

2018

## Interview with Dr. Sergei Khrushchev, February 20, 2009

Kyle Kordon  
*Chapman University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/vocesnovae>

---

### Recommended Citation

Kordon, Kyle (2018) "Interview with Dr. Sergei Khrushchev, February 20, 2009," *Voces Novae*: Vol. 1 , Article 12.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/vocesnovae/vol1/iss1/12>

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Voces Novae by an authorized editor of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [laughtin@chapman.edu](mailto:laughtin@chapman.edu).

## Voces Novae: Chapman University Historical Review, Vol 1, No 1 (2009)

[HOME](#) [ABOUT](#) [LOGIN](#) [REGISTER](#) [SEARCH](#) [CURRENT](#) [ARCHIVES](#) [PHI ALPHA THETA](#)

---

[Home](#) > [Vol 1, No 1 \(2009\)](#) > [Kordon](#)

---

## Interview with Dr. Sergei Khrushchev, February 20, 2009

Kyle Kordon

On February 20, 2009 I interviewed Dr. Sergei Khrushchev, the son of the late Soviet Premier, Nikita S. Khrushchev. The following is the transcript of that interview. This is the second of two interviews that I conducted with the younger Khrushchev. This interview was conducted after the beginning of the spring semester in 2009 of my senior year. The purpose of this interview was more focused than the first as I had done extensive research on my undergraduate thesis topic. We discussed a number of events that pertained directly to Nikita Khrushchev's 1959 visit to the United States. We talked about the 1958 Berlin Crisis, East German recognition, receipt of the invitation for the American visit, goals for the trip, the beginning of the idea of peaceful coexistence, how Khrushchev felt the trip went, the effects of the visit on Soviet-American relations during this period.

Kyle Kordon: First of all, thank you for allowing me to interview you again. I have a number of questions for you, so I guess we can get started.

Kordon: It was believed by some that your Father's "deadline ultimatum" on November 27, 1958 was little more than a bluff, and William Taubman seems to agree that its purpose was to get President Eisenhower to the negotiating table on the abnormal situation that was present in Berlin. Can you give some insight into what you believe your Father's purpose of the 6-month deadline was?

Sergei Khrushchev: I think it was not a bluff because it was an abnormal situation because it was two powers, or super powers, the United States and the Soviet Union. And they met, or maybe they confronted on the problem: recognition of East Berlin, or rather East Germany. For the Soviet Union, East Germany was part of the Soviet Bloc, and it was an independent country. For the United States, and the Western part of the world it was the zone of the Soviet Occupation, and it was only one Germany: West Germany. My Father tried to do everything to push Western countries for the recognition of East Germany, and he did everything. Because it was endless negotiations before that, he imposed this ultimatum that maybe he thought he would be able to declare that in the beginning he thought that now if we recognize East Germany, then the West will recognize it, or some similar rationale. But facing the strong opposition of the West, he changed his mind, and decided that it would be too high a price to bring the confrontation to such a level, and so it was better to try to bring Americans - because it was mostly an American position, the Europeans were ready to recognize East Germany de facto - to bring them to negotiations so I would not say that it is right to call it a bluff, but Bill Taubman is closer to the realities.

Kordon: Just for the record, your father's goal was to get East German recognition?

Kyle Kordon

.....  
S. Khrushchev: Of course if you are a superpower, you have to be recognized as equal, and your allies have to be recognized. So if I may make a comparison with Kosovo, the Western countries, the European Union, and the United States insisted that the rest of the world recognize Kosovo, because at the same time it is a recognition of your legitimacy to do what you think.

Kordon: It seems that your Father wanted to speak with Eisenhower and have a formal summit for quite some time before the Berlin Crisis. From the Soviet end, what do you was the perceived reason that Eisenhower and the United States refused to treat over the situation?

S. Khrushchev: Of course my father wanted to negotiate the East Germany case and the Berlin case, and he wanted to have the meeting with Eisenhower, and the meeting with the summit. It is the difference of understanding what is meaning of negotiations and different positions. My Father's position was if you negotiating, and you really believe that your position is right, you can influence your opponent. With the American position at the same time, it was similar to the position of President Bush when he said, "I will not negotiate with anyone who disagrees with me." It shows the weakness of the position, and it was the weakness of Eisenhower and the American position, "we don't want to recognize East Germany." And who knows, maybe they wanted to occupy East Germany at some point. Because you have these two states, but we know that in the 70s the United States recognized Germany as a state. So at that point my Father wanted to negotiate, because he wanted to find some solution that will be acceptable to both sides. For him, negotiation was like bargaining, "at last you will find something." And for the Eisenhower administration it was not bargaining, it was just a stubborn position, "you will accept what we said, or we need nothing." Maybe they were right because their position was stronger, but who knows.

Kordon: What do you think the overall effect of the situation of East and West Germany, and the Berlin Crisis had on Soviet-American relations at the time?

S. Khrushchev: I don't think that it really influenced the relations too much, because it was the beginning of the understanding of the position of each side. I think that the position became more transparent, more clear, and maybe had more of a positive impact than a negative one. Because the West understood that the Soviet position, the Khrushchev position was strong, and that they showed their strengths too.

Kordon: Is there a single event that you could point to that signifies the beginning of the first steps of the mutual understanding between the two nations?

S. Khrushchev: I will say that it was the Geneva Summit of 1955.

Kordon: Your Father seemed to be very surprised when he received the invitation in July 1959 to visit the United States that September. What was his reaction to the invitation? Did he talk about it with you?

S. Khrushchev: He did not talk about it at the time with me, but he was satisfied because for him it was the de facto recognition from the United States of his position, and the positive response that they were ready to deal with the Soviet Union as equals. All of these relations as I have talked with you before, that the Soviet Union wanted to be recognized as equal, and the United States as you know, doesn't like to recognize anybody as equal. So, and of course it was also important because it was the first visit of a Russian or

Soviet leader to the American soil. Some of them did not have invitations, Stalin rejected his invitation because he was very scared. So he looked for this as the victory of his policy.

Kordon: There has been some speculation that this invitation signaled a change in American policy toward the Soviet Union. Do you think that your Father perceived such a change?

S. Khrushchev: I don't think that he thought that it was a dramatic change. He did not believe in changes like, "today we use this policy, tomorrow it will turn 180 degrees," but of course it was a change of the policy, it was some step toward negotiation, and it was one more step on the very long road toward mutual understanding. You show respect and have negotiations on an equal basis. So he didn't look at this as some big victory, but it was a good signal. In each of these events you have the hope, you have the doves, and you have the look of more reasonable people now, who are making steps forward.

Kordon: Was there anything in particular that your father wished to accomplish on his visit that September?

S. Khrushchev: I don't think that he thought that he could reach some agreement from A-Z, but he wanted to present his position one more time to the American President on the obvious issues about Berlin, and about Disarmament. Because one of these problems in most countries was military spending and the threat of the possibility of Nuclear war. So I don't think that it was some special thing. His idea was that business would be as usual, but that it will be very positive, and he will be able to speak with the President personally, and I think it was very productive.

Kordon: Can you describe his preparations for the visit? What was he most concerned with prior to the trip?

S. Khrushchev: I cannot say that this preparation was different than preparation for any visit for any head of state. You are meeting with your experts, and reading all their memos about the personalities, I would not say about the position, because the position was well known to my Father, so he didn't want to refresh what he already knew. What was the people there, what were their relations like, what were their tastes? They met in the Kremlin, but my father preferred to make his preparation somewhere outside his office because there were too many other events that put pressure on him near his office. So he went to the Crimea resort, with the foreign minister, and other officials to discuss things like protocol. Because it was important to go over such details. In many cases it was a possibility that the other side would not give you all the respect that you deserved. So he insisted that he was received as head of state, not a prime minister. He received what he wanted. It was a day by day meeting with different people, and like any leader he had to go over details sometimes more than 12 hours a day.

Kordon: The idea of peaceful coexistence comes up a lot in my research of this time period. Theoretically the idea of peaceful coexistence does not seem to be possible between capitalist and communist nations, or perhaps it is exceedingly difficult to obtain. This especially seems so due to the desired world revolution in communist literature that ends with the downfall of capitalism, and the creation of a world communist society. Did the desire for peaceful coexistence, that your Father spoke so passionately about, signal a policy or ideological change on the Communist side?

S. Khrushchev: The beginning of Peaceful Coexistence began with the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Convention, and the changes and basic ideas of the Soviet dogma. He thought that the idea of the war between Communism and

Kyle Kordon

Capitalism is not inevitable, and that the victory of the Communist can be achieved in the peaceful way. He said that if we live better, and Americans will understand this - they might elect a Communist as a President, we must fight for this. It was just the foundation of the idea of a Peaceful Coexistence, it was not what was before 1956, and it was one of my Father's arguments, he told them, "the opposite side will not trust you from one side, you are talking about Peaceful Coexistence, from the other side, we have this communist idea of a world revolution." So after 1956 it was no contradiction. The official Communist ideology after that was Peaceful Coexistence.

Kordon: Last April when I last interviewed you, we only briefly discussed your Father's state visit. There are a few minor details that I'd like to cover. There were a number of times where your father got visibly upset over questions that were asked of him at various dinners in speeches by regional statesmen and elected officials. After the trip how did he feel that he was treated while he was in the United States? Did he feel that he was treated rudely, fair, or a little bit of both?

S. Khrushchey: I don't think that he felt that he was treated exceptionally rude. I would say not at all, but at the reception in Los Angeles he responded in an equal way. It was not easy to treat him in the rude way because he was a person who would not tolerate that. After that reception, President Eisenhower called the mayor of San Francisco and told him, "That son of a bitch Poulson wants to spoil my foreign policy. You have to improve this, and have to rescue it." So it was an opposite reaction in San Francisco. And of course Khrushchey interpreted it in the proper way, which was the reaction of what the mayor of Los Angeles did. So he thought that he was treated in a fair way. For him the important part was the talks with the President himself not all these people on the local level, and I don't think that there was any other case except in Los Angeles where there was any other case where anything happened that was not appropriate. Of course there were some discussions with the trade union leaders in San Francisco. There was some specific questions posed by a journalist, but he responded in the same way. He taught me when someone asks me if I am uncomfortable answering a question, I say no, not at all, but if someone asks me a bad question, I will give a bad answer; my Father was the same way.

Kordon: Before your Father's visit, officials were worried that your Father was coming to the United States solely to discuss policy. It seemed that part of the visit - notably the speech that your father gave at the United Nations, and the talks at Camp David - were for that, but for the most part it seemed that your Father was eager to meet the American people and to experience America at the ground level. Can you comment on this?

S. Khrushchey: I think that each visit of politicians to other countries were not different whatsoever. They have a political purpose because that is part of your job. From the other side you must understand that after the isolationism of Stalin, they wanted to discover what the opposite side looked like. For me personally, it was like the original discovery of America. For my father it was important to see how the United States works, how it looks, how it feels, and how its people live. The protocol of visits at that time, it was usually 2-3 days negotiations, but 1-2 weeks touring the country. It was the same for my father when he visited the United States, Indonesia, France, Britain, and it was the same for foreign leaders.

Kordon: Your father spent about two weeks in the United States, saw some of its major cities, met some of its rank-and-file workers of the country, and had a seemingly meaningful conversation with Eisenhower at

Camp David. When he returned to the Soviet Union he was greeted as a victor, and the Soviet Press confirms that. What do you think that his visit achieved?

S. Khrushchev: First of all the Soviet Press was a state press, so they wrote what they had to write. I thought that the achievement was a serious breakthrough. Because afterward they talked about the "spirit of Camp David", and more or less mutual understanding of both countries, so it was some feeling that we can find mutual understanding and maybe go forward in different aspects, especially over Europe and Germany, even with the resistance of the German Chancellor, and also in the nuclear test ban treaties, and some other aspects. But it set the stage for long term negotiations because at that time both sides were not ready to make some specific decisions. I will say that one thing that was important that Soviet Union started to feel itself safer, that an American attack is not imminent, and we can negotiate with the opposite side because there had been a fear of a possible attack on both sides, and the feeling I think was the same on the American side.

Kordon: With that in mind, can you comment on its affect on Soviet-American relations at the time?

S. Khrushchev: I will say that these relations were very unstable. They went up and down, and at that time it was on a rise. To many the hopes of both sides were high.

Kordon: Well that answers most of the questions I had for you, once again thank you for your time.

S. Khrushchev: You're welcome Kyle, if you need anything else feel free to call me, or visit me again. Good luck with your project.

END OF INTERVIEW

