

Introduction: The Making of the Cuban Missile Crisis

The Cold War: JFK's Crucible

The Cold War is over. The Soviet Union no longer exists. Global nuclear war between the two superpowers never happened. Anyone who had dared to predict in 1962 that these three assertions would become historical fact just over a quarter century after the dangerous Cold War confrontations of the Kennedy administration would have seemed hopelessly naïve or just plain foolish.

For young Americans of the early twenty-first century, unlike their counterparts from the mid 1940s into the early 1990s, the Cold War is no longer a perilous fact of everyday life but an increasingly remote historical curiosity—much like World War II or the Great Depression. Students find it almost impossible to understand that many Americans were entirely serious when they put bumper stickers on their cars reading, “Better Dead Than Red,” or that public opinion surveys taken in the early 1960s revealed that most Americans thought that war—that is, nuclear war—with the Soviet Union was inevitable. Indeed, black and white film footage of schoolchildren attempting to protect themselves from nuclear attack by crouching under their desks and covering their heads with their arms, often evokes not merely disbelief, but even laughter.

The United States and the Soviet Union had been allies only a generation before during the historic struggle against Nazi Germany in World War II. It had, of course, been an alliance of necessity, the ultimate example of the dictum that politics makes strange bedfellows. Both sides, despite mutual suspicion and distrust, recognized that the

defeat of the common enemy came first. The alliance had begun to crumble well before the death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in April 1945, and the surrender of Hitler's Germany less than a month later.

On April 23, for example, the new President, Harry S Truman, in office for only eleven days, chose to "get tough" with the U.S.S.R. and shocked even some of his own advisers by tongue-lashing Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov in the White House about Stalin's failure to implement the February 1945 Yalta agreements on Poland.¹ Truman, almost at once, seemed hostile to the more cautious and flexible outlook of FDR. Tensions continued to escalate during the Potsdam Conference in July as well, where Truman learned secretly of the successful test of the atomic bomb and the increasingly suspicious Allies warily crafted the joint occupation of Germany.

Historians remain divided about whether the United States or the Soviet Union was more responsible for the onset of the Cold War. A debate has raged for decades about whether President Truman authorized the use of the atomic bomb against Japan to save American (and Japanese) lives by ending the war quickly or was instead engaging in "atomic diplomacy" to convince the communist world that America had used nuclear weapons once and would not be afraid to use them again to assure U.S. domination of the postwar world. The idealistic language of this new American internationalism clearly masked a determined drive for political and economic hegemony at the dawn of the nuclear era.

Evidence released from archives in the former Soviet Union, however, has further highlighted the role of Joseph Stalin, the Soviet dictator whose reign of terror consumed the lives of many millions of his own people even *before* World War II:

For the more we learn, the less sense it makes to distinguish Stalin's foreign policies from his domestic policies or even his personal behavior. Scientists have shown the natural world to be filled with examples of what they call 'self-selection across scale': patterns that persist whether one views them microscopically, macroscopically, or anywhere in between. Stalin was like that: he functioned in much the same manner whether operating within the international system, within his alliances, within his country, within his party, within his personal entourage, or even within his family. The Soviet

¹Charles E. Bohlen, *Witness to History, 1929-1969* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), 213.

leader waged Cold War on all these fronts. The Cold War *we* came to know was only one of many from *his* point of view. . . . [Stalin's] personal propensity for Cold Wars . . . [was] firmly rooted long before he had ever heard of Harry Truman.²

“Since the system Stalin founded could never be sufficiently secure either internally or externally,” it would be a mistake to portray the Soviet dictator as a mere reactor to outside events. The Soviet worldview was the product of a historical experience “dramatically different from that of the West” and American revisionist historians have often failed to recognize that Stalin combined “imperial expansionism . . . [and] traditional Russian messianism” with Marxist “ideological proselytism.” He believed absolutely in the “special mission of the Russians: to be a world power, second to none.”³

A devout believer in ruthless state power, Stalin was a child of the Russian Revolution with its apocalyptic belief in the catastrophic destruction of the old world in purifying flames and the emergence of a new millennium. For Stalin there were always two worlds, not one: his empire, born in the Russian Revolution and representing the Kingdom of Light and the force of the future; and the dying—therefore desperate and aggressive—world outside, against which he wanted to protect it. Any opposition to him from within was perceived as a black threat; any opposition from beyond Soviet borders represented the decadent taint of a passing order.⁴

Stalin's suspicions and xenophobia dictated the need for a physical buffer between the borders of the Soviet Union and Western Europe (especially Germany) and he took full advantage of post-war chaos and exhaustion to prop up Soviet satellite governments in Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania and the Eastern zone of divided and occupied Germany. “Stalin at the end of the war was a quiet, aged, but very dangerous man. . . . who was pushing the reluctant and tired country to defy the West.”⁵

The U.S. and its European allies quickly concluded that it would be dangerous, and probably impossible, to force the Soviets out of Eastern

²John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 293–94.

³Vojtech Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 6; Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 2–4, 17.

⁴Zubok and Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War*, 12.

⁵*Ibid.*, 11.

Europe. The Truman administration, also concerned about potential Soviet footholds in Iran, Greece and Turkey, initiated a policy of “containment,” a term popularized in a 1947 article by State Department Soviet specialist George F. Kennan.

These historic events and decisions defined the beginnings of the Cold War: a struggle between the communist nations, led by the U.S.S.R., and the capitalist democracies of the West, led by the U.S., a struggle fought with escalating military budgets, propaganda and covert operations, wars by proxy, and the use of military and economic aid to influence or win over uncommitted or neutral nations. By 1946, the term “Cold War” had entered the American vocabulary, along with phrases such as “the iron curtain” (coined in a speech that year in Missouri by Winston Churchill).

In February 1946, in his first speech since the end of the war, Stalin declared that it was impossible to achieve peaceful coexistence “‘in the contemporary capitalist conditions of world economic development.’ . . . From that moment many in the United States regarded Stalin’s speech as the declaration of the Cold War.”⁶ The speech prompted George Kennan’s renowned “Long Telegram” from Moscow, warning the Truman administration: “we have here a political force committed fanatically to the belief that with the U.S. there can be no permanent *modus vivendi*.” However, he added, “Impervious to logic of reason, it is highly sensitive to logic of force. . . . Thus, if the adversary has sufficient force and makes clear his readiness to use it, he rarely has to do so.”⁷ John F. Kennedy, first elected to Congress later that year, would soon become an articulate representative of the new generation of World War II veterans and Cold War leaders determined to heed Kennan’s advice to avoid repeating the appeasement of the 1930s and instead achieve victory in what they perceived as a life-and-death struggle against international communism.

During the second half of the 1940s, due largely to the surprisingly effective political leadership of President Truman, the United States reversed its traditional political and military isolationism and abandoned its reluctance to become directly involved in the internal affairs of Europe.⁸ A series of ground-breaking policy decisions rapidly shaped

⁶*Ibid.*, 35.

⁷George Kennan, “Telegraphic Message from Moscow,” February 22, 1946, *Foreign Relations of the United States* [hereafter *FRUS*] VI: *Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1969), 696–709.

⁸Political and military isolationism had not included economic isolationism—as demon-

the new Cold War era: the Truman Doctrine, based on the premise that U.S. security interests were now international, received bipartisan support in Congress in 1947 for granting economic and military aid to governments threatened by “armed minorities or by outside pressures”—reflexively believed to be instigated by the Soviet Union. In the same year Congress approved the Marshall Plan which supplied 13 billion dollars between 1947 and 1951 to rebuild war-ravaged Europe, promote free-market economic and industrial growth and undermine political support for communist parties and movements. The U.S. offered assistance to all European nations—assuming that the U.S.S.R. would likely refuse. Indeed, Soviet intelligence operatives reported to Moscow that the U.S. was actually working behind the scenes “to bring the Western zones of Germany into the plan and keep the Soviet Union out of it” and Molotov detected a plot to construct “a strategic circle around the U.S.S.R.’” In fact, although the offer “was deeply subversive of Stalin’s hegemonial concept of international order,” Soviet foreign ministry officials seriously considered and initially favored the program. Young Congressman John Kennedy vigorously supported the Marshall Plan.⁹

Berlin quickly became the focal point of Cold War tensions. The victorious allies had divided the defeated German Reich into four zones of occupation (American, British, French and Soviet). In June 1948, President Truman reached accords with Britain and France to merge their three zones of occupation into a new republic of West Germany. This agreement included West Berlin, the sector of the German capital occupied by the three Western allies, despite the fact that it was located deep within the Soviet (Eastern) zone. Understandably fearful of a strong new Germany and suspicious of Allied plans to print their own currency, Stalin almost impulsively decided to attempt to remove the Western powers from their Berlin outpost in the Soviet zone by incrementally imposing an economic blockade against the Western sectors of Berlin.¹⁰

Truman, to preserve allied rights without military force if possible, ordered a massive airlift (Stalin had not restricted or closed air access) to bypass the roads, rail lines and waterways blocked by the Soviets; he

strated by the hollowness of Woodrow Wilson’s calls for neutrality “in thought as well as deed” from 1914 to 1917.

⁹Zubok and Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin’s Cold War*, 105; Mastny, *The Cold War*, 27.

¹⁰Mastny, *The Cold War*, 47–48.

also sent sixty nuclear-capable bombers to England. Two million people were supplied with food, fuel and other necessities by a quarter of a million flights round the clock—demonstrating to Stalin and the world the “stunning superiority” of U.S. air power. The Soviet leader finally lifted the blockade in May 1949. The previous month, a dozen Western Europe nations, desperate for a nuclear umbrella against the U.S.S.R. and security against a resurgent Germany, had established the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to provide for collective defense—an attack on any member nation would be regarded as an attack on all member nations. The division of Germany, symbolized especially by the tenuous Allied access to West Berlin, became the emblem of an increasingly acrimonious Cold War which might become hot at a moment’s notice.¹¹

1949 was a decisive year in the evolution of the Cold War: the U.S.S.R. tested its first atomic bomb, shattering the American nuclear monopoly which had existed since the end of World War II; Mao Zedong’s communist forces seized control of mainland China; the U.S. joined NATO—the first “peacetime” military/mutual security alliance with Europe in American history—creating a powerful deterrent to potential Soviet incursions into central and western Europe.¹²

Early the next year, President Truman asked the National Security Council (established in 1947) to undertake a comprehensive study of American foreign policy for the new Cold War era. The resulting report, NSC-68, first drafted in April 1950, argued that the United States had to assume world leadership in resisting the spread of communism and concluded that the future of mankind would be determined by the outcome of this struggle against “communist slavery.” NSC-68 advocated a vastly expanded military, a nearly four-fold increase in the defense budget and a dedication to the Cold War as a real war for the survival of freedom itself. This commitment to a Manichean showdown between good and evil had a profound influence on the generation that had fought in World War II and would be powerfully echoed in JFK’s Inaugural Address eleven years later.¹³

¹¹Mastny, *The Cold War*, 47–49; Zubok and Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin’s Cold War*, 51–52.

¹²The U.S.S.R. formalized the Warsaw Pact alliance of the communist states of Eastern Europe in 1955.

¹³This harsh Cold War rhetoric is often dismissed as nothing more than self-serving, hysterical paranoia. JFK, specifically, has been accused of “Arrogance, ignorance, and impatience combined with familiar exaggerations of the Communist threat.” (Thomas G.

Just two months after approval of the NSC-68 Jeremiad, the Cold War suddenly turned hot when North Korea invaded South Korea in June 1950. President Truman and his key foreign policy advisers, convinced that the invasion was meant to test western resolve and determined to avoid repeating the fatal errors at Munich, sent American military forces to Korea under United Nations command.¹⁴ The intervention of Communist Chinese ground forces led to several years of bloody fighting until the new Eisenhower administration negotiated a fragile truce in 1953.

Documents released from archives in the former Soviet Union have confirmed that the plan to invade South Korea originated with North Korea's dictator Kim Il-Sung. Stalin, after initial reluctance, did endorse the "reunification of Korea" and supplied North Korea with

Paterson, "John F. Kennedy's Quest for Victory and Global Crisis," in Thomas G. Paterson, ed., *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: America's Foreign Policy, 1961-1963* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 23) However, recently declassified Soviet documents, many available on the Website of the Cold War International History Project, have demonstrated that the U.S.S.R. ran a massive espionage network which infiltrated the highest levels of the State Department, the secret atomic weapons program at Los Alamos, New Mexico and even included a special assistant to FDR. The American Communist Party, controlled and financed by the U.S.S.R., was irrevocably committed to undermine and destroy democratic institutions in the United States. Senator Joseph McCarthy was an unscrupulous demagogue and McCarthyism was tragic and unnecessary, but the threat was not imaginary. Indeed, many of the most dangerous spies were unknown to McCarthy and never prosecuted because intelligence officials were determined to conceal the VENONA Project which had decoded secret Soviet messages during World War II. McCarthy, ironically, had no knowledge of the VENONA Project. See, for example, Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes and Kyrill M. Anderson, *The Soviet World of American Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Allen Weinstein and Alexander Vassiliev, *The Haunted Wood: Soviet Espionage in America—The Stalin Era* (New York: Random House, 1999). The record of world communism, massively documented by these blood-soaked regimes themselves, incontrovertibly proves that it *did* make a difference, despite the many failings of Western capitalist democracies, which side won the Cold War. See Stephane Courtois, et al., *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

¹⁴The symbolism of Munich and appeasement haunted the generation shaped by World War II and the Cold War. But, the lessons of Munich were more personal than abstract for the young John Kennedy: his Harvard honors thesis, "Appeasement at Munich," had been published as *Why England Slept* just after the fall of France in 1940. His father, Joseph P. Kennedy, had also been politically disgraced by supporting British isolationism and appeasement as ambassador to England from 1938 to 1940. Even by 1960, the elder Kennedy's public appearances were carefully curtailed because of the fear that the sins of the father would be visited upon the son. Former President Truman, for example, responding to questions about Kennedy's Catholicism, quipped, "It's not the Pope I'm afraid of, it's the pop." (David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 970)

money, arms, ammunition, training, fighter planes and Soviet pilots—but no ground troops. Mao Zedong, despite having concluded a formal alliance with the U.S.S.R. in February, was more skeptical—fearing that a war in Korea could give the West a pretext for attacking and overthrowing the new communist regime in China (exactly the policy soon advocated by General Douglas MacArthur). Some Cold War scholars now conclude that although the invasion of South Korea was not consciously intended to test Western firmness, Stalin would probably have interpreted the failure to respond as a green light for further military adventurism. Truman's instinctive interpretation of Stalin's motives was apparently closer to being right than wrong.¹⁵

In fall of 1956, a serious breach in western unity resulted when Britain and France joined Israel to prevent Egyptian nationalist Gamal Nasser, already friendly to the U.S.S.R., from controlling the Suez Canal. The Eisenhower administration denounced the invasion and eventually used tough diplomatic pressure to force its erstwhile allies to withdraw from Suez. Only days after the British-French invasion of Suez, however, the Soviets sent troops and tanks into Hungary to crush a popular democratic uprising and the United States refused to intervene. Europeans concluded, mistakenly as it turned out, that the Soviets had used force in Hungary because of the American failure to back their vital interests in Suez. Not surprisingly, European concerns that the United States would not risk war on their behalf surfaced repeatedly during the Cuban missile crisis ExComm discussions—particularly in relation to NATO suspicions that the U.S. would make a deal involving Turkey with the U.S.S.R.—to the detriment of European security.¹⁶

Exactly a year later, the Soviet Union stunned the West by successfully launching *Sputnik*, the first man-made satellite to orbit the earth. The Eisenhower administration, alarmed about the U.S.S.R.'s apparent technical superiority, created the manned space program in 1958. But, *Sputnik* also seemed to prove that the Soviets were capable of developing effective ICBM technology, and “called into question, to an un-

¹⁵See Kathryn Weathersby, “New Findings on the Korean War,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 3 [hereafter *CWIHPB*] (Fall 1993), 1, 14–18 and “New Evidence on the Korean War,” *CWIHPB* 6–7 (Winter 1995–96), 30–125; Zubok and Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War*, 54–55, 62–64.

¹⁶See Csaba Békés, “New Findings on the 1956 Hungarian Revolution,” *CWIHPB* 2 (Fall 1992), 1–3 and Mark Kramer, “New Evidence on Soviet Decision-Making and the 1956 Polish and Hungarian Crises,” *CWIHPB* 8–9 (Winter, 1996–97), 358–84.

precedented degree . . . the credibility of the U.S. strategic guarantee, the foundation of Western defense in the Cold War.” Despite pervasive doubts about the reliability and deterrent value of first-generation American IRBMs, the administration, largely for political and symbolic reasons, offered these weapons to the NATO allies to “offset the IRBMs that U.S. intelligence expected the Soviets to deploy in Europe in the near future.” NATO members were slow to embrace the proposals, but agreements were ultimately reached to deploy Thor missiles in England and Jupiter missiles in Italy and Turkey.¹⁷

The Kremlin, in 1958 and again in 1959, worked vigorously but unsuccessfully, in public and in private, to head off the NATO IRBM deployment. “Within the Kremlin walls, however, the IRBMs would continue to rankle.” President Eisenhower himself, at a June 1959 White House meeting, conceded that the Jupiter deployment could be very unsettling for the U.S.S.R., and acknowledged that if the Soviets made a comparable move in Mexico or Cuba, “it would be imperative for us to take positive action, even offensive military action.”¹⁸

Nuclear Confrontation in Cuba

Eisenhower was indeed prescient. The most perilous crisis of the Cold War would occur thousands of miles from Europe or Berlin and just ninety miles off the coast of southern Florida.¹⁹ In the first hours of 1959, the Cuban guerrilla movement led by Fidel Castro ousted the brutal and corrupt regime of Fulgencio Batista, a pro-American military dictator with ties to United States business interests and the Mafia. Initially, Castro seemed a heroic figure to many Americans. At the 1959 New Year’s Eve celebration in Manhattan’s Times Square, when word flashed across the electronic news line on the *New York Times* Building that Castro had entered Havana, a loud cheer erupted from the huge crowd. In April, Castro visited the U.S. as a guest of the American Society of Newspaper editors and aroused genuine interest

¹⁷Philip Nash, *The Other Missiles of October: Eisenhower, Kennedy and the Jupiters, 1957–1963* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 12–14, 28, 68–69.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 38–41; Laurence Chang, “The View from Washington and the View from Nowhere: Cuban Missile Crisis Historiography and the Epistemology of Decision Making,” in James A. Nathan, ed., *The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1992), 140.

¹⁹“The crisis was, in fact, the most acute and dangerous confrontation in the Cold War. It was, and remains, the closest we ever came to a nuclear exchange.” (Chang, “The View from Washington and Nowhere,” 132)

and enthusiasm in Washington, New York and at Harvard University—where nearly 9,000 people turned out to hear him speak and a dinner in his honor was hosted by the dean of arts and sciences, McGeorge Bundy. Castro was even interviewed by Edward R. Murrow on American television.²⁰

However, suspicions of Castro quickly escalated in the State Department, the Congress and the White House when he summarily executed hundreds of Batista supporters, waffled on setting a date for free elections, seized American property without compensation, suppressed freedom of expression and political opposition and challenged Latin American sympathizers to support political subversion. In September 1960, Castro openly announced his commitment to export the Cuban revolution and free all of Latin America from Yankee imperialism. Cuba became increasingly dependent on Soviet military and economic assistance. Decades later, declassified documents from the former Soviet Union revealed that Raúl Castro, without his older brother's knowledge, and while Fidel was visiting the U.S. in 1959, had already secured Khrushchev's agreement to help the Cuban communists gain control over the island nation's armed forces.²¹

Cold War issues inevitably dominated the 1960 presidential campaign. President Eisenhower had been particularly embarrassed by the shooting down of a U-2 spy plane over the Soviet Union in May. The pilot, Francis Gary Powers, was captured, tried and convicted of spying. The President, after an awkward attempt to lie about the facts, finally admitted the truth, but refused to apologize. Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev bitterly denounced Eisenhower, cancelled an upcoming summit meeting in Paris and angrily withdrew an invitation to have Eisenhower visit the U.S.S.R.

Senator John F. Kennedy, the Democratic presidential nominee, was harshly critical of the Eisenhower administration for failing to prevent the creation of a communist outpost in Cuba. The Eisenhower administration, in fact, was already supporting covert CIA efforts to sabotage and destabilize the new Cuban regime and to assist Cuban dissidents in

²⁰Fursenko and Naftali, "One Hell of a Gamble," 5–12; *FRUS: Kennedy-Khrushchev Exchanges*, VI (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1996), 355–56; 402.

²¹Fursenko and Naftali, "One Hell of a Gamble," 11–12. Fidel Castro had been distrustful of the Cuban communists before 1959. See Julia Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution: Fidel Castro and the Urban Underground* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

creating a government in exile. The CIA had also initiated contacts with the Mafia about poisoning Castro.²² Vice President Richard Nixon, the GOP candidate, like JFK, had been shaped by the escalating international conflict with the U.S.S.R. since they each entered politics in 1946. Both candidates promised to upgrade U.S. military forces and resist Soviet expansionism around the world, particularly in the American hemisphere. Kennedy also exploited fears of a “missile gap” despite the fact that the classified briefings he received as a presidential candidate provided no such evidence. Nixon was furious about JFK’s dissembling but powerless to expose him without revealing classified material.²³ Kennedy narrowly won.

On January 6, 1961, in a speech first broadcast on Moscow Radio nearly two weeks later, Khrushchev praised the Cuban revolution and declared that armed efforts to achieve national liberation from colonialism and imperialism were “sacred wars” which deserved the support of the Soviet Union and the world socialist movement. The speech was eventually disseminated among Kennedy’s inner circle and may have contributed to the strident tone of his Inaugural Address—which drew a razor-sharp line between the “free world” and the communist world. The new President offered assurances to Latin America, but also sent a firm message to Khrushchev and Castro: “To our sister republics south of the border, we offer a special pledge—to convert our good words into good deeds, in a new Alliance for Progress, to assist free men and free governments in casting off the chains of poverty. But this peaceful revolution of hope cannot become the prey of hostile powers. Let all our neighbors know that we shall join with them to oppose aggression or subversion anywhere in the Americas. And let every other power know that this hemisphere intends to remain the master of its own house.”²⁴ President Kennedy forwarded copies of Khrushchev’s January 6 speech to the new National Security Council, admonishing its members to “Read, mark, learn and inwardly digest. . . . Our actions, our steps should be tailored to meet these kinds of problems.”²⁵

²²Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 151.

²³For Robert McNamara’s recollection of discovering early in the Kennedy administration that “there *was* a missile gap, but that is was in the reverse direction,” see James G. Blight, Bruce J. Allyn and David A. Welch, *Cuba On the Brink: Castro, The Missile Crisis and the Soviet Collapse* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 135–36.

²⁴Zubok and Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin’s Cold War*, 240; John G. Hunt, editor, *The Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1997), 429.

²⁵Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power* (New York: Simon and Schus-