



K Blows Top: A Cold War Comic Interlude Starring Nikita Khrushchev, America's Most Unlikely Tourist

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"Khrushchev's 1959 trip across America was one of the strangest exercises in international diplomacy ever conducted - "a surreal extravaganza," as historian John Lewis Gaddis called it. Khrushchev told jokes, threw tantrums, sparked a riot in a San Francisco supermarket, wowed the coeds in a home economics class in Iowa, and ogled Shirley MacLaine as she filmed a dance scene in Can-Can. He befriended and offended a cast of characters including Nelson Rockefeller, Richard Nixon, Eleanor Roosevelt, Elizabeth Taylor, and Marilyn Monroe."

Published for the fiftieth anniversary of the trip, K Blows Top is a work of history that reads like a Vonnegut novel. This cantankerous communist's road trip took place against the backdrop of the fifties in capitalist America, with the shadow of the hydrogen bomb hanging over his visit like the Sword of Damocles. As Khrushchev kept reminding people, he was a hot-tempered man who possessed the power to incinerate America.

K Blows Top: A Cold War Comic Interlude Starring Nikita Khrushchev, America's Most Unlikely Tourist Details

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From Reader Review K Blows Top: A Cold War Comic Interlude Starring Nikita Khrushchev, America's Most Unlikely Tourist for online ebook

Hannah says

2.5 Stars - Okay book

Ultimately this book left me disappointed and frustrated.

The author tells the story of Nikita Khrushchev's 1959 visit to the U.S. and highlights Khrushchev's irrational (that's putting it lightly) demeanor. He reminds me, at least the way Carlson describes him, of a current, ~~subpar~~ idiotic world leader.

I thought I would really enjoy this book. Carlson's writing style is easy to read and engaging. However, about 20 pages into the book I started to wonder where he was getting all of his information from - what his sources were. There are no footnotes, so naturally I flipped to the end of the book to check for endnotes and/or a bibliography. Nope, neither of those exist in this book. He mentions his sources in a one page scribble at the end of the book. He states, *"I'm not an academic and I haven't attempted to write a "scholarly" or "definitive" book, so I don't feel the need to footnote every fact."* What a horrible, horrible thing to say and I will say it colored my reading of the book. He then goes on to list the newspapers and four memoirs he used but that's it. There is no easy way for a reader to check quotes and facts. I don't like it and I found it quite pretentious and lazy. It's also infuriating and I'm getting upset as I write, so I'm going to move on.

While Carlson writes well, I found that he was too vague at certain points. This accompanies the lack of source notation. He uses general pronouns in certain areas that make me question the validity of certain statements. I don't say I doubt anything the book is based on. I'm not denying Khrushchev's tour of the U.S., but there are so many little anecdotal things in the book that make me wonder where he's getting his info.

The last thing I'll mention is its flow and structure. The book is organized into three sections: pre-visit, visit, and post-visit. That's no problem. The issue is that each section is broken up into numerous vignettes. At first I didn't have a problem with it, but it soon became choppy and didn't flow too well. The book could have been better edited and formatted to flow better. The reader doesn't need 50+ vignettes. I would rather read a "normal" chapter book with longer sections rather than choppy short sections.

Overall, it made me uncomfortable as a reader. I felt that I couldn't fully trust what he wrote because I had no easy way to check it - or read further if I wanted.

Yalin says

As something of a Khrushchev buff myself, I read Carlson's work with great delight and amusement (which produced an occasional chuckle when I read certain parts). I have to warn my fellow readers here and know that this book is not academic, but it is not fictional either. It is an honest account - as honest as it could be - about one of the most memorable parts of the Cold War, and it sets out a well rounded account of what went down and how it went down. It is also full of insight into the character of Khrushchev, although that is a byproduct of the main focus of this book. For anyone specifically interested in Khrushchev, or interested

about this "escapade" of his (to put it jokingly) as an episode out of the Cold War, this book is will undoubtedly be a great read.

Jaylia3 says

During the height of the cold war Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev spent two madcap weeks exploring 1959 America--kissing babies, hobnobbing with Hollywood stars, touring factories, and setting off riotous media stampedes in an Iowa cornfield and a San Francisco Quality Foods supermarket. Fortunately, Peter Carlson chronicles the whole ridiculous but revealing episode in *K Blows Top*, a window into the world as it was not so long ago. Khrushchev was alternately charismatic, infuriating, hot-headed, warm-hearted, wily and artless, and Americans were mesmerized in spite of themselves, fascinated, frightened and charmed.

While this is one of the funniest books I've read for a while, Carlson doesn't neglect the serious side of the story. Whatever goodwill was generated by Khrushchev's visit was lost when the Soviets shot down an American U-2 spy plane in a mission that President Eisenhower only reluctantly approved. Both sides were angered and went into face-saving mode, ruining a multi-leader summit hosted by France's wryly frustrated Charles De Gaulle and leading to Khrushchev's UN shoe banging tantrum and the Cuban missile crisis. As Carlson presents him, Khrushchev is a temperamental conundrum who nevertheless brought real reform to the Soviet government after the bloody excesses of Stalin, a truth ironically proved by Khrushchev's own bloodless 1964 ousting by Leonid Brezhnev.

Leslie says

Khrushchev tours America in 1959. Here's my favorite quote from this fabulous book: "This trip is like one of those tea parties in Dostoyevsky when everyone meets in apparent comity and then, after three or four minutes, Nikolai Nikolaevich for no discernible reason overturns the boiling samovar on the head of Alexander Alexandrovich. It is a Russian party, elevated only by the possibility that the guest of honor may blow his stack. It is both awesome and deplorable how suddenly Nikita Khrushchev can blow his stack."

Tom says

Nikita Khrushchev seems like such an amazing and terrifying character. Journeying across the United States for two weeks in 1959, he seemed to oscillate between manic episodes of hilarity, sullen withdrawal, and livid spurts of rage. Quite frightening considering he was at the helm of the USSR. Khrushchev comes across as smart and funny at his best, and insecure and unhinged at worst. The use of a shoe as a gavel at the United Nations a year later reinforces the later. This book shows his strengths and his weaknesses, from his quick wit and wicked humor to his red-faced apoplectic anger.

One reason why this book was so interesting was that this book struck home the absurdity and fear of the Cold War. Being a relatively young individual, the specter of communism has never been frightening during my life time, or at least what I remember. This book, and its vivid descriptions of Khrushchev's bluster, as well as some truly frightening tales about Stalin, make it seem far more understandable. When a head of state continually references his ability to obliterate the world, it makes sense that he and his nation would be feared. Somehow even the odd stories like the premier ranting about how he could not go to Disneyland

drove home why the Soviet Union seemed like such an existential threat.

Jeff says

K Blows Top is laugh out-loud hilarious. If you're interested in books on the Cold War this one is a must. It's a great companion to Fred Kaplan's 1959: The Year Everything Changed, another great book. K Blows Top can be read as a sequel to the Kaplan book as it pretty much picks up where that book ends. Not very often do I read a non-fiction book that makes me laugh as this one did. The more you know about the time period, the more you'll appreciate the humor.

It just goes to show how, only now that 50 years have passed, we can see the humor of Krushchev's blustering and bluffing. If only we had known then what we know now, we wouldn't have been so stressed. We can laugh at Krushchev's antics and his claims that the Soviet Union was cranking out ICBMs like sausages. Only a handful of people besides Eisenhower (and later Kennedy) knew to what extent he was bluffing.

Carlson lays out the black and white facts of the U2 flights and the information gleaned from them and the fact that Eisenhower approved just one flight too many. But it seems as though Dulles was addicted to the information they were gleaning. The CIA knew the Russians only had a handful of missiles. In fact, Dulles bragged that they had seen every blade of grass in the Soviet Union. It's no wonder Krushchev backed down every single time he tried to push things to a head like West Berlin and Cuba.

Jason says

What is there to say really about a travelogue in which a man so hell-bent on a type of World Domination pays a visit on an unsuspecting nation and in turn proceeds to wreak havoc on everything (and everyone) that he meets there? Well, if that person is Nikita S. Khrushchev, Premiere of the Supreme Soviet during the bucolic, idyllic days of the Eisenhower era, you've got yourself one HELL of a story to tell!

The book itself is divided up into three separate sections (or "trips" mind you as the author puts it) on three different experiences that Khrushchev had in the years 1959 and 1960. It starts out with the famous "Kitchen Debate" between him and Vice-President Nixon in Moscow and then segues almost painlessly to the "surreal extravaganza" that was Premiere Khrushchev's first visit to America, a land of hula hoops, tail fins, Levittown and (shockingly enough) a place called Disneyland that Khrushchev was famously denied admittance to! Criss-crossing the country, Khrushchev butts heads not only with the President of the United States (who at first is none too pleased with the visit itself) but the members of the National Press Club as well as a roomful of classic Hollywood celebrities and an entire supermarket in San Francisco as well! Krushchev also made it to Iowa of all places, but to find out what he was doing there you gotta read the book! In between all this, a U-2 spy plane is downed over Russia and a long planned for summit is ruined leading us up to the famed "banging of the shoe" incident in September, 1960 at the United Nations (a journey more widely known for its initial meeting of both Khrushchev and his Cuban patron Fidel Castro). By this time, America had "gotten wise" to the wily ways of the nefarious Soviet strongman restricting him solely to the island of Manhattan upon this his final visit to America.

All in all, this was a light and slightly comical look at one man's audacity as well as his various parts of a type of "charm offensive" upon the people of this country, people that he never failed to mention he had the ability to wipe off the face of the earth with just one nuclear warhead! It's sobering stuff, but told this way...it

was done just SO well!

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN 2009

Gail says

Funny account of Khrushchev's two week visit to America during the Eisenhower presidency. His verbal duels with then Vice President Richard Nixon are documented and make you cringe at the absurdity of world leaders behaving as they do.

I had forgotten that there was a time, not so long ago, that Russia was ahead of us in the space program and some American scientists felt we were substantially behind Russia in research in many areas. This is the atmosphere in which Khrushchev takes a very unusual family vacation to the United States.

I listened to this on book tape and have ordered the book for my husband because so many parts were laugh out loud funny. Thankfully, we are here to laugh because the Soviets never followed through with "boom" as Khrushchev and KGB liked to describe their long range missile capabilities at the time. Henry Cabot Lodge, who was showing the country to Khrushchev and family, was constantly being reminded that if anything were to happen to Khrushchev in America---BOOM.

Adam Christian Smith says

As a child who grew up a Cold Warrior, I had no idea that our country was so close to understanding, and so close to nuclear war.

This book is why its title says, a Comic Interlude Starring Nikita Khrushchev. The book follows his time visiting the United States. Against all odds, by time "K" had seen our country, his ideas about outstripping us in tech and weaponry may have been changed - but the charm is in the story telling.

You don't have to know or like or enjoy history or biographies to enjoy this book. Even if I were to have read

this knowing it were pure fiction it still would have been enjoyable!

Connie says

Now here's a recently published book that is a fun ride on the time machine! In 1959, when Khrushchev came to the U.S. for the subject trip of this book, I was ten years old -- yet I do remember that it happened, and I especially recall his next trip out when he did the shoe banging at the U.N. (also covered in the book). I and my classmates were terrified that our fates were to be dictated by this world leader whose behaviors surpassed those experienced on certain days each month when we were to be especially nice to mom. Yikes. I even still have my "Last Will and Testament" written as a free time class project at the time!

Now at age 60, it all reads like a sit-com. Mr. Carlson pulls together many past stories and recent interviews to tell the story of K's visit, how it came about (against Ike's wishes), and what it was like from Henry Cabot Lodge's POV to be the man in the middle during the two week "vacation."

I enjoyed the "insider" look into the logistics and true attitudes of those involved, altho as other reviewer's have mentioned, in a rather shallow way, insight-wise. While the story is a true, deeply researched non-fiction, the tone is not one of serious documentary, so look elsewhere for that. (It's like don't read Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods* as a guide book to the Appalachian Trail. But love it all the same.)

K Blows Top is a fast, fun read overall which I enjoyed. I liked that sometimes I felt as ashamed of us as I did of him. (especially the LA portion of the trip). I learned new words, like "panjandrum". And I actually found points to ponder in some of K's Russian sayings.

I recommend it for those who lived through it or around it, and for younger people who want to feel what it was like during the times their parents or grandparents talk about.

Vicki says

I can't believe that I am about to say this, but this book was really, really good! I say that because I am in no way a politically-minded person. I read this book for one reason only: a reading challenge.

When I read the title, which included the word *Comic*, I wondered how on earth there could be anything comical about this book, communism, politics, or the Cold War. Was I ever wrong! There were so many funny lines and incidents throughout the book that made me either smile, smirk, or laugh aloud. Even in the *Prologue* there is a bit of humor when one contemplates this coming from a grown man: "Maybe it was Khrushchev throwing a temper tantrum because he wasn't allowed to visit Disneyland." The humor in the first line is the absurdity of a grown man, the Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, throwing a fit. This first sentence set the tone for humor; however, in the *EPILOGUE: "LIFE IS A COSMIC JOKE"* the reader learns that "K" was truly upset and even teared up when he was banned from Disneyland.

The book chronicles Nikita Khrushchev's trip to the U.S. during the time of the Cold War and the atomic bomb threat. The author, Peter Carlson, requested all of the film clips from K's trip to America from the

library. After seeing the first clip Carlson was admittedly obsessed and eventually wrote this book. The "accidental invitation" to America was due to the fact that K was invited by Ike, but with specific stipulations, none of which the premier received. So when K accepted his "invitation" Eisenhower was angry. The trip eventually became "three trips," with each one being more ludicrous than the previous one.

One of the aspects of the book that I enjoyed is reading about Nixon and his "debates" with the Khrushchev. It was funny (although a bit sad) to read how Nixon didn't hold his own. Nixon was up against a real pro who was charming, charismatic (even in America), funny, intelligent, and tough. In essence, Nixon was no real match for this man. Khrushchev had a Russian proverb for all topics, so Nixon studied up on proverbs, thus began the "proverb race." Funny because I can remember when he was running for president but I was too young to care about that. Now I read that one reason he needed to "handle" Khrushchev well was to get votes. Nixon was irate when he found out that K was coming to America because he felt that he'd been studying long hours memorizing proverbs so he could face him in the proverb race, so he felt Ike had blindsided him. It also made me laugh to read that Nixon thought it was "unfair." I "heard" a little boy whining.

One of my favorite lines in the book is, "...he ridiculed West German chancellor Konrad Adenauer: 'If Adenauer pulls down his pants and you look at him from behind, you can see Germany is divided. If you look at him from the front, you can see Germany will not stand.'" This is indicative of the type of humor in this book. One of the famous "debates" these prominent men had was about animal dung. K made the comment that "This resolution stinks...like fresh horseshit--and nothing smells worse than that." Nixon's response was, "There is something that smells worse than horseshit--and that is pigshit." LOL I can't even imagine that taking place.

Carlson does a superb job writing for both the non-historian/political person such as myself and those who relish in politics and history. K is a man who bullied, bluffed, charmed crowds of people, insulted, complimented, and tried to always one-up America. He talked about how Russia was so much younger than America and yet it was catching up to the U.S. and even would pass it up. Always puffing up his own country and belittling America.

I just want to add that there is also great irony in the book. The dictator had said many times while on his trip that Americans' grandchildren would live under communism one day. After he died and years later, his own son moved to America to live in Rhode Island, and while there the Soviet Union collapsed. K's son, Sergie, remained in RI and even taught at Brown. In 2006 he was on a panel regarding cold war and Susan Eisenhower was there. She had married a Russian and Sergei had become an American citizen. How's that for irony?

Recommendation: Read this book! I NEVER read books such as this one and I truly loved it.

Gerald Kinro says

Kind of nostalgic for me, as I remember Premier K's visit to the U.S. Author Carlson takes us back for a behind-the-scenes and some not too behind the scenes look at the whole episode. It begins with Nixon's "Kitchen Debates" in the Soviet Union with the premier. Then comes an accidental invitation that Mr. K accepts. The supporting cast—Host Henry Cabot Lodge, the ambassador to the United Nations, Shirley MaClaine, Marilyn Monroe, and Sinatra augment the comedy of the whole visit. The star itself, however, is Khrushchev. He is flamboyant, outspoken, intimidating, hated, loved—add any adjective you may. Tantrum throwing for not being able to see Disneyland?

I enjoyed the read. I remember Mr. K's threat to bury us all while his munching on a hotdog. Were his bursts of rage an act or for real? As a kid, I thought they were for real. Nevertheless, Carlson, for this brief enjoyable moment, turns the Cold War into a laughing matter.

Drew says

This was a lot of fun. Regardless of how he's remembered here in the US today, Nikita Khrushchev comes off as a colorful character who was probably fun to have around... When he wasn't pitching a temper fit. Also, K Blows Top makes clear that Khrushchev was nowhere near as tyrannical and awful as Stalin was--and that some planks of his Communist political platform were quite reasonable and probably smarter and more realistic than a lot of the standard American politics of his day (and today). The main problem there was probably the Soviet Union's unwillingness to admit that they were too poor a country with too little infrastructure to engage in the many idealistic/unrealistic projects that harmed and even killed so many of their citizens (and eventually caused their empire's disintegration). Finally, I will say that I never really realized before reading this book that notorious CIA director Allen Dulles's insistence on continuing the U-2 spy plane missions into the USSR despite Eisenhower's progress on making peace with Khrushchev was probably the single biggest cause of the last three decades of the Cold War. Go figure. Fucking Dulles.

Don't worry, this book isn't nearly as stuffy as I'm making it sound. I feel like the main reason I learned so much by reading it is because it was so much fun to read, I almost didn't notice I was learning. Even if you don't much care about 20th Century politics, this is a fun fish-out-of-water story starring some undisputably unique and highly entertaining characters (Nixon, Marilyn Monroe, Henry Cabot Lodge, and of course Ike and K themselves).

Tony says

In 1961, when I was eight years-old, two older, seemingly cooler cousins from New Jersey taught me a parody which, at the time, I thought was the funniest thing I had ever heard:

*Krushchev, the bald-head Russian,
Had a very shiny head.
And if you ever saw it,
You would even say he's Red.*

*All of the other Russians
Used to laugh and call him names.
They never let poor Krushchev
Play in any Russian games.*

...and so on.

I memorized that and sang it non-stop on my return home, probably annoying all of my friends. It did not annoy Sister Clemenza, however. I was taught by a rather small but violent sect of Italian nuns. Not sure why we drafted Italian nuns. But Sister Clemenza was my second-grade teacher. Her English was limited. Usually (but not always) prophylactically, she would drive her fingers into our foreheads to make a disciplinary point. Anyhow, in addition to being a molder of youth, she was also an ardent, bug-eyed anti-Communist.

I sang the Krushchev song for Sister Clemenza. It resonated in her John F. Kennedy-loving, Red-hating soul. I think she viewed me then more as a Vessel of Liberty than an off-key smart-aleck, which is what I actually was. Not taking a modest "no, please" as an answer, she made me write out the song on the blackboard in front of the whole class so that everyone could copy and memorize it to assist in the glorious fight for freedom. Which I did, precocious little shit that I was.

Everyone was able to copy this new anthem....except that is for Michael B. who was what they called at the time "slow". There were only eight students in that class, but the next year there were only seven. Michael B. "disappeared", kind of like Communists who didn't toe the party line "disappeared" back in those days. I felt oddly responsible.

K Blows Top captures the odd logic of those times and brought back many memories: the fear, the satire and the incongruities.

Come back, Michael B. Have a seat. And I'll shut up.

Gina says

There is a lot of fun in this book, but with some really serious issues underneath.

One thing I learned was that "We will bury you" was not a threat between countries but a statement of belief that communism would inevitably replace capitalism everywhere, and that history was on the Soviet side. It was taken as a threat originally anyway, but it may be remembered more that way because of what came after.

After Krushchev's visit to the US, relations were fairly good leading up to the 1960 Summit Conference, but that was derailed with the capture of Francis Gary Powers, crashing over Russia on a spying mission, which was taken as an insult. Krushchev would not back down on Berlin and was insulting to Eisenhower.

Between that - so after returning from the States but before the crash - Krushchev started reducing the military and scrapping plans for new warships. That seems to indicate that his stated desire for disarmament was real.

It was also dangerous. The Soviet version of the military-industrial complex was not thrilled, and neither were other Soviet leaders.

I was already aware of the post-Bay of Pigs deal, where Soviet concessions were admitted but US concessions were secret. Some of Krushchev's outrageous behavior (probably at least partially theatrical, but still...) was probably also complicit, but the losses of face were undoubtedly a factor in his removal.

I don't know enough about the history to know if Brezhnev was worse, but based on this it feels like the end of the Cold War could have come much sooner. That would have been worth something.

The pressures work both ways - one reason Eisenhower would not apologize for the spying is that blaming it on underlings would make him look weak. Looking weak (or not spying) could have been a great move toward peace.

The other thing that I think is worth noting is that Krushchev was responsible for a lot of deaths, but he was also able to denounce Stalin for that later, able to feel regret for that, and all along able to be very human. That could sound like a reason to look for the humanity in people doing horrible things, which is not a reason

to excuse actions. I think it is more to the point to realize how much evil a very human person will do because of pride or peer pressure or greed.

And in a lot ways the book isn't that heavy; those are just things I ended up thinking about because of it. Perhaps I should mention that reading about totalitarianism, the FBI's fight against communism, and Nazi occupation of Poland are the things that led me to looking up this book now.
