



# WORLDVIEWS FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

A Monograph Series

## From the Soviet Union of Nikita Khrushchev to Today's Russia: A Survey of Reforms

A Conversation with  
Sergei Khrushchev



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## *Worldviews for the 21st Century: A Monograph Series*

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**Question: Nearly two decades after the demise of the Soviet Union, what has changed the most for Russia, the main successor state?**

Sergei Khrushchev: The Soviet Union was a superpower, a country that challenged the United States and had its own vision for leading the world. Now, the situation is very different. Russia does not oversee an empire, it is not a superpower, and it is not a real player in the world arena. Russia is not even a regional power. It is just one more big country with nuclear weapons and huge natural resources, which it uses to supply the European Union. It is also a very corrupt country.

**Q: Why do you believe Russia is so corrupt?**

A: This is a consequence of one of the mistakes of the transition from a centralized economy to a market-oriented one. Generally, people did not understand what was happening in the early 1990s. But those with insider knowledge, access to government officials and influence did. Through these corrupt connections, wealth was concentrated in the hands of a relatively few oligarchs and state officials. It is not easy to separate them from each other. They are members of a new Russian business elite. Now, you have corruption

everywhere, including members of parliament, the police, business people and local officials. All of them are taking bribes.

**Q: Is there any way to fight the problem?**

A: Every system of government can be reformed. But how do you fix corruption that has spread all over the country like a cancer? You can address it when it is not too late. I hope that is true in the case of Russia. You have to take drastic measures, from the top to the bottom.

**Q: Does Russia have the proper leadership to take on that challenge?**

A: We have not yet identified the right leader. Both of the most recent Russian presidents have at least been trying to do something constructive. In general, they have made the country better than it was during the time of former President Boris Yeltsin. There is more freedom. You can go abroad. You can start your own business. But along with the positive aspects, there are many problems, and these are not limited to corruption. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin came from a KGB background. Although he has been trying to demonstrate that he is no longer linked to the intelligence community, he brought many people who have such connections into leading positions. Most of them are Stalinists, and that is very dangerous.

**Q: Given such circumstances, where do Russia's once-anticipated democratic possibilities now stand?**

A: Russia is not a democracy. It is in the process of transition toward democracy. It made substantial leaps toward democracy during the period of former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. But then everything stopped. Indeed, after the Yeltsin coup in October 1993, the country went the other way. This has happened many times in Russian history. You should know that with so many Stalinists exerting influence, it is even possible for the system to move back

to a brutal dictatorship like the one that existed under former Soviet leader Joseph Stalin.

**Q: Your father, Nikita Khrushchev, presided over a reformist moment in Russian history. What might have happened if his proposed reforms had been allowed to develop?**

A: I talk about that in my new book “Reformer,” which recently came out in Russian and is being translated into Chinese. The English version should be published sometime next year. My father followed in the footsteps of other Russian reformers, including former Czar Alexander II. Under Khrushchev, there was the beginning of a transition to a more democratic state. There was also a great improvement in the economy. During the last part of his time in power, Khrushchev was ready to move from a centralized to a decentralized system, very similar to what happened in China twenty years later. Also, he had plans for greater democratization.

**Q: But it didn’t happen.**

A: Unfortunately, that was the case. Former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, who succeeded my father, said nyet to reform, arguing that stability was more important – not for the country, but for the Soviet nomenklatura (elites). What we had as a result was zactoi (stagnation). If Khrushchev had stayed in power longer, or his successors had moved in the same direction, it is entirely possible that the Soviet Union would have become the first communist country to develop a market-oriented economy, long before China. Some estimates suggest that it could eventually have turned into a bigger power than even the United States. In a sense, the United States was lucky that Brezhnev took power and stopped reforms in the Soviet Union. I am quite certain that America prefers an authoritarian, weak Russia to a democratic, strong and competitive Soviet Union.

**Q: Summarize some of the other changes that Khrushchev proposed.**

A: He had prepared a draft of a new constitution, and was talking about full control by the parliament, term limits for high officials and elections with more than one candidate or party. These would have been important steps in the right direction. As you know, the road to democracy is not taken in a single leap. It is impossible to transform the mentality of a people overnight. It requires patience; the fruit of democracy needs time for ripening. This is true not only for Russia. As an example, consider how establishing democracy has proven difficult in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is because they both come from authoritarian roots and still have that mentality. As another example, France's revolution happened in 1789, but it was not until former President Charles De Gaulle in the 20th century that you finally had a stable democracy.

**Q: You have mentioned China several times. Russian-Chinese relations have had their ups and downs, including their historically famous split from 1959-1989. How is the relationship today?**

A: It is stable, and they are friendly. Russia buys Chinese goods like any other country in the world. But some changes are coming. For the last twenty years, China was dependent on Russian technology. Now they adopted everything that was developed in the Soviet era and, unfortunately, Russia did not produce anything significant in the area of new technologies. So, China is moving ahead on its own. Are there possibilities for tensions? Not in a military sense. I do not believe in conflicts between nuclear powers. The Cold War is over. The most important challenge in the world is the economy and the need for its success. China is the growing superpower. Russia, a country that has the resources to supply developed economies, is in a very good, but not leading, position.

*Sergei N. Khrushchev, son of former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, has been a senior fellow at the Watson Institute since 1996, and was a senior visiting scholar there from 1991-1996. He previously was a fellow at the Institute of Politics at Harvard University's John*

*F. Kennedy School of Government. From 1968-1991, Khrushchev served at the Control Computer Institute in Moscow, rising from section head to first deputy director in charge of research. From 1958-1968, he was an engineer, then deputy section head in charge of guidance systems for missile and space design, including work on cruise missiles for submarines, military and research spacecraft, moon vehicles, and the "Proton," the world's largest space booster. He earned his Soviet doctoral degree from the Ukrainian Academy of Science, a Ph.D. from the Moscow Technical University, and an MA with distinction from the Moscow Electric Power Institute. In addition to teaching courses at Brown University, he lectures at the Naval War College in Newport, R.I., on topics such as Russian economic and political reforms; U.S.-Soviet relations from 1950-1964; the history of the Soviet space program; and Nikita Khrushchev's economic, political, and security reforms. He is a regular commentator for the U.S. news media, and has authored more than 350 books and articles on engineering, computer science, history and the economy. His books include Khrushchev on Khrushchev (1990), Nikita Khrushchev: Crisis and Missiles (1994), The Political Economy of Russian Fragmentation (1993), Three Circles of Russian Market Reforms (1995), and Nikita Khrushchev and the Creation of a Super Power (2000). His books have been published worldwide in 12 languages. In 1967, he began to help his father work on his memoirs. The full text of the memoirs, The Time, the People, the Power, was published as four volumes in Russian in 1999 by Moscow News. He has also edited the memoirs in English to produce the three-volume Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev as a joint project of the Watson Institute and Pennsylvania State University. His newest book, Trilogy about Father: Reformer, The Birth of a Superpower, Pensioner Souznogo Znacheniya, was published in Russia in 2010. The forthcoming English-language first volume in this trilogy will appear under the title of Khrushchev in Power: Unfinished Business, 1961-1964. This interview was conducted by Worldviews Editor John C. Bersia on January 31, 2011.*