon him was that he led the Soviet Union in the period in which it gained the power not only to check the United States in moves abroad but to destroy the United States with nuclear arms. Nikita Khrushchev came personally to symbolize an unprecedented threat both to American preeminence and American survival. When he said, surely meta-

phorically, "we will bury you," many Americans took him at his word. In global policymaking, however, as in everything else this shrewd try-it-yourself peasant's son undertook, he learned. First he boasted and rattled the Soviet Union's new intercontinental rockets. Then, in a series of power plays culminating in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, he tried to transform missile strength into political and strategic advantage. Finally, in Cuba, he perceived the very real limitations placed on political-strategic maneuver by the imperatives of human survival. "In a nuclear war," he once said with characteristic pungency, "the living would envy the dead."

Under the slogan of "peaceful coexistence," Khrushchev pursued a policy—dictated not only by his Communist ideology and Russian nationalism but by his personal combativeness as well—of expanding Soviet power. Inevitably this brought collisions with the United States. For all the deadlines of the Soviet challenge, however, he was in many ways a model adversary. He was an authentic person, not a tyrant, not a zealot, not an automaton, not a clerk. He had the courage to draw back from great peril, even at heavy later cost. He recognized that certain rules on international competition had to be accepted. "Nobody's perfect," he said, "I'm no saint myself." But he was in a peculiar sense a great man.