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The Kennedy-Khrushchev Letters: An Overview

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The recently released communiqués between President John F. Kennedy and Chairman Nikita S. Khrushchev,* from the period immediately after the Soviet leader announced the withdrawal of the ballistic missiles from Cuba on October 28, 1962, underscore that the crisis did not end until November 20.¹ They also highlight several new lessons about the crisis.

In their so-called agreement of October 27 and October 28, the U.S. president promised to lift the quarantine around Cuba and “to give assurances against an invasion of Cuba,” while the Soviet leader promised to withdraw “the weapons which you describe as ‘offensive.’”² Kennedy qualified his pledge with two conditions: (a) that the “weapons systems” would be removed “under appropriate United Nations observation and supervision”; and (b) that the Soviets would “undertake, with suitable safeguards, to halt the further introduction of such weapons systems into Cuba.” Khrushchev’s unwillingness to acknowledge that he had placed missiles in Cuba, even as late as October 28, and his determination to emphasize that the Soviets viewed the weapons in Cuba as defensive, led him to use the phrase “the weapons which you describe as ‘offensive.’” This phrasing created an opportunity that Kennedy quickly seized.

U.S. officials had been concerned about IL-28 fighter-bombers that the Soviet Union had sent to Cuba along with the ballistic missiles because the

* Khrushchev was chairman of the Soviet Council of Ministers as well as General Secretary of the Communist party.

bombers had the capability of carrying nuclear bombs. During the height of the crisis, Kennedy focused on the missiles, but early in November he authorized the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson, to give the Soviet U.N. ambassador a list of “offensive” weapons, including the IL-28 bombers, to be removed from Cuba in addition to the missiles.³ The confrontation over the removal of the IL-28s created a second crisis that lasted until November 20, when Kennedy announced publicly that the Soviets had agreed to remove the bombers and he ordered the military alert reduced from Defense Condition 2. Much of the November correspondence focuses on the IL-28s.

On November 12, Khrushchev acknowledged Kennedy’s concern about the bombers and offered his “gentleman’s word” to remove the IL-28s, “although not now but later.” The Soviet leader’s formulation here echoes the secret promise Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy made to Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin during the height of the crisis to remove ballistic missiles from Turkey at a later date. But the president’s brother had demanded that the promise be kept secret. The United States, it was believed, could not publicly trade missiles in Turkey for those in Cuba, because it neither wanted to offend its NATO ally nor undermine its own credibility. Despite the seemingly parallel circumstances that now faced Khrushchev, President Kennedy was unyielding. In a message received by Moscow on November 13, he insisted on an announcement about the bombers’ removal, though he indicated a willingness to keep secret “the time period for withdrawing the IL-28 aircraft.” The next day, Khrushchev relented and agreed to “the withdrawal of the IL-28s within mentioned 30 days. . . .”

Meanwhile, Cuba was insisting—as Khrushchev alluded in his letter of November 12—that it would not permit withdrawal of the IL-28s, because they had been given to Cuba. Moreover, President Fidel Castro was demanding that U.N. inspection of Cuban territory could be undertaken only if there were a reciprocal inspection of U.S. territory—where there were alleged base camps used by the Central Intelligence Agency for training anti-Castro guerrillas. Just as the United States did not trust Cuba, and sought verified safeguards against the return of offensive weapons, so Cuba wanted to make certain that the United States upheld its pledge not to support terrorists who were attacking Cuba. The IL-28s were Cuba’s bargaining chip to secure a firm agreement with the United States not to invade Cuba. Yet, unknown to Castro, Khrushchev gave up the bombers on November 14, the day before the Cuban president wrote a strong letter to U.N. Acting Secretary General U Thant expressing Cuba’s position.