Khrushchev: Averting the Apocalypse

We had installed enough missiles already to destroy New York, Chicago and the other industrial cities, not to mention a little village like Washington. I don't think America had ever faced such a real threat of destruction.

THE moment in question was the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, when the U.S. and the Soviet Union came closer to nuclear war than at any time before or since. The 13 days of that near-apocalypse are vividly recalled this week by one of the two men who could have given the actual orders to push the button: former Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. Khrushchev's recollections, focusing on his years in power, are excerpted in LIFE and 19 foreign publications, and will appear shortly in the Little, Brown book *Khrushchev Remembers.*

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CASTRO & KHRUSHCHEV IN GEORGIA
Dangerous night on a couch.

Alarming News. Khrushchev says that in the spring of 1962, at a meeting in the Kremlin, he spoke about how Cuba's Fidel Castro had resisted the Bay of Pigs landing only a year earlier. "I said that it would be foolish to expect the inevitable second invasion to be as badly planned and executed as the first. I warned that Fidel would be crushed and said we were the only ones who could prevent such a disaster from occurring." Khrushchev found another justification: "The Americans had surrounded our own country with military bases and threatened us with nuclear weapons, and now they would learn just what it feels like."

Khrushchev began rushing intermediate-range nuclear missiles, launching equipment and Ilyushin-28 bombers to Cuba. President Kennedy's dramatic response was to order a naval blockade of Cuba and to warn that the U.S. would take "whatever means may be necessary" to remove the missiles. Khrushchev grew alarmed. Seeking "to take the heat off the situation," he suggested to other members of his government: "Comrades, let's go to the Bolshoi Theater this evening. Our own people as well as foreign eyes will notice, and perhaps it will calm them down." After he and Kennedy had begun exchanging secret personal messages, he recalls, "I spent one of the most dangerous nights at the Council of Ministers offices in the Kremlin. I slept on a couch, and I kept my clothes on. I was ready for alarming news to come any moment."

Dignified Way Out. The break in the crisis, says Khrushchev, came with a secret visit by Robert Kennedy to Soviet Ambassador to Washington Anatoly Dobrynin. Khrushchev says that Kennedy told Dobrynin: "We are under pressure from our military to use force against Cuba. If the situation continues much longer, the President is not sure that the military will not overthrow him and seize power." That quote is clearly suspect, suggesting that Khrushchev himself magnanimously found what he describes as "a dignified way out" of the crisis; most Western accounts give that credit to the Kennedys. In any case, Khrushchev continues: "We sent the Americans a note saying we agreed to remove our missiles and bombers on condition that the President give his assurance that there would be no invasion of Cuba." Khrushchev describes the affair as "a triumph of Soviet foreign policy and a personal triumph," in the sense that it assured a Communist future for Cuba. But he does concede that "we were obliged to make some big concessions." Public opinion in many places, he says, decided that "Khrushchev had turned coward and backed down," and even Cuba felt that the outcome was a "moral defeat."

Other gleanings from Khrushchev's memory:

ON VIET NAM: Before the Geneva conference of 1954, when Viet Nam was divided into North and South, Ho Chi Minh visited Moscow. The Communists had not yet scored their stunning victory at Dienbienphu and their situation was "very grave," says Khrushchev. When the Russians heard that France proposed the 17th Parallel as the dividing line at the conference, "we gasped with surprise and pleasure. The 17th Parallel was the absolute maximum we would have claimed ourselves."

ON EISENHOWER AND DULLES: "It was [Secretary of State John Foster Dulles] who determined foreign policy, not President Eisenhower. I watched Dulles making notes with a pencil, folding them up and sliding them under Eisenhower's hand. Eisenhower would then pick up these sheets of paper and read them before making a decision."

ON CHINA: "In my time we took great care never to offend China until the Chinese actually started to crucify us. And when they did start to crucify us, well, I'm no Jesus Christ, and I didn't have to turn the other cheek." On his final visit to Peking, in 1959, Khrushchev tried vainly to get Mao Tsetung's permission to build a radio in China that would reach Soviet submarines. Mao's reply: "No! We don't want you here. We've had foreigners on our territory for years now, and we're not ever going to let anyone use our land for their own purposes again."

ON KENNEDY: "I joked with [President John F. Kennedy] that we had cast the deciding ballot in his election to the presidency over that son-of-a-bitch Richard Nixon. I explained that by waiting to release the U-2 Pilot [Francis] Gary Powers until after the American election, we kept Nixon from being able to claim that he could deal with the Russians; our ploy made a difference of at least half a million votes."

Bolted Borders. In this final installment, Khrushchev does not discuss the events leading to his own downfall in 1964. But he does offer some thoughts about life inside his vast country. "If you try to control your artists too tightly, there will be no clashing of opinions, consequently no criticism, and consequently no truth," he says. In a similar vein, he says of the country's stifling travel restrictions: "Why should we build a good life and then keep our borders bolted with seven locks?"

Recalling his widely quoted threat that Communism will "bury" America, Khrushchev says that he did not actually mean that the Soviet Union will triumph over the U.S., but that "the working class of the United States would bury its enemy, the bourgeois class." He offers surprisingly little hope for truly peaceful relations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union: "Peaceful coexistence among different ideologies is not [possible]." History may contradict Khrushchev on that and many of his other judgments. But it is not likely to overlook the earthy, peasant-born Ukrainian who rose to become a world statesman, nor to forget his singular achievement: bestowing a measure of normalcy on the Soviet Union after the bloody aberrations of Stalin's 30-year reign.