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MAD, not Marx: Khrushchev and the Nuclear Revolution

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Over the past decade the United States has been developing a greater capability to fight a nuclear war. Despite President Obama's famous call in 2009 for a nuclear-free world, he presided over a thorough and costly upgrade of the US nuclear arsenal and approved new tactical nuclear weapons and counterforce intelligence systems designed for war-fighting rather than deterrence.¹ The Obama White House did not announce a radical new doctrine along these lines, nor did it rapidly push through new programs. The new President, Donald J. Trump, has not publicly articulated an official new policy on nuclear use. What can be said is that the Pentagon continues to make a clear effort to sustain and enhance America's ability to fight and win a nuclear war. At the same time, several scholars are developing new concepts of nuclear strategy and its necessary correlate, winnable nuclear war.²

As Keir Lieber and Daryl Press, two of the most prominent of these scholars, acknowledge, the new strategy has attracted serious criticism. A conspicuous U.S. buildup is likely to embolden hawks in other nuclear-armed states to demand similar systems, critics contend, thus triggering an arms race. Moreover, a continued and possibly increased U.S. reliance upon nuclear weapons undermines its position as a proponent of nuclear nonproliferation: a state cannot easily insist that others eschew the bomb for the purposes of nuclear peace if its military bristles with nuclear weapons.³

Another criticism, and one that has long been made of nuclear strategy, is that it fails to heed the logic of the nuclear revolution. As Hans Morgenthau, George Kennan, Kenneth Waltz, and, most systematically, Robert Jervis have argued,⁴ the costs of nuclear war are so potentially catastrophic that states will always be averse to initiating one, and so ought to rely on nuclear weapons only for deterrence amidst a condition of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). Because, in an age of thermonuclear warheads and intercontinental ballistic missiles, even a few nuclear strikes on urban targets will wreak more death and destruction than any nation has experienced in any conventional war, and because the 'fog' of a limited nuclear war is likely to foment escalation toward full-scale conflict, political leaders recognise that any deliberate use of nuclear weapons against other nuclear

¹ An official overview of the development of U.S. nuclear policy and weaponry can be found in the 2010 United States *Nuclear Posture Review*, available at: <http://archive.defense.gov/npr/docs/2010%20Nuclear%20Posture%20Review%20Report.pdf>. For more recent official policy, see the Congressional Budget Office's 2015 report, 'Projected Costs of U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2015-2024,' available at <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/49956>.

² Recent scholarship which suggests that the U.S. would benefit from new nuclear strategies include Keir Lieber and Daryl Press, 'The New Era of Nuclear Weapons, Deterrence and Conflict,' *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 7/1 (Spring 2013) 3-12; Lieber and Press, *The New Era of Counterforce: Technological Change and the Future of Nuclear Deterrence*, *International Security* 41/4 (Spring 2017, forthcoming); Matthew Kroenig, 'Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve: Explaining Nuclear Crisis Outcomes,' *International Organization* 67/1 (Winter 2013) 141-171; Kroenig, 'Facing Reality: Getting NATO Ready for a New Cold War,' *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 57/1, (Winter/Spring 2015) 49-70; and Austin Long and Brendan Rittenhouse-Green, 'Stalking the Secure Second Strike: Intelligence, Counterforce, and Nuclear Strategy,' *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38/1-2 (Winter 2015) 38-73. Also see Francis Gavin, 'Strategies of Inhibition: U.S. Grand Strategy, the Nuclear Revolution, and Nonproliferation,' *International Security* 40/1 (Summer 2015) 16-17.

³ Lieber and Press, 'The New Era of Nuclear Weapons,' 3-5; also see Alexandre Debs and Nuno Monteiro, *Nuclear Politics: the Strategic Causes of Proliferation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), chapter one.

⁴ See Hans Morgenthau, 'The Four Paradoxes of Nuclear Strategy,' *American Political Science Review* 58/1 (Spring 1964), 23-35; George Kennan, *The Nuclear Delusion: Soviet-American Relations in the Atomic Age* (New York: Random House, 1983); Kenneth Waltz, 'Nuclear Myths and Political Realities,' *American Political Science Review*, 84/3 (Autumn 1990) 731-45; Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); and Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

powers threatens to exact horrific, and potentially existential costs.⁵ As Ronald Reagan declared in 1984, 'A nuclear war cannot be won, and must never be fought.'⁶

Strategists reply that states do not, in actual practice, act according to the logic of the nuclear revolution. They have built nuclear arsenals far greater than has been needed for basic deterrence, developed war-winning and first-strike strategies, and initiated crises which ran the risk of the nuclear war they are supposed to abhor. We may wish that they do otherwise, but this amounts to a normative complaint rather than an analysis of international behaviour. These strategists conclude that the nuclear revolution has had little purchase in the real world of international politics.

The strategists' critique, however, misses the most salient consequence of the nuclear revolution: the determination of leaders to avert nuclear war. They may approve of war-fighting strategies and arms buildups, voice dissatisfaction with the international order, or push conflicts toward crisis, but as a crisis escalates toward war and the specter of nuclear apocalypse emerges, they find some way to step back from the brink. The salience of the nuclear revolution, in other words, hinges not on declared policies and rhetoric, but on the grasp by those with their finger on the button that they must not start a war which could kill hundreds of millions, destroy their countries beyond repair, and threaten human existence.⁷ It is this determination that really underlies the nuclear revolution and most specifically accounts for the absence of nuclear war, and indeed any major war between nuclear powers since 1945, a fact that remains the most obvious evidence in support of the nuclear revolution. As Kenneth Waltz has memorably put it, leaders may talk tough and push matters toward conflict, but when the possibility of nuclear war arises they 'have an overriding incentive to ask themselves one question: how do we get out of this mess without nuclear weapons exploding?'⁸

This article, a study of the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's engagement with the problem of nuclear war during the 1950s and early 1960s, provides an historical account of this effect at work. Using recently declassified evidence from several archives, some of it never seen before, we show how Khrushchev quickly recognized that the advent of thermonuclear bombs and missiles made major war insane, and how he acted upon this recognition in his continuing competition with the United States. Khrushchev did not believe that the Cold War had come to an end: he built new weapons systems, instigated crises, and engaged in belligerent rhetoric. But underlying this behaviour was a profound conviction that a nuclear war must never happen.⁹

⁵ More recent scholarship which incorporates the assumption that the nuclear revolution transforms international politics includes Daniel Deudney, *Bounding Power: Republican Security Theory from the Polis to the Global Village* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Deudney, 'Unipolarity and Nuclear Weapons,' in G. John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno, and William Wohlforth, eds., *International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Avery Goldstein, *Deterrence and Security in the 21st Century: China, Britain, France and the Enduring Legacy of the Nuclear Revolution* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000); Susan B. Martin, 'The Continuing Value of Nuclear Weapons: A Structural Realist Analysis,' *Contemporary Security Policy* 34/1 (Spring 2013) 174-94; Charles Glaser and Steve Fetter, 'Should the United States Reject MAD? Damage Limitation and U.S. Nuclear Strategy Towards China,' *International Security* 41/1, (Summer 2016) 49-98; and Nuno Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). Monteiro writes (p. 50) that 'the nuclear revolution is an integral component of my theory of unipolarity.'

⁶ Ronald Reagan, 'Address before a Joint Session of the U.S. Congress on the State of the Union,' January 25, 1984, access via The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=40205>.

⁷ McGeorge Bundy, who was involved in the development of nuclear strategies under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, famously expressed this view in 1969. 'Think tank analysts can set levels of 'acceptable' damage well up in the millions of lives. They can assume that the loss of dozens of great cities is somehow a real choice for sane men. In the real world of real political leaders – whether here or in the Soviet Union – a decision that would bring even one hydrogen bomb on one city of one's own country would be recognized in advance as a catastrophic blunder; ten bombs on ten cities would be a disaster beyond history; and a hundred bombs on a hundred cities are unthinkable.' Bundy, 'To Cap the Volcano,' *Foreign Affairs* 48/1 (October 1969) 9-10.

⁸ Waltz, 'Nuclear Myths and Political Realities,' p. 740.

⁹ This article builds upon several historical studies, including David Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War* (New York: Norton,

The historical narrative proceeds as follows. First, we outline Khrushchev's arrival at the conclusion that nuclear war was unwinnable during the first two years of his leadership, a policy he announced openly in his famous 'peaceful coexistence' speech in 1956. Second, we discuss Khrushchev's new foreign policy of bluster, whereby he talked tough about risking war in various Cold War hotspots, and then initiated the Berlin ultimatum crisis of 1958-59. Third, we describe his development of a new policy of basic nuclear deterrence and Cold War détente in 1959 and 1960, and his abandonment of this policy after the collapse of the Paris Summit in 1960. Fourth, we examine Khrushchev's diplomacy during the Berlin Wall and Cuban crises, and in particular the combination of confident rhetoric and acute war aversion that marked his behaviour during these two well-known showdowns. In the conclusion, we specify how Khrushchev's policies and actions substantiate the case for the nuclear revolution, and discuss some implications of this argument for contemporary policy.

Khrushchev, the Soviet Tradition, and the Dawn of the Nuclear Revolution

Since the days of the Soviet revolution, Marxist-Leninists had regarded great-power war as a natural and inevitable product of imperialism, and this doctrine was not abandoned by Soviet leaders during the first several years of the nuclear age.¹⁰ Following the Soviet test of its own atomic bomb in 1949, the Kremlin continued to plan for a nuclear third world war; Stalin, not long before his death, declared that only the destruction of imperialism would eliminate the inevitability of war.¹¹ Indeed, in an interview with Milovan Djilas at the end of World War Two, Stalin had predicted that the great powers of the world would recover for fifteen or twenty years, and then 'we'll have another go at it.'¹² He did not believe that nuclear weaponry invalidated this law of history.

Yet Soviet leaders after Stalin's death were beginning to have doubts. This was in part simply a consequence of availability of new information on the nature of nuclear weapons, which, though it did not yet appear in the Soviet press, regularly landed on the desks of the top Soviet decision-makers. This, for instance, included the April 21, 1953 article by the New York Times science correspondent William L. Lawrence, 'How Hellish is the H-bomb?' The article, published in *Look Magazine*, described how an H-bomb would vaporize its surroundings and how, even if dropped in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, it would produce radiation that would eventually drift towards the United States, killing millions. Whereas ordinary Americans would have read this article without incident, in the U.S.S.R. it picked up a 'top secret' classification and was circulated to just twenty-three party and government leaders, first and foremost the new Prime Minister Georgii Malenkov.¹³ Malenkov also received reports on Soviet nuclear testing, including the August 1953 summary of the successful test of the boosted fission weapon, which described horrendous destruction at the site of the blast, much worse than any previous explosions in the area.¹⁴ It was Malenkov who first took

2006); Vladislav Zubok and Hope Harrison, 'The Nuclear Education of Nikita Khrushchev,' in John Lewis Gaddis, *et al*, eds., *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); William Taubman, *Khrushchev: the Man and his Era* (New York: Norton, 2003); Margot Light, *The Soviet Theory of International Relations* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1988); and Michael McCgwire, *Military Objectives in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Washington: Brookings Institute Press, 1987).

¹⁰ For a study of the tensions between the nuclear revolution and Marxism more generally, and how this problem speaks to contemporary Marxist scholarship, see Campbell Craig, 'When the Whip Comes Down,' *European Journal of International Security* 2/1 (forthcoming).

¹¹ See Stalin, *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1952).

¹² Quoted in Richard Rhodes, *Dark Sun: the Making of the Hydrogen Bomb* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), p. 181. William Wohlforth argues that Stalin believed that the postwar era would be 'a grand, cataclysmic replay of prewar world politics.' Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions during the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 85.

¹³ 'TASS information bulletin,' May 7, 1953, *AP SSSR*, 3-1, 634-640.

¹⁴ Report from Malyshev and Vannikov to Malenkov, August 28-29, 1953, *AP SSSR* 3-2, p. 79.

interest in the subject of protecting the Soviet population from effects of a nuclear war, issuing instructions as early as July 21, 1953 to study the matter.¹⁵ Unsurprisingly, he also made the first authoritative pronouncement on the changed character of war on March 12, 1954. In a speech that was published in the main Soviet newspaper *Pravda*, he stated that a nuclear war could mean the 'destruction of world civilization.'¹⁶

Malenkov's speech triggered an unhappy reaction in the senior ranks of the Soviet leadership, including then-Deputy Minister of Defence Georgii Zhukov and the First Party Secretary, Nikita Khrushchev. Was Malenkov rejecting the long-standing assumption that the imperialists' wars would be their undoing? Khrushchev pursued the matter, and on 1 April received an article from Igor Kurchatov (inventor of the Soviet A-bomb) which explored these very issues.¹⁷ The article spelled out what Soviet atomic scientists called the 'grim prospects' for the nuclear age: 'Keeping in mind that the modern military technology gives the country that possesses atomic weapons the ability to strike locations thousands of kilometers from its borders, and given that it is practically impossible to protect oneself against such atomic weapons, it becomes clear the massive use of these weapons will lead to the annihilation of the warring states.'¹⁸ Khrushchev was surprised by these revelations and even called Kurchatov for additional explanations. Kurchatov told him that the article actually understated the impact of a nuclear war.¹⁹

Nevertheless, the First Secretary was not quite yet willing to openly adopt Malenkov's point of view. Instead, he used the Prime Minister's slip as a weapon of power struggle. When in January 1955 Malenkov was ousted from his position, his remarks were cited as proof that he was not sufficiently class-conscious. It fell to the hardline Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov to condemn Malenkov's theoretical shortcomings at the Communist Party Plenum on January 31, 1955. Dismissing Malenkov's defence that he simply 'overlooked' the issue, Molotov argued that his remarks had been 'politically incorrect' and 'demobilizing,' and that he had confused the international communist movement: 'A hundred years ago Marx wrote the Communist Manifesto. He said that things are heading towards the collapse of capitalism and towards the victory of Communism. ... If we are now saying that some kind of war can allegedly lead to [...] the end of the entire civilization, this means that we have something quite opposite from the head on our shoulders.'²⁰ The Plenum roared in laughter.

Khrushchev thus was aware of the political dangers of rejecting the concept of inevitable war; in May 1955 he remarked that 'the war has been merely postponed. We talk about peace but create atomic and hydrogen bombs.'²¹ By inertia more than genuine belief, he continued to endorse the Stalinist thesis to the effect that 'You cannot fight just with bombs. You have to fight with people.'²² But by the end of 1955 Khrushchev's thinking underwent a profound shift, both in terms of what a future war may look like, and also whether it could even be fought. This new thinking was clearly in evidence in December, when the Soviet leadership discussed the possibility of a peace treaty between the Soviet Union and the United States.

The idea of this peace treaty was discussed at the Presidium on December 8 and 15; the text of the

¹⁵ *AP SSSR*, 2-7, p. 568.

¹⁶ Harrison Salisbury, 'Malenkov says both sides would lose in atomic war,' *New York Times*, March 14, 1954, p. 1.

¹⁷ Sergei Khrushchev, *Nikita Khrushchev: Reformer* (Moscow: Vremya, 2010), p. 166.

¹⁸ Article by Igor Kurchatov (et al) (unpublished), March 1954, *AP SSSR*, 3-2, pp 163-167. See also Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb*, 337-338.

¹⁹ Sergei Khrushchev, *Nikita Khrushchev: Reformer*, p. 167.

²⁰ Molotov's remarks at the January (1955) Party Plenum, January 31, 1955, RGANI: fond 2, opis 1, delo 127, listy 112-114.

²¹ Cited in *Sovetsko-Yugoslavskie Otnosheniya*, p. 660.

²² Conversation between Nikita Khrushchev and the Indonesian Ambassador Subandrio, March 22, 1955, RGANI: fond 52, opis 1, delo 565, list 6.

memorandum was debated and changed. But one passage – referring to the impact of atomic and hydrogen weapons – was left completely unaltered. These new weapons, the passage read, ‘put people of all countries into a similarly dangerous position... threatening to subject their territories, and, first and foremost, the densely populated regions of the highly developed countries, to the devastating effects of an atomic war.’²³ Curiously, when the Soviet Foreign Ministry proposed similar formulations in a different memorandum (on the eve of the Geneva conference in July 1955), the idea that the Soviet Union – among others – would also be devastated in a nuclear war was explicitly rejected, replaced with a vague reference to destruction of countries *participating* in such a war.²⁴ But by January 1956, the Soviet leaders were talking about a nuclear war as an existential threat. Thus, the head of the Supreme Soviet, Kliment Voroshilov, announced on January 13 that war was ‘invented by savages. They moved from the bow to the powder, and now such a thing has been created, that it goes off once and destroys a whole city, and destroy the population. We’ll all die in a few generations.’ These comments were very much in line with Malenkov’s earlier thesis, yet Khrushchev, who, was in attendance, did not contradict Voroshilov. He, too, spoke about the dangers of war.²⁵

The shift from ‘the capitalists will die’ to ‘we’ll all die’ occurred against the background of the successful Soviet test of its first proper hydrogen bomb (on November 22, 1955). This test both excited the Soviet leaders and horrified them, for it became clear that thermonuclear weapons were theoretically almost unlimited in their destructive power. The test report, commenting on the practically complete destruction within a 5km radius of the blast and on visible effects as far away as 300-400 km, noted that the power of the charge was deliberately reduced by at least 500 kilotons for fear of causing too much damage.²⁶

This knowledge gave Khrushchev the confidence to set out the thesis of peaceful coexistence, which he did in his report at the 20th CC CPSU Congress on February 14, 1956. Khrushchev’s argument, that the socialist camp had become so strong that it could prevent any attempt by the imperialist camp to start war, was discussed at a session of the Presidium on January 30, 1956, exactly a year since Malenkov’s ouster. Even Molotov – one of the more conservative players in the leadership – voiced no criticism of Khrushchev’s formulations.²⁷ Khrushchev’s embrace of peaceful co-existence was a reflection of a growing political consensus.²⁸ Even as the military focused on the practicalities of fighting a nuclear conflict, the Soviet political leadership had already abandoned the notion of acceptability of war.

It was in this new political environment that Khrushchev delivered the most famous speech of his career. ‘We estimate,’ Khrushchev announced, ‘that the [two] blocs presently possess such means of destruction as to make war unthinkable, if not impossible.’²⁹ It was either a peaceful Cold War ‘or the most destructive war in history,’ Khrushchev said: ‘There is no third way.’ Despite intense criticism from orthodox Communists, especially those in Beijing, the Soviet leader was convinced that any rational leader understood this. ‘The danger of a military conflict is absent,’ he explained in July of that year. ‘One gets the impression that in America they talk about war out of fear than anything else. They are afraid themselves but they are trying to frighten the others.’³⁰

²³ A.A. Fursenko et al. (eds), *Postanovleniya TsK KPSS, 1954-1964*, 2 (Moscow: Rosspen, 2006), 139-144.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 99

²⁵ Conversation between Kliment Voroshilov, Nikita Khrushchev et al. with an Iranian parliamentary delegation, January 13, 1956, Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (AVPRF): fond 06, opis 15a, papka 21, delo 8, listy 12-29.

²⁶ Report on the test of RDS-37, November 23, 1955, *AP SSSR*, 3-2, 423-424.

²⁷ A.A. Fursenko et al. (eds.), *Prezidium TsK KPSS, 1954-1964*, 1 (Moscow: Rosspen, 2003), 88-95.

²⁸ Zubok and Harrison, ‘The Nuclear Education of Nikita Khrushchev,’ p. 147.

²⁹ M. Dejean à M. Pineau, March 9, 1956, Documents Diplomatiques Français, 1956, part 1, p. 362.

³⁰ ‘N.S. Khrushchev: U Stalina Byli Momenty Prosvetleniya,’ *Istokhnik*, 2 (1994), p. 90.

Bluster and Brinkmanship: 1956-59

By early 1956, Khrushchev had decided, in both secret policy debates and public declarations, that World War Three was unacceptable in the nuclear age. This led him to regard conflicts with the United States in a new way, but it hardly dissuaded him from taking advantage of the new Soviet arsenal for lesser political objectives—to ‘frighten the others.’ Once he realized the tremendous power of nuclear weapons, he rarely missed an opportunity to advertise this power, seeing it as very advantageous for political leverage. As early as January 1956 – just weeks before proclaiming peaceful coexistence – Khrushchev resorted to atomic saber-rattling in a bid to convince the Iranians to quit the UK-led Baghdad Pact. ‘Would you find it very interesting to catch several hydrogen bombs in Iran? Are the Iranian people dreaming about this? I think not. Why, then, did you join a pact that aims at exactly this?’³¹ When in June 1956 the Shah visited the Soviet Union, Khrushchev reminded him of the Soviet ability to rain destruction on any potential aggressor. He chose not to threaten Iran directly on this occasion but instead lashed out at the Turks for their naïve hope that their American friends in case of war. ‘By the time these friends come to their rescue, Turkey will be no more.’ Indeed, Khrushchev explained, America itself was increasingly vulnerable to a Soviet plane and missile attack. ‘We are not boasting,’ he concluded. ‘Such are the objective characteristics of these weapons.’³²

But of course Khrushchev *was* boasting. Not only was he boasting but he was increasingly prone to use Soviet achievements to impress and threaten friends and foes alike. In June and in September 1956 Khrushchev engaged in atomic diplomacy with visiting Yugoslav delegations – not to intimidate this time but merely to stress Soviet military power and so encourage the Yugoslavs to close ranks with Moscow. Josip Broz Tito was shown films of nuclear explosions and missile tests. The films, at least according to Khrushchev, ‘made an exceptionally strong impression.’ As he wrote on October 8, the Yugoslavs concluded that ‘the operation of the hydrogen bomb was so powerful that if it were dropped over Belgrade, Zagreb would not survive either.’³³ The bomb was a recurrent subject of Khrushchev’s discussions with the Chinese leader Mao Zedong. ‘Three-four missiles,’ he would tell Mao – no doubt hoping to impress – ‘and there would be no Turkey.’ Ten missiles would suffice to destroy the UK. ‘Now, that we have the [inter-]continental missile, we also hold America by the throat. They thought that America is out of reach. But this is not so.’³⁴

Arguably the most famous instance of Khrushchev’s atomic diplomacy occurred during the 1956 Suez crisis, when, following Gamal Abdel Nasser’s nationalization of the Suez canal, Great Britain, France, and Israel launched an abortive invasion of Egypt. On November 5, 1956 the Soviets sent letters to the British Prime Minister Anthony Eden and the French Prime Minister Guy Mollet with a nearly identical demand to back off or else risk an attack from ‘a more powerful state which possess all means of modern destructive weapons.’³⁵ The Suez campaign failed for reasons that had nothing to do with Khrushchev’s threats.³⁶ However, this was not how Khrushchev saw this episode – he believed that it was the Soviet threat that forced the British and the French to call it quits. On many subsequent occasions he cited this alleged achievement and was quite upset that Nasser, of all, didn’t seem to buy it. Khrushchev even complained to Nasser for this lack of faith, arguing, in a letter, that ‘we [the Soviets] were prepared for most decisive measures to provide the

³¹ Conversation between Nikita Khrushchev and an Iranian parliamentary delegation, January 13, 1956, AVPRF.

³² Conversation between Nikita Khrushchev and the Shah, June 27, 1956. RGANI: fond 52, opis 1, delo 567, listy 21, 19.

³³ ‘Note from N. Khrushchev to the CPSU CC Presidium regarding conversations with Yugoslav leaders in the Crimea,’ October 8, 1956, CWIHP Digital Archive:

<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112230.pdf?v=3c340b00832f55dab215f7f1d7908df9>

³⁴ Conversation between Nikita Khrushchev and Mao Zedong, July 31, 1958. In the authors’ possession.

³⁵ See letters from N.A. Bulganin to Anthony Eden and Guy Mollet, November 5, 1956, both printed in Pravda, November 6, 1956, 1-2.

³⁶ See, e.g. Keith Kyle, *Suez: Britain’s End of Empire in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

most effective aid both to Egypt, when it was attacked by the aggressors, and to Syria during the Syrian crisis.³⁷ 'If the aggressors unleash a war against you,' he reiterated, 'we can provide you help with these missiles from our territory.'³⁸

It was one thing to engage in this kind of theatre over peripheral conflicts; Khrushchev was not going to decide one morning to nuke Iran for not leaving the Baghdad Pact, or respond to some attack on Nasser's Egypt with every available bomb. It was quite another when alliance obligations were involved, as Khrushchev found out in 1958. It happened shortly after his visit to China in July-August 1958, when he boasted to Mao about Soviet nuclear capabilities. In his turn, Mao evidently decided to put Khrushchev's words to the test. On August 23 the People's Liberation Army unexpectedly began to shell Taiwan-held islands off China's coast. Khrushchev, who had not been consulted, did not know what to think. Was this a prelude to China's invasion of Taiwan – and, given Taiwan's defense ties with the U.S., would this not mean a general war? Khrushchev dispatched his Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko for talks with the Chinese. The Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai told Gromyko on September 7 that China was not counting on the Soviet nuclear umbrella. If the U.S. bombed China, the Chinese leaders did not expect their Soviet allies to get involved. Khrushchev understood Zhou's words as a test of Moscow's reliability as an ally. On September 19 he drafted a letter to Mao Zedong, which displayed a remarkable grasp of the logic of deterrence and credibility. It was imperative, he said in the letter, not to give the Americans any room for doubting the strength of Soviet commitment as an ally. 'If the enemy learned about this [i.e. about the absence of firm commitment], or even suspected this, it would create a very dangerous situation. And we must have a firm agreement on this.'³⁹ On the same day Khrushchev sent an open letter to Eisenhower, threatening retaliation in case of an American nuclear strike against China: 'if the PRC comes under such an attack, the aggressor will immediately be repulsed with the same means.'⁴⁰ This time it was not just rhetoric: it was a public expression of a private commitment that Khrushchev had clearly made.

Despite the peaceful resolution of the Straits crisis, Khrushchev was unsettled by the experience. Mao's lack of consultation and the strange way in which the crisis ended – with the Chinese deciding to shell the islands on every second day – revealed quite plainly that making the sort of guarantees that Khrushchev had offered in his letter to Mao put the Soviets at the mercy of whatever it was that the Chinese premier had in mind. Given that Mao repeatedly downplayed the perils of nuclear war – 'if the atomic bomb destroyed the Earth, it might be a major event for the solar system but it would hardly mean anything to the universe as a whole,' he once said – it was insane to follow the Chinese to the brink over Taiwan or any other issue.⁴¹ So, even as Khrushchev vowed to stand by Mao and threatened Eisenhower with nuclear war, he was beginning to re-evaluate his commitment to China, and to think more carefully about the implications of brinkmanship. In 1959 he reneged on his promise to deliver a prototype nuclear bomb to China, which he had unwisely made in 1957. The Sino-Soviet relationship rapidly went downhill after that: never again did Khrushchev have to restate his commitment that he so reluctantly made in September 1958.

Khrushchev used nuclear bluster in the hopes of brandishing Soviet power on the cheap, secure in his conviction that it would never escalate to an actual war. The Taiwan Straits crisis revealed to him the limits of this diplomacy: when firm alliance commitments, rather than vague boasts, were at

³⁷ Letter from Nikita Khrushchev to Gamal Abdel Nasser, April 12, 1959 in V.V. Naumkin (ed.), *Blizhnevostochnyi Konflikt, 1957-1967*, 2 (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi Fond Demokratiya, 2003), p. 267.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

³⁹ Khrushchev's draft letter to Mao Zedong, September 19, 1958, RGANI: fond 52, opis 1, delo 351, list 139.

⁴⁰ Khrushchev's letter to Eisenhower, September 19, 1958, published in *Pravda*, July 20, 1958, p. 1.

⁴¹ Finnish Ambassador to China Carl-Johan Sundstrom's conversation with Chairman Mao Zedong, January 28, 1955, Chinese Foreign Ministry Archive: 117-00429-04(1).

play, other leaders could drag him into a war he was determined to prevent. But what if the stakes were higher? No sooner had the tensions begun to ease in the Taiwan Straits that Khrushchev found himself saddled with a thornier problem on the western flank of the socialist camp. Trouble was brewing in Berlin, and this time it was Khrushchev, not Mao, who was responsible for the unfolding crisis.

In October 1957 Moscow startled the world by launching the first man-made satellite into space. As it beeped triumphantly in the dark skies, Khrushchev embraced ever rosier views of the changing balance of forces. The Soviets were advancing. The West was in retreat. How, then, could Khrushchev tolerate the indignity of the Western presence in Berlin? On many occasions the Soviet leader referred to Berlin as a sore of Europe, a rotten tooth that had to be pulled out, a thorn, a bone in his throat. On many occasions he described American efforts to hang on to Berlin as an attempt to 'humiliate' the Soviets, 'bring us down to our knees.'⁴² At last, Khrushchev came up with a plan to resolve the Berlin problem. On November 10, 1958, at a Polish-Soviet 'friendship rally,' he announced his intention to turn over control over access to Berlin to the East German regime.⁴³ Although he was initially unclear about what exactly this meant for the Western occupying powers, by the end of the month he removed any doubt: Berlin was to be made a 'free city,' and that meant the Western forces had to leave. The statement the Soviets issued on 27 November was effectively an ultimatum, set to expire on 27 May 1959.

Khrushchev's thinking was largely based on the premise that the Americans would not risk war over an outpost well within the Soviet bloc, would not gamble – as he liked to say –with the fates of hundreds of millions of people for the sake of just 2.5 million people who were in any case in no immediate danger of being forced into life under Communism. Some of what surely were among the strangest discussions of the Soviet Presidium on Berlin centred on this very subject: just how likely was it that the Americans would react to Khrushchev's ultimatums by going to war? Khrushchev's rule of thumb was that the probability of a general war over Berlin was about five percent.⁴⁴ To look at this from the other end of the stick: that meant 95 percent estimated success – excellent odds for a gambler! Khrushchev seemed willing to take the risk: 'you won't get anywhere without taking a risk. We cannot beg for anything from our opponents – we can only grab,' he would say. But there was something not quite right – and Khrushchev knew it.

To understand what it was, it is important to recount an anecdote that Khrushchev liked to tell about Berlin. Once, he would say, an officer went to a ball and accidentally farted. The officer was so dismayed by this embarrassment that he went outside and blew his brains out. 'Of course, it is impolite to spoil the air but why shoot yourself?'⁴⁵ In comparison to the fate of civilization, the occupation of Berlin was just a 'fart,' but was Khrushchev himself willing to pull the trigger if his gamble failed and the West resorted to force? The five percent estimate left this possibility wide open. Khrushchev's willingness to take a risk to redress an indignity never quite outweighed his fear of inadvertently causing a nuclear war.

That is why Khrushchev backtracked almost as soon as he announced the ultimatum. In January 1959 he sent his confidante Anastas Mikoyan to Washington to inform the White House that, despite all appearances, his demand was 'not an ultimatum,' and he told the Presidium on February

⁴² This formula became even more popular during the 1961 crisis. See, for example, Khrushchev's fourth meeting with John F. Kennedy in Vienna, June 4, 1961, RGANI: fond 52, opis 1, delo 468, listy 76-80.

⁴³ Record of the Presidium meeting, November 6, 1958 in A.A. Fursenko (ed.), *Prezidium TsK KPSS*, 338-339. For a detailed discussion see Douglas Selvage, 'Khrushchev's November 1958 Berlin Ultimatum: New Evidence from the Polish Archives,' *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 11, p. 200.

⁴⁴ Khrushchev stated this estimate on a number of occasions, including in the Presidium discussions. See e.g. *Prezidium TsK KPSS*, p. 503.

⁴⁵ Nikita Khrushchev's conversation with John J. McCloy, July 26, 1961, RGANI: fond 52, opis 1, delo 581, listy 91-143.

11 that, subject to certain restrictions, he was prepared to let the West keep some troops in West Berlin.⁴⁶ When the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan turned up in Moscow later that month, Khrushchev reiterated that the 27 May deadline ‘had no particular significance... It could be June 27 or August 27 or the West could name a date.’⁴⁷ In June, after his original deadline expired without any change, Khrushchev wrote a private letter to Eisenhower, suggesting that a general great-power summit could lead to a resolution of the issue.⁴⁸ When Khrushchev mentioned to a U.S. delegation in Moscow in early July that he would be willing to visit the United States to pursue these goals, Eisenhower invited him to America, an expression of interest in working toward a general Cold War deal. Khrushchev’s discussions with Eisenhower in September 1959 created a new atmosphere in Soviet-American relations, the ‘Camp David moment.’ The Berlin problem – though it still lurked in the background – lost much of its intensity, and it briefly seemed that it would be side-lined altogether in the broader process of détente, based (Khrushchev never lost sight of this point) on the mutual recognition of the other’s capacity to inflict unacceptable damage. The two statesmen agreed to meet at a summit in 1960.⁴⁹

Towards Nuclear Reform

The long-awaited summit with President Eisenhower was symbolically important to Khrushchev: it ratified the Soviet leader’s equal status and strengthened his domestic standing. Now he could claim before his colleagues that the policy of peaceful coexistence had borne fruit: the Soviet Union formally graduated to the rank of a superpower. He understood, and readily emphasized publicly and privately, that this status rested more than anything on Soviet nuclear capability: the ability to destroy any potential enemy, even the United States. Although the Soviet ICBM programme was still in its infant phase and (despite Khrushchev’s famous boast to churn out missiles like sausages) Moscow did not really develop a comprehensive second strike capability until the late 1960s, 1959 was a turning point precisely because of that acknowledgement of Soviet power that Khrushchev’s meeting with Eisenhower signified. But there was also a less pleasing aspect of Khrushchev’s American tour. The Soviet leader now acutely realized just how far the Soviet Union still had to go before it could ‘catch up’ with the United States.

In late 1959, Khrushchev developed a ‘grand design,’ as Naftali and Fursenko call it, to address both the danger of nuclear war, and his inferior economy, at once. In December, Khrushchev submitted a memorandum to the Central Committee Presidium. He stressed the recent progress in the development of the Soviet nuclear deterrent force, and concluded that Soviet nuclear capability was sufficient to ward off any potential aggressor. ‘How can any country or a group of countries in Europe attack us,’ he asked, ‘if we can literally wipe these countries off the face of the Earth with our atomic and hydrogen weapons and by delivering our missiles to any spot on the globe?’⁵⁰ Under these circumstances it simply did not make any sense to keep such a large conventional force, so Khrushchev proposed to cut a million to a million and a half servicemen, bringing the size of the Soviet army to under 2.5 million. His rationale? The money was badly needed in the development of the economy. Repeatedly, he emphasized that Moscow’s defence potential would not be undermined, even if its disarmament were not reciprocated by the West. Indeed, Khrushchev believed that a continued large American conventional army would be a budgetary drag, and so help

⁴⁶ A.A. Fursenko (ed.), *Prezidium TsK KPSS*, p. 346.

⁴⁷ Conversation between Harold Macmillan and Nikita Khrushchev, February 22, 1959. UK National Archive, PREM 11/2690 (Visit of Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary to Soviet Union, Feb-Mar).

⁴⁸ Telegram from the Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State, June 17, 1959, 9p.m., *FRUS*, 1958–1960, Berlin Crisis, 1958–1959, VOLUME VIII, 913-917.

⁴⁹ Khrushchev did not close the question of the German treaty until January 1963 but it never regained the sort of intensity as it had in 1958-59.

⁵⁰ Nikita Khrushchev’s note to the CC CPSU Prezidium concerning further measures in cutting the Soviet Union’s armed forces, December 8, 1959, RGANI: fond 52, opis 1, delo 351, listy 3-12.

the Soviets in their economic competition with the United States.⁵¹ When this memorandum was discussed by the Presidium on December 14, there was no opposition. All of the military brass – many of whom were Khrushchev appointees – backed their leader. Khrushchev personally announced the cuts in a speech on January 14.⁵²

Khrushchev's proposal of these dramatic unilateral reductions overlapped with a number of key developments. First, on the same day as he discussed his memorandum with colleagues in the Presidium, Khrushchev set out his vision for building a Communist society in the USSR within 10-15 years. In 1961 this vision was officially inaugurated in the Third Party Programme, which promised a better life under Communism to the present generation of the Soviet people. Clearly, in Khrushchev's mind, a much cheaper Soviet military was central to his economic initiative. Second, just three days after the December 17 Presidium discussion the Soviets officially established Strategic Rocket Forces as a branch of the military establishment: the first nuclear-tipped ICBMs were put into service in December 1959-January 1960. At the time there were only just a dozen of these ICBMs, far below the hundreds of missiles bandied about by American 'missile gap' alarmists. Of course, more were on the way. But it is quite clear that Khrushchev felt that whatever deterrent the Soviet Union possessed already, it was sufficient to deter an American or anyone else's attack. Already by early 1959 he was arguing that the Soviets had stockpiled 'more than enough' nuclear weapons, and 'needed no more.'⁵³ 'The number of hydrogen bombs we have produced,' he explained to a visitor just two days after the Berlin ultimatum, 'has already reached the point where its further increase does not play any role.'⁵⁴ 'At the time when I was still in the leadership,' Khrushchev recalled years later, 'we accumulated so many missiles and nuclear charges that we decided even then: 'That's enough!' You could of course replace outdated missiles with more modern ones, but there were more than enough of them.'⁵⁵

There was a difference, as far as Khrushchev was concerned, between having the capability to completely destroy versus the capability to inflict unacceptable damage on the probable enemy. He knew very well that in early 1960 the Soviet Union did not have the capability to completely destroy the United States. This, he revealed, citing his own General Staff, would require three hundred ICBMs – a lot more than the modest Soviet force then being deployed.⁵⁶ The threshold for unacceptable damage was much, much lower. He came back from the United States feeling that even one nuclear explosion in an American city was too many for President Eisenhower. 'Even if the arms race stopped [after each side had enough missiles to destroy the other], this would hardly make the people's lives more peaceful,' Khrushchev told the visiting Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. 'They will still live under the barrel of a gun with a cocked trigger, fearing that some madman will make the first shot, which will lead to a catastrophe. I think Eisenhower understands this. I think [the UK Prime Minister Harold] Macmillan also understands this.'⁵⁷

In short, whereas until the turn of the decade, Khrushchev enthusiastically pushed for the development of the Soviet deterrent force, actually gaining a (limited) nuclear deterrent turned his thinking towards the subject of nuclear control. The matter was discussed at the Presidium, where Khrushchev suddenly proposed to go beyond his vague calls for general and universal disarmament,

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² A.A. Fursenko (ed.), *Prezidium TsK KPSS*, 395-397.

⁵³ Conversation between Harold Macmillan and Nikita Khrushchev, February 22, 1959. UK National Archive, PREM 11/2690 (Visit of Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary to Soviet Union, Feb-Mar).

⁵⁴ Conversation between Nikita Khrushchev and Lazaro Cardenas, November 29, 1958. RGANI: fond 52, opis 1, delo 574, list 134.

⁵⁵ Nikita Khrushchev, *Vremya, Lyudi, Vlast*, 2 (Moscow: Moskovskie Novosti, 1999), p. 419. Also see Fursenko and Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War*, chapter ten.

⁵⁶ Conversation between Nikita Khrushchev and Jawaharlal Nehru, February 12, 1960, RGANI: fond 52, opis 1, delo 562, list 143.

⁵⁷ Ibid., list 144. See also Fursenko and Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War*, 243-44.

and actually consider cutting back on nuclear missiles. ‘They [the Americans] are all literally trembling,’ he told his colleagues on February 1, 1960. ‘... And suddenly we announce that we are prepared to destroy ballistic missiles and all rockets... This is a powerful thing, and it will powerfully act on the conscience of any reasonable person, especially as our proposal is completely sincere.’⁵⁸ Khrushchev went on to talk about closing down bases, scrapping bombers and other means of delivery, even while leaving some deterrent capability in place. This way, ‘even if a madman came to power, he won’t have a knife, he won’t be dangerous, and if he begins to sharpen his knife, the others will see that he is a madman, and they’ll be able to tie him down.’⁵⁹

In 1960, Khrushchev's odd metaphor was put to the test. His hope, that the Paris summit in May (followed by Ike’s scheduled visit to the USSR in June) would enable him to realize his grand design, depended upon American reciprocity; this in turn was based upon his belief that Eisenhower would be able to fend off the forces of militarism and imperialism which he believed still operated in U.S. politics. Unfortunately, Eisenhower could not control that perception effectively. Hawkish journalists and politicians had given the Soviet leader reason to worry, particularly during the missile gap controversy that had been raging in the United States since the *Sputnik* test of October 1957: columnists such as Joseph Alsop and Democratic politicians, including the presidential candidate John F. Kennedy, talked of a massive Soviet superiority in nuclear missiles, which no one more than Khrushchev knew to be a ridiculous lie—it was the United States which was massively ahead, not the USSR.⁶⁰ What could explain such brazen falsehoods if not the forces of imperialism? ‘It is not the journalists who write it themselves,’ Khrushchev worried, ‘but the journalists write about what the government thinks.’⁶¹

Much worse, however, was the U-2 fiasco in May. Eisenhower had approved the last flight of the CIA spy plane on May 1, a major Soviet holiday; these flights, ironically, provided the CIA with the clearest evidence of the fallacy of the missile gap. The U-2 plane was shot down by a Soviet surface-to-air missile, and the pilot was captured alive. Eisenhower refused to apologise for the mission, or to blame it on the CIA, which Khrushchev regarded as an affront to him personally, and to the Soviet Union. ‘This is insolence, insolence!’ he raved at a Moscow exhibition of the wreckage of the downed plane, telling the assembled journalists that he was no longer sure that Eisenhower, with his ‘thief philosophy,’ would be welcomed in the USSR.⁶²

The problem was the loss of face. Khrushchev could not be seen in parley with his ‘friend’ Eisenhower post U-2, as if nothing had happened. ‘My friend,’ ‘my friend,’ he repeated bitterly: ‘God, save me from friends like this, and I will take care of my enemies.’⁶³ Khrushchev arrived in Paris resolved to force Ike to apologize or else ruin the summit. The May 16 meeting of the four powers ‘bl[ew] up, like a volcano! It is ignominious; it is tragic; it is almost incredible,’ recounted Harold Macmillan, who tried more than other leaders to save the summit from a meltdown.⁶⁴ Khrushchev was unsympathetic and blamed the perfidious Americans with their ‘mania of greatness...probably, they think they can do anything because they have [so] many dollars.’⁶⁵ Now that the grand design was falling apart due to what Khrushchev perceived as Washington’s unwillingness to treat the Soviets as ‘equals,’ he threatened to increase missile production.⁶⁶ On

⁵⁸ A.A. Fursenko (ed.), *Prezidium TsK KPSS*, p. 431.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 425.

⁶⁰ See Christopher Preble, *John F. Kennedy and the Missile Gap* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2004).

⁶¹ Quoted in Fursenko and Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War*, p. 255.

⁶² Nikita Khrushchev’s statement to domestic and foreign journalists, May 11, 1960, RGANI: fond 52, opis 1, delo 613, listy 62-77.

⁶³ Conversation between Nikita Khrushchev and Harold Macmillan, May 15, 1960 (4:30pm), RGANI: fond 52, opis 1, delo 631, listy 83-85.

⁶⁴ Peter Catterall (ed.), *The Macmillan Diaries*, II (London: Pan Books, 2011), p. 297.

⁶⁵ Conversation between Nikita Khrushchev and Harold Macmillan, May 15, 1960 (4:30pm).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

June 11, 1960, he forwarded the transcripts of his aborted discussions in Paris to socialist allies, including Mao Zedong: he wanted them to know that he stood firm and successfully defended Soviet honour.⁶⁷

Berlin and Cuba

The election of John F. Kennedy as U.S. President in November 1960 focussed Khrushchev's attention on resolving some of the outstanding issues in the Soviet-American relationship, none of course more pressing than the Berlin problem, which became even more of a sore in the months that passed since the failed Paris summit because of the ongoing exodus of skilled workers across the unprotected border into West Berlin. East Germany's leader Walter Ulbricht demanded that Khrushchev solve the problem or take over the burden of subsidizing the GDR's faltering economy. Meanwhile, the Soviet leader felt that he had promised to sign a treaty with East Germany so many times that his prestige was now fully engaged. He could not back down without losing face. 'You must understand our situation,' he told JFK's envoy John J. McCloy. 'We already announced that we would sign the treaty, and [so] made an advance payment. If we did not sign, this would look like retreat, backing down under the pressure of Western countries.'⁶⁸ In June 1961 Khrushchev met with Kennedy in Vienna, and again spoke bitterly about how the Americans wanted to 'humiliate our country.'⁶⁹ The discussion went nowhere, and Khrushchev revived the ultimatum he had let elapse in the more confident days of 1959. On parting, Kennedy gloomily predicted a 'cold winter' in the months to come.

Khrushchev found himself during the summer of 1961 facing a choice between watching Ulbricht's East Germany hemorrhage or following through with his ultimatum and so running a real risk of war. Because both alternatives were unacceptable but the pressure from Ulbricht was relentless. So in the end, Khrushchev resorted to building a wall built around West Berlin. It was a demeaning expedient, and hardly an advertisement for the appeal of the communist system, but it solved the problem of West Berlin in a way that did not require the expulsion of western forces there and so invite the possibility of military confrontation.⁷⁰ On August 13, 1961 Berliners awoke to the awful reality of a divided city. But that was it: Khrushchev did not sign a treaty with the GDR, and indeed continued to talk about Berlin in less and less concrete terms. When the Presidium discussed the subject on January 8, 1962, it became patently clear that Khrushchev was content with the status quo. August 13, he said, removed the bone from his throat, and now the bone was in the Westerners' throats: they had to worry about Berlin, not he.⁷¹ Khrushchev was no longer anxious to stir the pot. 'The Americans,' he reflected disingenuously, two weeks after the Wall went up, '[wanted] to scare us but they ended up scaring themselves.'⁷² In fact, the opposite was equally true: it was Khrushchev who wanted to scare the Americans and very much ended up scaring himself.

The barbed wire that now encircled West Berlin solved the immediate problem, but it remained a tremendous blow to Soviet and Khrushchev's prestige. In a bid to compensate for this embarrassment, he finally did something that he had successfully resisted for more than two years: he authorized the resumption of nuclear testing. It is not clear when the decision was made but it was before July 5 (when Khrushchev spilled the beans to the Chinese). In other words, after his

⁶⁷ Mikhail Prozumenshchikov et al (eds), *Venskii Val's Kholodnoi Voiny: Vokrug Vstrechi N.S. Khrushcheva i Dzh. F. Kennedi v 1961 godu v Vene* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2011), 78-79.

⁶⁸ Conversation between Nikita Khrushchev and John J. McCloy, July 26, 1961. Reproduced in *Venskii Val's Kholodnoi Voiny*, p. 386.

⁶⁹ Conversation between Nikita Khrushchev and John F. Kennedy, June 4, 1961. Reproduced in *Ibid.*, p. 251.

⁷⁰ For a detailed account, see Hope Harrison, *Driving the Soviets Up the Wall: Soviet-East German Relations, 1953-1961* (Princeton UP, 2005).

⁷¹ Presidium CC CPSU Discussion, January 8, 1962, in *Prezidium TsK KPSS*, 537-538.

⁷² Conversation between Nikita Khrushchev and Nkrumah, August 28, 1961. RGANI: fond 52, opis 1, delo 556, list 45.

meeting with Kennedy in Vienna (which presumably convinced him of the impossibility of achieving a breakthrough on the German treaty), Khrushchev began to prepare the ground for the grandiose finale of his ill-fated Berlin ultimatum. The highlight of the prestige-saving exercise was the testing of the 50 megaton 'Tsar-bomb' on October 30, 1961, the most powerful man-made explosion in history. The monstrous blast shattered glass in some windows in Finland and Norway hundreds of miles from the epicenter. It was one of the final examples of Khrushchev's determination to maintain face in the nuclear age.

The other, and last, example was his decision to deliver nuclear rockets to Cuba. The Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 is probably the most written-about episode in the history of the Cold War. Historians still debate why Khrushchev did something as audacious as secretly shipping nuclear missiles to an island just 90 miles off the U.S. coast. Before Soviet records on the crisis became available, the tendency among scholars was to interpret his decision as a careful strategic calculation. According to this line of inquiry, the Soviet leader knew only too well that his much-advertised nuclear deterrent was in fact vastly inferior to that of the United States. There were far fewer ICBMs in the arsenal than Khrushchev's rhetoric suggested and the inflamed American public imagination allowed. To fix this problem, the Soviets decided to put shorter-range missiles on Cuban soil. But it later transpired, mostly from the writing of Russian historians, that Khrushchev's decision was much more emotional than strategic. The idea – the new narrative suggested – was to save Fidel Castro and the Cuban revolution from American attack.⁷³

Khrushchev first spoke of missiles in Cuba in a letter to Kennedy in April 1961. It is not entirely clear where he got this idea, though he himself attributed it to statements by Kennedy and other US politicians.⁷⁴ In rambling comments on a draft submitted by the Foreign Ministry, Khrushchev drew parallels between the possibility of an offensive Soviet base in Cuba and the reality of such bases in countries bordering the USSR. He clearly felt that the Soviets were not being treated fairly.⁷⁵ As a result of this dictated digression on equality, the April 22 letter ended up being rather long and incoherent, and it was effectively dismissed by the State Department. Yet it expressed Khrushchev's deep-held conviction that had also animated his approach to the Berlin problem. The matter came down to prestige: if, as Kennedy himself had admitted in Vienna, the United States and the Soviet Union were equals, then how could the Soviets be denied what the Americans took for granted? As Khrushchev later put it in his memoirs, justifying his decision to ship missiles to Cuba, 'we'd be doing nothing more than giving them [the Americans] a little of their own medicine.'⁷⁶ Tellingly, when privately questioned about his views at the very height of the crisis, he reiterated his claim that the source of the problem was Washington's habit to order others about. 'If the forces are equal, then opportunities are also equal. Then one must take into account the power possessed by other countries, and build relations in such a way that these forces do not clash because a clash is a mutual calamity.' When people part, Khrushchev added grimly, they say 'goodnight.' 'What hell of a goodnight can you talk about, when we are sleeping on a powder keg.'⁷⁷

The Cuban Missile Crisis reached its height during the week of October 22-28, following Kennedy's

⁷³ For a detailed exploration, see Sergey Radchenko, 'On hedgehogs and passions: history, hearsay, and hotchpotch in the writing of the Cuban missile crisis,' in Len Scott and R. Gerald Hughes (eds), *The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Critical Reappraisal* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

⁷⁴ Nikita Khrushchev's remarks on a draft of his letter to John F. Kennedy, April 21, 1961. *Venskii Val's Kholodnoi Voiny*, p. 167.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev, Edward Crankshaw, Strobe Talbott, *Khrushchev Remembers* (Boston: Little Brown, 1970), 493-4.

⁷⁷ Nikita Khrushchev's conversation with the deputy foreign minister of Iran, October 26, 1962, RGANI: fond 52, opis 1, delo 567, list 117. On Khrushchev's motivation to deliver the missiles for purposes of great-power prestige, see Robert Jervis, 'The Cuban Missile Crisis: What can we know, how did it start, and why did it end?' in Scott and Hughes, eds., *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, p. 9.

decision to establish a naval blockade around the island and demand the removal of the missiles. During this week, Khrushchev chose to shelve considerations of personal and national prestige, or his passion for Cuban Communism, or perhaps even his strategic calculations, and beat a hasty retreat. As soon as he learned of Kennedy's declaration of a 'quarantine' around Cuba, Khrushchev warned the commander of the Soviet forces in Cuba, general Issa Pliiev, not to use nuclear weapons without authorization from Moscow, confirming an earlier such demand on 22 October.⁷⁸ That order essentially negated the purported rationale for sending the missiles in the first place – to defend Cuba at all costs – but in an October 25 Presidium discussion, Khrushchev rationalized it this way: 'It is not to our benefit to fight. The future depends not on Cuba but on our country.'⁷⁹ Later that day, he decided to offer the U.S. the deal of removing the missiles in exchange for a non-invasion pledge, and sent a letter to the White House with this proposal on the 26th. Encouraged by a column by the American journalist Walter Lippmann, on the 27th he sent another letter also demanding the removal of U.S Jupiter missiles from Turkey; Kennedy famously agreed to this demand as long as it was kept secret, but Khrushchev was already willing to accept the original deal, no matter how seriously it damaged Soviet-Cuban relations. With the specter of thermonuclear war looming, each side was ready to offer more than the other was demanding. On October 28, Khrushchev publicly accepted Kennedy's demand to withdraw the missiles. In breach of diplomatic practice, his letter was broadcast *en clair* over the radio: the Soviet leader feared delays could inadvertently lead to war. This was how Castro learned of the deal to remove the missiles.

During that fateful week, Khrushchev recognized that his gambit had made a nuclear war seriously possible and his response was to negotiate and conciliate to prevent that war. What one sees in the Soviet leader's behavior (and also in Kennedy's) during the last few days of the crisis is a fixation upon getting out of the mess he had created, of subordinating every other concern to the immediate objective of securing some kind of deal. Thus it is easy to imagine his reaction to Castro's infamous proposal, written on the night of October 26-27, to strike the Americans first 'however harsh and terrible the solution would be.'⁸⁰ 'What is this – temporary madness or the absence of brains?' commented the astonished Soviet leader.⁸¹ 'We were completely aghast,' he recounted to the Czechoslovak leader Antonin Novotny. 'Castro clearly has no idea about what thermonuclear war is. ... At the same time, it is clear that with a first strike one cannot today knock the opponent out of the fight. There can always be a counter-strike, which can be devastating.... Only a person who has no idea what nuclear war means, or who has been so blinded, for instance, like Castro, by revolutionary passion, can talk like that.'⁸²

Choosing MAD

What is the 'nuclear revolution?' How, precisely, has the development of thermonuclear weaponry affected the practice of international politics? This question has been addressed by several authors;⁸³ its effect upon Khrushchev during the 1950s and early 1960s allows us to put forward a

⁷⁸ Malinovsky cable to Pliiev, October 25, 1962, Wilson Center digital archive, document at <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117324>; also see Mark Kramer, 'Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis for Warsaw Pact Nuclear Operations,' *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 8-9 (1995), 348-54.

⁷⁹ Presidium discussion, October 25, 1962, Wilson Center digital archive, document at <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/115136>. An excellent brief chapter on Khrushchev's diplomacy during the Cuban Missile Crisis is Fursenko and Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War*, chapter 19.

⁸⁰ James G. Blight, Bruce J. Allyn, David A. Welch, *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis, and the Soviet Collapse* (2002), p. 509.

⁸¹ Dictation by Nikita Khrushchev, October 30, 1962. RGANI: fond 52, opis 1, delo 600, list 8.

⁸² Conversation between Nikita Khrushchev and Antonin Novotny, October 30, 1962, Wilson Center digital archive, document at <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/115219>.

⁸³ See Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, chapters 1-2; Daniel Deudney, 'Nuclear Weapons and the Waning of the Real-State,' *Daedalus* 124/2 (Spring 1995) 209-31; and Waltz, 'Nuclear Myths and Political Realities.' For a recent overview, see Stephen Walt, 'Rethinking the Nuclear Revolution,' *Foreign Policy online*,

distinct definition.

Jervis stresses that the essence of the nuclear revolution lies in the condition of *mutual vulnerability*: the fact that any nuclear power contending with another in possession of a second-strike deterrent always remains vulnerable to immediate annihilation, irrespective of either the strategies it develops during peacetime or the progress of a limited war between them. He predicts that this condition will produce stability and peace, but also that rational states will shy away from confrontation and desist from maximal strategic competition and the quest for first-strike superiority.⁸⁴ It is these latter claims that critics of the nuclear revolution focus upon, by pointing to the fact that crises occurred during the Cold War and that the two superpowers built thousands of nuclear weapons and developed war-fighting strategies during the last 25 years of the Cold War.⁸⁵

As we have seen, Khrushchev's policies clearly seem, on one hand, to confirm Jervis's predictions: Khrushchev perceived the condition of mutual vulnerability, sought stability, and tried to install a strategy of minimum deterrence. Yet he also engaged in blustery atomic diplomacy, instigated crises that brought the world to the brink, and approved of new weapons production in the early 1960s, even though he had declared that the United States was already deterred by the small Soviet arsenal. Does not the latter behaviour contradict the former?

Our findings indicate that there was no contradiction. For Khrushchev, what the nuclear revolution ultimately meant was its more common-sense, less strategic connotation: the simple fact that the use of these weapons would result in a moral catastrophe and a political absurdity—that, as far as he was concerned, a nuclear war could not be won and must never be fought. This determination leaps out from his famous recollection of his response to Kurchatov's report in 1954:

‘I couldn’t sleep for several days,’ Khrushchev recalled. ‘Then I became convinced that we could never possibly use these weapons, and when I realized that I was able to sleep again.’⁸⁶

This oft-cited quotation provides us with a good way to characterize our take on the nuclear revolution. Khrushchev's experience suggests that it has manifested itself less in the strategies nuclear powers develop, or in the foreign policies they undertake, but rather in the gut conviction among leaders actually responsible for pushing the button that when push comes to shove they have to find a way to avoid nuclear war—to ‘get out of this mess.’ The Soviet leader cultivated a private determination, once he realized what nuclear war actually entailed, that he could ‘never possibly use these weapons,’ and set about trying to continue to wage the Cold War with this new purpose in mind. It was a delicate act, and Khrushchev – like his American counterparts – could not know for certain he would succeed. But at the moments of decision – most notably over Berlin in 1959, and Cuba in 1962 – he backed away, suppressing considerations of strategy or prestige. His simple determination not to be the man responsible for a war that could destroy humanity explains his decisions to step back from the precipice during the grim Cold War showdowns; it is here, we argue, where the power of the nuclear revolution really reveals itself.

The visceral effect of nuclear weaponry upon Khrushchev during the most dangerous period of the Cold War suggests two broader and related points, both of which speak to the recent debates about nuclear strategy today. First, our particular definition of the nuclear revolution provides a new means of contending with its critics. In short, it demands that in considering the effects of nuclear weaponry upon the real world of international politics, we must evaluate what leaders do when it

August 3, 2010, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/08/03/rethinking-the-nuclear-revolution/>.

⁸⁴ Jervis, *Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, chapters 1-2.

⁸⁵ See Lieber and Press, ‘The New Era of Nuclear Weapons,’ and their forthcoming *Myth of the Nuclear Revolution*.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb*, p. 339.

comes to the possibility of nuclear war, not just what their militaries plan for. It is undeniable that Cold War leaders instigated dangerous crises during the 1958-62 period, and that both sides continued to build vast weapons systems afterwards. But what must be weighed against this evidence is the clear determination of leaders like Khrushchev to avoid war when the crises threatened to get out of hand; and the fact that after 1962 neither superpower risked direct confrontation ever again, steering clear of hotspots like Berlin, Cuba, or Korea. Ronald Reagan, to take another example, approved of a massive nuclear buildup during the early 1980s, and engaged in belligerent Cold War rhetoric. Did he therefore believe that the U.S. might be able to win a nuclear war? He had one word for those who really thought this was possible: 'crazy.'⁸⁷

As we have noted, the case for nuclear strategy today depends upon downplaying the salience of the nuclear revolution, because these strategies become less attractive if leaders will be too afraid of nuclear war to use them. Scholars who want to make this case, who contend that the historical record proves that the nuclear revolution has played little role in the real world of international politics, must demonstrate that leaders were not determined to avoid nuclear war, when the possibility actually emerged, irrespective of the strategies they had approved or weapons they authorised. Alternatively, they could claim that a determination to avoid major war by leaders of great powers is peripheral to the real world of international politics.

Second, our account of the failure of Khrushchev's 'grand design' in 1960 highlights a second danger inherent in developing war-winning nuclear strategies: it communicates to nuclear rivals an unwillingness to play the game. To be sure, Khrushchev overreacted to the missile gap politics and to the U2 fiasco. He might have better understood how the American political system rewards threat inflation during election campaigns; he might have wondered how the CIA could have ensured that Soviet anti-aircraft defenses would shoot down that particular flight on the eve of the summit without killing the pilot. But that does not invalidate the larger point, which is the danger that a public policy of war-winning nuclear strategy signals to another nuclear powers one's belief in nuclear victory. This threatens not only to trigger dangerous strategic competition, as Lieber and Press allow. It also conveys a kind of disrespect, a dismissal of the other side's status, as occurred in 1960.

The aversion of leaders to nuclear war, we suggest, best explains the absence of major conflict among nuclear powers over the past seventy years and provides a real-world historical basis for the power of the nuclear revolution. In contemporary debates about nuclear strategy, scholars should

⁸⁷ Quoted in Beth Fischer, *The Reagan Reversal* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), p. 121. The full quotation from Reagan: 'There are still some people at the Pentagon who think that nuclear war is 'winnable.' I thought they were crazy.' On another occasion Reagan noted in his diary that 'we have to do all we can to have a deterrent and to see there is never a nuclear war.' Quoted in Michael Dobbs, *Down with Big Brother: the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 113.