

SECTION 3: Soviet Union

The Malin Notes: Glimpses Inside the Kremlin during the Cuban Missile Crisis

Introduction by Timothy Naftali

The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library's October 1996 release of the White House recordings made by President Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis revolutionized our understanding of how the American side handled the most dangerous nuclear crisis of the Cold War.² Some months earlier, the late Aleksandr Fursenko, a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, had learned about a collection of official notes from the meetings of the Presidium—the top decision-making body of the Soviet communist party and therefore of the USSR—during the missile crisis. These notes, which were written out in longhand by Vladimir Malin, the chief of the General Department of the Central Committee, formally recorded the Presidium's decisions and, occasionally, the discussion and justification behind the decisions. Fursenko was able to get access to a few, but by no means all, of the notes relevant to the Cuban missile crisis for our 1997 book, *“One Hell of a Gamble.”*³ In 2003, the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI), published a more complete collection of the Cuban Missile Crisis notes in Volume 1 of *Archivii Kremlya*, an edition overseen by Fursenko and edited by a team of RGANI archivists supervised by Director Natalia Y. Tomilina and Vitali Afiani.⁴

Whereas the Kennedy tapes are an exhaustive (and occasionally exhausting!) real-time resource, the Malin notes are fragmentary, but unless and until we discover that there was a Khrushchev Kremlin taping system, they are the best evidence we have on Soviet deliberations during the Crisis. For this special edition of the CWIHP *Bulletin* we have excerpted the notes of Presidium discussions related to the Cuban missile crisis from May through December 1962. The University of Virginia's Miller Center of Public Affairs, in agreement with RGANI, produced English translations of the notes for the Khrushchev era (1954-1964) and also of the small number of stenographic accounts of Presidium meetings also held by RGANI. Since 2006 most of these materials have been available in English on the website of the Miller Center's Scripps Library and Multimedia Archive. Professor Jim Hershberg and I are grateful to the Miller Center for its assistance with putting together this collection of Malin notes on the Cuban Missile Crisis. Dr. Mark Kramer, Director of the Harvard Project for Cold War Studies and a Senior Fellow of Harvard's Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, and I worked together to update the Miller Center's translations, which were done by Olga Rivkin, a native speaker but one without a detailed knowledge of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Mark, who did the bulk of the updating, also contributed translations for two notes not currently on the Miller Center's website.

What do the Notes Tell Us?

In 1969 former British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in his introduction to Robert F. Kennedy's *Thirteen Days* laid out a basic research agenda for students of the Kremlin side of the Cuban missile crisis: “why did the Russians risk so much? What was their ultimate purpose? Why

did they withdraw? Why did they not retaliate at other, but equally sensitive, points?”⁵

On the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis, how well do the Malin notes help us answer Macmillan’s questions? And do they suggest any others?

Why did the Soviets risk so much? What was their ultimate purpose?

Let’s take these questions together. In his dictated memoirs, Khrushchev credited himself with the idea of putting nuclear missiles on Cuba and ascribed two motives to the ploy: “The main thing was that the installation of our missiles in Cuba would, I thought, restrain the United States from precipitous military action against Castro’s government. In addition to protecting Cuba, our missiles would have equalized what the West likes to call ‘the balance of power.’”⁶

The notes underscore that the missile gambit was, indeed, Khrushchev’s idea and, also, that it was a hard sell. Protocol 32 (21 and 24 May, 1962) shows that it took Khrushchev two meetings and four days to get his colleagues to approve the plan.⁷ Although the sole leader of the USSR, especially since he survived a failed palace coup in 1957, Khrushchev still needed formal approval of the Presidium before moving ahead.

The question of the origins of the nuclear missile decision is more complex than Khrushchev remembered; but here, too, the notes are helpful, if less conclusive. Evidence that emerged in the 1990s, largely unearthed by Aleksandr Fursenko in the Archive of the President of the Russian Federation (APRF), strongly suggested that the missile decision in May 1962 had come at the end of a long reexamination of Soviet military support for Cuba. In September 1961, the Cubans had asked for conventionally armed Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAMs), the SA-2s, and shore-based Sopka missiles and a Soviet deployment of 10,000 troops. Initially, Moscow had set this request 300 side. But, in March 1962, the Kremlin came back to the six-month-old Cuban request and decided to reconsider the entire problem of Cuban defense. In early April, the Soviets concluded that the best way to secure the Castro regime was to help the Cubans defend themselves. The Presidium approved additional military supplies, a medium-term training program for the Cuban military, and a symbolic Soviet detachment of 3,000 troops. The only missiles the Kremlin intended to send at that time were the non-nuclear SAMs and the Sopkas.⁸

This new chronology effectively posed two new questions for scholars: if the Kremlin had made up its collective mind about Cuban defense in April, why did it choose to re-examine the issue in May 1962? And, more importantly, why did the Kremlin, which seemed satisfied with a non-nuclear approach to defending Cuba in April and the involvement of only 3,000 of its own men, approve dispatching Soviet nuclear weapons and over 50,000 Soviet troops to the island a month later?

Malin apparently took no notes for the April decisions regarding Cuba and his notes of the 21/24 May meeting do not reveal why Khrushchev sought to re-examine the issue of Cuban defense. They do, however, provide evidence that Khrushchev understood in May that he was proposing a big shift in how the Kremlin dealt with the problem of securing Cuba. On 21 May, Khrushchev introduced the nuclear missile proposal by saying, “[t]his will be an offensive policy.” According

to Malin, the question before the Kremlin at the time was “How to help Cuba so that it can remain firm.” Why would one need an “offensive policy” to achieve what was essentially a defensive objective? Did Khrushchev misspeak or did Malin mishear? It seems likely that Khrushchev meant what Malin recorded him as saying. Two weeks later, as seen in Protocol 35, once the Cubans had agreed to the offer of the nuclear missiles, Khrushchev added, in the same spirit, “I think we will be victorious in this operation.” Khrushchev’s use of the terms like “offensive” and “victorious” implied that he knew that he was suggesting a radical and risky shift in dealing with a more powerful United States.

One has to look beyond the Malin notes, I believe, to see what might be behind Khrushchev’s risktaking. In the same volume as the Malin notes, RGANI also published in 2003 a much smaller collection (less than 50) of stenographic transcripts of Presidium discussions from 1958 through 1964. These included a remarkable monologue by Khrushchev before the Presidium on 8 January 1962, during which the Soviet leader set out his foreign policy strategy for the year. Well aware that the Soviet Union lagged behind the United States in strategic power, Khrushchev recommended a policy of aggressive containment. With the international balance of power favoring the United States, Khrushchev believed that the Soviet Union had to exert pressure on the weak points of the US alliance system to restrain Washington. Subsequently, in February he approved the buzzing of Allied aircraft in the air corridors to West Berlin and in March he unleashed the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese, who had wanted to violate the ceasefire in Laos to allow the Pathet Lao to approach closer to the Mekong river in northwestern Laos.

By May, this approach—which Khrushchev likened to creating a liquid meniscus by pouring enough wine in a glass to reach the brim but not a drop more-- was not working. The US had stood up to Soviet provocations in Central Europe, had sent troops to Thailand to shore up the Royal Government of Laos, had resumed atmospheric nuclear testing, and there were indications of a continuing Kennedy interest in overthrowing Castro. Meanwhile Soviet production of intercontinental missiles had hit a snag. Did Khrushchev lobby his colleagues to upgrade Soviet plans for the conventional defense of Cuba so that he could add some more water to the glass, bring international politics even closer to the brim? Is this what he meant by it being “an offensive policy?”⁹

Malin’s notes for the 1 July meeting (Protocol 39) do provide some evidence that Khrushchev was thinking about more than Cuba that summer. After discussing the timetable for sending the missiles to Cuba, Khrushchev led his colleagues in a re-examination of the Soviet Union’s policy on West Berlin. Berlin had not been a topic of discussion for months. In January 1962, during his “meniscus” monologue, Khrushchev had told his colleagues that the balance of power was probably not conducive to getting a Berlin agreement in 1962. He predicted that a “final fight on the issues of West Berlin” was inevitable, but not yet.¹⁰ Why did Khrushchev return to the Berlin issue in July?

Although a matter of interpretation, I believe that the timing of the raising of the Berlin question reflects something other than a Soviet desire to use Berlin to distract John F. Kennedy from

the Cuban missile gambit. From the notes, we see that in July Khrushchev associated the idea of bringing the Berlin question to the UN with “the path of creating tensions.” And from other sources we know that by September he had chosen the path of renewed political crisis over Berlin. As the summer progressed, the Soviet foreign ministry began preparing to bring the question to the UN and, in September, Khrushchev began to tell foreigners, most notably the West German Ambassador Hans Kroll, that the USSR would be bringing the Berlin matter to a head at the UN in November and expected to prevail.¹¹ It seems likely that more than coincidence was involved in the fact that Khrushchev chose the path of renewing political confrontation with the United States over Berlin just as his missiles were reaching their launch sites in Cuba. In *Khrushchev's Cold War*, Aleksandr Fursenko and I argued that though we don't believe that the Berlin question inspired Khrushchev's risk-taking in sending nuclear missiles to Cuba, it seemed probable that as he gained confidence that his ploy would succeed, he began to consider how the new balance of power would allow him to solve problems like Berlin.¹² In this way, the missile gambit was politically but not militarily “offensive.”

Why did they withdraw? Why did they not retaliate against other, but equally sensitive, points?

The notes are much more revealing on these two questions. Let's take the second question first. At no time does it appear that Khrushchev or his colleagues considered threatening or attacking West Berlin—the main “sensitive” point Macmillan was probably thinking of—to counter the military advantage that the US held in the Caribbean. According to the notes, the Kremlin considered using force only twice during the crisis, and in each case it would have been in response to a US attack on Cuba. On 22 October, according to Protocol 60, as the Soviets awaited Kennedy's public announcement of what he planned to do about the Soviet missiles found in Cuba, Khrushchev and some of his colleagues briefly considered using tactical nuclear weapons in the event of a US airborne assault. But, at the suggestion of Soviet defense minister Rodion Malinovsky, the Kremlin postponed its consideration of a nuclear response pending details of Kennedy's speech. On 28 October, according to Protocol 63, when Khrushchev probably assumed that Kennedy's patience was at an end and the crisis might either be resolved or spin out of control, the Kremlin again considered how it might respond to a US attack. If anyone suggested a preemptive strike, or even a retaliatory strike, against a target outside of the Caribbean, Malin did not note it for the official record.

The notes also underscore the wisdom of Kennedy's choice of the blockade option. As the blockade's advocates in Washington—namely, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara—had argued, imposing a naval quarantine before possibly taking military action gave Khrushchev time to think. The continuation of Protocol 60 (when the Kremlin reconvened at 10 a.m. on 23 October) shows that once the Kremlin had seen a text of Kennedy's speech and knew for sure that Washington was not about to launch a “blitzkrieg,” it wasted no time in taking steps to reduce the risks of confrontation. It ordered some ships that were still in the Mediterranean to turn around. The Aleksandrovsk, the ship carrying the nuclear warheads for the IRBMs (the R-14s), was ordered to keep sailing, however, because it was close enough to Cuban shores to dock before the blockade went into effect. Not all decisions taken that day, however, showed a desire to reduce risks. The four diesel submarines, each of which carried one nuclear-

tipped torpedo, were told to proceed.

The Malin notes make clear that Kennedy's crisis team, known as the ExComm, met more often as a group than did the Presidium. The long session of 22 October continued into 23 October. But there are no notes for 24 October or 26 October and there is no break in the numbering of the protocols. This does not mean that Khrushchev and his colleagues went for carefree walks in Moscow's lovely parks on those days, just that the Presidium, for whatever reason, was not brought into formal session.

By 25 October, Malin noted in Protocol 61 that Khrushchev was taking even bigger steps away from the brink. Perhaps after informally canvassing the opinions of his colleagues on 24 October, Khrushchev decided that the ships carrying the IRBM missiles (the R-14s) on the high seas should turn around and come home. In addition, he floated a proposal for ending the crisis: when the time seemed right he would offer to dismantle the missiles already on the island (the MRBMs or R-12s) if Kennedy pledged not to invade Cuba. In laying out this proposal, Khrushchev partially answered one of Macmillan's 1969 questions. The missile ploy, he argued, had succeeded in scaring Kennedy and in insuring that the world was focused on the plight of little Cuba. As a result, he argued, the missiles already on the island could be withdrawn if the price of their removal was a public pledge from the United States not to touch Cuba in the future. Khrushchev may have had greater goals in mind when he proposed this "offensive policy" in May, but three days into the crisis a non-invasion pledge had become an acceptable return on this investment.

Khrushchev did not wait long to make that offer to Kennedy. The next day, 26 October, without having to reconvene the Presidium, he sent his famous "knot" letter to Kennedy suggesting the trade of the missiles for a US pledge not to invade Cuba. Something then happened, because when Malin resumed his note-taking on 27 October, Khrushchev clearly thought he could get Kennedy to pay a higher price for ending the crisis. The notes do not explain why he changed his mind. Ever the gambler, perhaps Khrushchev had recalculated the odds of a US invasion and thought he could risk pushing Kennedy a little harder. In any case, on 27 October he suggested to his colleagues that the USSR up the ante. Khrushchev proposed a new demand: the removal of US military bases from Turkey and Pakistan. In presenting this, he also used, for the first time since June 1962, the trope of victory: "if we receive in return the elimination of the [US] base in Turkey and Pakistan, then we will end up victorious."

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When the Kennedy administration officials heard a few hours later that the Kremlin had increased its terms for a diplomatic settlement, they feared that the Soviet leader had lost a battle with some hawks in Moscow. Protocol 62 effectively puts that theory to rest. It was Khrushchev who decided to raise the stakes and the notes indicate that he dictated the new letter to Kennedy. What the notes do not indicate was when, or how, the Kremlin decided to narrow the new demand to just getting the US to agree to removing its "Jupiter" IRBMs from Turkey. Khrushchev would ultimately not mention Pakistan in his 27 October letter to JFK.

The acute crisis ended on 28 October, and the notes for that day (Protocol 63) have already

spawned some historical controversy.¹³ As in the case of those for 22-23 October, the structure of Malin's notes suggests that there was a break in the meeting. In the first part of the meeting, Khrushchev proposed reacting positively to Kennedy's response to his 27 October letter. Kennedy, in his response, had ignored the demand to remove US IRBMs from Turkey and offered only a non-invasion pledge in return for Moscow dismantling the missiles. The structure of the Malin notes for 28 October suggests that Khrushchev may have made this decision to end the crisis before knowing that late on 27 October (Washington time; after midnight in Moscow), the President's brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, had told the Soviet ambassador in Washington, Anatoly F. Dobrynin, that JFK was also prepared to order the removal of the Jupiter missiles from Turkey. The meeting recessed after Khrushchev reacted positively to Kennedy's letter. When it resumed, there were fewer participants and, at that point, Khrushchev discussed the message from Dobrynin. Without more information, the notes do not make clear whether Khrushchev received the message from Dobrynin only after the recess or that Khrushchev, who already knew about Kennedy's secret offer, recessed the meeting and excused some of the participants because he wanted to discuss Kennedy's Turkish concession in front of a smaller group. The latter explanation is not wholly satisfactory. Although President Kennedy had requested through his brother that Khrushchev keep this concession secret, it is not clear why Khrushchev would have felt that he could not mention it in front of Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko, who would have seen Dobrynin's dispatch at some point any way, and his Minister of Defense, Rodion Malinovsky. According to Malin, Gromyko and Malinovsky were among those who left after the morning session.

The timing of when Khrushchev learned about Kennedy's secret offer remains unclear and it is extremely significant. Would Khrushchev have ended the crisis without that additional US concession? The structure of Protocol 63 raises but does not settle this important question. Even though fragmentary, the Malin notes suggest strongly that except on the long night of 22 October, Khrushchev took steps to minimize the risk of war. The time offered by Kennedy's quarantine policy allowed the Soviet leader to come to grips with the need to withdraw the missiles. It took the Kremlin only three days to devise the basic structure of an agreement and it appears that it was Khrushchev who suggested it. With the possible exception of the resolution of the question of tactical missiles on 22 October, there is little that appears from the notes to have been forced upon Khrushchev by the rest of the Presidium, and here one needs to be careful. Other sources, such as notes made by Anastas Mikoyan at some of these meetings, suggest much more give and take than is reflected in Malin's official record.¹⁴ This does not mean that the Malin notes are an unreliable source for the decisions taken. We already know that Malin's recording technique smoothed over disputes. There can be no doubt that the two-day session of 21/24 May 1962, for example, involved a debate and none of that is in the notes that we have. Regardless of the arguments that may have preceded the final decisions, however, Malin's notes are powerful evidence that Khrushchev was the key player on the Soviet side during the missile crisis. He caused the crisis in the first place and once he got enough from Kennedy, he brought it to an end.

After the crisis ended, it was Khrushchev who was the chief spinner in defining its ramifications. On 3 December (Protocol 71), Khrushchev explained why he viewed the outcome of the crisis as a success. "The USA," he said with evident satisfaction, "was compelled to recognize

that we, too, have our interests in the Western Hemisphere.” He also stressed his pleasure at seeing that the Soviet Union could scare the United States “They themselves got frightened,” said Khrushchev adding that if the Kremlin had held out a little longer they might have been able to get Kennedy to pay a higher price. It was as if the missile crisis had redeemed his beloved meniscus strategy. Curiously, when listing the successes of the missile gambit to his colleagues that December, Khrushchev said nothing about extracting the Turkish missile concession from JFK.¹⁵

The notes do, however, add new questions to those posed by Macmillan. The pre-crisis notes from October 1962 (Protocols 58 and 59), which show an intense focus on the Sino-Indian confrontation, suggest that the Kremlin was completely taken by surprise by the crisis. In light of Khrushchev’s personal interest in the Gary Powers’ incident of May 1960, it remains a mystery why the Kremlin did not begin to worry that the missiles sites would be seen by American U2 surveillance before the SAMs were fully operational. And it is not that the Kremlin did not ask questions about US intelligence efforts regarding the missile ploy. In

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July, as shown by Protocol 39, Khrushchev discussed the importance of getting the US to stop flying over the ships heading to Cuba. The notes also provide significant details on the effect that the missile crisis had on Soviet-Cuban relations. Thanks to Castro’s so-called Armageddon letter and his five points, by December 1962 (Protocol 71), Khrushchev was calling the Cubans “unreliable allies.”¹⁶ As we all know, that relationship would ultimately become close again.

It has been forty-five years since Harold Macmillan launched his challenge to explain what he termed “this strange and still scarcely explicable affair.” Scholars can now explain much more about Khrushchev’s motives and his actions during the crisis, in part thanks to the Malin notes. Huge gaps, however, remain in the Soviet record of the crisis, ensuring many more years of lively, interpretive debates and major discoveries.