

STATE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF IOWA

IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 79 | Number 1 (Winter 2020)

pps. 109-111

Nikita Khrushchev's Journey into America

Stephen J. Frese

Marshalltown High School, Marshalltown, Iowa

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2020 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Frese, Stephen J.. "Nikita Khrushchev's Journey into America." *The Annals of Iowa* 79 (2020), 109-111.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12655>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](https://iowaresearchonline.org/)

years before *Silent Spring* appeared. Great Plains agriculturalists made a serious study of the technology and skills needed to practice pest and weed control via airplane without allowing undesirable effects like “drift” to poison neighboring fields or populations, and they did it *before* the start of the environmental movement.

Vail’s nuanced description of the regional culture that surrounded aerial spraying is his most significant contribution. As he claims in his introduction, *Chemical Lands* adds to the scholarship by “shedding light on the Great Plains story” (5). Where Vail is less convincing is in his claims of Great Plains regional distinctiveness. Throughout the book he argues that agriculturalists of the plains reacted differently to aerial spraying technology than those in other regions of the country. The marketing strategies adopted by chemical companies like Dow and DuPont did not work as well on the plains as they did elsewhere, for example, because the companies did not appreciate the plains farmers’ dedication to safety (63–64). Okay. But *why*? While Vail admirably contributes to the Great Plains agricultural story, he does not adequately explain *why* that story is distinctive from other regions. He does cite Great Plains environmental, climate, and agricultural variability as a potential answer to the “why question” (66) but does not go far enough with his explanation and its connection to aerial chemical spraying.

The difficulty of proving distinctiveness does not, however, detract from the importance of *Chemical Lands*. Vail’s work is a significant contribution to scholarship on the Great Plains and the American West and to environmental and agricultural history. It highlights local experiences and local thinking regarding a critical shift in agricultural technology and practice—a shift that had profound environmental implications. Vail demonstrates that many Great Plains farmers and aerialists were thinking about the long-term consequences of pesticide use even as the technology was still developing. That is not the impression readers received from *Silent Spring* but is revealed by Vail’s research. As the twentieth century continued, the “pioneering efforts” of Great Plains agriculturalists to “manage the benefits and measure the risks” of aerial chemical spraying influenced areas beyond the region itself. *Chemical Lands* tells that story, and Great Plains history is now more enlightened as a result.

Nikita Khrushchev’s Journey into America, by Lawrence J. Nelson and Matthew G. Shoenbachler. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas. 2019. x, 283 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliographical essay on primary sources, index. \$34.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Stephen J. Frese is a high school science teacher at Marshalltown High School. Many years ago, his paper, “Comrade Khrushchev and Farmer

Garst: East-West Encounter Fosters Agricultural Exchange," was a National History Day Historical Paper winner.

Arguably one of the most important eras in the shaping of the modern geopolitical landscape is one of the least known about by the people in the United States: the post-Stalin Soviet Union. That era is defined by fears and proxy wars fought by the U.S. public and the iconic fall of the Berlin Wall. Hidden in all of these troubles is the exchange of culture and goodwill brought about by the visit of Nikita Khrushchev.

In *Nikita Khrushchev's Journey into America*, Lawrence Nelson and Matthew Schoenbachler tackle the task of introducing readers to this historic visit via a focus on the Soviet leader's viewpoint and the factors influencing him. "No matter how callously Nikita Khrushchev pursued his ambitions," they write, "he genuinely wanted to improve the lives of the Soviet people. . . . He freed millions from the gulags, eased censorship, lifted economic restrictions, and help create cultural contacts with the West" (16). This exploration of a largely unknown, or even caricatured, Soviet premier gives readers a glimpse into what drove the "dark horse" of Stalin's inner circle to become the first Russian leader — tsarist or soviet — to step out from behind the Iron Curtain and visit the United States. At times, however, it seems as if the authors portray the Soviet leader and his actions through rosy-colored lenses, painting him as jovial and good natured with a few ill-tempered flare-ups. Juxtaposed with this is the effective portrayal of the consternation the U.S. leadership felt when dealing with the tumultuous Soviet, as evidenced by the way guests of Averell Harriman's described their interactions with Khrushchev: "If Khrushchev was blunt and provocative, the Americans verged on the didactic and condescending. . . . The industrialists' reaction was summed up by . . . 'There's no "give" to this man. He's trying to get us to accept *his* position. . . .' It apparently did not occur to the tycoons that they were insisting that Khrushchev accept *their* opinion" (73–74).

It may be surprising that a Soviet leader would demand to make a stop in the small town of Coon Rapids, Iowa, to speak with Roswell Garst—a friend and pioneer in the hybrid seed market. As the authors note, "The unlikely meeting between an Iowa farmer and the boss of the communist world once again put a human face on international politics, oddly softening the razor sharp edges of the Cold War" (159). The authors spend substantial time in the book helping readers get to know who Khrushchev was and what his motivations were. I wish they had invested more pages and content exploring the details and significance of the visit. Substantively, Khrushchev's visit to the cornfields of Iowa carried implications that could forever have changed the agricultural landscape of the Soviet Union. Khrushchev thought that by buying into

hybridized corn, Soviet collective farms could produce enough food for their people (something that had virtually never been accomplished throughout the history of Soviet Russia), and begin to challenge the agricultural superiority the United States has enjoyed since the end of World War II. The unlikely diplomacy between the two men who were described as rough around the edges was seemingly easier to accomplish than all of the state dinners, cabinet level meetings, and Washington insider networking events Khrushchev was treated to on his trip. The lack of emphasis on this part of the trip is a little disconcerting, knowing how much it meant to both men.

That said, for a readership that is not well acquainted with this part of the Cold War, Nelson and Schoenbachler have woven together an impressive narrative. They have introduced the people involved with the historic visit, their influences, and their desired outcomes. Readers will experience the clash between a true believer in the superiority of Marxist ideology and the bedrock figures of American capitalism. The authors have done well to shed light on a complex period in history in such a way that anyone could pick up the book, enjoy the story, and learn about a time during the Cold War when warheads were laid down in favor of toasting glasses and ears of corn.

A Delicate Aggression: Savagery and Survival in the Iowa Writers' Workshop, by David O. Dowling. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019. xi, 420 pp. Timeline, illustrations, notes, index. \$35 hardcover.

Reviewer Jeff Charis-Carlson is a freelance writer based in Iowa. He is an adjunct instructor for the University of Iowa School of Journalism and Mass Communication, a former reporter for the *Des Moines Register*, and a former editorial writer for the *Iowa City Press-Citizen*.

"Everywhere I go I'm asked if I think universities stifle writers," Flannery O'Connor said during an interview in 1960. "My opinion is that they don't stifle enough of them." O'Connor offered that quip (which is cast in bronze on Iowa City's Literary Walk) more than a dozen years after she graduated from the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. But the sentiment she expressed also deftly summarizes the Darwinian purpose behind the intensive critique sessions that her mentor, Paul Engle, envisioned for the MFA program he directed from 1941 to 1965.

How different writers react to those stifling Workshop sessions—those "volatile cocktail(s) of ego and competition" (2)—provides the through line for David Dowling's comprehensive history of the program, *A Delicate Aggression: Savagery and Survival in the Iowa Writers' Workshop*. In this 420-page, heavily endnoted book, Dowling traces the