

October 30, 1962

**Minutes of Conversation between the Delegations of
the CPCz and the CPSU, The Kremlin (excerpt)**

Citation:

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Summary:

In this conversation between Khrushchev and Novotny, Khrushchev used exceptionally candid language to defend his handling of the superpower confrontation, what he described as "six days which shook the world." While well aware that many fellow communists (including the Chinese and Cubans) regarded his agreement under pressure from US President John F. Kennedy to remove the missiles as a surrender to the imperialists, Khrushchev stoutly defended his action as not only a necessary measure to avoid a catastrophic nuclear war, but actually a victory. Khrushchev bluntly criticized Fidel Castro for failing to comprehend the true nature of war in the thermonuclear age and, that at the height of the crisis, he had suggested in a letter to Khrushchev that the Soviets should be the first to use nuclear weapons, striking the United States should it attack Cuba, even though this would lead promptly to a global war.

Credits:

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Original Language:

Czech,Russian

Contents:

Translation - English

Present: CPCz: Novotný, Hendrych, Šimůnek, Dvořák
CPSU: Khrushchev, Kozlov, Brezhnev, Kosygin, Kolesnikov, Zimyanin

[....]

Cuba

Concerning the problem of Cuba, Comrade Khrushchev said: Today it is now possible to consider the danger of armed conflict to have been averted. The Americans may have flown over Cuba, but we have shot down one U-2 aircraft with our missiles [on 27 October]. The Cubans announced that they shot down a foreign plane. The Americans said that one of their planes had probably crashed into the sea (but it crashed into Cuba, and the pilot [Maj. Rudolf Anderson] was killed). We recommended to the Americans that they should not fly over Cuba, and they stopped.

How did this situation develop? We knew that the Americans wanted to attack Cuba. As early as in his conversation with [Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei] Gromyko [on 18 October] President Kennedy was very reserved and very aggressively inclined concerning Cuba. 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 attacking Cuba.

The Americans announced maneuvers at sea-20,000 Marines. The focus of the maneuvers was "conquering the Island and overthrowing the dictator" and the code word was "Ortsac," which is Castro backwards. (That, by the way, is a game we played in school.) The maneuvers were suddenly called off, allegedly after a storm at sea, but that was followed by the president's speech [on 22 October], hysteria was unleashed in the USA, and a blockade was announced.

We believe that shortly before the beginning of the maneuvers, their intelligence discovered that our missiles were in Cuba, and the Americans became furious. Another possibility (as we have now been told by our intelligence) is that the presence of our missiles in Cuba was discovered by West German intelligence and then communicated to the USA.[1]

Naturally we wanted the presence of our missiles with atomic warheads to remain secret. That is obviously impossible in Cuba. They were hardly the most powerful missiles, but the Americans calculated well when it came to their range-they could have reached Washington and New York.

We now know the subsequent course of events. We had to act very quickly. That is also why we even used radio to contact the president, because the other means might have been too slow. This time we really were on the verge of war.

We received a letter from [Fidel] Castro in which he told us that the USA would attack Cuba within twenty-four hours.[2] That would mean nuclear war. We could not be certain that they would not do so. The presence of our missiles provoked them too much; the Americans thus sensed the winds of war from up close. It was necessary to act quickly. That is why we issued the statement [on 28 October] that we would dismantle the missiles if the USA declared it swore not to attack Cuba. (The missiles, by the way, are of two kinds: some are placed on the ground, the others underground. The ones on the ground can be destroyed by a blast of air. We had both sorts of missile in Cuba, as well as our officers and technical staff. We were concerned about them, too.)

In a letter, Fidel Castro proposed that we ourselves should be the first to start an

atomic war.[3] Do you know what that would mean? That probably cannot even be expressed at all. We were completely aghast. Castro clearly has no idea about what thermonuclear war is. After all, if a war started, it would primarily be Cuba that would vanish from the face of the Earth. At the same time, it is clear that with a first strike one cannot today knock the opponent out of the fight. There can always be a counter-strike, which can be devastating. 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. Can we even contemplate a thing like that? Could we allow ourselves to threaten the world of socialism which was hard won by the working class? Only a person who has no idea what nuclear war means, or who has been so blinded, for instance, like Castro, by revolutionary passion, can talk like that. We did not, of course, take up that proposal, especially because we had a chance to avert war. What the Americans feared most, by the way, was that the missiles were in the hands of the Cubans and that the Cubans would start a war. That is why in our letter to the president we stressed also that the missiles were in the hands of our officers, who would not fire before receiving orders from the Soviet government. From our intelligence reports we knew that the Americans were afraid of war. Through certain persons, who they knew were in contact with us, they made it clear they would be grateful if we helped them get out of this conflict.

We agreed to dismantle the missiles also because their presence in Cuba is essentially of little military importance to us. The missiles were meant to protect Cuba from attack; they helped us to wrench out of the imperialists the statement that they would not attack Cuba, and they thus served their main purpose. Otherwise we can hit the USA from elsewhere, and we do not need missiles in Cuba for that. On the contrary, their deployment on our territory is safer for us and our technical personnel who look after them.

Concerning Turkey, in our second letter to the president we backed down from that stipulation. We understood that these questions are too far removed from the concrete situation in the Caribbean and Cuba, that Kennedy could not answer them because he would have also to consult with other members of NATO, and the situation was too serious for us to postpone its solution.

Conclusion:

How should one assess the result of these six days which shook the world? Who won? I am of the opinion that we won. One must start from the final aims we set ourselves. What aim did the Americans have? To attack Cuba and get rid of the Cuban Republic, to establish a reactionary regime in Cuba. Things did not work as they planned. Our main aim was to save Cuba, to save the Cuban revolution. That is why we sent missiles to Cuba. We achieved our objective - we wrenched the promise out of the Americans that they would not attack Cuba and that other countries on the American continent would also refrain from attacking Cuba. That would not have happened without our missiles in Cuba. The USA would have attacked Cuba. The proximity of our missiles made them understand, perhaps for the first time, that we have weapons that are at least as strong as theirs. Though they knew we had atomic weapons, they kept calming themselves by saying that Russia, with its missiles, is somewhere far away, whereas Cuba is right next door. But now they have felt the winds of war in their own house.

One might ask whether we made concessions. Of course we did. It was one concession for another. (Because ultimately it is no business of the United States what kind of weapons Cuba has.) But this mutual concession has brought us victory.

This clash (and we were truly on the verge of war) demonstrated that war today is not

inevitably destined by fate, that it can be avoided. The Chinese claim was therefore once again refuted, as well as their assessments of the current era, the current balance of forces. Imperialism, as can be seen, is no paper tiger; it is a tiger that can give you a nice bite in the backside. That is why one has to be careful of it. At the same time, however, it is not a tiger that determines whether or not there will be war. The Leninist policy of peaceful coexistence thus gained a glorious victory and graphic confirmation. This encounter was truly a classic manifestation of peaceful coexistence, which is nothing other than continuous struggle, a sequence of conflicts, one concession after another. Only in such a struggle is it possible today to keep the peace and to win one position after another from the imperialists.

Castro now tells us that the USA cannot be trusted, that the USA can break its promise. Of course, they cannot be trusted. But we won't get anywhere with that sort of argument. Following that logic, a child in a socialist country would have to pounce on the imperialists almost as soon as it was born. Today, however, it will be harder for the imperialists to attack Cuba in front of the whole world. We cannot, after all, permit a war just because the imperialists cannot be trusted. (Comrade Gromyko, incidentally, stated that we have no atomic missiles in Cuba. And he was lying. And how! And that was the right thing to do; he had orders from the Party. So, the imperialists cannot trust us either.) One of the important consequences of the whole conflict and of our approach is the fact that the whole world now sees us as the ones who saved peace. I now appear to the world as a lamb. That is not bad either. The pacifist [Bertrand] Russell writes me thank-you letters. I, of course, have nothing in common with him, except that we both want peace.

Such, on the whole, are the results of these six tense days. (In the presence of Comrade Novotný and other members of our delegation, the Presidium of the Central Committee of the CPSU debated also the letter to Comrade Castro, in which the position of the Soviet Union in the whole conflict is explained, and the reason the USSR was unable to agree to Castro's proposal is also explained.)

[1] Ed. note: It is not clear where Khrushchev obtained this idea; no evidence has emerged to suggest that West German intelligence alerted the US government to the installation of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba. For contacts between the United States and the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) during the crisis, see the collection of translated FRG documents published elsewhere in this issue of the CWIHP Bulletin.

[2] Ed. note: In fact, in his letter, dated October 26 but composed during the night of October 26-27, Castro judged a US attack "almost imminent within the next 24 to 72 hours." See Fidel Castro to Khrushchev, 26 October 1962, in James G. Blight, Bruce J. Allyn, and David A. Welch, *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis, and the Soviet Collapse* (NY: Pantheon, 1993). p. 509-10.

[3] Ed. note: In his October 26 letter, cited above, Castro advised Khrushchev that if "the imperialists invade Cuba with the goal of occupying it, the danger that the aggressive policy poses for humanity is so great that following that event the Soviet Union must never allow the circumstances in which the imperialists could launch the first nuclear strike against itthat would be the moment to eliminate such danger forever through an act of clear legitimate defense, however harsh and terrible the solution would be, for there is no other."