

Books

Who wrote it?



KHRUSHCHEV (CENTER) WITH STALIN IN 1936



WITH CASTRO AT LAKE RITSA IN THE CAUCASUS, 1962

KHRUSHCHEV REMEMBERS. With Introduction, Commentary and Notes by Edward Crankshaw. Translated and edited by Strobe Talbott. Little, Brown & Co.; 636 pp.; illus., \$10.

Reviewed by
Christopher Lehmann-Haupt

SO, HERE it comes at last, the book itself. "Khrushchev Remembers." And what with the circumstances surrounding its arrival — the haphazard way its pieces came together, the questions about its origins and authenticity, and the reports of its inaccuracies and discrepancies, its gaps and self-contradictions, its fragmentariness and bias — this reviewer, for one, positively dreaded confronting its 636-page bulk.

A reading of the minutes of last year's meeting of the Society of Carpathian Numismatists seems a lively prospect by comparison. But I couldn't have been more wrong. True, it is a tantalizingly mysterious document, and reading it only complicates the possible explanations for its appearance in the west. And yes, its faults are as numerous and gross as all the reports have promised. But for all that, the book transfixed me; it seized me by the lapels, forced me rudely into my chair, and held me there fascinated until its tale was done.

A Happy Collaboration

And if it was not really Nikita Sergeivitch Khrushchev who was charming me and bluffing me and wheedling me, but some impostor with motives for imposture too devious to follow, then it was a magical impostor and I'll accept him until the real thing comes along and tells me not to.

Just how can a book so fragmentary and so inconsistent in its candidness be so continually enthralling? To begin with, there is the happy

Khrushchev, Or Magical Impostor?

collaboration of Strobe Talbott and Edward Crankshaw. Talbott, who is a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, has translated the manuscript — superbly, if one can judge by the clarity of its voice and the variety of its rhetoric — and has arranged what were once its disparate parts into coherent, roughly chronological chapters.

Ignorance of Form

Crankshaw — a former Russian correspondent for the London Observer and the author of several books on the Soviet including "Khrushchev: A Career," which was until now the most revealing study of the former Soviet leader — has supplied an introduction, footnotes, and commentary at the start of each chapter. These serve as excellent navigating instruments to plot Khrushchev's twisting course — his loops and turns, his exaggerations, his understatements, his rationalizations, his revealing omissions, his unconscious self-contradictions, and his outright falsehoods. Crankshaw's presence in this book is as palpable as its author's: He leans on our shoulders as we read along and we rarely feel like shrugging him away.

But naturally it is Khrushchev himself who makes this book what it is — one of the most

interesting, revealing, chilling, and, yes, entertaining memoirs by a modern statesman one can imagine. And the main reason for its excellence is its refreshingly unstatesmanlike character. Khrushchev is almost blessed by his ignorance of form. He knows no consistent language of diplomacy or academy. His sense of history is crude, his perspective narrow, his theoretical sophistication non-existent.

His ability to characterize people is limited to blunt vituperation when he doesn't like them and to simply dubbing them "good honest Communists" when he does. A peasant wit, he has been said to possess; whatever one calls it, it is perfectly matched to the history he remembers — the history of a practical man who rolled up his sleeves and did, whether the doing involved subways or missile systems or dangerous rivals.

Straight to the Heart

So Khrushchev's narrative always goes straight and quickly to the heart of whatever matters to him (even if it often takes Crankshaw to explain why it matters) and following it there is usually like being end man in a game of crack-the-whip. The major blur in what he tells us (putting aside what he fails to tell us) is caused by his ambivalence toward Stalin. For clearly one of the purposes of the book — perhaps the major purpose and the true reason for its distribution outside of the Soviet Union — is to further denigrate the character of Joseph Stalin.

And Khrushchev's ultimate scorn for Stalin does not lie comfortably with his early idolatry of him. (In fact, so awkwardly do the two attitudes co-habit that one doubts that the book was forged for this reason alone: Even the cleverest forger out to strike a blow against the revival of Stalinism would have done a slicker job.)

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