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H-Diplo Commentary on “‘Documentary Evidence’ and Llewellyn Thompson’s Berlin/Cuba Assessment of Soviet Motives in the October 1962 Missile Crisis.”

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Essay by **Philip Zelikow**, University of Virginia

In a favorable review of *The Kremlinologist*, the fine recent biography of the great American diplomat and Soviet expert Llewellyn “Tommy” Thompson that was written by his daughters, David Foglesong added this curious cavil. “The Thompsons argue that the Cuban missile crisis stemmed from [Soviet leader Nikita] Khrushchev’s seeing ‘an irresistible opportunity to use missiles to solve all his problems’—including Chinese criticism, Soviet military complaints, and East German instability, as well as Cuban vulnerability—even though they acknowledge that there is very little documentary evidence to support that thesis.”¹

Both Ambassador Thompson then, and his daughters in their book, developed an argument that is focused primarily on the climax of the Berlin Crisis. Throughout 1962, Thompson had been playing a central part in the Berlin Crisis diplomacy. In the months before the missiles in Cuba were discovered, Thompson (and President John F. Kennedy) had been puzzled as to why Khrushchev was launching another diplomatic offensive on Berlin, with a warning that he would settle the matter, once and for all, after the U.S. congressional elections on 6 November 1962.

Once the missiles in Cuba were discovered, Thompson believed the puzzle had been solved. He made this point to Kennedy and the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm); the lightbulb went on for the president too. In coming days President Kennedy repeated this thesis to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the ExComm, and to congressional leaders.

Thompson also drafted the State Department’s October 24 guidance on Khrushchev’s behavior that was passed along to all of America’s NATO allies and other European states. In it, Thompson explained that,

¹ David Foglesong, “Old School Wise Men,” *H-Diplo*, November 2018, 2, reviewing Jenny Thompson and Sherry Thompson, *The Kremlinologist: Llewellyn E. Thompson, America’s Man in Cold War Moscow* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018): <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=52286>. In the review, Foglesong references the Thompsons’ quote to page 272, but I think he was mainly referring to their language on 280-281.

“When Soviet action in arming Cuba with offensive nuclear missiles became evident, it was because of developments set forth above that this Government tended [to] believe [the] Soviet action was probably primarily geared to showdown on Berlin, intended to be timed with Khrushchev’s [late November] arrival in US and completion of installation of these missiles in Cuba.”² Britain’s Joint Intelligence Committee arrived at the same conclusion. The CIA’s post-crisis assessment also dovetailed with Thompson’s and Kennedy’s view.

Thompson’s and President Kennedy’s assessment of the Berlin link is important historically, of course, but also because it reframes the reason Kennedy felt he had to act in October and risk general war. Kennedy concluded that if he did not eliminate the missiles in Cuba he would face another, more dangerous, nuclear crisis over Berlin, beginning in November. And in that crisis the burden of nuclear escalation would be on the United States, and thus on him.

Foglesong is correct that, after the authors explain the conclusion of Thompson, and of Thompson’s friend, fellow diplomat and Sovietologist Charles Bohlen, about the convergence of Berlin and the timing of the Cuban missile deployment, they acknowledge a problem with “Soviet documentary evidence.” They write: “Although, as Svetlana Savranskaya pointed out, no Soviet documentary evidence exists that draws a connection between the missiles in Cuba and the dilemma Khrushchev faced over his East Germany-Berlin strategy, it was the elephant in the room.”

The Thompsons go on to explain that Khrushchev had staked his prestige on getting Western forces out of West Berlin and his patience had finally run out. “The missiles in Cuba would guarantee that the United States could no longer simply ignore him.” The authors observe that in his memoirs, former secretary of state Dean Rusk said that a “top-ranking Russian,” whom Rusk did not name, had later admitted to him that the Soviets “wanted to get the missiles to Cuba secretly and quickly and then, after our November elections, use the Cuban missiles as additional leverage with us on Berlin.”³

The “no documentary evidence” phrase is a common dismissal of the assessment these experts arrived at in 1962 (and which I believe was confirmed by later evidence, as I have indicated in other works). For instance,

² Circular Telegram from State to Certain Diplomatic Missions, 24 October 1962, in *FRUS 1961-1963: Berlin Crisis, 1962-1963*, vol. 15 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1994), 398-399; see also, stressing that the Berlin Crisis was why the missiles in Cuba had to be removed, Topol 581, “Relationship Cuba Crisis to Berlin,” 28 October 1962, 404-405.

³ Thompson and Thompson, *The Kremlinologist*, 302, including the quote from Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 242. Thompson and Thompson do not cite a source for Savranskaya’s statement. The U.S. government’s other most famous Sovietologist, George Kennan, was at his post in Belgrade. From there, in February 1962 Kennan wrote Thompson (then in Moscow) an “outburst” to confide his worries that the U.S. did not grasp just how deeply Khrushchev was committed to winning on Berlin. To Kennan, Khrushchev’s determination was so risky that he thought the U.S. had to step back from what Kennan regarded as an unreasonable commitment to the fate of the West Berliners. Kennan’s shared his argument with others. It drew an intense reply from Allan Lightner, the top U.S. diplomat in West Berlin, that was also shared with Thompson, Rusk, and National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy. The exchanges were carried on in the State Department’s “official-informal” back channel. See Kennan to Thompson, 9 February 1962, and Lightner to Kennan, March 9, 1962, in *FRUS Berlin Crisis*, vol. 14, 802-804, 865-867.

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Don Munton and David Welch regard a Berlin hypothesis about Khrushchev's motives as "by far the least plausible" because there is "no testimony or documentary evidence suggesting that the deployment was about Berlin."⁴ Barton Bernstein, a very conscientious historian, has also repeatedly asked me to show him such documentary evidence.

These arguments from good scholars have puzzled me. To me, the documentary evidence is abundant. But if good historians do not see it, there is an interesting problem. To make the problem even more interesting, there are not important disputes about the relevant evidence (although no one appears to know the identity of Rusk's "top-ranking Russian" source). Mainly, this is an issue of inference.

The issue of inference can be presented relatively simply. The notes from the Soviet Presidium meeting on May 21 in which Khrushchev formally introduced his proposal, put them under an agenda item of "Regarding assistance to Cuba. How to help Cuba so that it can remain firm." About Khrushchev's proposal to place the Soviet ballistic missiles in Cuba "under our command," the notes only state cryptically: "This will be an offensive policy."⁵

After this, two chains of actions are very well documented.

A) It is well documented that the Soviet government developed and refined its plan to set up a large missile base in Cuba, and persuaded the Cubans to go along, between May and July 1962. In July 1962 the deployments began. If the missiles had not been discovered in mid-October, the Soviets expected to have completed their secret missile deployment *in November 1962*.

B) It is well documented that the Soviets reopened a diplomatic offensive on the stalemated Berlin crisis in July 1962, escalating their warnings and threats to liquidate the Western military presence that held on to West Berlin. The Soviets secretly warned both American and West German leaders that the Soviet government intended to settle the issue finally *in November 1962*.

Saying that he knew the president appreciated "frankness," Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko told JFK on October 18 that the "NATO military base and the occupation regime in West Berlin represented a rotten tooth which must be pulled out." If the discussions in November did not succeed, the Soviet government would be compelled, "and Mr. Gromyko wished to emphasize the word 'compelled'" to proceed without the West's consent.⁶

⁴ Don Munton and David Welch, *The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Concise History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 27.

⁵ Protocol No. 32 (trans. Mark Kramer), 21 May 1962, in Timothy Naftali and Mark Kramer, eds., "The Malin Notes: Glimpses Inside the Kremlin during the Cuban Missile Crisis," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, nos. 17/18 (Fall 2012), 303.

⁶ Gromyko-JFK memcon, 18 October 1962, in *FRUS, Berlin Crisis*, vol. 15, 371-372. Berlin was Gromyko's main topic for his meeting with Kennedy. It was the great issue in U.S.-Soviet relations, Gromyko explained, on which

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Those who use the “no documentary evidence” phrase tend to discuss only the documentary evidence about (A), and not the evidence about (B).

There are only two hypotheses that can explain the convergence of timing of these two courses of Soviet action.

#1: The convergence of the two plans is connected.

#2: The convergence of the two plans is coincidental.

There is no document in which Khrushchev is recorded directly explaining how the two plans are connected. Hence there is indeed a need for inference.

Yet hypothesis #2 (coincidence) also requires an inference. It requires the inference that the Soviet leaders did not comprehend what they were doing.

Khrushchev and other senior leaders were certainly very aware of both lines of action. They very closely and personally orchestrated both plans, the missile deployment and the Berlin moves. For instance, on 1 July 1962, the Soviet Presidium held a meeting. At this meeting they first reviewed the details of progress in organizing the secret deployment of ballistic missiles to Cuba. They then went over the renewed diplomatic offensive on Berlin, to review and approve the new proposal for withdrawal of Western troops from West Berlin that Khrushchev delivered to President Kennedy through the secret ‘pen-pal’ channel, four days later. Related to that, they discussed Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara’s latest statement on U.S. nuclear weapons posture, then they returned to a review of the Cuban missile deployment plan.⁷

One of the problems for even well-placed people at the time like McNamara, as well as many scholars today, is that they do not immediately grasp why missiles in Cuba could be related to or would make a difference in a Berlin “showdown.” This may be because they, like McNamara, may not readily understand just how Khrushchev saw the crisis. But Thompson did. So did Rusk. And so did President Kennedy.

The Berlin crisis of 1958-1962 was so dangerous because West Berlin, comprising the two million-plus people protected by the original postwar U.S., British, and French zones of military occupation presence, was in the middle of East Germany. It was indefensible. The only way the West could keep the city from being cut off or overrun was to challenge the moves in a process that would lead to war, and in that war the U.S. could only deter an attack by threatening to make the war a nuclear war.

all the others would depend. Rusk and Thompson were two of only three Americans, other than Kennedy and the interpreter, who attended this meeting on the American side.

Kennedy had first learned that Soviet ballistic missiles were being based in Cuba on October 16. On October 18 the fact of this knowledge was still very secret. Kennedy did not reveal what he knew to Gromyko.

⁷ Protocol No. 39, 1 July 1962 (trans. Mark Kramer), in Naftali and Kramer, eds., “The Malin Notes,” 304.

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This position required the U.S. to believe, or convincingly pretend to believe, that it was willing and able to *start* a nuclear war with the Soviet Union. To pull off this horrifying threat, or bluff, the U.S. had to believe, or pretend to believe, that its nuclear arsenal was greatly superior to the Soviet one, so superior in fact that the U.S. was ready to risk a nuclear war.

From Khrushchev's point of view, such a threat, or bluff, meant the Americans were almost unbelievably arrogant, or even a little crazy, or both. "Arrogant" was a favored term. From his point of view, the whole American posture meant that the Americans were, somehow, not quite afraid enough of the Soviet ability to strike the United States. He was not looking for a disarming first-strike capability. He was just looking for a move that would take down the arrogance, make the Americans feel sensibly vulnerable too, to make them suitably afraid of escalating to start a nuclear war.

Two relevant vignettes: On 12 May 1962, Khrushchev spent hours with a visitor to Moscow, Kennedy's press man, Pierre Salinger, who was treated as his emissary. Thompson, then the U.S. ambassador in Moscow, was also there. Khrushchev's main foreign fixation was Berlin. That day, what particularly infuriated Khrushchev were the (accurate) reports he had received indicating that the Kennedy administration had recently used a journalist, Stewart Alsop, to put out a story about how superior the American nuclear arsenal was and how ready the U.S. was to escalate to nuclear war, if necessary in order to defend Berlin. Thompson had already been trying to dampen Soviet anger about the article, to assure them that the U.S. was not looking to start a preemptive nuclear war.

The next week, by Khrushchev's own account, is when he came up with his idea to build a large base of Soviet ballistic missiles in Cuba. This was something that neither the Cubans nor his defense people had asked for when the Presidium had made its final decisions about a Cuban military aid package, a month earlier.⁸

The other vignette: On 6 September 1962, with Khrushchev monitoring the secret deployment to Cuba on practically a daily basis, and deciding that same week to add some tactical nuclear weapons to the package, he met another emissary from President Kennedy, Stewart Udall, at his Black Sea retreat in Petsunda. Khrushchev said that he had concluded the American Congress would not let Kennedy make a deal on Berlin. So:

[W]e'll sign a peace treaty [ending the basis for the West's presence in West Berlin]. If any lunatics in your country want war, Western Europe will hold them back. ... War in this day and age means no Paris and no France, all in the space of an hour. It's been a long time since you could spank us like a little boy—now we

⁸ See Thompson and Thompson, *The Kremlinologist*, 281-282; and, on the Soviet-Cuban military aid decision process, Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Longman, 2d ed., 1999), 86-88. Kennedy had firmly decided in March 1962 that the U.S. would not invade Cuba, communicated that decision to the leader of the Cuban exiles on March 29, and the dismaying word spread quickly through the exile community which was well penetrated by Cuban intelligence, 132 n. 26. A former senior Cuban intelligence and foreign policy expert has confirmed that, for a variety of reasons that turned out to be accurate, Cuban intelligence did not expect a U.S. invasion. Cuban intelligence came to believe that Soviet intelligence was exaggerating such a threat, in order to persuade the Cubans to go along with Soviet plans formulated to serve Moscow's agenda. Domingo Amuchastegui, "Cuban intelligence and the October crisis," *Intelligence and National Security* 13:3 (1998): 88-119.

can swat your ass. So let's not talk about force. We're equally strong. You want Berlin. Access to it goes through East Germany. We have the advantage. If you want to do anything, you have to start a war. And nowadays that course is insanity. ... Out of respect for your President we won't do anything until November. If it depends on us, there will be no war.⁹

The next week, back in Moscow, Khrushchev shocked the departing West German ambassador with a warning, again keyed to a Berlin move in November, that was very much like what he had just told Mr. Udall. On September 28, Khrushchev relayed the same November warning, polished up in writing, in a secret message sent directly to President Kennedy. And then on October 18 Gromyko reinforced the same November warning once more, with that same "frankness," directly to Kennedy.¹⁰

We thus return to the question of "documentary evidence" and inference. The issue is which hypothesis invites the more credible inference. The one that infers a connection between these two policy plans? Or the one that infers that Khrushchev did not comprehend a connection?

There is, too, that added mystery of why the much-promised November move on Berlin then disappeared into thin air, as if no such warnings had ever been uttered at all. Perhaps the course and outcome of the Missile Crisis had something to do with that. In 1963, the Soviets seemed to wish to bury the Berlin crisis, treat it as if it had been settled all along with the building of the Wall back in 1961, and hope everyone accepted that story. As most did, and do.

Perhaps Thompson's original inference about Khrushchev's motives deserves plenty of deference, after all. To be fair, Thompson had another great advantage. He was privy to all the documentary evidence about the Berlin warnings being conveyed to Americans that were focused on a November move that I have just mentioned. Almost all Americans, including most of the Kennedy administration, were not.

Rather than leaning on the inferences for a hypothesis of 'coincidence,' a more interesting argument is between two versions of the 'connected' hypothesis, hypothesis #1. A sort of 1A would be that Berlin and the related nuclear threat to crack American arrogance were a prime motive all along. The 1B version is that at first Khrushchev thought of the move as a universal solvent for all his problems, including Berlin. The Berlin focus—with its associated choreography—did not become more central until later in the summer.

I tend toward 1A. Excellent scholars, as with Timothy Naftali and Aleksandr Fursenko's most recent views, tend toward 1B.¹¹ A key variable is how one weights the 'Cuban defense' motives in the May decisions. For

⁹ Udall-Khrushchev memcon, 6 September 1962, in *FRUS Berlin Crisis*, vol. 15, 309. Khrushchev personally ordered 12 tactical nuclear weapons added to the deployment in Cuba on September 7, the day after he met with Udall. Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 455.

¹⁰ Though his book is mainly on a different subject, David Coleman includes an excellent short summary of the development of the Berlin issue during 1962 in a chapter in *The Fourteenth Day: JFK and the Aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012), 170-191. Coleman adds a convincing explanation of why he believes Khrushchev decided to bury the Berlin issue after the nearly apocalyptic failure of his Cuban missile base plan.

¹¹ See Fursenko and Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War*, 434, 440-460; and Naftali, "Introduction," to "The Malin Notes," 299-301.

reasons I alluded to earlier, I think that Cuban defense was always more of a cover story for the ballistic missile plans, but there are reasonable arguments for the ‘universal solvent/evolution’ view.

To bring this comment back to where it began, Ambassador Thompson’s achievements deserve notice and reflection. Thompson’s track record of judgments during the crisis was astonishingly good. He was sound on Khrushchev’s likely motives. During the debates of October 18-20 he was sound on preferring the blockade-ultimatum option versus the blockade-negotiation option, while also opposing a no-warning attack. During the debates on October 27, he was sound on opposing a negotiated Cuba-Turkey trade and explaining why that would backfire into failure. He was sound in persuading Kennedy that he should largely ignore the Turkish move (except to adopt an idea suggested by U.S. ambassador to Turkey Raymond Hare and Rusk for how to take the issue off the table), while instead arguing that Kennedy should insist on Khrushchev’s earlier proposal (with the fig leaf of the no-invade Cuba pledge) plus a renewed ultimatum.

It is no wonder that, as his daughters correctly observe, after the crisis “the Washington rumor network held that Thompson had a lot to do with things turning out right.”¹² In all this, as in the fine book by Thompson’s daughters, there are also some fresh reminders of just how valuable real foreign expertise can be in America’s public servants, when joined—as it was in Thompson—with shrewd, practical policy judgment.

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¹² Thompson and Thompson, *The Kremlinologist*, 334. The most complete, annotated records of the missile crisis deliberations are in *The Presidential Recordings, John F. Kennedy: The Great Crises*, vol. 2, ed. Timothy Naftali and Philip Zelikow, and vol. 3, ed. Philip Zelikow and Ernest May, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001). The records of the post-October 28 deliberations and settlement of the crisis are in *The Winds of Change* volumes in this series, specifically vols. 4 and 5, both ed. David Coleman (New York: W.W. Norton, 2016). The duly updated summary volume is *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White during the Cuban Missile Crisis*, ed. Ernest May and Philip Zelikow (New York: W.W. Norton, concise ed., 2002).