

the Kremlin's new leader, however, was quite another matter.

Nikita Khrushchev was a poorly educated peasant, coal miner, and factory worker who had become a Stalin protégé and then, after deposing Malenkov and other rivals, Stalin's successor. He came into power knowing little about the nuclear weapons he now controlled, but he learned quickly. Like Eisenhower, he was appalled by the prospect of their military use: he too had seen enough carnage in World War II to know the fragility of rationality on a battlefield.⁴⁰ He was no more prepared than Eisenhower had been, however, to declare himself a pacifist. He was convinced, as was the American president, that whatever their impracticalities in fighting wars, nuclear weapons could be made to compensate for national weaknesses in situations short of war.

There, though, the similarities ended. The supremely self-confident Eisenhower was always in command of himself, his administration, and certainly the military forces of the United States. Khrushchev, in contrast, was excess personified: he could be boisterously clownish, belligerently cloying, aggressively insecure. Dignified he never was, and the volatilities of post-Stalin politics were such that he could never be sure of his own authority. There was one other difference as well. The weakness for which Eisenhower sought to compensate with nuclear strength was the manpower deficit of the United States and its NATO allies. The vulnerability Khrushchev hoped to correct with his nuclear capabilities was his own absence of nuclear capabilities.

He faced the need to do this because although the Soviet Union's thermonuclear weapons worked well enough, its long-range bombers were few, primitive, and capable of reaching most American targets only on one-way missions. **And despite his claims to be turning out missiles "like sausages," there were far fewer of them than his boasts suggested and they lacked sufficiently precise guidance to place their warheads where they were supposed to go.** "It always sounded good to say in public speeches that we could hit a fly at any distance with our missiles," Khrushchev later admitted. "I exaggerated a little." His son Sergei, himself a rocket engineer, put it more bluntly: "We threatened with missiles we didn't have."⁴¹

Khrushchev first tried this trick in November, 1956. Soviet troops were crushing a rebellion in Hungary just as the British, the French, and the Israelis—without informing the Americans—had seized the Suez Canal in an abortive effort to overthrow the anti-colonial Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser. On the spur of the moment, with a view to deflecting attention from the bloodbath in Budapest, Khrushchev threatened Britain and France with "rocket weapons" if they did not immediately withdraw their forces from the canal. They immediately did so, but not in response to Khrushchev's warning. Eisenhower, furious at not having been consulted, had ordered them to evacuate Suez or face severe economic sanctions. Because Khrushchev's threats were public and Eisenhower's were not, however, the new Kremlin leader concluded that his own huffing and puffing had produced the withdrawal—and that this practice could become a strategy.⁴²

From 1957 through 1961, Khrushchev openly, repeatedly, and bloodcurdlingly threatened the West with nuclear annihilation. Soviet missile capabilities were so far superior to those of the United States, he insisted, that he could wipe out any American or European city. He would even specify how many missiles and warheads each target might require. But he also tried to be nice about it: at one point, while bullying an American visitor, Hubert Humphrey, he paused to ask where his guest was from. When Humphrey pointed out Minneapolis on the map, Khrushchev circled it with a big blue pencil. "That's so I don't forget to order them to spare the city when the rockets fly," he explained amiably.⁴³

It was a logical observation, at least in Khrushchev's mind, because amiability was part of his strategy as well. He had rejected Stalin's belief in the inevitability of war: the new goal was to be "peaceful coexistence." He took seriously what his scientists told him about the dangers of continuing

Soviet agent, Kim Philby, happened to be the British liaison officer with the American Central Intelligence Agency.⁴⁸ Stalin's U.S.S.R. remained a closed society, opaque to anyone from the outside who tried to see into it.

Khrushchev's strategy of rattling rockets he did not have required sustaining this situation. That is why he rejected a proposal from Eisenhower, at their first summit conference in Geneva in 1955, to allow the United States and the Soviet Union to fly reconnaissance missions over each other's territory: it would have been, he complained, like "seeing into our bedrooms."⁴⁹ What Khrushchev had not known was that Eisenhower had a secret backup for his "open skies" inspection plan that would soon accomplish precisely its purposes.

On July 4, 1956, a new American spy plane, the U-2, made its maiden flight directly over Moscow and Leningrad, snapping excellent photographs from a height well above the range of Soviet fighters and anti-aircraft missiles. That same day Khrushchev was enjoying the annual Independence Day reception in the garden of Spaso House, the American ambassador's residence in Moscow: whether he was visible in the photos has never been made clear.⁵⁰ The flights continued at regular intervals over the next four years. The Russians, who could detect them on radar but could not shoot them down, confined themselves to perfunctory protests, not wanting to advertise their inability to control their airspace. The Americans, aware that the flights violated international law, said nothing at all while reaping an intelligence bonanza.

The U-2 photographs quickly confirmed the limited size and inferior capabilities of the Soviet long-range bomber force. Determining Soviet missile capabilities took longer, however, because the missiles themselves—in the quantities that Khrushchev had claimed—did not exist. By the end of 1959 his engineers had only six long-range missile launch sites operational. Because each missile took almost twenty hours to fuel, leaving them vulnerable to attack by American bombers, this meant that the *total* number Khrushchev could count on launching was precisely that: six.⁵¹

What the Soviet Union did have by then, however, was an improved anti-aircraft missile. "The way to teach these smart-alecks a lesson," Khrushchev told his son, "is with a fist. . . . Just let them poke their nose in here again."⁵² On May 1, 1960, they did: the Russians shot down what might well have been the last U-2 flight Eisenhower would have authorized, captured the pilot, Francis Gary Powers, and threatened to put him on trial for espionage. The president had become convinced that Khrushchev's missile claims were fraudulent, but he had also begun to worry about U-2 vulnerability. The first American reconnaissance satellite was about to go into orbit, and Eisenhower expected—correctly—that it would render the U-2 obsolete. So the plane went down at the end of its usefulness, but Khrushchev turned the crash into a crisis nonetheless.

The next summit conference with Eisenhower was to convene in Paris two weeks later. Khrushchev showed up for it, but only for the purpose of wrecking it. He had decided, just before leaving Moscow, that the U-2 incident made further cooperation with the lame-duck Eisenhower administration impossible. "I became more and more convinced that our pride and dignity would be damaged if we went ahead with the conference as if nothing had happened."⁵³ He would wait, therefore, for Eisenhower's successor. It was an impulsive decision, but it reflected an awkward reality: having seen the quality of the photographs from the downed plane, Khrushchev had to know that his Potemkin strategy was in trouble.

John F. Kennedy took his time in taking advantage of this. He had made much, during the 1960 campaign, of the alleged "missile gap" that Eisenhower had allowed to develop. To acknowledge its absence too soon after taking office would be embarrassing. There followed, though, a string of