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Nikita Khrushchev, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Aftermath

Jason Roeschley

The Cuban missile crisis of October 1962 was one of the most significant events of the twentieth century. Because of the actions of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and U.S. President John F. Kennedy, nuclear devastation of the globe was avoided. This essay seeks to explore Khrushchev's role in the crisis and to discuss its effects, including the further Sino-Soviet split, the downfall of Khrushchev, and Cuban-Soviet relations.

The actual crisis began on October 16 and 17 of 1962, when President Kennedy and members of his administration saw photos taken by American U-2 of missiles on Cuban soil that had nuclear capabilities and a range of over 1,600 kilometers.¹ The origins of the crisis and Khrushchev's involvement, however, occurred three months earlier in July when the Premier met with Fidel Castro's brother Raúl. It was during this week long visit that "the decision was [presumably] taken to send to Cuba medium-range missiles with nuclear warheads."² But blame should not be placed solely on the shoulders of the Premier. Khrushchev would later write in his memoirs that the purpose of the placement of nuclear-capable missiles in Cuba was "to maintain the independence of the Cuban people" after Kennedy had endorsed the U.S. orchestration of an invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in 1961.³ Regardless of which leader bears more responsibility and possible ulterior motives for placing the missiles that were not mentioned by Khrushchev, Soviet missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads and striking the United States were erected in Cuba in the fall of 1962, and the Kennedy administration soon found out. Although the U.S. had no "direct evidence that the Soviet Union had placed nuclear warheads in Cuba," strong, forceful reactions on part of the United States would take Khrushchev by surprise.⁴

Khrushchev had completely miscalculated the American response to Soviet missiles in Cuba, as British diplomat to the Soviet Union, Sir Frank K. Roberts affirmed: "Khrushchev had never intended that his Cuban adventure [would] involve any risk of war."⁵ Khrushchev himself was aware of the logistical disadvantage of any Cuban operations, writing: "It would have been preposterous for us to unleash a war against the United States from Cuba. Cuba was 11,000 kilometers from the Soviet Union. Our sea and air communications with Cuba were so precarious that an attack against the US was unthinkable."⁶ In addition, the United States had a significant military advantage over the Soviet Union at the time.⁷ It is not surprising, then, that Khrushchev's actions during the crisis underscored his resolve to avoid a nuclear Third World War with the United States.

When Kennedy announced a blockade of Cuba on Monday, October 22, in order to prevent further Soviet ships from reaching the island, Khrushchev could have plowed ahead and

¹ Roy Medvedev, *Khrushchev*, trans. Brian Pearce (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1983) 187.

² Ibid., 184

³ Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, trans. Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974), 511.

⁴ Robert A. Divine, "The Crisis," in *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, ed. Robert A. Divine (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 28.

⁵ Frank K. Roberts, "Encounters with Khrushchev," in *Khrushchev and Khrushchevism*, ed. Martin McCauley (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 226.

⁶ Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, 511.

⁷ Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 38.

sought confrontation, which would have escalated the crisis even further. Though he initially ordered the ships to continue en route to Cuba while they were still in international waters, the Premier soon decided to order “all Soviet transport ships carrying military cargoes... to halt and turn around,” but not other “freighters and tankers.”⁸ Both Premier Khrushchev and President Kennedy shared the will to avoid full-scale war, which contributed to Kennedy’s decision to allow several ships through the quarantine line. In addition to Khrushchev’s order for ships to “stop at the line of blockade and to await further instructions.”⁹ As Sir Frank Roberts writes, “It was abundantly clear that nuclear war would not erupt by Soviet intention, despite Khrushchev’s entire responsibility for creating the scenario.”¹⁰

Khrushchev’s actions, however, were not completely without fault, for “almost every day Kennedy received a message from Khrushchev [and t]he tone of the first had been threatening.”¹¹ The Premier had employed a vocabulary that included words such as “banditry,” “folly,” and “imperialism.”¹² But soon enough, Khrushchev would become aware of the gravity of the situation and the mood of the Americans, thereby modifying his actions. On Friday, October 26, ten days after the Kennedy administration saw the U-2 photos, the Premier received an intelligence report of plans of a U.S. invasion of Cuba.¹³ Khrushchev was shocked; he knew then that the United States was serious about removing Soviet missiles from its Cuban neighbor. That same day, on October 26, rather than request the removal of certain U.S. missiles in Europe as he had previously planned, Premier Khrushchev decided “not to complicate negotiations” and only requested in his letter a pledge from Kennedy that the United States would not invade Cuba.¹⁴ He called for both nations to “normalize relations,” stating that “if assurance were given by the President... that the USA itself would not participate in an attack on Cuba and would restrain others from actions of this sort, if you [the U.S.] would recall your fleet, this would immediately change everything.”¹⁵ Khrushchev clarified later in that same message that “the question of armaments would disappear, since, if there is no threat [to Cuba from the United States], then armaments are a burden for every people” and “the necessity for the presence of our military specialists in Cuba would disappear.”¹⁶ Obviously, Khrushchev desperately wanted to avoid a conflict between the two nations and was a willing and easy compromiser – there was no other demand in the message, aside from the request for a U.S. pledge to not invade Cuba.

The next day, however, the Premier awoke to news that an invasion would not happen so soon. The information related to the threat of invasion was obtained in two informal meetings between Soviet embassy official Georgi Kornienko and reporter Warren Rogers.¹⁷ Khrushchev felt that he had “given way to nerves” and was convinced that he “had been in too much of a

⁸ Sergei Khrushchev, “How My Father and President Kennedy Saved the World,” *AmericanHeritage.com*, n.d., 26 February 2010, <http://www.americanheritage.com/content/how-my-father-and-president-kennedy-saved-world>.

⁹ Ibid. Medvedev, *Khrushchev*, 189.

¹⁰ Roberts, “Encounters with Khrushchev,” 227.

¹¹ Medvedev, *Khrushchev*, 190.

¹² Quoted in Ibid.

¹³ Sergei Khrushchev, “How My Father,” n.p.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Nikita Khrushchev, “Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev Asks for a U.S. No-Invasion Pledge, October 26, 1962,” in *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations*, vol. 2, 7th ed., eds. Dennis Merrill and Thomas G. Paterson (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2010), 376-377.

¹⁶ Ibid., 377.

¹⁷ Sergei Khrushchev, “How My Father,” n.p.

hurry with his letter to Kennedy.”¹⁸ Khrushchev would draft and send a letter that day, October 27, requesting that the United States “evacuate its analogous weapons from Turkey.”¹⁹ The withdrawal of the Jupiter missiles would remove what Khrushchev called a “‘pistol pointed at the head’ of the Soviet Union.”²⁰ Though Kennedy “ignored the second letter [which included the demand to remove U.S. missiles from Turkey] and replied only to the first,” Kennedy reassured Khrushchev “through other channels... that American missiles in Turkey would be dismantled.”²¹ The crisis was over.

As for the effects of the crisis, there are many. To begin, there were the immediate outcomes of the negotiations during October. It had been determined that the Soviet Union would withdraw its nuclear-capable missiles from Cuba, and in return, the United States would pledge not to invade Cuba and promise to dismantle its Jupiter missiles in Turkey. The latter can be considered rather insignificant, for the United States had already considered dismantling the missiles in Turkey, and it soon replaced them with more effective nuclear rockets that could be launched by submarines.²² The United States’ non-invasion pledge yielded more significant effects. After a failed invasion, assassination plots, and myriads of other schemes to kill or oust Fidel Castro, the USSR succeeded in securing the survival of its fledgling island ally. In addition, relations between the two nations “remained firm,” with Fidel Castro taking a forty-day tour of the Soviet Union only six months after the resolution of the crisis, despite his previous anger over the removal of the missiles.²³

However, there were also negative side effects for the Soviet Union concerning its Cuban relations, namely, the dependency of Cuba on Soviet economic assistance. After the United States eliminated exports of oil and prohibited sugar imports from Cuba, the Soviet Union stepped in and footed the bill in order to keep the Cuban economy from collapsing, buying sugar that it did not need.²⁴ By the early 1980s, Cuba had become a \$4.5 billion liability per year for the Soviet Union.²⁵

Even though Khrushchev achieved one of his objectives by securing the safety of his ally, it was not enough to maintain his reputation. As Jeremi Suri writes, “The withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba loomed much larger than the American noninvasion pledge. Instead of bolstering the international prestige of the Soviet Union, Khrushchev discredited Moscow’s commitment to its allies,” most notably China.²⁶ Although communist China and the Soviet Union had always had a tepid relationship, the situation between the two deteriorated further, with traded criticisms becoming more public and bitter as the “Chinese press began to publish aggressively anti-Soviet articles.”²⁷ Khrushchev attempted to warm Sino-Soviet relations by declaring a summit meeting for July 1963; the talks, however, had not concluded when the Chinese decided to leave the discussions.²⁸ Trade and commerce all but disappeared, and

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Nikita Khrushchev, “Khrushchev Requests U.S. Removal of Jupiter Missiles from Turkey, October 27, 1962,” in *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations*, vol. 2, 7th ed., eds. Dennis Merrill and Thomas G. Paterson (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2010), 377-378.

²⁰ Quoted in Brian Moynihan, *The Russian Century* (New York: Random House, 1994), 203.

²¹ Medvedev, *Khrushchev*, 191.

²² Suri, *Power and Protest*, 40.

²³ Medvedev, *Khrushchev*, 192.

²⁴ Jutta Weldes, *Constructing National Interests* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 28.

²⁵ Brian Moynihan, *The Russian Century*, 221.

²⁶ Suri, *Power and Protest*, 41.

²⁷ Medvedev, *Khrushchev*, 197.

²⁸ Ibid.

statements from the Chinese government stopped just short of a declaration of a “complete break” between the two communist powers.²⁹

Khrushchev’s detractors were not only foreign but also domestic. According to Russian historian Peter Kenez, Khrushchev’s yield to the United States was “humiliating” for the Soviet Union, and it “surely contributed to his [Khrushchev’s] downfall.”³⁰ Some in the Soviet camp would not tolerate a leader who blinked when the USSR squared off with the United States. In October 1964, two years after the Cuban missile crisis, Nikita Khrushchev was peaceably removed from power. At the meeting in which he was confronted by high-level officials, including later Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev, Khrushchev did not offer much opposition and accepted the situation as it was, saying, “I’m old and tired... I won’t put up a fight.”³¹ Alexei Kosygin succeeded him as Premier.

The crisis had still more effects that produced different agreements, policies, and reactions. One example is the infamous “crisis hotline” that was established between Washington and Moscow. In addition, Ronald Steel writes that “the resolution of the Cuban missile crisis ironically set the stage for a more cooperative policy from Moscow, culminating in the test-ban treaty of 1963.”³² The treaty banned “the testing of nuclear weapons in the atmosphere, in space and under water” and carried the signatures of seventy-seven nations by the middle of September 1963 including the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain.³³ Following the treaty, Khrushchev and Kennedy met in order to discuss their desire to “pursue a policy of détente.”³⁴ It is interesting to note that at those meetings, Khrushchev and Kennedy discussed the situation of the United States in Vietnam, about which Khrushchev made remarkably accurate predictions: “If you want to, go ahead and fight in the jungles of Vietnam... Perhaps the Americans will be able to stick it out for a little longer [than the French], but eventually they will have to quit too.”³⁵

In addition, Suri adds that “the decline in the prospects of full-scale war between the superpowers made direct Soviet-American confrontations far less frequent in the period after the Cuban missile crisis.”³⁶ Both sides were cautious to not overly antagonize the other in order to avoid another crisis that might have gone beyond that of October 1962 and unleashed nuclear destruction.³⁷ The direct result, Suri says, was an acceptance of the situation as it was, or the “status-quo,” in order to maintain security at the expense of progress.³⁸ But, Suri continues, instead of producing the security that was so ardently sought, improved Soviet-American relations contributed to the destabilization of many areas of the globe that would mark the rest of the sixties and seventies.³⁹

²⁹ Ibid., 197-198.

³⁰ Peter Kenez, *A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 210.

³¹ Quoted in William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003), 13.

³² Ronald Steel, “Lessons of the Missile Crisis,” in *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, ed. Robert A. Divine (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 223.

³³ Medvedev, *Khrushchev*, 195.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Quoted in Ibid., 196.

³⁶ Suri, *Power and Protest*, 43.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

Although Nikita Khrushchev arguably made a serious tactical blunder by secretly sending nuclear-capable missiles to Cuba, his actions during the crisis, along with Kennedy's own response, prevented atomic war from scarring the globe. It is possible to speculate as to whether Khrushchev could have struck a better deal for the Soviet Union. Hindsight, however, provides a very different perspective of the situation, and Khrushchev deserves respect for setting aside his pride, risking his career, and withdrawing the missiles. The crisis perhaps provided a more realistic grasp of what nuclear war would mean to Soviet and American policy-makers, which produced a stronger resolve to avoid it.

As an afterthought, there is an interesting fact that still remains of the Cuban missile crisis: the Castro regime, the axle of the entire affair, is still in power on the island of Cuba. This has represented a thorn in the side of the United States, which has sought through various means to topple the island nation's government, including the establishment of a trade embargo that is still in place today. The Castro government, still dedicated to communism, despite recent, small changes, inspires others in the world. Socialist leaders Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and Evo Morales of Bolivia find inspiration and friendship in the Cuban revolutionaries. And in 2007, Michael Moore released his documentary *Sicko*, which included an excursion to Cuba in which he praised the socialized medical system of Cuba and encouraged the United States to adopt a similar system. The unbroken presence of a Cuban socialist state since the crisis of 1962 is a successful product of Cuban-Soviet relations and continues to be a victory for the Soviet Union, even though it no longer exists. Thus, the Cuban missile crisis produced important consequences for the twentieth century, and it continues to do so in the next.