File—viewers can be held rapt and also reassured that no wound, no invasion of the body, is, in the end, fatal.

For though CSI is an innovative (as they say) police show, it has also pushed the medical drama into a new phase. The doctors on ER race to save a person’s life. The cops on CSI, fiber by fiber, semen stain by semen stain, wound by wound, work to capture the perpetrator of the fatal blow, and thus, by finding the agent of the formative wound, they do not save a person’s life—they resurrect a person from the dead. In a similar way, the detectives on Without a Trace redeem a person from the ranks of the missing. As American society goes, so goes the American crime drama. If ever there was a show that expressed our solitary, computer-riveted sense of being there but not being there, of being mysteriously injured or depressed yet feeling healthy and optimistic, of being helpless to influence events but feeling strangely that we are powerful enough to do so, it is these raw, entertaining, gripping, utterly delusive fantasies of transparency and control.

Stephen Kotkin

Truth and Consequences

KHRUSHCHEV:
THE MAN AND HIS ERA
By William Taubman
(W.W. Norton, 876 pp., $35)

BERRIA—MY FATHER:
INSIDE STALIN’S KREMLIN
By Sergei Beria
(Duckworth, 397 pp., $26.95)

HITLER STARTED THE COLD WAR. Let us remember, he decisively won World War II. By 1941, through conquests, annexations, and alliances, Nazi Germany controlled all of Europe from the English Channel to the Soviet border. The defeated British, an irritable, posed no threat, and the compliant Soviets were obediently fulfilling a non-aggression pact and a trade pact with their Nazi comrades. But Hitler unilaterally broke his deal with Stalin and invaded the one country that had the power to defeat the Nazi land army, calling forth an epochal defensive war that unexpectedly implanted the Soviets in Berlin. The crusade that Hitler thrust upon the Soviets afforded them the transcendent purpose and the geopolitical aggrandizement that Communist ideology promised but that had largely eluded the Soviets outside their factory towns. The war integrated the huge village population into the revolution, extended state borders in all directions, and brought a bonus European buffer empire. The Vozhd, as Stalin liked to be called, never had a greater partner than the Führer, not even Lenin.

And Stalin, in turn, conjured up today’s Pax Americana. Flush with victory in the great war, not only did he stubbornly refuse to accept change, or to bring his devastated domestic order even minimally in line with the more powerful liberal ascendancy being imposed on defeated Germany and Japan, but he also force-cloned Soviet regimes in the windfall lands that Hitler’s racist megalomania had perversely bestowed. In the years after the war, Stalin appears to have expected a capitalist crisis still greater than the Great Depression, as well as divisions among the capitalist powers even deeper than those of the interwar period. Mistake! He and his heirs came smack up against the capitalist world’s greatest economic boom, while his ideologically infected opportunism in Eastern Europe, and then in Korea, united the highly fractious Western powers and decisively mobilized the internationally circumspect United States for a sustained global campaign. Stalin is long dead and the Cold War won (except, of course, on the Korean peninsula). But the world that the Soviet menace induced, with a huge initial hand from the Nazis (and a lesser one from the Japanese), lives on: an American superpower engaged and deployed across the entire planet, not to mention outer space.

From a state’s-interests viewpoint, Stalin’s foreign policy stands among the greatest failures in world history. And yet the Soviet dictator cast a shadow over his heirs as a supposed grand statesman for having vanquished Hitler and presided at Yalta and Potsdam. Following Stalin’s death, when one man, again, emerged to rule one-sixth of the earth, Nikita Krushchev inherited this confrontational security policy that failed to provide security (evidenced by a ring of American bombers based in Norway, Germany, Italy, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, and Japan). Krushchev inherited also a blemranging occupation of Eastern Europe, a gratuitous rift with Tito, an unresolved German problem, an unsustainably hypercentralized economy, grain harvests smaller than they had been in 1913, a self-defeating Gulag of slave labor seething in revolt, and more than two hundred million “free” people living a lie, which a majority understood in some fashion as truth.

How could a new Soviet leader possibly overcome Stalin’s legacy at home and abroad? Krushchev unavoidably, and erratically, struggled to square that circle. It is strange that Krushchev, despite his sensational denunciation of Stalin and his gripping showdowns with Eisenhower, Nixon, and Kennedy during an era of basement bomb shelters and drills to practice ducking heads under school desks, has not provoked a rich biographical literature. There is Edward Crankshaw’s journalistic treatment in the 1960s, and Roy Medvedev’s brief but incisive portrait in the 1980s, and William Thompson’s updated overview in the 1990s, and that’s about it. But now William Taubman has produced a breakthrough book. Twenty years in the making, this extraordinary tome ranks in accomplishment with Paul Preston’s Franco, Renzo de Felice’s untranslated Mussolini, and Ian Kershaw’s Hitler.

Krushchev, with three volumes of his own in English (four in the new Russian edition), was an industrious self-chronicler, an industry overseen and expanded by his son Sergei, now a scholar at Brown and an American citizen. (So much for his father’s boast that “we will bury you!”) Taubman makes thorough use of this remarkable record—he even listened to the disjointed master tapes from which the autobiography was culled; but he deftly corrects the Krushchev family’s version of events. He evokes the period and its personalities through a masterly use of quotations, some from older sources (such as the nonpareil insider account by Veljko Mićunović, the Yugoslav ambassador to Moscow), many from documents that were declassified.
and published in the 1990s. Taubman ably navigates the big issues in Soviet and Cold War history, and he brilliantly illuminates Khrushchev's family and inner life. His splendidly illustrated study is a consummate piece of scholarship and a delight to read. It paints an unforgettable portrait of an impossible inheritance combustibly mixed with a hypomanic (this was the CIA's formulation) but ultimately war-wise personality. Everything, it seems, goes back to World War II.

The outcome of World War II was essentially decided on the Eastern front, before the landing in Normandy, but the war concluded with only one genuine victor, the United States, even as Britain (and more so France) rode American coattails. The war also had what might be called three fortunate losers: Japan, Germany, and Italy. And it had one other loser, the Soviet Union, although almost half a century passed before that country's defeat in victory became manifest. It has taken more than a decade since the climactic events of 1980–1991 to recognize the upshot of World War II and its aftermath: namely, the new-style American empire, consisting in unmatched and combined economic, cultural, military, and diplomatic power, without costly direct rule of territories, which, when taken, were relinquished. This unforeseen but logical by-product of the necessary Cold War (with all its excesses and commercial aspects) is the American situation still: a world in which everything that happens, no matter where or why, is somehow an American responsibility, so that if the United States tries to abjure this responsibility in particular cases—choosing not to act, say, in Rwanda or North Korea—it finds that its credibility comes into question. And this imperial dilemma is one that Khrushchev, ruling a far different kind of empire that controlled and in most cases subsidized colonies, faced as well.

Nikita Khrushchev was born dirt poor in a southwestern Russian village in 1894. Fourteen years later, his landless (even horseless) farming family relocated to a mining settlement in the empire's Russianized eastern Ukraine, where his father performed seasonal labor. Though Khrushchev never ceased to cultivate a vegetable garden or to utilize a pungent peasant speech, he was ashamed of his rural origins and styled himself a miner's son. By the age of fifteen, having completed just a few grades at a village school, he apprenticed himself to a metalworker. Out of scrap he built a bicycle, then converted it to a motorcycle so he could arrive at social gatherings with a roar. Under his mother's influence, Nikita neither drank nor smoked. During World War I, when he received a skilled-worker exemption from the carnage, he helped to organize strikes against the proletariat's infernal conditions and the imperialist conflict. Mostly, though, he dreamed of returning to school to become an engineer. But revolution and civil war intervened, and he became an apparatchik. Taubman calls him "the archetypal Soviet man," a climber but also a true believer.

For people of his generation who vaulted high in the new regime, Khrushchev joined the party relatively late, in 1918. His chief patron, Lazar Kaganovich, Stalin's henchman in Ukraine, was only a year younger than Khrushchev but joined the Bolsheviks in 1911. In September 1920, however, with a boost from Kaganovich, Khrushchev landed among a select hundred individuals who were admitted to Moscow's Industrial Academy. He never graduated, but he excelled in the Stalinist clampdown and party purges there, particularly against well-educated types who condescended to him. Khrushchev also pulled around with Nadezhda Alliluyeva, an inconspicuous student and earnest party worker who, he discovered, happened to be Stalin's wife. Taubman speculates that Nadezhda's denunciation to her husband of Khrushchev's fanaticism may have served as an unwitting recommendation, for in 1930 one of Stalin's aides contrived Khrushchev's installation as party secretary of the academy. Two years later Nadezhda shot herself, in apparent protest against her husband's dictatorship. In January 1934, Stalin's pet—as Taubman aptly designates Khrushchev—was elevated to party boss of the Soviet capital. His leap from a mud-spattered birth village and an adopted black-lung hometown to the gilded offices and granite façades of Stalinist Moscow made the revolution personal.

Responsible for everything from garbage collection to supervision of the intelligentsia, Khrushchev threw himself into the socialist upheaval in the metropolis, and into the liquidation of his colleagues. Of Moscow city and province's thirty-eight highest functionaries, only three survived the bloodbath of the late 1930s. Khrushchev's portrait bobbed above the parading crowds. The capitalist world's prolonged Great Depression and fascism's frenzy of militarism mitigated whatever doubts surfaced about Soviet socialism, and, paradoxically, so did proximity to the dictator. In one of his spellbinding private audiences with Stalin, Khrushchev broached the subject of arrests that appeared utterly without foundation, and
Stalin replied: "I know what you mean. There are these kinds of perversions. They are gathering evidence against me, too." Call it paranoia as persuasion.

Separated by a generation, the two men shared humble origins and abbreviated formal educations; and at barely over five feet Khrushchev also stood five unthreatening inches shorter than the diminutive dictator. In 1938, Stalin enthused him with overseeing vital Ukraine, a territory the size of France, where Khrushchev reigned until 1949, returning periodically to Moscow for Politburo meetings. In Kiev, the autocrat who loved to play the democrat took over the resplendent villa of a pre-revolutionary sugar magnate. In June 1941, when the Nazis blasted across Soviet frontiers and began bombing Kiev, Khrushchev was spending the night in his office after a defector had warned of imminent attack. Less than two weeks later, he and the entirety of Soviet officialdom deserted the burning Ukrainian capital.

For the most part, Stalin’s inner circle sat at the dictator’s knee in the Kremlin during the Nazi firestorm, only venturing to the front lines under heavy guard on “inspection” tours to find fault. Khrushchev, by contrast, who missed World War I, spent all of the incomparably vaster World War II on the front lines. He took a prominent part in the triumphs at Stalingrad and Kursk—and also in debacles elsewhere, for which Stalin emptied his pipe ashes on Khrushchev’s bald head, though he might have made human ashes out of him. Alexander Dovzhenko, the film-maker, traversed the battlefields with Khrushchev and described a scene that they witnessed:

An airplane was lying in the road, burning: not more than half an hour had elapsed since it crashed. Nearby the airplane lay the pilot—legless, charred, with a white skull, armless. Naked black bones protruded from his shoulders. The co-pilot had been tossed out and lay at a distance. His head was shattered. The pink brain, hemispheres separated, lay in the rubble and large green flies crawled over it. I looked at the pilot’s face, which had been covered with a cloth. A dark, bloody hole gaped in his forehead. That was where his brain had come out.

Multiply this incident by, say, twenty-seven million. "The war traumatized Khrushchev," Taubman observes. "It drove him to smoke and to drink; it commanded more attention in his memoirs than almost any other subject." (These were precisely the chapters most abridged in the incomprehending English translation of the memoir.)

Like no other top Soviet official, then, Khrushchev knew firsthand the horrors and the blunders of the war, including his own. But "the fact that so many fought and died for the Soviet system," Taubman surmises, "deepened his faith in socialism." The war also emboldened him. Struggling to halt the Nazi onslaught, Khrushchev hurriedly inquired into the fates of purged Soviet officers, intellectuals, and political leaders, forcefully recalling many people from the camps (though none from the grave). He clashed with top military commanders, but he also established close bonds with them, and they became a crucial constituency in later power struggles.

After the hostilities, he may have risked his career trying to block the wholesale arrests of those who had met the misfortune of having fallen behind German lines, insisting that they should be thanked for not having taken flight (like their would-be interrogators). Moving into a still more luxurious villa, Khrushchev made the rounds of Ukraine’s shattered factories, mines, and villages, commiserating with the countless invalids, widows, and homeless. A changed Khrushchev also dared to speak to Stalin directly of the terrible famine (and cannibalism) of 1946–1947, even asking that the requisition quotas of grain for the state be reduced, thereby provoking the tyrant’s wrath and a demotion, which proved to be temporary.

In 1949, the aging tyrant recalled Khrushchev to Moscow and the inner circle, making him both a target of a pending gigantic new purge and a contender in the scramble for the sick man’s succession. "Khrushchev wasn’t stupid," one of the big losers, Vyacheslav Molotov, snobbishly allowed. "But he was a man of meager culture ... a very primitive man." Was the onetime peasant’s ascension a fluke, then? Not in the least. Taubman’s sure-handed account of the arrest of Lavrenti Beria in the summer of 1953 demonstrates that the stupendous coup against the secret police chief was indeed Khrushchev’s handiwork. In the end Khrushchev proved to be the wildest in the unseen entourage, and the most daring. The others underestimated him, just as Lenin’s heirs had underestimated Stalin. Consider that all the top Stalinists managed state ministries, except Khrushchev, who ran mass party organizations—and the biggest ones to boot, in Moscow and in Ukraine. He was not only Stalin’s master pupil in dissembling and political intrigue, he was also a skilled politician, a barnstormer with Communist convictions, as well as a frontline veteran.

De-Stalinization would seem to be a secure feather in Khrushchev’s cap, and yet his historic claim has been questioned. Huge uprisings in the Gulag in 1953–1954, when it held at least 2.5 million prisoners, had to be put down with tanks and fighter planes, demonstrating that Stalin’s terrible legacy would confront his heirs whether or not they confronted it themselves. Also, Khrushchev initially resisted efforts to probe and to criticize Stalin’s rule, seeking instead to scapegoat Beria for the millions of arrests, executions, and deportations. And it was Beria who initiated de-Stalinization, in the months between Stalin’s death in March 1953 (happy fiftieth anniversary!) and his own execution in July—that is, three whole years before Khrushchev’s secret speech at the Twentieth Party Congress. Stalin was barely cold when his police chief Beria acted on his own to repudiate the Doctors’ Plot and other falsified cases, to release Gulag prisoners en masse, and to launch numerous self-serving but unorthodox initiatives in domestic and even foreign affairs, such as an unauthorized rapprochement with Tito and a proposal to cash in East Germany.

So was Lavrenti Beria, notorious rapist and torturer, the true “liberal reformer,” and Khrushchev merely a schemer—not to mention an anti-Semite—who tweaked and therefore in effect preserved Stalinism? Such was Amy Knight’s “revisionist” argument in her serviceable if overwrought biography, Beria, Stalin’s First Lieutenant, which appeared in 1993. Such is also the contention of an unusual work that Knight uncomfortably denounced (in the Times of London) for its attempt to rehabilitate Beria, but that uncannily conveys the flavor of its subject: namely, Beria—My Father: Inside Stalin’s Kremlin. Sergio Beria’s ineluctable apologia for his father, who here stands for everything good and opposes everything evil, is too absurd to warrant refutation. Anyway, Sergio—who was born in 1924 and named for Sergio Ordzhonikidze, his father’s main patron and the commissar for industry under Stalin—refutes his own book. “The reader may be
The Blessed Redemption of Delft

i.m. Carel Fabritius (1622–1654)

Rank with clotted, simmering greens, the sleek canals were overgrown with shade, and then the thought of shade the painter made his own.

The rain was caught by harder rains, as if the heavens disagreed with that distinguished, apostolic light invented in his need.

He loved the century’s moral itch, the mortal purpose of the eye, revealing what would constitute a civilized reply.

Within the burnished, gilded frame, the oil starts to turn to flesh, as if the burning of long silences let us begin afresh.

WILLIAM LOGAN

Stalin-fostered enemies—along the lines of “my father drew the conclusion that [Marshall] Konev was a shit rather than a madman.” Sergo further explains that Beria’s arch-enemy was Andrei Zhdanov, the party’s top ideologue and a Russian chauvinist whose pretensions Beria openly mocked. But after Zhdanov came under serious attack for war-related fiascos, Beria defended him because, Sergo writes, he preferred such a worthless adversary to a more formidable replacement. In fact, when Zhdanov died in 1949, his position was effectively taken over by his protégé Mikhail Suslov, who despite a castrator voice proved more dangerous to Beria owing to his indomitable capacity for work. Francois Thom, who supplies helpful notes that question and occasionally confirm Sergo’s recollections, remarks correctly upon a “hideous world, made up of petty intrigues and great crimes,” a “regime of blackmailers.”

The son details his father’s frequent blackmailing of colleagues, showing that Beria was no “liberal” reformer, contrary to Knight. Yet Sergo’s book (along with some choice declassified Politburo documents) indicates—and here Knight was on to something—that Beria represented a counterpoint to Stalin as well as to Khrushchev. Beria was a statist, dismissive of the party. He detested Communist agit-prop and its accompanying censorship, and he proposed eliminating entirely the party’s role in managing the economy and instead relying exclusively on the state apparatus, which was his power base. He did not advocate the market or political pluralism, nor did he want to dismantle the Soviet Union; but he did seek to curtail Russification, preferring to augment the autonomy and the loyalty of the non-Russian elites, his other power base. In the aftermath of the war Beria looked askance at establishing Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, but not because he was anti-empire. On the contrary, he evidently wanted to use military types to consolidate two blocs or federations, one in the north centered on Poland, the other in the south centered on Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, which would be non-Communist but economically oriented toward the Soviet Union. Were these consistent views? Could any of this have worked? Would a more federalized Soviet Union and two loyal non-Communist blocs have lasted longer than the Russian-dominated USSR or its Communist satellites?

Beria recognized his own vulnerabilities for his utmost complicity in monstrous bloodshed, and also the similar and larger vulnerabilities of the Soviet system, and he was alive to many overlooked opportunities. Alone in the hierarchy he seems to have appreciated the strategic significance, during and after the war, of Turkey and Iran. Most of Beria’s personal files remain closed, but his son writes plausibly that his father hated to see Turkey so readily recruited into the American orbit. In northern Iran, according to Sergo, contrary to the party’s transparently doomed intrigues to create a Communist regime, Beria stressed maintaining good relations to guarantee access to oil, or possibly organizing a putsch to bring back the Shah, who would then be beholden to the Soviets. (The CIA-assisted coup that re-installed the Shah in 1953 happened to take place one month after Beria’s arrest.)

Khrushchev wrote that Beria was the sole person able to proffer frank advice to Stalin on foreign policy, but Stalin seems not to have followed it. Neither did Khrushchev, whose triumph over Beria signaled the re-assertion of the party over the state, and of Communist ideology over realpolitik. Both Beria and Khrushchev were Stalinists, but with significant variations. They
offered different paths of de-Stalinization, with divergent implications: cautious re-
trenchment founded on dangerous cynic-
ism versus dangerous risk-taking focused on ultimately disabling idealism.

Having failed to consult Eastern European leaders before taking the bungee plunge of de-Stalinization in February 1956, Khrushchev hurried to Poland and delivered an impromptu second secret speech, which was recorded verbatim and has been declassified from the Polish archives. “If you ask, comrades, how we now evaluate Stalin, who Stalin was, he was the enemy of the party and working class, then the answer is no, and that’s what the tragedy is, comrades,” Khrushchev fumbled. “The devil knows how to explain why so many perished.”

Or what the consequences were going to be. Worker strikes broke out in Poland demanding bread and freedom. It has come to light that Khrushchev mobilized the Soviet military, and in response the Poles mobilized. A “fraternal” armed confrontation was avoided only owing to the dexterity of the Polish Communist leader Władysław Gomułka, and owing to the fact that Hungary also erupted. Even more startling, Khrushchev acquiesced in the overthrow of socialism in Hungary; but a few hours later he reversed himself and dispatched tank armies. “Khrushchev lurched from surrender to bloodbath in Hungary,” Taubman concludes. “The whole terrible sequence confirmed that he and his colleagues were in over their heads, just as Stalin had predicted they would be.” In fact, here as elsewhere, Taubman’s evidence demonstrates that Stalin had bequeathed a lose-lose situation.

Blaming Stalin proved an unstable strategy for ruling his empire. Confounded by the escalating Hungarian revolt, a waifing Khrushchev lamented to Tito (as paraphrased by Mićunović) that “if we let things take their course, the West would say we are either stupid or weak, and that’s one and the same thing.” Worse, Khrushchev continued, people would say that “when Stalin was in command everybody obeyed and there were no big shocks, but that now, even since they [meaning himself; Khrush-
chev] had come to power, Russia had suffered defeat and the loss of Hungary. And this was happening at a time when the present Soviet leaders were condemning Stalin.” Thus, although he relished the interventionist troubles that the simultaneous Suez crisis was causing Britain and France, Khrushchev opted for armed intervention. “If we leave Hungary,” he reasoned out loud to his colleagues, “that will encourage the Americans, English, French, the imperialists. They will … go on the offensive … Our party won’t understand our behavior.”

Indeed, perhaps the most interesting thing that we have learned from the secret archives is the difficulty encountered in controlling local party discussions of Khrushchev’s secret speech, and the apparent incomprehension or outright disapproval of de-Stalinization among much of the Soviet masses. Within fifteen months of the secret speech, in summer 1957, a majority of the Politburo brazenly voted to oust Khrushchev—another fact that we have belatedly learned. Only with the determined help of younger party protégés in the Central Committee, and also of Marshal Zhukov, the wartime hero he knew so well, did Khrushchev beat back his Stalinist comrades in an eleven-day marathon showdown, cleverly branding his opponents the “anti-party group.”

Just seven years later, however, the Kremlin leader was sacked by the very men who had earlier saved him. “Khrushchev’s speech denouncing Stalin was the bravest and most reckless thing he ever did,” Taubman concludes, echoing Roy Medvedev’s view as well as other scholarship. “The Soviet regime never fully recovered, and neither did he.” Much later, following the ignominious Brezhnev years and Soviet collapse, some surviving participants in Khrushchev’s dismissal publicly expressed regret. Taubman’s narrative, completely in command of this extensive literature, reveals the scope of the disarray in the Kremlin, and of Khrushchev’s wild mood swings. “He’s either all the way up,” Khrushchev’s devoted third wife, Nina Petrovna, confided to the wife of the American ambassador in 1959, “or all the way down.”

Foreign policy, perhaps not a suitable endeavor for a manic-depressive (and an ideologue), dominates Taubman’s biography. Khrushchev made himself inordinately accessible to the diplomatic community in Moscow; especially compared with Stalin; but as a result foreigners came to know, and to dislike, his unrestrained garrulity (his ramblings on agriculture alone fill eight volumes) and his vulgarity. Sipping cognac, the Soviet leader would exude charm and then suddenly explode, his folksiness turning foul. “If Adenauer pulls down his pants and you look at him from behind,” he once told W. Averill Harriman, “you can see that Germany is divided. If you look at him from the front you can see that Germany will not stand.”

It was Khrushchev who never figured out what to do with Stalin’s bastard East Germany. (As Beria had bluntly pronounced behind closed doors in May 1953, “The GDR? What of the GDR? It isn’t even a real state. It only manages to stay together because of Soviet troops.”) In 1958, the frustrated Khrushchev blockaded Berlin to force Eisenhower to recognize East Germany. Naturally, the United States refused to bow to pressure, instead pressing the re-armament of West Germany. American analysts puzzled over what Khrushchev was trying to accomplish in Berlin. What was his strategy? As Taubman shows, there was none. Khrushchev loved playing chicken—or chess in the dark, as he called it; and he regarded war threats as a method to unlock a grand peace. When Hubert Humphrey was dispatched to Moscow to divine the Soviet leader’s intentions—good luck!—Khrushchev inquired about the senator’s hometown and, hearing the answer, approached a wall-sized map, circled Minneapolis, and said he would spare that city when the rockets started flying. “Khrushchev’s deepest fear,” Taubman surmises, “seemed to be that he was being taken for a fool by the Americans.”

No episode of the Khrushchev era, or of the Cold War generally, has been more scrutinized than the Cuban missile crisis. Scholars have argued that Khrushchev made a bold gambit to undo America’s strategic advantage and to win concessions in the stalemate over Berlin. Taubman, again incorporating the latest research, suggests that Khrushchev had fallen romantically for the Cuban revolution and thus at least partially wanted to protect Castro from an American invasion—a motive, the biographer emphasizes, that Washington never imagined. Thus Kennedy’s threats to Cuba helped to provoke the crisis, Taubman argues, but finally the crisis resulted from Khrushchev’s impulsiveness. “What it,” Khrushchev characteristically remarked, “we throw a hedgehog down Uncle Sam’s pants?”

There was virtually no way the Soviet leader could get away with transporting and installing the huge missiles undetected, given the capability of American spy planes. Khrushchev had himself examined the photos that were captured along with downed U-2 pilot Gary Powers, and he knew there
were flights over Cuba. Soviet generals, whose bloated Stalin-era budgets Khrushchev kept slashing, viewed the Cuba operation as a "crackpot scheme," and wondered what would happen if it were discovered. Would Khrushchev go to war with the United States? Even die-hard revolutionaries were anxious. To Che Guevara, Khrushchev boasted: "You don't have to worry. There will be no big reaction from the U.S. And if there is a problem, we will send the Baltic Fleet." But the fleet stayed in port, while Kennedy proved ready to risk nuclear annihilation to remove the missiles. Castro cursed Khrushchev as a "son of a bitch" with "no cojones," but the world was fortunate that the reckless Soviet leader blinked, accepting the humiliation of retreat.

The Chinese Communists grandstanded over both the nuttiness of Khrushchev's Cuban adventure and his capitulation to the imperialists. Taubman, exploiting the recent archival bonanza in the re-examination of Sino-Soviet relations, quotes Zhou En-lai, who after a trip to Moscow wrote perceptively in his diary that, being "extremely conceited... lacking farsightedness, and knowing little of the ways of the world, some of their leaders have hardly improved themselves even with the several rebuffs they have met." Zhou further observed that the putative leaders of the world proletariat spoke no foreign languages and "appear to lack confidence, suffer from inner fears, and thus tend to employ the tactics of bluffing or threats in handling foreign affairs or relations with [fraternal] parties."

But what could the Soviets do with the haughty, touchy Chinese? Whereas Stalin had forced Mao in the wake of the Chinese revolution's triumph in 1949 to cool his heels for two and a half months in Moscow waiting for an audience, Khrushchev went out of his way to coddle the Chinese leader, who took the respect as a sign of weakness. Even low-level Soviet officials noticed Mao's open disdain for Khrushchev, the kernel of the momentous Sino-Soviet dispute. As for the rift with Tito, another attempted Khrushchev fix that ended in failure, the Yugoslav leader had broken with Stalin well before Khrushchev unmasked him, and he, too, insisted on presenting his country's socialism to the world as an alternative to the Soviet model. Khrushchev may have had a harder time achieving "peaceful co-existence" with the socialist bloc than with the West. And yes, he did bang his shoe at the United Nations, when a Philippine delegate turned the issue of decolonization against Moscow.
behind him? A dreadful reputation, and the atomic bomb in the hands of those wretches." He is half right. Khrushchev could indeed be pathetic, begging his party interrogators to shoot him, but he was no wretch. He possessed far greater destructive power than Hitler had possessed, and though the Soviet leader never sought to start a war, he blustered the world to the brink. Yet Khrushchev always drew back. The cunning Communist idealist died in peaceful old age in 1971.

Khrushchev was buried on the site of a former monastery, religious ground that as a youth he had foreseen, with a headstone sculpted by a member of the intelligentsia, Ernst Neizvestny, whom he had berated. Khrushchev had once told the artist that his work "resembles this: it's as if a man climbed into a toilet, slid down under the seat, and from there, under the toilet seat, looked up at what was above him, at someone sitting on the toilet, looking up at that particular part of the body from below, from under the seat." And so on. Still, Neizvestny accepted a Khrushchev family private commission and created a magnificent monument. Half black, half white, encasing a bust, it expresses the stark contrasts of Khrushchev's life and times: the liberalization and the crackdowns, the quest for peaceful co-existence and the near attainment of mutually assured destruction, the hopes and the disappointments—in sum, the chimera, with all its consequences, of socialism with a human face.

David Thomson

Locomotion

RIVER OF SHADOWS: EADWEARD MUYBRIDGE AND THE TECHNOLOGICAL WILD WEST
By Rebecca Solnit
(Viking, 305 pp., $25.95)

It is a wonder there are not more books about Eadweard Muybridge (1830–1904). He was an astonishing photographer, intrigued by both immense distances and tiny movements of the human body. To scan the superficial facts of this adventurer's life is to realize that Muybridge contributed significantly to a period of convulsive change, and that he might be the subject of a great novel. But we know only enough about him to be intrigued, not enough to furnish that fictional life.

Rebecca Solnit has never published fiction, which is not to say that she lacks a large, ambitious imagination. She has been moved to print by Muybridge, and the result is rich and rewarding, even if much of her material cannot be made to fit together. She has rescued a strange, inexplicable fellow from mere histories of photography. After this book, it will not be possible to think of Muybridge as less than one of the great uneasy Victorians.

Such a book faces the experiments that its subject made with his own name, so that the actual humdrum English Edward Muggeridge took flight in romantic spelling and a mythical mind's eye structure. For illustration, there are the noble but mysterious nudes that march in the silent parade of Muybridge's photographed figures. But still the greatest literary thrill awaits. At some point in such a book, the author is going to be able to say—as Solnit does, on page three—that "in the eight years of his motion-study experiments in California, [Muybridge] also became a father, a murderer, and a widower, invented a clock, patented two photographic innovations, achieved international renown as an artist and a scientist, and completed four other major photographic projects."

I know, I know, you want to hear about that clock. All in good time. In life, everything stops for murder. In 1874, in San Francisco, Muybridge was forty-four. He had been married for three years to Flora Stone, very pretty, half his age, married once but divorced, a photographic re-toucher at one of the city's many galleries. A son was born to the couple in April of that year, called Florado Helios. "Helios," Greek for sun, had been a professional name that Muybridge briefly adopted as he made the career shift from bookseller to photographer.

On October 17, Muybridge found a photograph of Florado, with an inscription on the back—"Little Harry"—and "stamped on the floor and exhibited the wildest excitement. His appearance was that of a madman; he was haggard and pale, his eyes glassy; his lower jaw hung down; showed his teeth; he trembled from head to foot, and gasped for breath. He was terrible to look at." These are the words of Susan Smith, nurse to Mrs. Muybridge, and indiscreet enough to explain that "Harry" referred to Harry Larkyns, a "man-about-town" whom Muybridge had already warned to leave his young wife alone. Yet it is plain that Flora and Harry were often together during Muybridge's extended photographic journeys. That same day, Muybridge caught the four o'clock ferry from San Francisco to Vallejo, and then went by train up the Napa Valley to Calistoga. Arriving there by 10:30 p.m., he found Larkyns in a group playing cribbage and shot him. Struck an inch below the left nipple, Larkyns staggered out of the house and died under an oak tree.

As you might expect, the trial in Napa was far more closely covered than the events of the troubled marriage. The defense was led by William Wirt Pendegast, a noted orator and a friend to Muybridge's patron Leland Stanford, president of the Southern Pacific Railroad and governor of California. The plea was not guilty by reasons of insanity. How could unreason be alleged in this Muybridge who was one of the world's finest photographers, and who had already devised a system of successive, "instantaneous" pictures, enough to prove that Stanford's horse, Occident, sometimes had all four hooves off the ground when running?

In 1860, in Texas, Muybridge had been involved in a stagecoach accident in which he suffered a head injury. The only record of the event is Muybridge's later claim that he had suffered double vision, some loss of smell or taste, and confused ideas. These symptoms are often linked to concussion, but Solnit has enlisted a Berkeley neurologist who "makes a strong case" that Muybridge suffered brain damage in Texas. "Among the common effects of these confusions," she writes, "are emotional outbursts, inappropriate social behavior, risk-taking, obsessive-compulsive behavior, and a loss of inhibition."

The Napa court did not have the benefit of those words. But it listened to stories of the accident and a few anecdotes about Muybridge being absent-minded, careless with money, and "strange." One of these tales involved him posing on a high, rocky outcrop in Yosemite—no matter that the site was famous for daredevil acts and souvenir photographs. (There is one of two ladies dancing on the jutting nose of