

Check your ALCE Reading Skills: Activity 1

Key and item analysis

Text

Khrushchev's Cold War: The Inside Story of an American Adversary.
Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali

American leaders throughout the cold war struggled – usually unsuccessfully – to understand what made their Russian rivals tick. And for many years historians, working with the benefit of hindsight, did little better. Only recently have answers started to emerge, thanks to the partial opening of Soviet records. With their deeply researched *Khrushchev's Cold War*, Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali lift the veil of secrecy further than ever, exposing how Moscow made foreign policy decisions during Nikita Khrushchev's reign as leader of the Soviet Union from 1955 to 1964. The book is indispensable for anyone hoping to understand the cold war's most dangerous phase, and how the world managed to survive it.

Fursenko and Naftali covered some of this ground in a 1997 book on the Cuban missile crisis, one of the first studies to make extensive use of Soviet records. This time, they draw on a much larger collection of Kremlin material declassified in 2003. These documents shed new light on one of the cold war's most puzzling questions: Why would Khrushchev, who spoke of "peaceful coexistence" with the West, be willing to risk nuclear Armageddon by installing nuclear weapons in Cuba? How could he simultaneously be, as Richard Nixon once said, "a man of great warmth and totally belligerent"?

Rejecting those who have dismissed Khrushchev as a reckless fool, Fursenko and Naftali see logic in his erratic behavior. They contend that the Soviet leader wanted to ease tensions and to focus on raising his country's abysmal standard of living. "Khrushchev," they write, "imagined a grand settlement with the United States that would demilitarize the cold war, in order to allow him to redirect resources to the Soviet civilian economy and restrict the East-West struggle to the ideological and economic level, where he was convinced history would ultimately prove him right." What changed repeatedly, the authors say, was Khrushchev's strategy for attaining such a settlement. Sometimes he tried to seduce Washington with gentle words and offers to negotiate. At other times he sought to scare the United States to deter it from exploiting its considerable advantages, and ultimately to force concessions at the bargaining table.

The decision to place nuclear arms in Cuba provides the quintessential example of the latter approach. By positioning missiles so close to the United States, he hoped to compensate for a huge American advantage in nuclear weaponry and to intimidate Kennedy into negotiating with Moscow as an equal.

Perhaps he was right. But Fursenko and Naftali shrewdly point out that any success Khrushchev may have had came at an enormous cost. His risk-taking not only put the world through hair-raising crises but also played straight into the hands of American hawks, who instigated a major arms buildup and denounced any politician who dared suggest a relaxation of tensions. Still, the authors never really say whether the Americans, if they had recognized Khrushchev's basic interest in peace, might have been able to strike a deal to end the cold war — or at least ease it drastically. The authors sometimes criticize American policy makers for failing to recognize Khrushchev's basic desire for coexistence. At other points, they blame the Soviet leader himself for obscuring his basic desires in a cloud of unnecessary posturing.

In the end, only Gorbachev's emergence would bring Khrushchev's boldness, stripped of its brinkmanship, back into play.

Question 1

How does the reviewer say Soviet cold war policy has become better understood?

- A. Through the actions of American leaders.
- B. Through the study of the Cuban missile crisis.
- C. Through the research of Fursenko and Naftali.
- D. Through the work of American historians.

ANSWER KEY

C.

LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY

Medium

ITEM INFORMATION

C is the correct answer choice because the text states “With their deeply researched *Khrushchev’s Cold War*, Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali lift the veil of secrecy further than ever, exposing how Moscow made foreign policy decisions during Nikita Khrushchev’s reign as leader of the Soviet Union from 1955 to 1964.”

Question 2

What is the main function of the second paragraph?

- A. To criticize Khrushchev’s personality
- B. To describe a book on the Cuban missile crisis
- C. To stress the significance of newly released documents
- D. To summarize Cold War issues

ANSWER KEY

C.

LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY

More challenging

ITEM INFORMATION

C is the correct answer choice because the text states “This time, they draw on a much larger collection of Kremlin material declassified in 2003. These documents shed new light...” and the rest of the paragraph describes what questions the documents answer.

Question 3

What is Fursenko and Naftali's overall opinion of Khrushchev?

- A. He was unbalanced.
- B. He was a war-monger.
- C. He was irresponsible.
- D. He was rational.

ANSWER KEY

D.

LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY

Medium

ITEM INFORMATION

D is the correct answer choice because the text states "Rejecting those who have dismissed Khrushchev as a reckless fool, Fursenko and Naftali see logic in his erratic behavior."

Question 4

According to Fursenko and Naftali, what did Khrushchev want most of all?

- A. To have friendly relations with the United States.
- B. To improve the Soviet economy.
- C. To put pressure on the United States.
- D. To strengthen Soviet defense.

ANSWER KEY

B.

LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY

Medium

ITEM INFORMATION

B is the correct answer choice because the text states "...the Soviet leader wanted to... focus on raising his country's abysmal standard of living. "Khrushchev... imagined a grand settlement with the United States that would demilitarize the cold war, in order to allow him to redirect resources to the Soviet civilian economy..."

Question 5

What was the end result of Khrushchev's risk-taking?

- A. Americans increased their weaponry.
- B. Americans recognized his interest in peace.
- C. It began a decrease in hostility.
- D. It helped bring about the end of the Cold War.

ANSWER KEY

A.

LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY

Medium

ITEM INFORMATION

A is the correct answer choice because the text states "His risk-taking... played straight into the hands of American hawks, who instigated a major arms buildup..."

Question 6

What does the reviewer say about the lack of an agreement to end the cold war?

- A. That the authors blame Khrushchev for being unclear.
- B. That the authors claim Americans misunderstood Khrushchev.
- C. That the authors do not clearly state a reason.
- D. That the authors lay the blame on American politicians.

ANSWER KEY

C.

LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY

More challenging

ITEM INFORMATION

C is the correct answer choice because the text states "Still, the authors never really say whether the Americans, if they had recognized Khrushchev's basic interest in peace, might have been able to strike a deal to end the cold war."

Question 7

What is the reviewer's opinion of Khrushchev's Cold War?

- A. It effectively clarifies the Cuban missile crisis.
- B. It is an exceptional critique of American foreign policy.
- C. It offers essential insight into the Khrushchev era.
- D. It successfully explains Khrushchev's power.

ANSWER KEY

C.

LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY

Medium

ITEM INFORMATION

C is the correct answer choice because the text states "The book is indispensable for anyone hoping to understand the cold war's most dangerous phase, and how the world managed to survive it."
