

The Dictator and the Scoundrel

by Alan J. Levine

The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963
by Michael R. Beschloss
New York: HarperCollins;
816 pp., \$29.95

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To anyone old enough to recall the early 1960's, the names Kennedy and Khrushchev will provoke a wealth of emotional associations far stronger than those evoked by the names of most later Presidents, or of the colorless characters who followed Khrushchev as rulers of the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, both men have been much misunderstood during the subsequent three decades. Michael Beschloss has not cleared up all misunderstandings, especially those concerning Nikita Khrushchev and his policies, but about John F. Kennedy, we now know too much—too much, at least, for his fantastically glamorized image to survive intact. *The Crisis Years*, which discloses a fair amount of new information, is a well-written book of exceptional interest, despite some severe flaws.

Beschloss' treatment of the 1961 Berlin crisis displays his virtues and faults as a historian: the revelation of new details in a skillful narrative married to an unconvincing interpretation of history. Kennedy, he argues, was successively both provocative and weak, while managing affairs of state in a shoddy and careless fashion. He recklessly bypassed the normal channels to deal with the Soviets through his brother and an obscure Soviet agent. Overreacting to Khrushchev's speech of January 6, 1961, in favor of "wars of national liberation," he then embarrassed the Soviet leader by bluntly exposing the "missile gap" as a myth—something Eisenhower had allegedly carefully avoided. Finally, he demonstrated what Khrushchev took to be weakness at the Bay of Pigs and the Vienna summit.

Even Kennedy's court historians never made his performance at Vienna look good, and Beschloss makes clear that it was a disaster. It may well be the case, as

Beschloss (and before him Robert Slusser) has suggested, that the Berlin crisis was far more dangerous than has been generally realized. For Soviet sources have indicated that Khrushchev and the other Soviet leaders did not believe that Kennedy would fight over Berlin. Beschloss argues that, in his efforts to defuse the crisis, Kennedy, through the secret channel mentioned above, actually encouraged Khrushchev to seal off East Berlin with the wall (a violation of the Potsdam Agreement) to stop the flow of refugees and relieve what was allegedly the Soviets' main motive for pressure on West Berlin. His evidence for this point, however, while suggestive, is not conclusive, although the rest of this book makes it clear that Kennedy was morally capable of such an action. Since the diagnosis of Soviet motives was wrong, the crisis did not end, but rather climaxed in the famous face-off of Soviet and U.S. tanks at Checkpoint Charlie (an incident concluded by the exchange of messages through the same secret channel).

Beschloss argues, on several occasions, that Khrushchev aimed at creating only the illusion of Soviet might, and that Kennedy's exposing of that illusion, which Eisenhower allegedly refrained from doing, forced Khrushchev to become more aggressive in compensation, thus ultimately provoking an escalation of the arms race as the Soviets built to match their earlier billing. Beschloss' argument here becomes unreal. Throughout the period from 1957-1960, Eisenhower repeatedly, even angrily, insisted that the United States was *currently* superior militarily. His assertion was widely doubted in Western Europe, but not in the United States; what Americans worried about was what the situation would be in a few years. The notion of a "missile gap" that caused a furor in 1959-60 was based upon the administration's own estimate that between 1960-1964 the Soviets would lead the United States in the number of missiles in its arsenal. In 1960, after intelligence had been unable to verify the existence of the expected Soviet missiles, the administration cut back its own estimates, and openly doubted the reality of a "gap" at all. Wise or not, Kennedy's policy of disclosure did not differ from

what Eisenhower had tried to do. The notion that any administration could have connived at Khrushchev's pretense of superiority, a pretense he was trying to use for blackmail, is self-evidently absurd.

Despite new information uncovered by Beschloss, the other great confrontation of the era still eludes satisfactory explanation. Beschloss argues that Khrushchev genuinely feared an American invasion of Cuba and believed that basing Soviet missiles there would deter it. Contrary to what has been widely supposed, he probably did not plan to "trade" the missiles for something else; these were to be permanent installations. Again Kennedy, according to Beschloss, helped to produce the crisis: first, by hounding the Cuban regime with covert actions and inspiring fear of an invasion; and second, by never *specifically* warning Khrushchev against placing offensive missiles in Cuba. That, and the fact that he remained unimpressed by Kennedy, led Khrushchev to believe that the President would accept the missile bases or at least try to conceal their existence, attempting to negotiate once again through a secret channel. Khrushchev never expected the explosive reaction he got.

The problem with this explanation is that everyone else did. Soviet sources (which are oral recollections, not contemporary documents) indicate that Gromyko and Mikoyan, and the Cubans themselves, warned that the Americans would react violently. The general American stance over many years made it clear that, specific warning or no, Washington would never accept an offensive Soviet base in Cuba. And there is, of course, an unresolved contradiction between Khrushchev's assumption—or supposed assumption—that Kennedy was bothered enough by Cuba to invade it, and the idea that JFK could accept Soviet missiles there.

Despite *glasnost* and the thick smoke screen generated by the Kennedys and their admirers, we still know more about the American side of the story than about the Soviet one. And while Beschloss' excessive focus on personalities can be tiresome (it is hard to get worked up about Frol Kozlov's bad table manners or LBJ's aesthetic deficiencies),

he does tell us a lot about John F. Kennedy, and none of it very flattering. For there is precious little evidence of Kennedy's competence, much less excellence; it is hard to find any indication of principles, much less idealism, in the Kennedy administration. Not to mince words, John F. Kennedy comes off in Beschloss' account as a nincompoop with the morals of a gangster. The excessive attention paid to the President's womanizing—by far his most amiable fault—has distracted people from far more serious vices. Beschloss details an almost endless record of dishonesty and folly: Kennedy was a vengeful man of consuming vanity, obsessed with publicity and the manipulation of his own image, better at avoiding responsibilities than executing them, incapable even of ordinary consistency. And all of these delightful characteristics were coated with a thick layer of hypocrisy.

It is characteristic of his grotesque egomania that, on learning of the missiles in Cuba, he moaned that Khrushchev "can't do this to me." Kennedy has often been credited with "grace under pressure"; in fact, his usual reaction under pressure seems to have been to whine that it was unfair and somebody else's fault. He accepted the Pulitzer Prize for a book he did not write, hid his poor health (which was so bad that it alone should have disqualified him from the presidency), and wiretapped his own wife. If only through his father, he had maintained a long-standing relationship with organized crime, long before his incredible sharing of a Mafia don's mistress. He recklessly let a quack feed him drugs, including amphetamines.

Unable to stand up consistently to the Soviets, he maintained a personal resentment against Castro, who was important only as Khrushchev's cat's-paw. While publicly accepting responsibility for the failure at the Bay of Pigs, he sedulously leaked false accounts to blame everyone else for the disaster. After the Cuban missile crisis, he arranged to blame Adlai Stevenson for suggesting the very concession on Turkey that he himself had made; Stevenson had proposed this concession only as part of an arrangement for a complete demilitarization of Cuba, which Kennedy failed to achieve. Tactically, it was a clever effort to hide what really happened, while exploiting Stevenson's reputation (on the whole justified) for being "soft" on

the Soviets. Yet it was also part of a crazy vendetta against Stevenson—one much against Kennedy's own interests, since Stevenson still wielded considerable influence and could have greatly embarrassed Kennedy by resigning his post within the administration.

Did Kennedy suffer from amphetamine-induced paranoia? Or did he simply hate Stevenson because he knew his old rival was a better man? One way or the other, that great liberal leader, Adlai Stevenson, could not conceal his glee when he learned of the assassination. And had the American public known what he did—known what kind of man their President really was—one suspects that his feelings might have been widely shared.

Alan J. Levine is a historian living in New York City.

Freaks for Our Time

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

The Animal Rights Crusade: The Growth of a Moral Protest
by James M. Jasper and Dorothy Nelkin
New York: The Free Press; 280 pp., \$22.95

The typical animal rights activist is a female agnostic or atheist, unmarried with no children and six "companion animals," "educated," and living a resolutely urban life in the company of other activists on behalf of all sorts of causes, most of them left-wing. This bizarre specimen of contemporary humanity aspires to echo one day over the carcass of a carnivorous, speciesist culture the words that Tosca pronounced above the prostrate body of Scarpia: "*E avanti a lui, tremava tutta Roma.*"

Although the animal rights movement as a whole cannot, after a decade of strident militancy, claim great accomplishments beyond the curtailment of the use of animals in industrial testing, and while its ultimate goal of forcing the majoritarian culture to accept animal life as inherently equal with human life is unlikely to be achieved, its emergence as a focus of international attention is a phenomenon that ought not to be taken lightly. Animal rights, like feminism and popular environmen-

talism, represents the triumph of emotionalism over wisdom, of sentimentalism over reason, of fantasy over common sense. It is an attempt to reinvent the wheel by people who have failed to grasp the idea of circumference. It is a chaos of perversity, short-circuited thought, and unexamined assumptions, many of which produce hilarious examples of unsuspected homocentrism. ("You're not even human," one outraged animal rightist wrote to the president of a company charged with cruelty to research animals.) It is also a not untypical constituent of that rainbow coalition of weird single-interest groups that have managed so often and in so many instances to co-opt the attentions of the so-called mainstream political parties, the result being that politicians and commentators today spend their time debating crackpot "philosophy" instead of those grave matters of state that in better times were the staple of political discourse: gunboats, diplomacy, and trade.

The animal rights movement, like so many other movements that afflict contemporary society, is a Frankenstein monster created by people who are themselves half Frankensteins. Professors Jasper and Nelkin discern its origins in the first animal protection bill introduced in the British Parliament in 1800, and in the subsequent founding of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1824. Before the century's end, the SPCA had its counterparts in the United States where, as in Great Britain, the immediate cause of reformist sentiment was the observable maltreatment of carriage animals. The replacement of the horse by the automobile in the early years of the 20th century caused concern for the welfare of animals to subside in America until the 1950's, when a number of new associations, among them the Humane Society of the United States, were formed to protest cruelty to animals used in medical research, as well as inhumane methods applied to the wholesale butchering of slaughterhouse animals. In the 1960's, the radicalization of a significant minority of the animal protectionist movement produced the Fund for Animals, founded by Cleveland Amory in 1967. Even the FFA, however, is essentially a preservationist organization, concerned for the protection of endangered species such as the Gray Timberwolf. With the emergence of the