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Discussion of The Lost Khrushchev with Author Nina Khrushcheva and Professor Jeffrey Sachs

On Monday, October 13, the Harriman Institute hosted Nina Khrushcheva, author of *The Lost Khrushchev: A Journey into the Gulag of the Russian Mind* (Tate Publishing, 2013), professor of political science at The New School and great-granddaughter of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, to discuss her book with Jeffrey Sachs, Quetelet Professor of Sustainable Development at Columbia, and author of *To Move the World: JFK's Quest for Peace* (Random House, 2013). Both speakers addressed the legacy of Nikita Khrushchev on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of his 1964 ouster. Khrushchev, they contended, provided a period of relative openness and understanding, not only between the United States and the Soviet Union, but also between the Soviet people and their government. The Khrushchev era, they said, represents a threat to the current Russian regime, which has chosen to scapegoat Khrushchev and his family for political gain.

Leonid, the "lost Khrushchev" and Nina's grandfather, was a pilot during the Second World War, but he did not survive. After Khrushchev was removed from power, the Soviet press ran stories characterizing Leonid as a traitor. The story went that he had defected to the Nazis after crash-landing behind enemy lines. Khrushcheva contends that her research found no support for this accusation. Khrushcheva described Leonid as "a kind of Russian James Dean," distant from his father and, until he was wounded and decorated in World War II, known mostly for his womanizing. Because the exact circumstances of his death are unknown, and because World War II is so central to Russian identity, Leonid's story presented the Kremlin with an opportunity to undermine in the eyes of the public Khrushchev's accomplishments. Indeed, the Russian media has revived the story of Leonid's desertion and treason as an indirect way of valorizing Stalin. Supporting both Khrushchev and Stalin, says Khrushcheva, is impossible in Russia today, and the contemporary Russian regime—she did not mention President Putin by name—has chosen to identify itself with Stalin's legacy, encouraging, if not orchestrating, the smear campaign against her grandfather.

Professor Sachs discussed Khrushchev's significance from an American point of view. Focusing on the openness of communication between President John F. Kennedy and the Soviet premier, Sachs contended that Khrushchev was just as influential as Kennedy in keeping the world from descending into nuclear war. The loss of both leaders—Kennedy in 1963 to an assassin's bullet, Khrushchev to political maneuvering that put him out to pasture—deepened Cold War tensions and emboldened hard-liners in both countries. "The humanity of the communications between Kennedy and Khrushchev," Sachs said, may have saved the world.

During the question and answer session, both speakers deplored the actions of the Putin regime, particularly the events in Ukraine. However, Sachs argued, Russia's actions cannot be understood without accepting that the United States bears part of the blame. The U.S. has wielded NATO as a weapon, driving deeper into Eastern Europe without regard for the political consequences of these actions, and practically daring Russia to retaliate. Sachs proposed an alternative reality, where "our leaders communicate like Kennedy and Khrushchev: frankly and with respect." Our world, Sachs concluded, could deal with a little more candor between leaders, even if it has to take place behind closed doors.

Reported by Matthew Van Meter
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