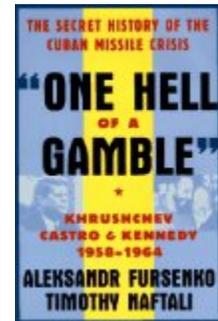


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Aleksandr Fursenko, Timothy Naftali. *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997. xi + 420. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-393-04070-8.

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Published on H-Diplo (March, 1998)



The Cuban missile crisis of October 1962 has been a veritable cottage industry for scholars.[1] Moreover, considerable primary materials continue to become available, most recently State and Defense department documents published in *The Foreign Relations of the United States*, which appeared about one year prior to the publication of the study under consideration, and *The Kennedy Tapes* edited by Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, which came out too late for *One Hell of a Gamble*. With the publication of the May-Zelikow study, one now has access to all of the taped deliberations of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm), increasing our understanding of how Kennedy and his associates grappled with Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba. With the release of the Kennedy tapes, the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library has opened about ninety-nine percent of its material on the missile crisis. All that remains closed apparently are the materials in Robert Kennedy's personal papers as well as some intelligence-related documents.

Of the recent works, none is more significant than *One Hell of a Gamble* because it represents the first to incorporate sources from the Russian archives, including the Presidium materials on Cuba, the KGB's records of its Washington, D.C. and Havana bureaus, and the military intelligence files. Whether this represents full disclosure remains unclear. The study also incorporates personal interviews of former Soviet officials. This collaborative effort involves Timothy Naftali, a teacher of history at Yale University where he is a fellow at International Security Studies, and Aleksandr Fursenko, chairman of the History Department of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Billed as an international study, it also includes materials from the archives of France and the Czech Republic.

What is notably missing are sources from Cuban repositories, which most likely will remain closed.

The book title comes from a response President Kennedy made to the congressional leadership in the heat of the crisis following a recommendation to invade Cuba. With Soviet nuclear medium- and intermediate-range missiles pointed at the United States, it would indeed have been "one hell of a gamble" to knock them out—one that Kennedy privately did not wish to take. But this work does not limit itself to the crisis; it begins with the emergence of Fidel Castro as the leader of the Cuban revolutionary government, and it concludes with Khrushchev's ouster from power. It covers Soviet-U.S. relations through the late Eisenhower-Kennedy presidencies, paying particular attention to the Bay of Pigs and the Kennedys' obsession with Cuba afterward. Since the greatest revelations come from Soviet sources, it tilts in that direction. Those who are accustomed to associating certain events and names with the missile crisis will be surprised by the omissions: There is no mention of Dean Acheson, Adlai Stevenson's confrontation with the Soviets at the UN, Andrew Cordier, AM/LASH, or the dramatic events relating to the blockade. Obviously, this is not a definitive study of the crisis.

One Hell of a Gamble does show the extent to which Khrushchev directed Soviet foreign policy from the inception of the Cuban revolution. He alone decided to support the Castro regime by supplying it with arms and then negotiating a secret treaty pledging to defend Cuba. Because of Castro's fears of a U.S. invasion—there were four separate invasion scares in 1960-1961—Khrushchev advised an ambivalent Castro to accept Soviet ground-to-ground missiles as a deterrent. Soviet sources suggest

that Khrushchev may have been even more concerned by the discrepancy between Soviet and U.S. ICBM capabilities. Placing Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba would enable him to close the gap. Those same missiles might force the United States to reconsider its Jupiter missiles in Turkey. Moreover, Kennedy's decision to resume nuclear testing also became a consideration as was Castro's suspected drift away from Moscow as the result of internal considerations. Khrushchev made the missile deployment decision, and the Presidium unanimously approved it.

Khrushchev's strategy included a proposed visit to the United States following the congressional elections of 1962 to inform Kennedy personally of the missiles. Of course, his plan could succeed only if the missiles remained undetected prior to being made operational and if Kennedy were willing to "swallow" them as the Soviets had done in Turkey. From the beginning the Russian military leaders were skeptical that the missiles could be concealed from American U-2 reconnaissance flights, and even Khrushchev soon had his doubts. Kennedy's tough September statement against possible Soviet military presence in Cuba suggested that the American president would find the missiles difficult to ingest.

The United States detection of the missiles and the Ex-Comm secret deliberations of how to respond is a familiar story that *One Hell of a Gamble* retells. It emphasizes the fluidity of the positions taken, with Defense Secretary Robert McNamara favoring a limited air strike by the morning of October 26 after initially opposing it, and it reveals that JFK, despite supporting an air strike until October 20, became the greatest proponent of a trade involving the Jupiter missiles in Turkey. Less well-known is the extent to which both sides engaged in back-channel negotiations largely involving Robert Kennedy, the president's brother, and Georgi Bolshakov, the Soviet military intelligence officer. In such encounters Soviet sources confirm the misperceptions that both had of one another. While the Soviets correctly surmised that Kennedy faced pressure from the military for an air strike, they exaggerated the possibility of a U.S. invasion of Cuba. U.S. policymakers, meanwhile, had it wrong that Soviet hard-liners were pressuring Khrushchev. The study also discloses the weakness of Soviet intelligence during the crisis. While ignoring more credible sources, the Russians instead accepted questionable information from a New York Herald Tribune correspondent that the U.S. planned an invasion, convincing Khrushchev that he could not keep ballistic missiles in Cuba without going to war.

One Hell of a Gamble suggests that Khrushchev's October 26 letter, proposing a U.S. promise not to attack Cuba for a Soviet one to remove the missiles, was circulated among Presidium members before being sent to Kennedy. His letter the following day represented a reconsideration influenced not by hard-liners but by feelers emanating from meetings between Bolshakov and close Kennedy friend Charles Bartlett, a Washington-based correspondent; and journalist Frank Holeman, who had ties with Robert Kennedy. That second letter of October 27, proposing a missile trade, was apparently dictated by Khrushchev at a meeting of the Presidium. Of course, it became a crucial part of the settlement in which Robert Kennedy secretly promised Bolshakov that the missiles in Turkey would be removed in four or five months. Khrushchev apparently did not betray Kennedy's confidence either to Castro or to his own bureaucracy even after coming under heavy criticism for failing to extract any concession other than the U.S. promise not to attack Cuba.

Perhaps the most controversial issue of the missile crisis remains the deployment of tactical nuclear missiles in Cuba. Did the Soviet military commander, Issa Pliyev, have authorization to use them in the event of an invasion? Apparently, even though Pliyev had not received final instructions from Khrushchev, enough ambiguity existed where they could have been used against invading forces. It was not until the 27th that he received an order that "you are forbidden to apply nuclear warheads ... without authorization from Moscow" (p. 276). Also on the 27th, a Soviet commander disobeyed instructions by firing a SA-2 rocket, thereby destroying a U-2 plane piloted by Captain Rudolf Anderson, an indication that matters were spinning out of control. Fortunately, cooler heads on both sides prevailed. None proved cooler than the American president who rejected military retaliation. He not only persistently pressed for the Soviet withdrawal of the ground-to-ground missiles, but he also pushed for the removal of all offensive weapons, including the Il-28 bombers.

Khrushchev's capitulation invited Castro's wrath. The Soviet records reveal the extent to which antagonisms developed between the two allies. Angry at not being consulted, Castro opposed UN inspection of the removal of the missiles and the withdrawal of the bombers. His compatriots—particularly "Che" Guevara—mocked Soviet power; one attempted to toast Joseph Stalin at a dinner attended by Anastas Mikoyan, Khrushchev's personal envoy to Havana. At the same time Khrushchev became livid at Castro for threatening to shoot down Amer-

ican U-2s and for earlier suggesting that the Soviets unleash their nuclear arsenal against the United States. He called Castro unreasonable and undisciplined and momentarily questioned his commitment to him. And after the Cubans began to covet the tactical nuclear weapons, which were unknown to the U.S., the Soviets decided to remove them too.

Soviet files revealed how concerned Khrushchev was about Kennedy's assassination. Since the Soviet leadership had only Kennedy's word about not invading Cuba, rather than a written agreement, his demise threatened to overturn the arrangement and the emerging detente between the two countries. Viewing Kennedy's assassination as a right-wing conspiracy, the Soviets became immediately suspicious of President Johnson who was repeatedly denigrated by Kennedy loyalists. In the end, as Soviet sources suggest, Cuba contributed to Khrushchev's collapse. He fell victim to a bloodless coup in October 1964 following an attack in the Presidium for his Cuban adventurism, which his detractors argued brought the world to the brink and led to Soviet humil-

iation. The authors conclude that Cuba had contributed to the vulnerability of both protagonists, leading to their destruction.

One Hell of a Gamble is a well-structured book that commands attention. It adds significantly to our understanding of the most serious crisis of the post World War II era. One question it might have addressed, however: How did the testimony of former Soviet participants, given at the various conferences of the late 1980s and early 1990s, compare with the recently opened material?

Notes:

[1]. For a recent annotated bibliography of the Cuban missile crisis, see James N. Giglio, *John F. Kennedy: A Bibliography*. Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1995, pp. 246-259.

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Citation: James N. Giglio. Review of Fursenko, Aleksandr; Naftali, Timothy, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. March, 1998.

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