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## ‘Assignment Russia’ Review: Murrow’s Man in Moscow

Khrushchev called the 6-foot-3 Marvin Kalb ‘Peter the Great’—and in Paris shared croissants with the CBS reporter.

By Edward Kosner  
March 18, 2021 7:04 pm ET

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Roger Mudd ascended to Network News Heaven at 93 last week. There he was reunited with Walter Cronkite, John Chancellor, Douglas Edwards, Howard K. Smith, Edward R. Murrow and other luminaries. Still with us are old hands Dan Rather, Diane Sawyer, Bernard Shaw, and the Kalb brothers, Marvin and Bernard—living witnesses to the days when TV news was more serious business and less partisan gasbaggery.

Now Marvin Kalb, himself 90 but acute as ever, has written a memoir of his early career, especially his years as Moscow correspondent for CBS News in the direst period of the Cold War. His earnest and discursive “Assignment Russia” will be a nostalgic treat for older readers. For younger ones it’s a wake-up call about what they’re missing in their daily feeds of cable news, Facebook, Twitter and the clamorous rest.

Tall and angular—Nikita Khrushchev called him “Peter the Great” after Russia’s towering czar—Mr. Kalb had dreamt for years of covering the Soviet Union. He’d grown up in New York of Eastern European parents, gone to City College, then on to Harvard as a nascent Russia scholar. With good Russian, at 27 he spent a year as a translator for the U.S. embassy in Moscow before being the last of Murrow’s recruits for CBS News. After decades at CBS, he went on to “Meet the Press” at NBC, a long run at journalistic and academic think tanks, and more than a dozen books.

Anyone who ever started a journalistic career in a deserted newsroom on the midnight-to-8 a.m. “lobster” shift will be entranced by Mr. Kalb’s account of venturing into CBS News Radio on June 27, 1957. His task was to write the scripts for four five-minute local newscasts beginning at dawn. He’d never done one before, and nobody was there to tell him how. Scouring the papers and wire copy, he decided to lead with a tourist-boat accident on the Ganges River that killed 27. The old-pro editor showed up, praised his maiden effort—and totally rewrote it to lead with a local subway delay. But the kid was a natural. Soon, he was writing commentaries for the big-time evening anchors and he was launched.



Marvin Kalb of CBS in 1962. PHOTO: DUANE HOWELL/THE DENVER POST VIA GETTY IMAGES

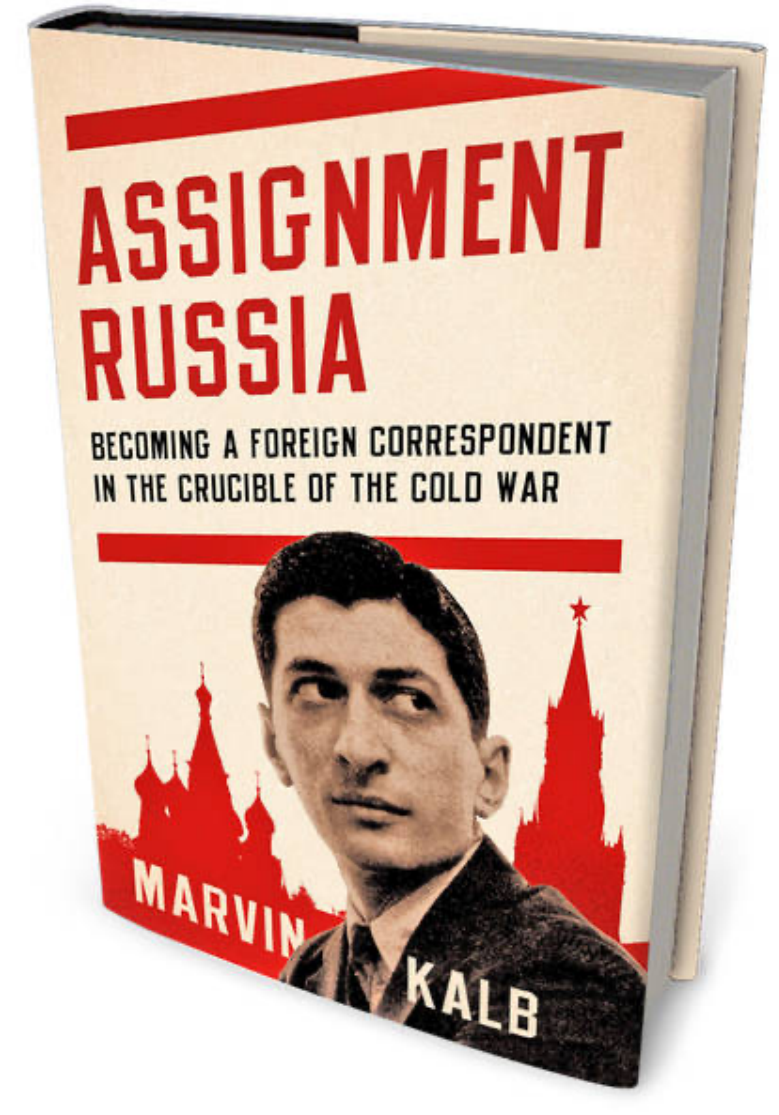


PHOTO: WSJ

### ASSIGNMENT RUSSIA

By Marvin Kalb  
Brookings Institution, 337 pages, \$24.99

Rookie Kalb’s ambition was to be the “Harry Schwartz of CBS News”—to do smart analysis of Russian affairs as the veteran Schwartz did for the New York Times. Led by the charismatic Murrow, CBS News was a powerhouse devoted to in-depth coverage of the Cold War world, with stars like Eric Sevareid, Charles Collingwood and Richard C. Hottel. Besides its many daily television and radio newscasts, on those pre-NFL-football Sunday afternoons CBS TV ran full-hour documentaries on subjects like the human brain, the defense of Western Europe, and Khrushchev’s torment of Boris Pasternak, the author of “Doctor Zhivago,” who was forced to decline the Nobel Prize in Literature. No fewer than six correspondents were sent to cover a 1960 Big Four summit in Paris.

“Assignment Russia” is filled with glimpses of Murrow and admiring sketches of his “boys”—there were no women in the network’s “Murderers’ Row.” In his Savile Row suits, chain-smoking and delivering his scripts in a voice that linguists called “Great American,” Murrow constantly fretted that TV news wasn’t properly informing the American people—and that television itself was, as he said in a famous 1958 speech, “nothing but wires and lights in a box.”

Marvin Kalb plainly admires his younger self. In often tedious detail, he describes working his way up at CBS; the books about Russia he reviewed for serious magazines; publishing his first book, an account of his travels for the embassy as translator; his CBS fellowship in Russian history at Columbia, where his young wife was finishing her Ph.D. in the same subject. He devotes a soporific 59 pages to a 100-day, 13-stop world tour in which he quizzed experts on whether the Sino-Soviet alliance was doomed to collapse. Some said yes, some said no, some said maybe—classic foreign-policy chinwagging.

But he was ready when, in 1959, the Russians allowed CBS to reopen its Moscow bureau. The network brass chose an old pro for the job, but he was inexplicably refused a visa—and Mr.

Kalb’s dream came true.

Khrushchev is the star of many of his Russian tales. Assigned to that 1960 summit—which Khrushchev blew up over the U-2 incident—Mr. Kalb takes a film crew to the Russian embassy at dawn, on the hunch that the Russian leader will go for a stroll as he often did when abroad. Sure enough, Khrushchev appears, greets “Peter the Great,” and agrees to join him for a tasty croissant and a newsy interview in Russian at a neighborhood boulangerie—a Kalb coup. Later, Mr. Kalb invokes his Khrushchev nickname as he wrangles with an Intourist bureaucrat to get a bed big enough for his 6-foot-3 frame in the couple’s tiny hotel bedroom. “Khrushchev rewrote the script for a Soviet leader,” he writes. “He was so unlike Stalin, who was remote, unapproachable . . . Khrushchev enjoyed projecting power, even if much of it was pure propaganda.”

There’s lots more—the invisible Moscow censors, the camaraderie of his competitive fellow correspondents, the thrill of participating in what turned out to be Murrow’s last broadcast, the heartbreak of having an American tourist courier his exclusive, undeveloped film of Pasternak’s funeral past Soviet customs on a flight to the West only to have the woman and the film disappear.

The book ends with Mr. Kalb’s painful rejection of a job offer from his hero Murrow, now the new Kennedy administration’s head of the U.S. Information Agency. He was still living the dream.

Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

Appeared in the March 19, 2021, print edition as ‘Murrow’s Man in Moscow.’

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