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Introduction by William Taubman

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## Introduction by William Taubman, Amherst College, Emeritus

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The Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) opened on 14 February 1956 in the Great Kremlin Palace. In attendance, in addition to more than 1,400 delegates from the CPSU itself, were representatives of 55 Communist and workers' parties including the leaders of all Eastern European countries except Yugoslavia. The Congress was scheduled to end on February 25, but that morning the Soviet delegates were summoned to a secret session at which their party leader Nikita Khrushchev delivered a secret speech denouncing Joseph Stalin.

His audience was shocked. In the long run, Khrushchev's denunciation of a 'Soviet God' began the process of delegitimizing Communism and unraveling the USSR.

Khrushchev's 'secret speech' quickly became public. In the USSR, millions of Communist party and Young Communist League members, and then more rank-and-file citizens, had it read to them. In June, the *New York Times* published a copy that had leaked in Poland and then reached Israeli intelligence, which in turn gave it to the CIA. Kathleen E. Smith's book tells the story of how Soviet citizens reacted to Khrushchev's speech: how prisoners returning from the Gulag tried to reorient themselves in the capital and, in some cases, reinsert themselves into political life; how intellectuals (writers, artists, scientists, students) took up Khrushchev's challenge to work for change; how some of them pressed for more radical reforms than Khrushchev was willing to contemplate; how unrepentant Stalinists and other hard-liners resisted the change that Khrushchev had begun; and how he himself reversed course by the end of the year.

We all know that that 1956 was a turning point for the Soviet Union and Communism. But Smith's book takes us through the tumultuous year, month by month, in unprecedented detail. Each month gets its own chapter focusing on one or more Soviet citizens whose lives were changed by Khrushchev's speech. January: Novelist Varlam Shalamov, poet Anna Barkova, and screenwriters Iulii Duhnski and Valerii Frid, all prison camp veterans, began the new year with no inkling of the upheaval to come. February: Khrushchev prepared his speech with the help of another former prisoner, Aleksei Snegov, who smuggled a letter out of a labor camp to his old comrades Khrushchev and Anastas Mikoyan. March: Party historian Anna Pankratova gave public lectures explaining what needed to be done and not done in the light of Khrushchev's revelations. April: Old Bolsheviks like Elena Stasova, a revolutionary since 1890, advised other survivors about how to return to public life. May: Shalamov, Barkova, Dunsii and Frid struggled to adjust to their new lives. June: Younger intellectuals like Anatoly Gladilin made their way in the new environment of freedom, limited though it still was. July: Biologist Nikolai Timofeev-Resovskii and mathematician Aleksei Liapunov explored what Smith dubs "new kinds of semifreedom." August: Thousands of students mobilized by the party head for what Khrushchev calls 'the Virgin Lands' in Siberia to try to convert them to agriculture. September: Soviet tourists, prime among them Khrushchev himself (who conducted talks in London), descended on the 'bourgeois West' for the first time in decades. October: Vladimir Dudintsev's novel, *Not By Bread Alone*, sparked a sensational response from allies and opponents, alike. November: Turmoil in Poland and a revolution in Hungary frightened Khrushchev and his Kremlin colleagues while prompting Soviet radicals like Revol't Pimenov to defend the Hungarian revolutionaries. December: re-Stalinization began.

The stories Smith tells, often culled from declassified archival documents and interviews, are poignant and touching, while illuminating much larger matters such as the sources and limits of change in the Soviet system.

All three reviewers have high praise for *Moscow 1956: The Silenced Spring*. Artemy Kalinovsky calls it “a terrific book” that he would recommend “wholeheartedly to all my students and colleagues, both as an introduction to the period and primer on how to capture the complexities of a hopeful era.” For Sergey Radchenko, Smith’s “absorbing narrative . . . beautifully laid out across twelve chapters. . . recounts stories of hope, fears, and disappointments, all the wonderful uncertainties and unfortunate certitudes of the Soviet 1950’s.” Peter Ruggenthaler finds it “a valuable and most welcome contribution to Soviet studies.”

All three reviewers also offer criticism. For Kalinovsky, Smith’s choice to focus on 1956 seems at first to be too familiar and too narrow, given that the ‘thaw’ period extended for several years at least. And although he praises Smith for showing how important the world beyond the USSR was for Soviet leaders and for citizens, he would have liked more attention to the impact of Khrushchev’s secret speech on the outside world, especially China, India, and the Third World.

Radchenko, too, wishes that Smith had paid more heed to “the broader, international aspects of de-Stalinization.” And, pointing to the way Smith’s account focuses mostly on Moscow intellectuals, he raises the important question of the extent to which their views were shared by non-elite Muscovites and the broader population outside the capital. Actually, as the young Mikhail Gorbachev (then serving as a Young Communist League official in Stavropol) discovered when briefing ordinary citizens in the countryside on Khrushchev’s ‘secret’ speech, many of them refused to credit Khrushchev’s indictment of Stalin. “Why do we need it? Why wash dirty linen in public?” was one response. “Serves them right,” declared one woman, referring to victims of Stalin’s purges. “They were the ones who herded us into collective farms and oppressed people.” “They paid for our tears,” growled another.<sup>1</sup>

Ruggenthaler also believes that “the broader political framework” extending beyond writers and artists would have merited more attention, even as he particularly welcomes Smith’s case studies of former Gulag prisoners who returned to Moscow after their release.

In my view, these criticisms have some merit, but if Smith had covered all the areas mentioned by reviewers, she would have written a different book. There is always room for more than a particular author includes in her work, but, as the three reviewers recognize, Smith’s book, as written, is itself a major achievement for which we must be grateful.

### **Participants:**

**Kathleen E. Smith** earned her Ph.D. in Political Science from UC Berkeley. She is currently a teaching professor at the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. She is the author also of *Remembering Stalin’s Victims: Popular Memory and the End of the USSR* and *Mythmaking in the New Russia: History and Politics in the Yeltsin Era*. She is currently researching a book on Peredelkino, the Soviet writers’ village founded in 1934.

**William Taubman**, Bertrand Snell Professor of Political Science emeritus at Amherst College, received his Ph.D. in Public Law and Government from Columbia in 1969. He is the author of *Khrushchev: The Man and*

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in William Taubman, *Gorbachev: His Life and Times* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2017), 97.

*His Era* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003) and *Gorbachev: His Life and Times* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2017).

**Artemy M. Kalinovsky** is Assistant Professor of East European Studies at the University of Amsterdam. He is the author of *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). He has also co-edited and co-authored several works, including *The Routledge Handbook of Cold War Studies* (London: Routledge, 2014), *Cold War Orientalism: Interlocking Orientologies in the Cold War Era* (London: Routledge, 2015), and *Missionaries of Modernity: Advisory Missions and the Struggle for Hegemony in Afghanistan and Beyond* (New York: Hurst, 2016). His current work is *Laboratory of Social Development: Cold War Politics and Decolonization in Soviet Tajikistan*.

**Sergey Radchenko** is Professor of International Relations at Cardiff University. His research interests include the Cold War and the history of Chinese and Soviet foreign relations. He is the author of *Two Suns in the Heavens: the Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2009) and *Unwanted Visionaries: the Soviet Failure in Asia at the End of the Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2014). He is currently working on a history of Chinese foreign relations since 1949.

**Doz. Mag. Dr. Peter Ruggenthaler**, senior research fellow at the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Research on War Consequences, Graz, Austria. His publications include “*The Concept of Neutrality in Stalin’s Foreign Policy, 1945–53.*” *Harvard Cold War Studies Book Series* (2015); “*Der Wiener Gipfel 1961. Kennedy–Chruschtschow*” [The Vienna Summit 1961. Kennedy–Khrushchev] (Co-editor, 2011); “*Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.*” *Harvard Cold War Studies Book Series* (Co-editor, 2010). His current project is entitled “European Neutrality and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.”

Review by Artemy M. Kalinovsky, University of Amsterdam

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After Joseph Stalin's death in March 1953, the Soviet Union entered one of the most hopeful periods of its 75 year existence. The terror was over, for good, millions returned from the camps, and a new period of openness arrived in literature and the arts. That era lasted roughly until 1964, when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev was ousted by his erstwhile comrades, who oversaw a partial return to Stalinist norms. That, at least, had long been the popular interpretation of the decade after Stalin's death. In recent years historians such as Stephen Bittner, Miriam Dobson, Vlad Zubok, Denis Kozlov, and Juliane Fürst have done much to complicate our understanding of this period.<sup>1</sup> They have asked questions about the thaw's chronology, its impact beyond the Russian intelligentsia, and turned our attention to those who did not see denunciation of Stalin or the opening of camps as an unalloyed good.

In this terrific new book, Kathleen Smith situates her story of the thaw back with the intellectual and creative elite. Here I must admit my initial skepticism about yet another work that focused on the Russian—Moscow based no less—intelligentsia in the year 1956. Yet this is a remarkable book in that even though there are a number of stories that are familiar, at least in their outlines, to those who study the era, the book never feels stale. There are fascinating stories about more familiar individuals like the writer Varlaam Shalamov, whose problematic reintegration after release from the camps is told through his relationship with his wife and the soon to be Nobel Prize laureate Boris Pasternak. But there are number of less familiar figures, including the poet Anna Barkova, the historian Anna Pankratova, and rehabilitated Communists like Aleksei Snegov and Aleksandr Mil'chakov. Moreover, the book is infused with sensitivity to its subjects, and consistently open to the full spectrum of contradictory emotions and impulses they experienced.

The choice of 1956 may also appear, at first glance, a bit forced, especially since most of the recent historiography has tended to question a narrow chronology for the era. The focus on 1956 works, however, because Smith's project is not an account of the era, but rather an exploration of the promises and contradictions of the time as experienced by a number of actors, and thus, less directly, of the promises and contradictions of the Soviet Union more generally. The book begins with the run-up to the secret speech in January 1956, takes us through the hopeful months that followed the speech in February, through the complicated fall months and on to Khrushchev's apparent repudiation of his own program in December. As a narrative framing device, this chronology works quite well, though it can leave some readers with the sense that the back and forth about de-Stalinization effectively stopped there, when in fact it continued throughout the Khrushchev era and even beyond.

Readers of this roundtable, who are presumably most interested in the foreign relations of the USSR, will no doubt want to know what is in it for them. In the first place, the book provides important contextualization for any discussion of the Soviet Union's foreign policy in that period. The domestic and international politics of the thaw were intimately connected. Khrushchev's secret speech raised the hopes of reformers in other

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen V. Bittner, *The Many Lives of Khrushchev's Thaw: Experience and Memory in Moscow's Arbat* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); Denis Kozlov, *The Readers of Novyi Mir*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); Miriam Dobson, *Khrushchev's Cold Summer: Gulag Returnees, Crime, and the Fate of Reform after Stalin*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); Juliane Fürst, *Stalin's Last Generation: Soviet Post-war Youth and the Emergence of Mature Socialism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

socialist bloc countries; his willingness to open up at home also facilitated better relations with countries beyond the bloc.

More broadly, *Moscow 1956* shows how important the world beyond the USSR was for Soviet leaders and for citizens. Students at Moscow university, sensing a new openness to ideas of reform, looked to the near abroad, including Yugoslavia and Hungary, for models. Students like Revol't Pimenov and Aleksandr Gidoni read newspapers from other socialist countries to gain new ideas about possible forms of socialism. As Smith writes, "For many freethinkers in 1956 the 'nearby' West of Poland, Hungary, and Yugoslavia was at least, if not more, fascinating than the distant West represented by France, England, or the United States" (304).

While young people like Revol't Pimenov explored the wider world from libraries, politicians and privileged intellectuals were able to physically go beyond Soviet borders. Drawing primarily on press accounts and the memoirs of Khrushchev and his son Sergei, Smith provides a memorable account of Khrushchev's trip to the United Kingdom in April 1956. Khrushchev's optimistic comments about living in peace despite their mutual dislike of each other's systems, were tempered by boasts about the USSR being able to make a "guided missile with a hydrogen bomb that can fall anywhere in the world" (235). Throughout the trip, Khrushchev measured himself, and, by extension, his country, against his hosts, obsessing over his plane, his suit, and his itinerary.

Even more fascinating is Smith's discussion of the first tourist cruises to Europe, reconstructed from memoir accounts, press reports, and archival records. Stalin had sent his underlings on study tours to the west and had brought specialists from abroad to help build the Soviet economy. But from the mid-1930s in particular the Soviet Union rarely allowed people to leave and sharply limited who could enter; foreign tourism—even to the socialist bloc after it took shape—was unheard of. That changed in the 1950s. Khrushchev wanted to present a more confident Soviet Union, one that had much to show off but little to hide. Of course, travel remained a rare privilege. Those who were chosen represented the political and cultural elites, or were model workers being rewarded for their efforts. They were expected to dress formally, so as to make a better impression on the locals. And they were expected to write about their experiences, and to assure their fellow citizens that—no matter how impressive the sites—not only was the Soviet Union respected, but ultimately home was the best place to be.<sup>2</sup>

Soviet tourists were accompanied by security officials, but they were not always under their minders' watchful eyes. Roaming the streets of European cities, they ran into Russian emigres, visited mosques, and tried to communicate with locals. But travel was also an opportunity for reflection, not just on strange places and people, but also on one's homeland and fellow travelers. The relatively cosmopolitan intellectuals were amused by the tourist who remarked that "the Italian government doesn't have the resources to fix the coliseum" and a government official who questioned a writer's praise of the sea—as if it was any worse than the sea back home (247).

If the primary motivations for Khrushchev's secret speech stemmed from domestic politics, his retreat on de-Stalinization at the end of 1956 was directly connected to foreign concerns and how they echoed

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<sup>2</sup> On foreign travel, see also: Anne E. Gorsuch, *All This is Your World: Soviet Tourism at Home and Abroad After Stalin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Anne E. Gorsuch, and Diane P. Koenker, eds. *The Socialist Sixties: Crossing Borders in the Second World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

domestically. The Hungarian and Polish crises earlier in October had demonstrated the political dangers of de-Stalinization for Soviet foreign policy, but the response among students at home also emboldened conservatives who objected to Khrushchev's criticism of Stalin. Party officials and prosecutors were again urged to be more vigilant in monitoring and combating anti-Soviet sentiment.

Throughout the book, Smith generally refrains from pronouncing a verdict on the thaw, instead preferring to lay out the complexities and possibilities of the time. The year 1956 is taken less as a turning point and more a slice of history. This has its advantages, but also its drawbacks. It leaves out, for example, Khrushchev's confrontation with his main rivals in the Politburo (Lazar Kaganovich, Viacheslav Molotov, and Nikolai Bulganin) in 1957; the 21<sup>st</sup> and especially the 22<sup>nd</sup> party congresses and such contradictory events as the publication of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, as well as the rejection of Vasili Grossman's *Life and Fate* and Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*; and a number of political rehabilitations of people swept up by the terror.

Smith's focus on the *Russian* intelligentsia, traditional for historians of the 'thaw', makes it difficult to examine either phenomenon as a Soviet one. Would it be possible to write about this period from the perspective of the Soviet intelligentsia, rather than primarily the Russian one? De-Stalinization led to all sorts of debates about national identity, tradition, and the Soviet legacy far beyond central Russia. Indeed, in October of 1956, the Uzbek SSR organized a congress of the Uzbek intelligentsia, specifically to hash out some of these questions. The concerns of Uzbek historians, writers, and artists were not identical to those of their Russian counterparts, but they cannot be so easily separated either. How would looking beyond Moscow affect our chronology of the thaw? Could we extend it perhaps as late as 1965, when an estimated 20,000 people took to the streets in Yerevan to demand an official recognition of the Armenian genocide? That event, too, was a culmination of debates and questions unleashed by Khrushchev's de-Stalinization.<sup>3</sup>

The limitation of looking at Moscow's intelligentsia is also evident when Smith turns to the world beyond the USSR. The book's subjects look to the west and travel to the west. Tellingly, a chapter entitled "Winds from the East" is actually about the influence of Hungarian, Polish, and Yugoslav developments. Yet this was the same period that official relations with China, India, and the broader post-colonial world took center stage. The visits of dignitaries such as Indian leaders Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi to Central Asia and travels to the 'Third World' undertaken by local elites undoubtedly left a greater mark there than the tours of Europe and visits by Europeans.

These are, admittedly, not entirely fair criticisms. The focus on Moscow and people connected to the city allows Smith to tell the story of the 'thaw' in a new way, and much that is good about this book would have been lost if she had extended the framework geographically or chronologically. I will be recommending this wholeheartedly to all my students and colleagues, both as an introduction to the period and a primer on how to capture the complexities of a hopeful era.

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<sup>3</sup> Maike Lehmann, "Apricot Socialism: The National Past, the Soviet Project, and the Imagining of Community in Late Soviet Armenia," *Slavic Review* 74:1 (2015): 9-31.

Review by Sergey Radchenko, Cardiff University

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In one old Soviet joke that goes back to the 1950s, a tour guide is showing a group around Hell. Presently he says, pointing at one of the exhibits: 'These two here are Hitler and Stalin. You can see that they are standing in excrement as punishment for their terrible sins.' Someone from the tour group asks: 'But why is Hitler in excrement up to his neck, whereas Stalin is only up to his waist?' 'This,' explains the tour guide, 'is because Stalin is standing on Lenin's shoulders.'

As far as jokes go, the boisterous Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev would have not found it funny in the least. It went to the heart of the dilemma that he faced in February 1956 when, speaking from the rostrum of the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, he denounced Joseph Stalin's crimes and announced the return to Leninist norms of collective leadership. Stalin may have been bad. The system, though, was good. Rid of the dangerous 'perversions' of the cult of personality, the Party would steam forward to greater victories, to socialism. But there were lingering questions: how could a good system produce such a monstrosity as Stalin? On whose shoulders did Stalin stand? As the news of Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' leaked out to the public, some were beginning to ask these difficult and politically dangerous questions. Before long, the leadership clamped down on dissent. Doubts were pushed out from the public sphere into kitchens; public debates gave way to whispers and surreptitious jokes. The brief 'thaw' of intellectual freedom succumbed to the biting frost of party orthodoxy.

Kathleen Smith's absorbing narrative takes us back to the drama of 1956. Beautifully laid out across twelve chapters—twelve months—the book recounts stories of hope, fears, and disappointments, all the wonderful uncertainties and the unfortunate certitudes of the Soviet 1950s. These are stories of people released from the Gulag, of poets and writers, of scientists and students, stories of anger and betrayal, regret and forgiveness, a snapshot of the Soviet society at an important historical turning point. The cast of characters includes the writers Varlam Shalamov and Konstantin Paustovskii, the dissident Yuri Orlov, but also less-known names. There is even a smattering of fictional heroes, as Smith enlivens her narrative by generously citing from some of the literature of the 1950s.

We follow these characters' lives and their various exploits. Here, Shalamov, a returnee from the Gulag, struggles to re-attach himself to his wife and daughter who would prefer to forget the painful memories of his imprisonment. Here, Vladimir Dudintsev, the famous author of *Not By Bread Alone*, struggles—and fails—to keep the discussion of his controversial novel within the permissible bounds. Here, Paustovskii partakes of the newly-won freedom to cruise around Europe on a Soviet liner, bringing back colourful memories of foreign life. Here he is again, making a fiery, if not reckless, speech at meeting called to discuss Dudintsev's work, as students strain to hear every word. Here are angry students boycotting their canteen because they are not happy with the quality of food, only to find themselves on the receiving end of party criticism. Meanwhile, other students head to Kazakhstan to participate in Khrushchev's pet project, *The Virgin Lands*, only to encounter stupendous waste, impenetrable bureaucracy, and, on occasion, local hostility. In short, life as one would expect to see it in Moscow in 1956.

Smith has done an excellent job intertwining her different story lines, pulling together threads from the memoir literature and archival materials. The book is an important contribution to our knowledge of Soviet history, and a useful addition to the growing literature on the 'thaw.'

That said, the book has certain limitations. The author consciously avoids the broader, international, aspects of de-Stalinization. This is for the good reason that covering every conceivable story cannot be done and perhaps should not be attempted. After all, there was 1956 in Poland, in Hungary, in China, even in North Korea. There was unrest in Communist parties in Western Europe and in the U.S. (most never recovered). The feelings of puzzlement, excitement, joy, and fear, so well accounted for in Smith's narrative, were widely shared around the world by all those who had ties of allegiance to the so called international Communist movement. Often, international reactions to the 'thaw' in the USSR in turn spurred domestic feedback. The conservative backlash of late 1956 can only be understood with reference to the events that shook Budapest that fall. Some of these issues are discussed in passing in the book. But readers hoping—in line with the current fashion for 'transnational history'—for some sort of a 'global 1956' moment, will be disappointed by the book's limited scope. Moscow 1956. Just that. Well, maybe a bit of Leningrad.

One minor point of criticism that I would like to raise with regard to this otherwise impressive piece of work centers on the Smith's selection of her case studies. This is a problem that all historians face. How do we select evidence? How do we construct narratives without subconsciously surrendering to this or that bias, unwittingly exaggerating some phenomena while understating something else? I wondered about this as I read the book. I was struck by the fact that most stories recounted here are those of Moscow's intellectual elite. Can we assume that their views were shared by other Muscovites, never mind the broader populace? There is a danger of conflation of elite opinions with the general public opinion with the result that counter-narratives are shoved out of sight. Was every Russian a child of the 'thaw'? Of course not. There were plenty of detractors, plenty of unreformed Stalinists, and many of them were not in the party bureaucracy. There were anti-de-Stalinization riots in Georgia, as the author rightly points out (350) but that was just the surface of a much broader phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

So, yes, there were people like Revol't Pimenov, a radical student and one of Smith's characters, who criticized the limits of de-Stalinization and condemned Khrushchev and other Soviet leaders as "the true comrades in arms and students of Joseph the Bloody" (295). Pimenov even wrote letter to the Supreme Soviet, complaining about the Soviet actions in Hungary. But, then, there were also people like Anatolii Danilevskii, a secondary school teacher, who *defended* Stalin and criticized Khrushchev, "an upstart and a wheeler-dealer," for "bias and false testimony, hypocrisy and betrayal."<sup>2</sup> Danilevskii, too, wrote letters—only to Mao Zedong. One (Pimenov) is a dissident voice who, in retrospect, helped shaped the legacy of the 1950s; the other (Danilevskii) is someone that we do not really know anything about. Yet there was a Danilevskii for every Pimenov. The diversity of perspectives is what is missing in our assessments of the thaw. This creates a disconnect of the same kind that we often see in the current assessment of the Russian civil society, a disconnect between those, whose values, as intellectuals, we share, whose narratives, as historians, we help perpetuate, and the stubborn reality of a different, 'un-intellectual' Russia, that was likely there in 1956, and remains there today, unheard but tangible.

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<sup>1</sup> For a sample of documents *defending* Stalin, see K. Aimermakher et al. (eds.), *Doklad N.S. Khrushcheva o Kul'te Lichnosti Stalina na XX s'ezde KPSS: Dokumenty* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Anatolii Danilevskii to Mao Zedong, 12 August 1957. Chinese Foreign Ministry Archive: 109-01098-03, 19.

These reservations aside, I highly commend this study of remarkable breadth and readability. Smith has done us all a service by showing us how engaging and thought-provoking history should be written.

## Review by Peter Ruggenthaler, Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Research on War Consequences

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Looking in isolation at 1956, a year of decisive importance for the Soviet Union, has both advantages and drawbacks. The drawbacks are apparent in the way Kathleen E. Smith focuses selectively on the preparation of Soviet leader Nikita S. Khrushchev's secret speech, which he delivered at the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. What is not, in my view, sufficiently taken into consideration here are the political framework conditions. This might lead readers who are not already well versed in Soviet history to believe that writers and artists had exerted a decisive influence on Khrushchev, swaying him to initiate the rehabilitation of the victims of Stalinism. The documentation of the influence that writers and artists actually did have on Khrushchev and of how the First Secretary interviewed in person former prominent Gulag inmates to get first-hand information is one of the strong points of the first part of Smith's book, and the conclusion she arrives at in this respect is totally plausible: "Khrushchev not only adopted Snegov's [a veteran party member who had spent seventeen years in the Gulag] ideas about de-Stalinization but used the man himself as a pretext to push the idea that the past abuses had to be dealt with at the Congress" (34).

Smith outlines in a detailed and highly informative manner the difficulties the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) found inherent in its task of communicating the substance of the 'secret speech' within the party in the far-flung Soviet Union and doing so in an appropriate language. Initially only the upper and lower levels of the party were to be briefed (people were individually allowed to read the speech, but they were not allowed to share it with others). The Central Committee in Moscow did not issue any clear instructions—nor was it in a position to do so. The core message of Khrushchev's speech was: that "Stalin committed heinous crimes against the people and the party, which no one was aware of at the time (not even the party top brass), and if anyone became suspicious, they were unable to voice those suspicions in the conditions prevalent then and there. All other party leaders were reputedly blameless (apart from rogue political adventurers of the Beria or Abakumov type) and found themselves now forced to publish the facts that had come to light suddenly and 'against all expectations' in order not to lose the party's trust and to forestall a repetition of such developments in future."<sup>1</sup>

This was the dilemma the Soviet leaders found themselves confronted with. Quite rightly in my opinion, Smith comes to the conclusion that, in opening Pandora's box, Khrushchev was "motivated not by curiosity but by conviction. He believed that by airing some of the regime's dark secrets in a controlled and limited way he and other party loyalists could liberate themselves from guilt over the past and reinvigorate the party" (334). There is, however, one minor quibble. Might it not have been the case that Khrushchev was equally motivated by a desire to—as far as he was concerned—legitimately undergird the positions he had managed to reach?<sup>2</sup> The tragic irony in this story is that Khrushchev not only got rid of the genie he had released, he even succeeded in consolidating his own position after suppressing the Hungarian Revolution due to his

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<sup>1</sup> Michail Prozumenščikov, "Ereignisse, die die kommunistische Welt erschütterten. Zum 50. Jahrestag des XX. Parteitags der KPdSU," in *Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung* 2006, 49-65, here 53.

<sup>2</sup> This is the view put forward by Mikhail Prozumenshchikov, in *ibid.*, 51, in a first analysis of the declassified files on the preparatory stage of the 'secret speech' that had been strictly off limits for a long time.

determination to keep Soviet power in the driver's seat in Moscow. These crises earned him "a reputation as a resolute and clear-sighted politician."<sup>3</sup>

Smith quite clearly points to the limits of this particular 'thaw period,' using the fate of dissident-to-be Yuri Orlov as an illustration. Orlov had rather provocatively suggested that not every instance of incompetence could reasonably be blamed on the capitalist class enemy. His argument that while the USSR was socialist, it was certainly not democratic led him to demand "the total democratization in our lives—we'll have socialism [only] when one can live confidently without looking over one's shoulder" (74). Like others guilty of similar offences, Orlov was "expelled from the party, fired" from his work, and "blocked from finding suitable employment in Moscow...people would still be punished for speaking out, but not as harshly as before" (77).

Of great interest are Smith's case studies of former Gulag prisoners who after their release sought to make their way back into society and take up residence, mostly in Moscow. These case studies do not rely on memoirs but are based on solid research and full of archival material. Smith made use above all of the holdings of the GARF, the Russian State Archive. The case studies are therefore a valuable and most welcome contribution to Soviet Studies.

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<sup>3</sup> See Ol'ga Pavlenko, "Between Pragmatism and Ideology: The US-Soviet Negotiating Process in the Khrushchev Era," in Günter Bischof, Stefan Karner and Barbara Stelzl-Marx, eds., *The Vienna Summit and its Importance in International History*, Harvard Cold War Studies Book Series Lanham *et al.*, 2014, 195, here 183–207.

### Author's Response by Kathleen E. Smith, Georgetown University

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I appreciate the format of the H-Diplo Roundtable with its collection of several distinct perspectives on a single volume and the chance for the author to engage with the reviewers. I am also extremely grateful to the organizers for the privilege of having *Moscow 1956: The Silenced Spring* included in such an exercise, especially as at first glance a book on political liberalization might not be seen as priority reading for those interested in diplomatic history. Yet as Artemy Kalinovsky generously notes, “the domestic and international politics of the thaw were intimately connected.” I agree with his sentiment. Beyond the obvious shockwaves created by the crisis in Hungary in the fall of 1956, a myriad of international influences, both cultural and political, shaped the course of the ‘thaw’ inside the Soviet Union. I particularly enjoyed exploring two lesser-known aspects of foreign relations from the summer of 1956 that shaped both domestic culture and attitudes toward the abroad--interest in Yugoslav socialism sparked by Prime Minister Josip Broz Tito’s long visit to the USSR and publicity generated by the ‘first Soviet tourists’ as they cruised by boat around Europe.

I am very pleased that two of the reviewers complimented the readability of *Moscow 1956*. My goal was to write an account that would be accessible and compelling to non-academic readers while also offering something new for experts. I strove to write a lively text that combined original sources and secondary literature to illuminate the complexity of the thaw through a set of interlinked biographies. In my response, I would like to focus on several other key methodological challenges that I faced in composing the book and of which the reviewers have taken note.

All of the reviewers quite rightly observe that the choice of a limited chronology has advantages and disadvantages. I began my research with the idea that Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev’s ‘Secret Speech’ and the crackdown on ‘freethinking’ at home after the Soviet intervention in Hungary could logically bookend an in-depth account of a momentous year in Russian history. Yet, while it was possible to succinctly summarize the three-year period of silent de-Stalinization that preceded the famous speech, I found it difficult to encapsulate the subsequent dramatic events of the thaw, which lasted for nearly another decade. Rather than provide sketches of subsequent high and low points in cultural and political liberalization, I tried to convince readers in closing that the year 1956 illustrated a persistent cycle of reform and retreat. December 1956, I contend, did not mark a permanent silencing of the Soviet spring. Instead, this year as a whole may be understood as the first, but only the first, layer of a process that would repeat until General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms decisively failed.

The next challenge that I faced in designing the scope of the book was geography. Recognizing the limits of my language skills and time available for field research, I decided from the start that I would concentrate almost exclusively on Russia. The view of the thaw from Yerevan or Tashkent or from Tbilisi or Tallinn would certainly differ from the Russian experience, and yet, given the specificities of the other republics, it would be difficult to choose just one or two. I was delighted to be able to reference a recent edited volume that took up the topic of 1956 in Georgia<sup>1</sup> and I can imagine a fascinating conference that would bring together scholars of multiple former Soviet republics to address the impact of the Secret Speech. That said, had nationalities policy been as big of an issue for Khrushchev as it was for Gorbachev, a Russian-centric view

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy K. Blauvelt and Jeremy Smith, eds., *Georgia after Stalin: Nationalism and Soviet Power* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016).

would be impossible to justify; however, for 1956 it was possible to follow the most salient developments of de-Stalinization—responses to Khrushchev’s attack on the Stalin cult, pressure for more free speech, the opening up of the Gulag, and mobilization of youth around new heroic tasks—within a limited geography.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in a centralized state, decision-making needs to be examined through Moscow-based institutions ranging from the Presidium to the Writers Union.

Sergey Radchenko notes quite rightly that Moscow 1956 is not a transnational history. For those interested in the global sweep of events that year, I recommend Simon Hall’s recent book on 1956 in which the Soviet experience takes up just one chapter.<sup>3</sup> And yet, Radchenko’s comment: “Moscow 1956. Just that. Well, maybe a bit of Leningrad” strikes me as somewhat unfair. He overlooks the motion captured in the lives of many of my book’s subjects. Whether it is Party commissions heading off to review the populations of labor camps in Arkhangelsk and Vorkuta, former prisoners making their way back to urban centers from the Russian far north, young people leaving provincial towns to study in Moscow or Leningrad, or city kids setting out for the ‘Virgin Lands’ of Kazakhstan and the great Komsomol construction projects in Siberia, action takes place on the broader stage. In particular, the story of would-be geneticists having to travel to a remote laboratory in the woods of the Urals to study with one of the Soviet Union’s few surviving experts, an ex-prisoner who in turn did not have permission to live in Moscow, conveys quite vividly some of the important limitations of reform in 1956. That said, ideally, I would have gone beyond the stories of students from the provinces to convey more disparate views of the impact of de-Stalinization. Polly Jones, for one, achieves this in her examination of responses to various turning points of de-Stalinization; Benjamin Tromly as well incorporates archival and oral histories from Saratov and Ukraine in his history of post-War Soviet students.<sup>4</sup>

As another limiting factor, all of the reviewers call out *Moscow 1956* for focusing on members of the Moscow intelligentsia. Like the old joke about the man who has lost his keys in the gutter but is looking for them under the lamppost because the light’s much better—historians have a natural tendency to examine the lives of those who have left the most written traces. I felt this most keenly in choosing a small number of ex-prisoners to profile. There is a large memoir corpus on the gulag, but one that is unsurprisingly dominated by highly literate survivors. Oral histories collected in the 1990s expanded available perspectives, but I very much wanted to be able to triangulate between retrospective self-reporting and documents of the time. Ultimately, I embraced the topic of literacy and the gulag prisoner by selecting four writers of varying degrees of fame. Such a choice meant that I could draw on letters, fiction, autobiographical testimony, and memoirs of others in their circles while addressing the problem of how to write about the tragic past in a time of only partial freedom. That said, my account of 1956 also includes many self-made Party members who do not fit the

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<sup>2</sup> I applied a similar logic to narrowing down the scope of international influences; this was not the key year in Soviet-Sino relations, and Hungary—rather than Suez—had a great impact on Khrushchev’s domestic political battles.

<sup>3</sup> Simon Hall, *1956: A World in Revolt* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Polly Jones, *Myth, Memory, Trauma: Remaking the Stalinist Past in the Soviet Union, 1953-1970*. (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2013); Benjamin Tromly, *Making the Soviet Intelligentsia: Universities and Intellectual Life under Stalin and Khrushchev*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

traditional category of intelligentsia and I highlight tensions between Muscovite and provincial students in the universities.

Does a focus on educated persons lead to bias in presentation of a range of opinion? I would say yes and no. Of course, an assessment of students, scientists, politicians and writers by definition cannot convey the opinions of ordinary urban workers, collective farm peasants, and residents of towns. And I make no claim in the book to do so. However, 1956 was a moment in time in which ideas mattered critically and therefore I think it is not unwarranted to focus on those who were openly engaged in the difficult issues of the day, including: what did a return to Leninist principles mean in practice? What were appropriate heroes for young people after the cult of Stalin had been undermined? What reforms might prevent the future erosion of legality? What could one learn from other cultures and political systems? What Radchenko refers to as the “‘un-intellectual’ Russia, that was likely there in 1956, and remains there today, unheard but tangible” is arguably more tangible today for researchers given public opinion polls, widespread social media use, and free range journalism. In 1956, authentic voices were hard to find, period, even in diaries and letters and perhaps especially in the sort of documents held in state archives.<sup>5</sup>

The substantial gaps in the written record of public opinion, especially outside the urban elite, however, means that scholars frankly do not have the data to say, as Radchenko does, that for every radical democracy-seeking student there was an ardent defender of Stalin. In reading transcripts of questions to those who presented Khrushchev’s Secret Speech, or in the case of the historian Anna Pankratova, who tried to interpret its consequences, one can see a very strong fealty, whether out of conviction or apprehension, to sticking close to the Party line. Since that line had shifted quite sharply away from obeisance to Stalin, open defenses of the late leader were rare in the spring of 1956. When possible I documented traces of pro-Stalinist speech, but such statements seem to have been largely limited to the occasional anonymous letter until the fall of 1956 when authoritative persons began to express a more respectful view of Stalin’s leadership. Even then, based on having read hundreds of student reminiscences, I feel confident in saying that in the wake of the Secret Speech Radchenko’s letter writer defending Stalin and addressing Mao was more uncommon than a Soviet student complaining about the bureaucracy that had grown up under Stalin and pushing for more freedom of speech.

Moreover, I hope that my use of biographies has drawn attention to the fact that in many instances the views of Soviet people in 1956 were inconsistent and in flux. The dividing line on evaluating the Stalinist system quite often ran through the individual. Drawing largely on William Taubman’s incisive psychological portrait of Khrushchev,<sup>6</sup> I see the Soviet First Secretary as a perfect example. Here was a man trapped in his own past as a top aide to Stalin and yet someone aware that he could easily have been one of Stalin’s victims; Khrushchev admired some of Stalin’s policies and disavowed others. I can only concur with Peter Ruggenthaler that a strong survival instinct and sharp pragmatism underlay Khrushchev’s fateful decision to

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<sup>5</sup> I made some use of published diaries in writing *Moscow 1956*. A new initiative to collect and digitize published and unpublished diaries from the Soviet period holds out the tantalizing possibility of comparing multiple individual perspectives on any given day. See [www.prozhito.org](http://www.prozhito.org). Since 1991, the Memorial Society has been encouraging high schoolers to use family papers and local sources to create rich “bottom-up” histories. The best works of their program can be found at <http://urokiistorii.ru/raboty>.

<sup>6</sup> William C. Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and his Era*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003).

denounce Stalin. Yet, his return to anti-Stalinist rhetoric in the Anti-Party Crisis of 1957 and at the 22nd Party Congress in 1961, I would argue, displays a lasting belief that de-Stalinization could be good for the Party and not just for his personal position.

Ruggenthaler worries that “readers who are not already well-versed in Soviet history” might be misled as to the extent of influence of writers and artists on the leadership. I suppose it is possible that my book, in so far as it highlights a bounded set of personal narratives, might exaggerate certain actors’ importance or imply a false level representativeness of others. Though I set out deliberately to create a text that could be enjoyed by readers of serious non-fiction (with footnotes that would appeal to scholars), I expect that most of my readers will not be total novices to Soviet history. Hence I tried to cast fresh light on familiar episodes of the thaw while introducing lesser known persons and adding a level of complexity to biographies of the better known. Radchenko puts it eloquently when he writes that “the book recounts stories of hope, fears, and disappointments, all the wonderful uncertainties and the unfortunate certitudes of the Soviet 1950s.” *Moscow 1956* is not meant to be a revisionist look at the arc of the thaw, but rather to be a nuanced if partial story of a turbulent time. If I have managed to convey the complex emotional landscape of the Russian intelligentsia and Party leaders alike at this liminal moment, then I am content.