A Failed Empire

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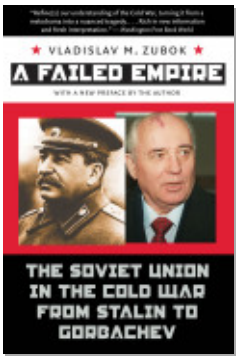

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(CHAPTER 5)
THE NUCLEAR EDUCATION OF KHRUSHCHEV, 1953–1963

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Let this device [nuclear bomb] hang over capitalists
like the sword of Damocles.
—Khrushchev to Soviet nuclear designers, July 1961

On October 4, 1957, a Soviet intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launched a satellite, the orbit of which took it on a path over North America.[1] Sputnik was an innocuous and peaceful satellite, but American analysts also recognized that the same missile could carry a multimegaton nuclear charge. Almost immediately, these same experts warned of a "missile gap" that might eventually give the USSR the ability to destroy American strategic forces in a surprise attack. For Americans, this brought back memories of Pearl Harbor, which increased their sense of sudden loss of security. Across the United States, middle-class families saved money to build fallout shelters. Children took part in frightening "duck-and-cover" drills, learning how their desks would save them from a nuclear blast. A friend of mine who grew up in New York in the 1950s recalls looking at the Manhattan skyline during a drill to see if the Empire State Building was still there.[2]

In reality, now it was the Soviets' turn to have nuclear fears. The strategic military balance hugely favored the United States. Soviet strategic defense, writes Steven Zaloga, was "horribly expensive, technically unsound, and bound for premature obsolescence." And the Soviets had no nuclear strategic forces to retaliate in case of an American first strike. At the same time, the United States relied on the "first use" strategy for atomic weapons. Americans planned to use nuclear weapons against the Soviet Union to prevent the Soviets from overrunning Western Europe. The Pentagon built bases for strategic bombers and missiles not only on American territory but also on the territories of allies, namely Great Britain, West Germany, Italy, and Turkey.[3]

Until recently, very little was known about Soviet reactions to the thermonuclear revolution and the nuclear arms race with the United States. Some scholars suggested that the nuclear factor forced Moscow to behave more responsibly

and moderately in the Cold War.[4] In reality, the opposite happened. The American containment strategy and strategic superiority left the Soviets feeling they had no choices between resistance and unconditional surrender.[5] Facing this choice, the mercurial Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev chose to resist. He decided to trump American nuclear superiority with Soviet nuclear brinkmanship, using nuclear missiles as the last argument during international crises. His choice resulted in the most dangerous Soviet ventures during the entire Cold War.

THE BOMB AND THE DOGMA

Stalin died just at the start of the thermonuclear revolution. By 1953, Soviet military programs had already produced several types of atomic weapons, medium-range missiles, antimissile defense systems, cruise missiles, and nuclear submarines. But it turned out to be just the first phase in the upswing of the Soviet nuclear strategic forces. Viktor Adamsky, a veteran of the Soviet nuclear project, recalls that "the years of 1953–1962 were the most productive in the development of thermonuclear weapons."[6]

While Stalin was alive, the atomic program was rarely, if ever, discussed at the Politburo, and information on American and Soviet tests never spread outside a limited circle of officials, including Lavrenty Beria, Minister of Defense Bulganin, and the top military echelons.[7] Then came the news of the impending big test of the fission-boosted bomb designed by Andrei Sakharov and Vitali Ginzburg in the secret laboratory, "Arzamas-16." In July 1953, a deputy head of the nuclear project, Avraami Zaveniagin, reported to the Party Plenum delegates: "The Americans, at Truman's order, began to work on the hydrogen bomb. Our people and our country are no slouch. The hydrogen bomb is tens of times more powerful than a plain atomic bomb, and its explosion, now under preparation, will mean the liquidation of the second monopoly of the Americans. It will be an event of paramount importance in world politics."[8]

The first Soviet hydrogen test on August 12, 1953, gave the Soviet leaders an enormous boost of optimism. For a while, the Kremlin leaders believed, mistakenly, that the Soviet Union had become the leader in the nuclear race. Khrushchev recalls his enthusiasm: "No one else, neither the Americans nor the British, had such a bomb. I was overwhelmed by the idea. We did everything in our power to assure the rapid realization of Sakharov's plans." Andrei Sakharov immediately became a darling of the Kremlin. According to a plan, approved on November 20, 1953, by the Presidium of the Council of Ministers, Sakharov's bomb, upgraded to a one-to-two-megaton yield, would be attached to a huge intercontinental missile. This missile would be designed by another colossal

complex that Stalin had created. The chief designer of the intercontinental missile, Sergei Korolev, pledged to conduct its final tests by the end of 1957.[9]

Thermonuclear power immediately became the object of Kremlin politics. After the arrest of Beria, the "atomic czar" under Stalin, other members of the collective leadership claimed he wanted to use the successful test in his bid for power. True or not, it was obvious the nuclear program was too important to remain the exclusive fiefdom of any single politician. Immediately after Beria's arrest, the Special Atomic Committee and the First Chief Directorate, the main structures in charge of nuclear programs, were merged into the Ministry of Medium Machine-Building Industry. Vyacheslav Malyshev, the head of tank production during World War II, became the atomic minister. Although he was close to Malenkov, he was not a member of the Presidium.[10] This did not end the political bickering around the Bomb.

Meanwhile, the United States dispelled Moscow's claims of superiority in thermonuclear developments. In January and February 1954, Secretary of State Dulles turned up his rhetoric of "massive retaliation" to full volume. And on March 1, the United States started a new series of nuclear tests with the explosion of a fifteen-megaton hydrogen bomb, with an explosive strength three times more than scientists had predicted. After the huge fallout cloud, covering 7,000 square miles over the Pacific, irradiated a Japanese fishing trawler, a global outcry arose to ban further testing of this kind. At a press conference on March 10, Eisenhower and Lewis Strauss, head of the Atomic Energy Commission, admitted that a super bomb could destroy a whole metropolitan area and a thermonuclear war could endanger civilization. Three months earlier, on December 8, 1953, President Eisenhower had made his "Atoms for Peace" proposal to the United Nations, an effort intended to dispel the image of the United States as a state preparing for thermonuclear war. The proposal suggested joint efforts in the exploration of peaceful nuclear energy to help underdeveloped parts of the world. In the light of subsequent American tests, however, this proposal began to look disingenuous, a fig leaf covering the demonstration of nuclear superiority.[11]

Soviet nuclear designers realized that the Americans had made a breakthrough to construction of multimegaton weapons. The Sakharov bomb could not yield such power. As a result, Igor Kurchatov and other nuclear physicists lost interest in the Sakharov design and soon zeroed in on the principle of radiation compression, the idea that Edward Teller and Stanislaus Ulam had discovered in January 1951 in the United States.[12] About the same time, the atomic minister, Malyshev, asked Kurchatov to draft a response to Eisenhower's "Atoms for Peace." Soviet scientists used this opportunity to bring the startling facts about the thermonuclear revolution to the attention of Kremlin leaders. The result-

ing essay, "The Danger of Atomic War and President Eisenhower's Proposal," reached the desks of Malenkov, Khrushchev, and Molotov on April 1, 1954.[13] "Modern atomic practice, based on the utilization of thermonuclear reaction," the physicists wrote, "allows for increasing the explosive energy contained in a bomb practically to an unlimited extent. Defense against such a weapon is practically impossible, so it is clear that the use of atomic weapons on a mass scale will lead to the devastation of the warring countries. One cannot help admitting that a huge threat, which could obliterate all life on Earth, hangs over mankind." The authors suggested exposing the duplicity of Eisenhower's proposal and publicizing the dangers of thermonuclear war.[14]

It is probable that these ideas had reached Georgy Malenkov earlier and that he had decided again to preempt other members of the collective leadership with an authoritative pronouncement. On March 12, 1954, the chairman of the Council of Ministers said in a public speech that the continuation of the Cold War between the USSR and the United States would lead to hostilities, "which with modern weapons mean the end of world civilization." This was a startling departure from the Soviet political discourse on nuclear weapons. For instance, Mikoyan's speech on the same day contained the traditional refrain that "hydrogen weapons in the hands of the Soviet Union are a means for deterring aggressors and for waging peace."[15]

Malenkov's speech reflected the growing nuclear fears in the Kremlin. On February 4, 1954, the Party Secretariat sanctioned upgrading underground bunkers and bomb shelters for the military and the government in case of nuclear war. Molotov and Khrushchev, however, used Malenkov's departure from the party line to charge him with ideological heresy. They claimed that his pessimistic conclusion would demoralize Soviet people and allies around the world, because it disputed the inevitability of the triumph of Communism over capitalism. They also attacked the speech from the position of "realism": any concern about nuclear weapons, they argued, could be interpreted by the enemy as a sign of weakness. In his next public speech, Malenkov admitted that a nuclear war would actually lead to the "collapse of the whole capitalist system."[16]

According to Molotov, another war would bring a "final victory" over "the aggressive forces of imperialism." Minister of Defense Nikolai Bulganin and most high-ranking Soviet military figures agreed. They still refused to acknowledge the revolutionary implications of thermonuclear weapons. In September 1954, the Presidium authorized the military exercise at Totskoye near the Urals. A Hiroshima-type atomic bomb was detonated there for the purpose of training troops. Bulganin and a group of marshals and generals attended the exercise and

were optimistic: after taking certain precautions, the Soviet army would be able to wage atomic warfare.[17]

Khrushchev, despite his public stand, was initially greatly troubled by demonstrations of thermonuclear power. After the August 1953 Soviet test, his son recalled, Khrushchev watched a secret film on the nuclear explosion and came home depressed and could not calm down for days. The film showed houses shattered and people knocked off their feet at a distance of dozens of miles from ground zero. A witness of the test recalled that the impact of this explosion "apparently transcended some kind of psychological barrier. The effect of the first atomic bomb explosion had not inspired such flesh-creeping terror, *although it had been incomparably more terrible than anything seen in the still recent war*." Khrushchev, who had been exposed to the horrors of war in 1941–44, must have felt a similar shudder. He confirmed his shock later in conversation with an Egyptian journalist: "When I was appointed First Secretary of the Central Committee and learned all the facts about nuclear power I could not sleep for several days."[18]

After the initial shock, Khrushchev realized that if the fear of thermonuclear power was mutual, it would prevent a future war between the Soviet Union and the United States. He suspected that the Eisenhower administration, despite its preparations and rhetoric, would not use such terrible weapons, especially if Americans feared possible retaliation. A natural optimist, Khrushchev transformed his anxiety into the determination to overcome American superiority. Once he consolidated his hold on power, he introduced dramatic changes in the structure of the Soviet armed forces. By early 1955, he discontinued Stalin's program of construction of a large navy, arguing that it could not withstand a strike by the new weaponry, conventional or atomic. He came to believe, as Eisenhower had earlier, that missiles would dominate future warfare.[19]

The fear of nuclear war did not change Khrushchev's belief in the revolutionary-imperial paradigm. True, he no longer thought, as Stalin and Molotov had, that a future war would make the world communist. But he felt that the mutual balance of fear disadvantaged the United States more than the Soviet Union. It would mean that "American imperialism," despite its economic, financial, technological, and military superiority, would not dare to challenge Communist control over Central Europe. Moreover, the Soviet Union and its allies would get more chances, under the cloak of nuclear fears, to promote the causes of decolonization, the anti-imperialist struggle, and Communism far beyond Soviet borders. The Soviet leadership, in Khrushchev's opinion, also had another advantage over the U.S. government; it was relatively free from "domestic deterrence," that is, public fears of nuclear war that could conflict with the global goals. The Soviet

propaganda machine had developed a habit of suppressing the slightest signs of pacifism and used enormous resources to combat erosion of the ideological militancy in the society. With the exception of Malenkov's speech, the Kremlin leaders studiously avoided scaring the Soviet people with the consequences of a nuclear war. There were no "duck-and-cover" exercises in Soviet schools in the 1950s (although Soviet kids had plenty of paramilitary training), and the press and radio kept readers on a very slim diet of information about nuclear tests, American or Soviet. The physicists' remarkable letter of April 1954 was never published.[20]

However, the Soviet public *did* know about atomic bombs and *did* read about the destruction of Hiroshima. Not only soldiers on duty but also many civilians looked anxiously at planes in the skies, fearing them to be an *Enola Gay*. There was an obvious gap between the realities of the nuclear age and the party ideological dogma that predated them. This gap provoked questions and doubts. In the summer of 1954, a member of the Party Secretariat, Pyotr Pospelov, reported to Khrushchev the "mistakes" made by the world chess champion Mikhail Botvinnik in his letter to the party leadership. How, Botvinnik had asked, was one supposed to match the danger of nuclear annihilation with the official ideological thesis that wars were begun by imperialist "warmongers" in search of profits? Should the Soviet Union reach accommodation with these imperialists? Would this accommodation be a betrayal of "socialist" ideals? These questions aimed right at the heart of Soviet ideology and Cold War propaganda.[21]

On November 22, 1955, Soviet nuclear designers successfully tested a 1.6-megaton bomb. Unlike the one tested in August 1953, this bomb was a genuine "super," using the radiation compression principle and nuclear fusion. Igor Kurchatov and his designers knew they now could, just like the Americans, build multimegaton, ever-more-powerful, weapons. After the test, Andrei Sakharov suggested to Marshal Mitrofan Nedelin, the military commander of the test, that it would be a catastrophe if thermonuclear weapons were ever used. Sakharov was not alone in his doubts. Even Kurchatov, the scientific director of the Soviet nuclear project, would develop pacifist ideas, to the great displeasure of Khrushchev.[22]

Ideological optimism and militarist bravado suppressed fears of nuclear war in the top military circles. One exception was Marshal Georgy Zhukov, who replaced Bulganin as minister of defense. He agreed with President Eisenhower in July 1955 that with the appearance of atomic and hydrogen weapons many notions that were valid in the past had changed. Zhukov noted that "he personally saw how lethal this weapon is." The president and the marshal also agreed

that only gradual trust-building and arms control measures could save the two sides from the current situation and overcome mutual fears.[23]

KHRUSHCHEV'S NEW LOOK

In February 1956, Khrushchev and his colleagues in the collective leadership were ready to bring ideological dogma to the nuclear age. At the Twentieth Party Congress, Khrushchev renounced Stalin's doctrine of the inevitability of world war and laid out the principles of "peaceful coexistence" between capitalism and socialism. But Khrushchev revised Stalin's interpretation of Marxism-Leninism only halfway. On the one hand, he said that imperialism does breed wars and repeated that capitalism would find its grave in another world war, should it unleash one. On the other hand, he added, "the situation has changed radically, because today there are mighty social and political forces possessing formidable means to prevent the imperialists from unleashing war." Influential circles in the West, Khrushchev concluded, had begun to realize that there could be no victor in an atomic war.[24]

Khrushchev argued that the Soviet view of Western imperialism remained the same, but that Soviet thermonuclear power could force the imperialists to be reasonable. After the test of the super bomb in November 1955, the Soviet leader could rely on the fresh demonstration of power. On February 20, 1956, the successful launch of the first medium-range ballistic missile with a nuclear warhead occurred. Khrushchev felt awed at the enormous destructive potential of the nuclear missile strike. But again, as in 1953, he conquered his emotions and began to search for the ways to use the newly acquired power. His conclusion for the public was: "Let these bombs get on the nerves of those who would like to unleash war."[25]

Khrushchev's most immediate goal was to create the appearance of a nuclear stalemate so as to undermine NATO and the other anti-Communist alliances engineered or sponsored by Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles in 1954 and 1955, specifically the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO or the Baghdad Pact) and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). American missiles were deployed in Turkey, a member of CENTO. Khrushchev wanted to get rid of these missiles. He also wanted the United States to acknowledge the USSR as an equal power. In Khrushchev's opinion, the Americans would do so only if presented with a stark choice between war and peace. "There are only two ways," the first secretary said at the Twentieth Congress. "Either peaceful coexistence or the most destructive war in history. There is no third way."[26] To drive this point home to the Ameri-

cans, Khrushchev needed to convince them that he was prepared to use the new terrible weapons. Thus, the implementation of his new vision led logically not to a moderate version of nuclear deterrence but to nuclear brinkmanship and dangerous bluff.

In a sense, Khrushchev emulated the policies and rhetoric of President Eisenhower and Secretary Dulles, who privately abhorred the prospect of nuclear Armageddon yet directed all their energies to maintaining American nuclear superiority in order to achieve specific foreign policy goals. Dulles, as a recent study has concluded, sought to "make nuclear weapons useful as something other than a Sword of Damocles suspended over the entire world." During the Geneva summit of 1955, Khrushchev realized that both Eisenhower and Dulles had deep misgivings about nuclear weapons. Khrushchev understood that their game (mistakenly, he believed that Dulles, not Eisenhower, was the chief strategist) was to intimidate the Soviet Union without becoming too provocative. And he decided to respond in kind. He felt that, "as a war veteran," Eisenhower would not allow confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States to get out of hand. With such counterparts in Washington, Khrushchev believed there was a margin of safety in brinkmanship.[27]

Because the Soviet Union still lacked both ICBMs and reliable strategic bombers to deliver a strike against the United States, the first target of Soviet nuclear threats became Western European members of NATO. The first apparent success from the point of view of the Soviets was in November 1956, during the Suez crisis of Anglo-Franco-Israeli aggression against Egypt. At Khrushchev's suggestion, the Kremlin threatened the aggressors with a nuclear strike, while seeking to neutralize the United States by offering to send a joint Soviet-American "peacekeeping" mission to the Middle East. In reality, it was American pressure on London and Paris that ended the war, but Khrushchev firmly believed that Soviet threats did the trick and that "Dulles was the one whose nerves snapped." In June 1957, Mikoyan told the delegates of the Party Plenum that "everybody acknowledged that with this we decided the fate of Egypt."[28]

The outcome of the Egyptian affair emboldened Khrushchev to believe that nuclear power overshadowed all other factors in international relations. Thereafter, he began to regard the nuclear buildup not only as a means of deterrence but, according to the nineteenth-century Prussian war theoretician Carl von Clausewitz, as the continuation of state policies by other means.[29] In May 1957, Khrushchev said in an interview that the Cold War confrontation apparently boiled down to the relations between the two countries, the Soviet Union and the United States.[30]

In August 1957, the long-awaited technological breakthrough in missile tech-

nology occurred. The Soviet aerospace firm headed by Sergei Korolev successfully tested the R-7 missile ("Semyorka") as the world's first ICBM. On September 7, Khrushchev observed one of the missile's tests. He allowed Korolev to proceed with his pioneering plans of space exploration, and on October 4, Sputnik stunned the Americans and the rest of the world. In the longer term, the Sputnik effect galvanized the United States into launching another costly round in the arms race in order to restore public confidence in American superiority. Khrushchev, however, achieved what he wanted: now Americans feared nuclear war even more than the Soviets did. In February 1960, he said to the Presidium that the intercontinental missiles made an agreement with the United States possible, because "main-street Americans have begun to shake from fear for the first time in their lives."[31]

In the following years, the Soviet military-industrial complex focused even more on producing ever larger and more numerous nuclear weapons and missiles. Still, for many years, the Soviet Union had only a hypothetical strategic capacity against the United States. The R-7 was an inefficient and horribly costly weapon. A 300-ton behemoth, it operated on liquid oxygen fuel, which made every launch a nightmare. Each launch site cost half a billion rubles. In 1959, Soviet missile designers began to develop two other missiles, the R-9 and the R-16, but neither was good for serial deployment—they operated on liquid fuel and were extremely vulnerable to air attack. The deployment of the first generation of reliable intercontinental missiles began only in April 1962. Meanwhile, Korolev's behemoth had to be transported by railroad to the launching pad in Plesetsk in northern Russia. By the end of 1959, only four of these behemoths and two launching pads for them had become operational. In case of a U.S. first strike, the Soviets would have time for one launch only, and, according to Sergei Khrushchev, they targeted four U.S. "hostage cities" for retaliation: New York, Washington, Chicago, and Los Angeles.[32]

More prudent leadership in these circumstances would have waited years before bragging about new strategic capabilities, but not Khrushchev. On December 15, 1959, the Kremlin announced the creation of the Strategic Rocket Forces (RVSN), a new branch of the Soviet armed forces. Economic factors contributed to Khrushchev's impatience. He repeatedly promised to win the economic competition with the United States and sharply raise Soviet living standards. The global appeal of the Soviet planned economy, especially in India, Indonesia, Egypt, and other countries of the decolonizing world, was then enormous. Yet the romantic vision of the planned economy produced ever-diminishing practical results. Just at the time the RVSN was created, the Soviet economy began to slow down. The rapid rise of living standards since 1953 stopped. Khrushchev boasted that Soviet

consumerism would outpace that of the Americans, but the facts belied his boasts. The nonmilitary sectors of the economy languished; the agricultural program of "virgin lands," after initial success, turned into a major disappointment; and Khrushchev's hasty measures to curb private peasant households created shortages of meat, milk, and butter. Massive assistance to China, growing generosity to Egypt, and rapidly rising subsidies to Poland and Hungary after 1956 put new strains on the Soviet economy and budget. To "correct deep disproportions in the people's economy," the Soviet government had to scrap the last three years of the five-year plan and announce a new "seven-year" plan. The promise to produce both guns and butter turned out to be more difficult than Khrushchev had expected.[33]

Meanwhile, the requirements of the new armament and research and development programs grew precipitously and far surpassed the allocated resources. From 1958 to 1961, military production in the USSR more than doubled, increasing from 2.9 to 5.6 percent of the Soviet national income. Strategic missiles turned out to be more expensive than Khrushchev had thought. Construction of launching pads and silos, including a new colossal complex at Tyuratam, Kazakhstan, as well as giant plants for the mass production of strategic arms, required enormous capital investments. Nuclear and missile projects necessitated the building of "secret cities" that had to attract the best workforce and maintain high living standards for it. One "secret city," Snezhinsk near Chelyabinsk, in the Urals, hosted the second Soviet nuclear laboratory. By 1960, its population had reached 20,000 people. Another "secret city" near Krasnoiarsk in Siberia began to produce weapons-grade plutonium in 1958. The reactors and twenty-two workshops were located in a huge artificial cavern at a depth of 200 to 250 meters beneath the earth; the complex had its own subway system and high-quality urban infrastructure that serviced and housed many thousands of scientists, engineers, and workers.[34]

Facing the growing discrepancy between promises and performance, Khrushchev was impatient to test his New Look. He hoped to achieve breakthroughs in the German Question and use the Soviet nuclear-missile programs as a "great economizer" in defense spending.

TESTING THE NEW LOOK IN BERLIN

In November 1958, Khrushchev presented the United States, Great Britain, and France with an ultimatum: either convert West Berlin into a "free city" within six months, or he would act unilaterally and give control over Western access to Berlin to the government of the GDR. At first, the impulsive Soviet leader

was prepared to declare the Potsdam agreements—the basis for the presence of the Western powers in Berlin—to be defunct, because of Western violations. However, he realized that this radical step could hurt Soviet diplomacy in the longer term. So Khrushchev focused just on the idea of the "free city"—and on a separate peace treaty agreement that Moscow could reach with the GDR. As it turned out, the deadline was repeatedly postponed over the course of about four years.[35] Since the United States and other Western powers refused to accede to the ultimatum, Khrushchev's move created the East-West standoff that became known as the second Berlin crisis. Initially his approach seemed to bring about the expected results. NATO became visibly fractured under the renewed Soviet pressure. British prime minister Harold Macmillan hastily visited Khrushchev in February 1959 in an open attempt to mediate between him and Eisenhower. A long-delayed conference of foreign ministers on the German Question took place in Geneva from May to August. Finally, in July, Eisenhower extended an invitation to the Soviet leader to visit the United States. The results of the Khrushchev-Eisenhower talks at Camp David, from Khrushchev's viewpoint, were promising: Eisenhower acknowledged that the situation, with Berlin a divided city in the middle of East Germany, was "abnormal." He seemed to be agreeing to resume the quest for a diplomatic resolution of the German Question within the framework of a four-power summit, scheduled for the spring of 1960.[36]

There are divergent views on the origins of this confrontation. Hope Harrison concludes: "Khrushchev's concern about the GDR, combined with his desire to gain prestige by successful negotiations with the West, were the most consistent influences on him during the crisis." Other scholars believe that the Soviet leader reacted to the growing integration of West Germany into NATO and to American plans for "nuclear sharing," the result of the NATO "first strike" nuclear doctrine, which presented a security threat to the Soviet Union. There is evidence that the Kremlin was concerned with the prospect of West Germany gaining access to nuclear weapons.[37]

Khrushchev had multiple motives in the Berlin crisis. First, he was committed to ensuring the existence of the socialist GDR, a commitment he had repeatedly and publicly proclaimed during his criticism of Beria and Malenkov. Second, he was determined to demonstrate the effectiveness of his New Look in making Western powers abandon the containment strategy and begin to negotiate with the Soviet Union. Finally, as his rhetoric suggests, he hoped that a victory in Berlin would trigger the unraveling of Western imperialism globally and would help promote the revolutionary process in the countries of Asia and Africa.

Khrushchev laughed at the fears of his son, Sergei. "No one would undertake war over Berlin. On the other hand, it was time to fix the existing post-war

balance of forces." Khrushchev hoped, according to his son, that he could scare the Western powers into making them "sit at the negotiating table."[38] The Soviet leader felt that the Soviet Union's nuclear power gave him an opportunity to succeed where Stalin had failed ten years earlier, namely in moving the relationship with the United States onto equal terms. He wanted to bring back to life the Yalta-Potsdam formula of great power diplomacy destroyed by Hiroshima and America's containment strategy.

Nuclear missiles were at the core of this gamble. The Soviet leader wanted to present the Western governments and citizenry with a stark choice: accept responsibility for the consequences of thermonuclear war or dismantle the anti-Soviet ramparts. It is sometimes overlooked that the flip side of Khrushchev's diplomacy of crisis-mongering and nuclear brinkmanship in 1958–61 was his campaign for disarmament. The Soviet leader wanted to offset the impression of Soviet bellicosity. In April 1957, Khrushchev told the Presidium that the Soviet Union should step up a propaganda campaign to ban nuclear weapons. Otherwise, he said, "we would lose the support of broad masses" in the West.[39] In November 1958, the Soviet Union declared a unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing (a few days after the United States and Great Britain had done the same). In February 1960, Khrushchev proposed to the Presidium that the Americans be offered the destruction of the Soviet ICBMs and nuclear weapons, on the condition that they would eliminate their military bases on the Soviet periphery and their strategic bombers. "Then NATO, SEATO, and CENTO"—all U.S.-forged alliances in Eurasia—"would fall into precipice." Mistakenly, he assumed that this proposal would be irresistible to the frightened American and West European publics.[40]

In September 1959, Khrushchev arrived in the United States at the invitation of President Eisenhower. Speaking for the first time at the UN General Assembly, he unveiled, for propaganda purposes, a plan of "general and complete disarmament." On the one hand, Khrushchev must have felt that his gamble worked. He toured America from coast to coast, clearly enjoying the fact that the most powerful capitalist country had to swallow its arrogance and entertain "the number one communist." His son-in-law Alexei Adzhubei and a host of Soviet journalists launched a mini-cult of Khrushchev in the Soviet Union, presenting him as an indefatigable peace fighter. It was an additional bonus of the New Look, but perhaps it was the one Khrushchev coveted most. On the other hand, his meeting "face to face with America" revealed Khrushchev's lack of preparedness for the diplomatic game. Khrushchev was both impressed and upset by American power and opulence; deep inside, he was insecure and looked for a

pretext to give a rebuff. And he could not elicit from Eisenhower any specific concessions on West Berlin.[41]

Khrushchev was especially eager to demonstrate to his domestic constituency that his approach could bring immediate economic benefits. After his much-heralded trip to the United States and in anticipation of another summit in Paris in 1960, where he expected to extract Western concessions on Germany, the chairman decided to make the economic implications of his views public. In December 1959, in a secret memo to Presidium members, Khrushchev proposed a stunningly radical plan of reduction of armed forces. The Soviet Union, he argued, no longer needed a mass army, because nuclear-missile forces would provide a sufficient deterrent to potential aggressors. The reform would give the USSR "major political, moral, and economic advantages." On January 12, 1960, in his speech to the Supreme Soviet, Khrushchev announced the reduction of the armed forces by 1.2 million men in three years. A quarter of a million officers were forced to retire, many without adequate material compensation, retraining, pension, or housing.[42] This military reform was, in Khrushchev's mind, a logical follow-up to the creation of the RVSN just a month earlier.

Nobody dared to criticize Khrushchev's hasty steps, but privately some senior military officers were appalled. Doubts about the emphasis on nuclear missiles and expansionist schemes, not supported by real power, had started soon after the Suez crisis. Later Khrushchev's critics would contend: "We were one breath away from the big war. Our country had not yet recovered from the war with Hitler; people did not want war, did not expect it. Fortunately, all turned out well, and comrade Khrushchev immediately presented it as the product of his genius."[43] The military brass could not publicly oppose Khrushchev's military reforms, but they grumbled about "Nikita's folly" and resisted it by all possible means. Chief of General Staff Marshal Vasily Sokolovsky resigned in protest over Khrushchev's 1960 cuts. Some of the most intelligent generals took advantage of "theoretical discussion" in the classified journal *Military Thought* to question Khrushchev's excessive reliance on nuclear weapons. In 1960 and 1962, General Petr Kurochkin, Colonel-General Amazasp Babadzhanyan, and other authors agreed with Maxwell Taylor in *The Uncertain Trumpet* and Henry Kissinger in *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (both books were translated and published in the Soviet Union) that an exclusive emphasis on nuclear retaliation left no choice between surrender and suicide.[44]

Khrushchev failed to persuade his marshals and generals, but he forced them to accept his New Look. Defense Minister Rodion Malinovsky created a task force at the Academy of the General Staff to prepare a classified book on military

strategy in the nuclear age and ordered a reluctant Marshal Sokolovsky to bring the project to fruition. The book elaborated on the thesis that the next war would be a nuclear war and described the immense importance of the opening phase of the war (the first strike). It also established that the main reason for Soviet possession of nuclear weapons was to deter an American strike, not to wage a nuclear war. A nuclear war would be too devastating and thus must be avoided. The manuscript had to be redrafted several times, until Khrushchev liked the final product and approved its unclassified publication in 1962 under the title *Military Strategy*. In the opinion of the Soviet leader, it was a "sobering" reminder to American "hot heads."[45]

Khrushchev confronted another unexpected critic of his approaches, the leadership of the PRC. In November 1957, at the world conference of Communist parties, Mao hailed the new nuclear missile might of the Soviet Union as a reason for Communist forces to be more aggressive against Western imperialism. At the same time, he asked Khrushchev to share nuclear and missile technology with the PRC. From 1957 to 1959, the Chinese received the technology for the medium-range R-12 missile and cruise missiles and the complete know-how for the construction of atomic weapons. The Soviets even pledged to give the Chinese a working sample of the atomic bomb. Yet Mao could never forgive Khrushchev for his "secret speech" denouncing Stalin without consulting the Chinese. He believed that de-Stalinization was a grave error, perhaps even a challenge to his own authority. And Khrushchev's vision of nuclear bipolarity became anathema for Mao, because it relegated China to a secondary position in the pecking order of great powers.[46]

Mao's hidden animosity became public when the Soviet military asked Beijing to build joint bases for the Soviet navy and submarine fleet in the Pacific. Mao angrily rejected the proposal. On July 31, 1958, Khrushchev, in deep secrecy, flew to Beijing with the aim of soothing the PRC leader. Instead, he was subjected to a barrage of insults and humiliating treatment by the host. He was also shocked to discover a chasm opening between his vision of the nuclear age and Mao's ambitions. Mao did to Khrushchev what Stalin had done to the Americans after Hiroshima: he defied the nuclear factor altogether by describing it as "a paper tiger." "I tried to explain to him," recalled Khrushchev, "that one or two missiles could turn all the divisions in China to dust. But he wouldn't even listen to my arguments and obviously regarded me as a coward." Khrushchev did not disclose his concerns to his colleagues at the Presidium, but the prolonged Sino-Soviet honeymoon was over.[47]

The Chinese continued to startle the Soviets. On August 23, 1958, the People's Liberation Army of the PRC, without warning either Moscow or Washington,

started shelling Quemoy, one of the offshore islands and still held by the Guomindang. Mao commented in his private circle: "The islands are two batons that keep Khrushchev and Eisenhower dancing." By staging this provocation, the Chinese leader drew both the U.S. and the Soviet leadership into a game of nuclear brinkmanship—but this time against their will and in accordance with his own scenario. In their official correspondence with the Kremlin, the Chinese leaders suggested that in the event that the United States used tactical nuclear weapons against the PRC, the Soviet Union should not declare war on America, the Sino-Soviet Treaty of 1950 notwithstanding. Perplexed by this suggestion, Khrushchev and the rest of the Presidium wrote to Beijing that such a scenario would be "a crime before the world working class" and would give the enemy "hope that they will be able to separate us."[48]

Khrushchev would not mind helping China with the islands, as long as Chinese actions coordinated with Moscow's strategy. Yet Mao's nuclear bravado struck him as either irresponsible dogmatism or "Asiatic cunning." Khrushchev soured on the idea of sharing nuclear power with the Communist ally in the East. On June 20, 1959, the Presidium quietly cancelled Sino-Soviet atomic cooperation. An atomic device with complete documentation, ready to be shipped to China, was destroyed. Mao's challenge to Khrushchev's authority profoundly troubled the Soviet leader. According to Troyanovsky, China was always on Khrushchev's mind.[49] At the same time, as the Chinese shelling of the islands failed to produce any results, Khrushchev expected that his nuclear bluff would be productive in Germany and West Berlin.

BRINKMANSHIP FALTERS

Just at the time when Khrushchev proposed the unilateral cuts of Soviet troops, his New Look began to falter. The first big glitch occurred, again, in China, where the Soviet leader appeared in October 1959, immediately after his triumphant trip to the United States. Evidently, the Soviet leader believed he was arriving in Beijing in triumph. He had obtained from President Eisenhower a commitment for a conference of great powers in Paris on Germany and Berlin. Mao Ze-dong, however, openly mocked what seemed to look like the second edition of the Yalta-Potsdam "system." The Chinese leaders, celebrating the anniversary of their revolutionary victory, decided to teach the Soviet leader a lesson and blamed him for accommodating the United States at their expense. To Mao's evident satisfaction, Khrushchev quickly lost his temper, and the meeting degenerated into an angry exchange. In vain, Andrei Gromyko and Mikhail Suslov, present at the meeting, tried to get the talks back on a positive track.

Khrushchev returned from China in a terrible mood, cursing Mao.[50] At the next Party Plenum, he instructed Suslov to report on the bad behavior of the Chinese comrades, but many of his colleagues in the Presidium and the state apparatus blamed deterioration of the Sino-Soviet relations on his rude and clumsy behavior.

Mao's criticism increased Khrushchev's self-doubts. The Soviet leader was taking an enormous risk. His arms reductions antagonized the military and created an uncertain future for the giant military-industrial complex, which involved, to varying degrees, 80 percent of the industrial enterprises of the Soviet Union. His old critics, Molotov, Kaganovich, and Voroshilov, were still party members who eagerly awaited the collapse of his schemes. Expectations for Khrushchev's upcoming trip to Paris and President Eisenhower's state visit to the Soviet Union were very high in official circles, and especially among the Soviet public. In case of failure, the political authority of the chairman and even his grip on the party elite would suffer irreparable harm. The Soviet leader, never a skillful negotiator, abruptly retreated from his euphoria and began to doubt. What if the Western leaders left him with empty hands?[51]

Soviet air-defense missiles shot down an American U-2 spy plane on its reconnaissance flight over Soviet missile bases on May 1, 1960, and Khrushchev seized this episode to show his toughness not only to the West, but also to the Chinese and his own military. When Eisenhower unexpectedly claimed responsibility for the flight, Khrushchev felt betrayed and angry. In Paris, he demanded a personal apology from the U.S. president, irrevocably ruining his relationship with the American leader. By the end of 1960, all plans for détente with the United States were in tatters. The Soviet leader had destroyed the fruits of many months of pressure and negotiations. Many Soviet diplomats regretted it. Defense Minister Malinovsky and the military, however, were satisfied because Khrushchev's New Look now appeared to be doomed.[52]

This episode revealed Khrushchev's lack of diplomatic skills. Khrushchev wanted some kind of accommodation with the United States, yet ideologically and psychologically he was ill-prepared to negotiate with Eisenhower and other Western leaders. The collapse of the Paris summit left Khrushchev with only one part of his foreign policy standing, the aggressive pressure on the West. The Soviet leaders decided to wait for the results of the U.S. presidential elections to find out who his next bargaining partner would be.

The fiasco also demonstrated the tenacity of Khrushchev's ideological worldview. He could not stand it when Mao and his own colleagues at home began to suspect him of being "soft" on Western imperialism. Even before the U-2 incident, in January 1960, Khrushchev assured the delegates of the Communist par-

ties in Moscow that his policy of deterrence of war and peaceful coexistence meant more, not less, support for the "wars of national liberation" in the third world. After the collapse of great power diplomacy in Paris, he unleashed all his revolutionary instincts. His long-held conviction that Soviet nuclear power would accelerate the revolutionary process globally now translated into feverish activity to promote decolonization. He personally led the Soviet campaign of support of national-liberation movements in Africa, from Algeria to the Congo. A Soviet expert on the third world, Georgy Mirsky, recalled that at a time "when the revolutionary process in the Western countries was frozen," Khrushchev's leadership expected "to use post-colonialist momentum, break into the 'soft underbelly of imperialism' and win sympathies of the millions of people who woke up to the new life."[53]

This peculiar revival of "revolutionary" diplomacy, almost in the Comintern style, culminated in Khrushchev's memorable visit to New York to attend the UN General Assembly in September and October 1960. Confined by the U.S. government to Manhattan "for security reasons," the Soviet leader spent almost a month crisscrossing the island. He was a whirlwind of energy. He proposed to radically reform the United Nations, castigated Western colonialism from the UN podium using his shoe to make a point, dashed to Harlem to meet Cuban revolutionary leader Fidel Castro, and denounced American imperialism to anyone who would listen. In his message to Presidium members, he wrote that he enjoyed "cursing capitalists and imperialists" and yet counted every hour he was forced to stay in this "wretched capitalist country" and in New York, this "lair of the Golden Devil." His behavior in New York, especially the episode with the shoe, scandalized his own delegation.[54]

The victory of John F. Kennedy heartened Khrushchev, because his bête noir, Richard Nixon, lost. Yet he also became convinced that Kennedy was a lightweight, a spoiled rich young man, unready for serious confrontation. By all indications, Kennedy was not "another Franklin Roosevelt," that is, the kind of partner the Soviets had missed since 1945. Khrushchev felt he could intimidate the new president by his brinkmanship tactics. His confidence grew after the first successful space flight of Yuri Gagarin in April 1961. By contrast, Kennedy's reputation plummeted after the failed invasion of Cuba at Bay of Pigs by CIA-trained guerrillas.[55] It was a moment Khrushchev could not miss, an opportunity for nuclear pressure on the White House.

On May 26, 1961, Khrushchev told the Presidium that the Soviet Union should sign a separate treaty with the GDR. Western powers would have to choose between retreat and nuclear war. He confessed that he could not guarantee what the Americans would do in response. The Bay of Pigs invasion, he said, was proof

that the U.S. government was not in the firm hands of one leader but rather "under influence of various groups and ad hoc situations." Yet Khrushchev concluded that the gamble was worth taking. "I would say the chance is more than ninety five percent there would not be a war." The Presidium members, by then all obedient associates of Khrushchev, did not object. Brezhnev, Suslov, and Gromyko supported Khrushchev's position. Cautious Mikoyan said that the United States "might start hostilities without using atomic weapons" but assessed this risk as minimal.[56] Encouraged by this fake unanimity, the first secretary behaved at the summit with Kennedy, in Vienna, Austria, on June 3–4, 1961, with shocking boorishness. Soviet diplomat Georgy Kornienko was stunned to learn that Khrushchev had said to Kennedy that it was better to let the war start now, before the emergence of new, even more terrible means of warfare. This remark was so provocative that both U.S. and Soviet official transcripts omitted it.[57]

Many scholars of the Berlin crisis have taken for granted that Khrushchev was deterred from unilateral action on West Berlin by Kennedy's tough countermeasures. As evidence, they cite Kennedy's July 25, 1961, speech, in which the U.S. president took steps to mobilize armed forces and announced that the Western allies would use all military options to defend their rights in West Berlin. They also cite the speech by Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric on October 21, 1961, in which he disclosed that the United States had a large numerical superiority in nuclear missiles over the Soviet Union. "We have a second-strike capability," said Gilpatric, "which is at least as extensive as what the Soviets can deliver by striking first. Therefore, we are confident that the Soviets will not provoke a major nuclear conflict."[58]

Indeed, Khrushchev never acted on his threat to sign a unilateral peace treaty with the GDR, despite his desire to boost the East German regime and sovereignty. At the same time, Khrushchev's understanding of American behavior was different from what the White House sought to project. Soviet intelligence repeatedly informed the Kremlin leader about the Pentagon's plans for a preemptive nuclear attack on the Soviet Union, using American strategic superiority. Apparently this only strengthened his instincts for brinkmanship. Not the perception of Kennedy's resolve but rather Kennedy's domestic weakness impressed the Soviet leader. In August 1961, at the secret meeting of the Warsaw Pact leaders in Moscow, Khrushchev repeated his lamentations that Kennedy, unlike Eisenhower and Dulles, could not be a predictable partner in the brinkmanship game. If Kennedy pulls back from the brink, like Dulles had done many times, "he will be called a coward" at home.[59]

If so, what could be gained by provoking Kennedy? Khrushchev's inconsistency began to worry even his friends and allies. A number of leaders of the

Warsaw Pact, including Walter Ulbricht of the GDR and Georgy Georgiu-Dej in Rumania, already highly critical of the Soviet leader's de-Stalinization, began to have doubts about his foreign policy. The discontent among the Soviet military continued. Oleg Penkovsky, a high-ranking Soviet GRU official who began to spy for British and American intelligence in 1960, reported to the CIA that some in the Soviet military grumbled that "if Stalin were alive, he would have done everything quietly, but this fool is blurting out his threats and intentions and is forcing our possible enemies to increase their military strength."[60]

There were other signs that the strategy of nuclear bluffing was reaching its limits. The balance of fear had to be maintained by demonstrating the horrible potential of ever-more-powerful nuclear weapons. But the construction of protected silos and the testing of reliable ballistic missiles was far from complete, despite hectic and costly measures. In October 1960, a new R-16 missile accidentally ignited on a launching pad in Tyuratam, Kazakhstan, killing Marshal Nedelin, the head of the RVSN, and seventy-three other top designers, engineers, and officers. In the absence of a credible deterrent, any stopgap measure attracted the Kremlin's attention. The Soviet General Staff and the KGB competed in suggesting measures to discourage the United States from contemplating the use of force.[61] On July 10, 1961, Khrushchev informed the managers and scientists of the atomic complex about a decision to renounce the moratorium on nuclear tests that had been observed since November 1958. He enthusiastically supported the idea of nuclear designers Andrei Sakharov and Yakov Zeldovich to test a new 100-megaton device. Khrushchev said, according to Sakharov: "Let this device hang over capitalists like the sword of Damocles."[62]

The failure of the U.S.-Soviet summit generated fears of permanent closure of intra-German borders. A growing number of refugees rushed from East Germany to the West. The rapid deterioration of the situation in the GDR allowed Ulbricht the opportunity to present the Soviet leader with his own ultimatum. Either the Soviet leader must sign a separate treaty with the GDR and end the uncertainty or he would "lose" the GDR. Khrushchev faced a prolonged confrontation with the United States—he could see that Kennedy was not about to give up West Berlin. And signing a separate treaty with the GDR could lead to Western countermeasures. Khrushchev was not afraid of a nuclear outbreak. But he did fear economic sanctions against the GDR. The Kremlin leader knew that in this case the East German economy, heavily dependent on West German supplies, would crash—and the USSR would have to rescue its satellite at a tremendous cost. The estimates ran as high as 400 tons of gold and at least two billion rubles as credits. For Khrushchev, it was unacceptable. Searching for another

option, he decided to build the wall around West Berlin. On August 13, 1961, Berlin became a divided city, and preparations for erecting the permanent structure began. The Berlin Wall provided, in Khrushchev's eyes, a substitute for a provocative unilateral treaty with the Ulbricht regime. The Soviet leader believed that West Berlin would wither away economically. He also assumed that West Germany, without its bulwark in the East, would gradually shift from confrontation to negotiation and economic partnership with the Soviet bloc.[63] At the same time, the Kremlin leader continued to maintain his nuclear pressure. In a response to Gilpatric's speech, the Soviet Union detonated the monstrous 100-megaton bomb at half strength on October 30 above the Arctic Circle at Novaya Zemlia. A jubilant Khrushchev told the Party Congress: "When the enemies of peace threaten us with force, they must be and will be countered with force."[64]

A few days earlier, on September 25, a spat between the Americans and the East German border guards at Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin grew into a demonstration of U.S. military force. Khrushchev immediately ordered Soviet tanks to advance to the checkpoint. There they stood, their engines running, faced by American tanks.

Most important, despite the obvious crudity of Soviet behavior in Berlin and the violation of the test moratorium, Khrushchev demonstrated that he, not Ulbricht, was in control in East Germany. During the confrontation at Checkpoint Charlie, the Soviet leader remained perfectly calm. On October 26, GRU colonel Georgy Bolshakov, a special liaison of the Kremlin with the Kennedys, reported that the U.S. president wanted to resume talks on the German Question and find a compromise on West Berlin. Khrushchev withdrew the tanks from Checkpoint Charlie, and soon the Americans reciprocated. Kennedy's behavior confirmed, in Khrushchev's mind, that the Americans would not start a war over West Berlin.[65] The Soviet leader's belief in nuclear pressure remained unshakable. As 1962 began, Khrushchev told the Presidium members: "We must increase pressure and let our adversary feel that our strength is growing." He assured his colleagues that he would know when to stop. "The game is still worth playing."[66]

A great problem with Khrushchev's nuclear brinkmanship was the lack of clear strategic goals. His allegiance to the revolutionary-imperial paradigm left Soviet foreign policy straddled, as it had been during the 1920s, between support of the radicals and revolutionaries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the search for geopolitical accommodation with the West. Khrushchev wanted Western "imperialism" to retreat on all fronts, including West Berlin, but it was an utterly unrealistic expectation. Khrushchev's nuclear threats could not substitute for Soviet lack of capabilities. The chairman's increasing impulsiveness aggra-

vated this situation. He made decisions on the basis of his own judgment only, virtually without analytical input from his colleagues, the Foreign Ministry, the KGB, or the Ministry of Defense.[67] And he continued to feel a mixture of scorn and impatience about Kennedy. He told the Presidium that Eisenhower and Kennedy might consist of "the same shit" as far as the German Question was concerned. Sakharov recalled Khrushchev saying: "In 1960 we helped to elect Kennedy with our policy. But we do not give a damn about Kennedy, if he is tied hand and foot."[68] It seemed that brinkmanship spared Khrushchev the need to look for more complicated and nuanced approaches in foreign affairs. Meanwhile, the developments in the Caribbean led Khrushchev to take his most dangerous step. On May 21, 1962, he decided to send nuclear missiles to Cuba.

THE CUBAN HURRICANE

The Cuban missile crisis of October–November 1962 was the ultimate exercise in nuclear brinkmanship, the one case in which it might well have caused a world war.[69] There has also been an ongoing discussion about the motives that pushed Khrushchev to send missiles thousands of miles away from the Soviet Union. Scholars have connected Khrushchev's gamble in Cuba to his desire to break Western resistance in West Berlin.[70] Others have asserted that the missiles in Cuba were to help the Soviet leader regain his balance.[71] Recent studies trace the crisis back to the Soviet leader's impulsive personality and his increasingly desperate search for a panacea, a dramatic gesture to rescue his failing foreign and domestic policies. William Taubman concludes that the Cuban missiles were Khrushchev's "cure-all that cured nothing."[72] Only recently have scholars come to recognize how important it was for Khrushchev to protect Cuba against possible and credible American aggression. Belief in the ultimate victory of Communism and the desire to accelerate this victory were always factors in Khrushchev's motivation and behavior. His nuclear brinkmanship was not only a strategy to gain geopolitical advantages for the Soviet Union but also an instrument to constrain Western imperialism, facilitate decolonization, and, ultimately, promote the global spread of Communism.[73]

The issue of Cuba's security was linked to the growing problem of Khrushchev's authority in the Communist world and at home. The Cuban Revolution had become a big factor in Soviet domestic politics, as growing segments of Soviet leadership, elites, and general public, especially the educated youth, sympathized with Castro and his "bearded friends" (*barbudos*).[74] The more the domestic expectations about the "anti-imperialist" revolutions in the third world grew, the more Khrushchev felt a personal responsibility to promote their fru-

ition. Troyanovsky wrote in his memoirs "that Khrushchev constantly feared that the United States would compel the Soviet Union and its allies to retreat in some region of the world. Not without reason he believed that he would be held responsible for that." This feeling grew stronger as Khrushchev heard the increasingly strident accusations from Beijing that he was appeasing the imperialists. Historians Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali demonstrate the crucial role of this factor in Khrushchev's decision to deploy the missiles in Cuba.[75]

Khrushchev was not alone in believing that sooner or later the United States would invade Cuba, most likely during the Kennedy administration. Many intelligence estimates, both Soviet and Cuban, pointed in this direction.[76] Declassified American sources on MONGOOSE, the covert actions against Castro's Cuba, demonstrate that Khrushchev's fears were not completely off the mark: powerful elements in the Kennedy administration indeed wanted "to develop new and imaginative approaches to the possibility of getting rid of the Castro regime."[77]

At the same time, the temptation to improve the Soviet position in the strategic balance of the superpowers was also great. Troyanovsky believes that Khrushchev wanted to redress, "at least partially," the nuclear imbalance between the Soviet Union and the United States. In 1962, the United States began deploying Minuteman and Titan missiles that were far superior in quality and quantity to what the Soviets had in their arsenal. The strategic disparity was rapidly increasing, undermining the credibility of Khrushchev's policy of nuclear pressure.[78] "In addition to protecting Cuba," Khrushchev argued before the Presidium, "our missiles would equalize what the West likes to call 'the balance of power.' " The Americans had surrounded the Soviet Union with their missile and air bases. Now "they would learn just what it feels like to have enemy missiles pointing at you."[79] Cuba, of course, was deep inside what the United States perceived as its exclusive sphere of influence. The American military had absolute predominance in the Caribbean. This meant that the delivery and deployment of missiles and the huge amount of supporting equipment and troops would have to be carried out right under the nose of the Americans. Khrushchev proposed to the Presidium that the Soviet Union deliver nuclear missiles in secrecy and announce their arrival afterward. Whatever doubts the members of the Presidium and the Secretariat had, they did not reveal them and voted unanimously for Khrushchev's plan. The military called it "Anadyr," after a river in Siberia, to mislead Western intelligence.[80]

The Kennedy administration overlooked a key element in Soviet motivation, the provocative nature of U.S. actions aimed at Cuba. The consensus in Washington was that the Soviets would never deploy their nuclear missiles outside of the USSR. The Americans knew nothing of an important precedent: in the spring of 1959, at the height of the Berlin crisis, Soviet medium-range missiles and their

nuclear warheads arrived in the GDR. The Soviets pulled them out in August, when Khrushchev's trip to the United States was in preparation.[81] This episode seems to confirm that Khrushchev wanted to create a nuclear-missile force but not to provoke a war, and to back up his position in talks, in case that would be necessary.

In July 1962, when the Cuban delegation, with Raul Castro at its head, arrived in Moscow to sign a secret Soviet-Cuban agreement on missile deployment and other issues of Cuba's defense, Khrushchev exuded confidence. But the Cubans found Khrushchev overconfident and bombastic. If the Yankees find out about the missiles before the agreement is made public, he told them, there would be nothing to worry about. "I am going to grab Kennedy by his balls. If the problem arises I will send you a message—and that will be signal for you to invite the Baltic Fleet to visit Cuba."[82] The Soviet military, despite its earlier quiet criticism of Khrushchev's arrogance and recklessness, acted in the same manner. Marshal Sergei Biryuzov, the commander of the RVSN, who traveled to Cuba to do reconnaissance, concluded that it would be easy to conceal Soviet missiles among Cuban palm trees. As it turned out, the top brass simply misled their commander in chief, because they wanted a base close to their primary enemy.[83] From the beginning, "Anadyr" proposed to deploy on Cuba "a Group of Soviet Forces comprising all branches of the Armed Forces," including the dispatch of a squadron of surface ships from the Baltic Fleet and a squadron of submarines. Had the operation succeeded, the Soviet Union would have had 51,000 troops, missile bases, and a naval base on the island.[84] The combination of Khrushchev's nuclear policies and the agenda of the military turned "Anadyr" into a juggernaut that could no longer be stopped.

As risky as it was, "Anadyr" paled next to other macabre schemes bandied about by the military. In 1960–62, the leaders of the Soviet space program, encouraged by the propaganda bonanza after Gagarin's flight, began to lobby for the construction of military space stations, presumably capable of launching nuclear missiles against any part of U.S. territory. General Nikolai Kamanin, deputy for space to the commander of the Soviet air force, was frustrated that the high military command and Khrushchev did not see the potential in the militarization of space. He wrote in his diary on September 13, 1962: "Malinovsky, [Andrei] Grechko, and [head of the General Staff Matvei] Zakharov have been missing opportunities for us to become the first in creating a space force—I would even say, an absolute military force which could facilitate the domination of Communism on Earth."[85]

In May 1959, a military research group headed by engineer Major A. Iroshnikov sent a proposal to Khrushchev to create twenty to twenty-five artificial islands

around the United States that could be used as Soviet bases "for launching atomic rockets of intermediary range." The project's authors expected that "the construction of our islands in the immediate proximity to the vital U.S. centers" could force the U.S. government "to agree, in the process of further negotiations, to liquidate its air-fields and missile pads in the countries bordering on the USSR." This scheme reached the desk of Marshal Sokolovsky, who found the whole project technically feasible but "ill-advised."[86] The test of the super bomb in October 1961 generated other wild-eyed projects. Andrei Sakharov, future recipient of a Nobel Peace Prize, suggested that a similar device might be launched in a large torpedo from a submarine. Later, in 1962, academician Mikhail Lavrentiev wrote a memorandum to Khrushchev proposing the use of a 100-megaton device to generate an artificial and huge wave, similar to an earthquake-generated tsunami, along the North American coastline. In case of a war with the United States, Lavrentiev concluded, this could inflict irreparable damage on the enemy. After a series of tests, Soviet scientists found that the continental shelf would protect New York City and other U.S. cities from such a super surf. The extraordinary project was dropped.[87]

On October 22, 1962, Kennedy, prompted by the U-2 aerial reconnaissance pictures of Soviet missiles in Cuba, publicly denounced the Soviet deployment in Cuba. From the start, the Soviet leader miscalculated what the initial American reaction to Soviet deployments in Cuba would be. The Soviets must have hoped that if the Americans discovered the Soviet missiles, they would try first to approach the Kremlin through a secret channel and perhaps offer a trade between them and the Jupiter missiles in Turkey. Various signals fed this illusion, until Kennedy went public with his announcement of Soviet "perfidy." Suddenly the crisis was a public event, and this, as both sides knew, severely increased pressures on the leadership. Kennedy, at least, had a week of secret deliberations in his narrow circle before the crisis became public. Khrushchev learned about Kennedy's announcement only a day before.[88]

Just hours before Kennedy's speech, Khrushchev convened an emergency Presidium meeting to discuss possible Soviet responses to American actions. He called the new situation "tragic." The longer-range Soviet missiles and their nuclear warheads still had not arrived in Cuba. And the Kremlin had missed the chance of publicizing the Soviet-Cuban defense treaty and thus lacked international legal grounds for the deployment of its missiles. The Americans could try to invade Cuba or launch an air strike against the island. "If we do not use nuclear weapons," Khrushchev said, "then they would capture Cuba." "In fact, we do not want to unleash a war," Khrushchev explained. "We wanted to intimidate, to contain the U.S. with regard to Cuba." And now "they can attack us, and

we shall respond," he concluded. "This may end in a big war." Khrushchev, as the Presidium debates reveal, did not want to preclude the *possibility* of using nuclear weapons—the essence of his brinkmanship policy. The military supported him; Marshals Malinovsky, Andrei Grechko, and others disliked the idea of disarming unilaterally. They believed their U.S. counterparts would not hesitate to use nuclear weapons first. Defense Minister Malinovsky read to the Presidium members the draft instruction to General Issa Pliyev, the commander of Soviet forces in Cuba: "If there is a [U.S.] landing, [use] the tactical atomic weapons." The strategic nuclear missiles could not be used without an order from Moscow. In the discussion that followed, Anastas Mikoyan objected: "Doesn't using these [tactical] missiles mean the start of a thermonuclear war?" Khrushchev vacillated. Still, after the prolonged debates, he agreed to changes in the instructions to Pliyev. No nuclear weapons were to be used, even in the event of attack on Cuba.[89] As a result, the Soviet strategic missiles in Cuba were never ready for war. Their nuclear warheads were kept miles away in special storage sites and stayed there throughout the crisis.[90] At Malinovsky's insistence, Khrushchev ordered the commanders of four Soviet submarines, each armed with a nuclear-tipped torpedo, to approach the Cuban shore, in order to increase the Soviet nuclear deterrent. The military claimed, again incorrectly, that this maneuver could be done without the Americans detecting it. The commanders and political commissars of four Soviet submarines, which sought to make their way through U.S. antisubmarine defenses, did not have a clear idea of what to do with their nuclear weapons if fired upon by the U.S. Navy or U.S. aircraft. Some of their leaders were under the impression that they could use them. Fortunately, they did not do so when the U.S. Navy destroyers detected the submarines and forced them to the surface.[91]

By October 23, Khrushchev had recovered from the initial shock and had learned that President Kennedy and his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, were also hesitant and fearful. At the Presidium on October 25, he said: "No doubt, Americans got scared." He acknowledged that strategic missiles must leave Cuba before the situation reached "the boiling point," but this moment had not yet come.[92]

On October 27, in the absence of clear intelligence on Kennedy's intentions, Khrushchev decided to offer terms to Kennedy. In his message to the president, he said that the Soviet Union would remove its missiles from Cuba if the United States removed "its analogous weapons from Turkey." Following that, the United States and the Soviet Union, he continued, "would pledge to the UN Security Council to respect the integrity of the frontiers and the sovereignty" of both Turkey and Cuba. Khrushchev backed away from nuclear brinkmanship, to the great relief of many in the Soviet foreign policy establishment. As Viktor Israelyan, a

senior official in the Foreign Ministry, recalls in his recent memoirs, Khrushchev's message evoked a great sigh of relief, and also "in broad public in Moscow." Israelyan and his colleagues also greeted Khrushchev's negotiating terms as providing equal, decent, and mutually acceptable terms of compromise.[93]

At a second meeting during the night of October 27, Robert Kennedy and Anatoly Dobrynin agreed that the Soviets would withdraw the missiles from Cuba in return for two U.S. concessions, a public pledge not to invade Cuba and a secret one to take the missiles out of Turkey. Kennedy explained that any publicity on the missile deal would create an uproar at home and among NATO allies and as a result would undercut his brother's political standing.[94] The deal looked like an acceptable and fair option for the Soviets. But simultaneous events dashed Soviet hopes for a dignified exit from the crisis. Signals from Soviet and Cuban intelligence, the embassy in the United States, and the Soviet military in Cuba added to the perception that the situation was rapidly getting out of control. In a cable written on the night of October 26–27, Fidel Castro advised the Soviet leader to launch a preemptive nuclear attack in case an American invasion or strike on Soviet missiles was imminent. At a conference in Havana in 1992, Castro explained his cable as an attempt to prevent "a repetition of the events of the Second World War," when the Nazis had caught the Soviets by surprise. Khrushchev, however, was aghast. Castro had failed to understand the logic of his nuclear brinkmanship.[95]

Finally, it dawned upon Khrushchev how dangerous the game he had started was. The chairman's views on nuclear war were straightforward: once it started, it could not be limited. In July, Khrushchev had angrily dismissed the new American doctrine of targeting military installations instead of cities. "What is their aim?" he wondered at the Presidium. He answered: "To get the population used to the idea that nuclear war will happen." Armed with such a doctrine, the American military could now convince Kennedy to start such a war. He sent an urgent telegram to the commander of the Soviet forces in Cuba, General Pliyev, confirming "categorically" the ban on using nuclear weapons from planes and on tactical weapons, as well as on strategic missiles.[96] On the same day, a Soviet operator of a surface-to-air missile shot down a U-2 plane over Cuba, killing its pilot. Khrushchev learned about this on Sunday, October 28, and was under the impression that Castro had ordered the operation. About this time, the GRU informed the Presidium that Kennedy was about to give another televised address. It turned out to be a repetition of the "quarantine speech," but Khrushchev mistook it for an announcement of war. He immediately accepted American terms: at 6:00 A.M., Moscow time, only two hours before Kennedy's speech, Soviet radio announced to the world the unilateral withdrawal of "all Soviet

offensive arms" from Cuba. The announcement made no mention of the withdrawal of American missiles from Turkey.[97]

Later, Khrushchev's bravado returned; he maintained that the Soviet retreat from Cuba was not the defeat Castro and the Chinese Communists perceived it to be. And he attempted to keep tactical missiles, cruise missiles, and bombers in Cuba after sending their atomic payloads back to the Soviet Union.[98] On October 30, he gave his own version of what had happened to the Czechoslovak Communist Party delegation that happened to be in Moscow. "We knew that the Americans wanted to attack Cuba," Khrushchev asserted. "Both we and the Americans talked about Berlin—both sides with the same aim, namely to draw attention away from Cuba; the Americans in order to attack it; we, in order to make the USA uneasy and postpone the attack." The Soviet leader then said that the Americans had been about to start a giant maneuver codenamed ORTSAC (Castro spelled backward) at sea with 20,000 marines, a ploy to invade Cuba. "We believe that shortly before the start of the maneuvers, their intelligence discovered our missiles were in Cuba, and the Americans became furious." Castro's telegram suggesting a preemptive Soviet nuclear strike prompted Khrushchev to articulate his views about nuclear warfare. "It is clear that today with a first strike one cannot knock the opponent out of the fight. There can always be a counter-strike, which can be devastating. There are, after all, missiles in the earth, which intelligence does not know about. There are missiles on submarines, which cannot be knocked out of the fight right away, and so on. What would we gain if we ourselves started a war? After all, millions of people would die, in our country too. Only a person who has no idea what nuclear war means, or who has been so blinded, like Castro, by revolutionary passion, can talk like that." The Soviet leader hastened to add that it was not he who lost the game of brinkmanship. "From our intelligence reports we knew that the Americans were afraid of war. Through certain persons they made it clear they would be grateful if we helped them get out of this conflict." Khrushchev concluded with this face-saving thesis: The missiles in Cuba were "essentially of little military importance" to the USSR and had "served their main purpose."[99]

BACKING AWAY FROM THE BRINK

In his memoirs, Mikoyan observed that the crisis began as a pure gamble but ended "surprisingly well."[100] What did he mean? Kennedy and Khrushchev both claimed victory. Yet both were chastened by their experiences in the crisis. They had a glimpse into the nuclear abyss and discovered that even carefully calculated schemes of nuclear brinkmanship could lead to a catastrophe. They also realized

how many things could go wrong during such a crisis.[101] Troyanovsky observed Khrushchev closely throughout the events of October, and in his opinion they "had a tremendous educational value for both sides and both leaders." The crisis "made them realize, not in theory, but in practical terms, that nuclear annihilation was a real possibility and, consequently, that brinkmanship had to be ruled out." Above all, Khrushchev dramatically revised his opinion of the U.S. president. From now on, he began to regard Kennedy as a valued negotiating partner, not a pushover target of nuclear brinkmanship.[102] This was the start of the mutual move toward U.S.-Soviet détente that would blossom, despite many obstacles, ten years later.

The outcome of the Cuban missile crisis killed Khrushchev's New Look, although he never admitted it. Public repercussions of the crisis inside the Soviet Union were minimal, and many Soviet citizens, inured to constant news about "provocations of American militarism against the island of liberty" in the Caribbean, did not lose sleep over the crisis until its worst phase was over. Political elites, however, took the Cuban crisis with utmost seriousness. Moscow party functionaries decided to send their families to the countryside. When provincial officials learned more details, they were shocked. A Ukrainian party leader, Petro Shelest, wrote in his diary in November 1962: "We stood on the brink of war. In a word, we created the situation of untenable military tension, and then tried to extricate ourselves out of it." Shelest and many of his colleagues felt that "crazy Nikita" got them into a big mess.[103]

The Cuban missile crisis also put an end to Khrushchev's brinkmanship and ultimatums regarding West Berlin. In July 1962, the Soviet leader seemed to be planning to put more pressure on the Western powers there. If the Cuban gamble had succeeded, Khrushchev would have gained an enormous psychological and political edge over Kennedy. Yet, from October 22 on, Khrushchev dismissed all suggestions from his subordinates to respond to the American actions against Cuba with a blockade of West Berlin.[104]

Unfortunately for Khrushchev, he could not reveal his secret agreement with Kennedy on withdrawal of American missiles from Turkey. The American media celebrated Kennedy's victory, but Khrushchev's reputation at home suffered disastrously. Many senior military and diplomats were convinced that Khrushchev had lost his nerve and hastily accepted the American ultimatum without any concessions. Negotiations between the Soviet deputy foreign minister, Nikolai Kuznetsov, the American ambassador to the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson, and Kennedy's personal representative, John McCloy, added to this impression. The Americans skillfully exploited Khrushchev's plight and rejected any Soviet attempts to save face. Also, they used Khrushchev's vague pledge about the

withdrawal of "offensive weapons" (the Kremlin doggedly refused to mention the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba in his public speeches) and forced the Soviets to remove all their weapons systems, including the Ilyushin bombers Moscow had promised to hand over to the Cubans.[105] Many in Moscow's halls of power believed Khrushchev should not have deployed missiles to Cuba in the first place, but once he had done so, he should have held his ground. The outcome of the crisis, with the Soviet weapons leaving Cuba under close U.S. supervision, left a bad taste for the military high command.[106]

To the Cuban leadership and to Khrushchev's enemies in Beijing, the end of the crisis looked like abject capitulation. Khrushchev forgot to consult with Castro before the public announcement of Soviet withdrawal. He also did not disclose to Castro the nature of his secret deal with Kennedy, justifiably fearing that the touchy Cuban leader would treat it as an insult to Cuban sovereignty and would divulge this secret to the world. Castro, in turn, felt personally betrayed and believed that Khrushchev had betrayed the Communist cause as well. When Khrushchev accidentally blurted out the news about the missiles trade-off with Kennedy during Castro's visit to Moscow in the spring of 1963, the Cuban leader was livid with fury and humiliation.[107]

The crisis cast a long shadow; never again would Soviet leaders risk a head-to-head clash "between the two systems" in the manner practiced by Khrushchev. After the harsh Cuban lesson, the Kremlin leaders began to take more seriously the idea of arms control. The military and the leaders of the huge military-industrial complex, especially the head of the nuclear ministry, Efim Slavsky, and the head of the military-industrial commission, Dmitry Ustinov, continued to oppose any limitations on military development. But an influential scientific lobby prepared the ground for this change. Many Soviet nuclear scientists were sympathetic to the worldwide antinuclear campaign. Since the late 1950s and until his death in February 1960, Igor Kurchatov had lobbied hard for a moratorium on nuclear testing.[108] In early 1963, when both Khrushchev and the Kennedy administration began to move toward agreement on a partial test ban, a major impulse came from nuclear scientists. Viktor Adamsky, a member of Sakharov's theoretical group in the nuclear design bureau, Arzamas-16, wrote a proposal to Khrushchev urging him to accept the terms that had earlier been offered by the Americans but rejected by the Soviets. Sakharov approved the letter and on the next day flew to Moscow to show it to the atomic minister, Efim Slavsky. The latter agreed to transmit the letter to Khrushchev. The scientists succeeded in pressing the right buttons to please Khrushchev. A few days later, Slavsky informed Sakharov that Khrushchev had accepted the proposal.[109]

At that time, the Soviets could not overcome their mistrust of intrusive inspec-

tions and the presence of NATO inspectors on Soviet territory. Even Khrushchev, who would speak eloquently in his memoirs about the "malaise" of Stalinist xenophobia, remained adamant on this point. He told his Presidium colleagues that even two or three inspections, his initial negotiating position in talks with the United States, would mean "letting spies" into the Soviet Union. Even if the Western powers agree, "we do not need it." By 1963, the Soviet atomic program no longer required large-scale atmospheric tests to build a strategic arsenal and achieve strategic parity with the Americans. Most important, the partial test ban did not require on-site inspections. When the issue of inspection was dropped, the last obstacle to the agreement fell. On August 5, 1963, the American-British-Soviet negotiations ended in the signing in the Kremlin of the Limited Test-Ban Treaty. Khrushchev's son recalls that the Soviet leader was "extraordinarily glad, even happy," with this achievement.[110]

Meanwhile, Khrushchev openly attacked Chinese "revolutionary" rhetoric on war and peace.[111] In his speech to the Supreme Soviet in December 1962, he ridiculed the Chinese notion of imperialism as "a paper tiger." "This paper tiger, he said, has atomic teeth and this cannot be regarded frivolously." In July 1963, the Soviet leadership was determined "to cross the swords publicly with the Chinese"; their main goal at the meeting of the Warsaw Pact that month was to rally the support of allies against Beijing. As the U.S. embassy correctly concluded at that time, the "outbreak of virtually undeclared war" between Moscow and Beijing in the spring of 1963 "explained Soviet acceptance of a partial test ban agreement which it could have had at any time during the past year."[112]

These perceptions led to a bizarre episode in Soviet-U.S. relations. Against the background exchanges and consultations with Khrushchev on the test ban, the Kennedy administration implicitly and sometimes explicitly proposed combining efforts to thwart the Chinese nuclear program. On July 15, Kennedy instructed his negotiator, Averell Harriman, "to elicit K's view of means of limiting or preventing Chinese nuclear development and his willingness either to take Soviet action or to accept U.S. action aimed in this direction." This was a scarcely concealed probe on the idea of a preventive strike on Chinese nuclear facilities. Harriman and other U.S. representatives met with Khrushchev several times in the period between July 15 and July 27 and discussed this matter, but to their disappointment, "Khrushchev and Gromyko have shown no interest and in fact brushed subject off on several occasions."[113] As it happened, the American proposal came at the worst possible moment, when both the meeting of the Warsaw Treaty Organization and the secret Sino-Soviet ideological discussions were taking place in Moscow. For ideological reasons, Khrushchev could not risk a secret alliance with Washington.[114]

In hindsight, Khrushchev stands out as a rare case of a nuclear optimist. His nuclear brinkmanship was exceptionally crude and aggressive, reckless and ideology-driven. The architect of the New Look played hardball. But he relied more on his instincts than on strategic calculations. And he was not a master of diplomatic compromise. His improvisations, lack of tact, rudeness, and spontaneity let him down, after several strokes of luck. His ideological beliefs, coupled with his emotional vacillations between insecurity and overconfidence, made him a failure as a negotiator. Also, the Soviet leader was never able to come to a systematic or consistent conclusion regarding nuclear strategy. There remained a huge gap in Soviet political and military thinking between the emphasis on nuclear weapons as a means of prevention of war and the official military doctrine with its pursuit of "victory" at any cost in a future war. At their internal meetings after the Cuban missile crisis, the head of General Staff, Zakharov, the minister of defense, Malinovsky, and the head of RVSN, Biryuzov, admitted that the outcome of a war between the superpowers would be decided by a massive wave of nuclear strikes. At the same time, they clearly wanted to quash Khrushchev's schemes of sharp cuts of conventional arms. On February 7, 1963, Malinovsky, at an internal military conference, said that all branches and types of Soviet armed forces should be preserved and developed, since there could emerge "local non-nuclear wars," for instance in South Vietnam, and since even "in thermonuclear war" it would be necessary "to eliminate the remnants of the enemy's forces and keep the captured territories under control." Not surprisingly, after the downfall of Khrushchev in October 1964, his successors began to pursue numerical parity with NATO, a choice that required enormous expenditures and, eventually, would lead to overextension of the Soviet economy.[115]

Khrushchev's threats to the West and the military doctrine of victory in nuclear war that he imposed on the Soviet military left a dark shadow on Soviet-U.S. relations. Khrushchev's missile rattling left a profound impression in the U.S. political leadership and strategic analytical communities. It took twelve years of careful diplomacy and an extraordinarily costly military buildup for Khrushchev's successors to reach the same stage of negotiating with Western powers that he had squandered in May 1960. But even the years of détente could not repair the damage Khrushchev had done. His attempt to browbeat Kennedy in Vienna haunted several U.S. presidents. Similarly, for a long time, Americans continued to be allergic to any Soviet activities around Cuba, which resulted in the minicrises of 1970 and 1979. The neoconservative pundits in the mid-1970s used the publications of Khrushchev's era, including *Military Strategy*, to argue that the Soviets indeed intended to fight and win nuclear war.

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