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Review of *Nuclear Folly: A New History of the Cuban Missile Crisis* by Serhii Plokyh

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Serhii Plokyh, *Nuclear Folly: A New History of the Cuban Missile Crisis*. London: Allen Lane, 2021. Notes, Bibliography, Index, 464pp. + 17 Plates. ISBN 978-0241454732 (hardcover). Price £25.

On 27 February this year, the Reuters news agency reported that President Vladimir Putin had put Russia's nuclear deterrent on high alert 'in the face of a barrage of Western reprisals for the invasion of Ukraine'. Whilst many commentators saw this as dangerous rhetoric rather than a statement of intent, for others it invoked memories of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. It is now sixty years since this dramatic nuclear stand-off between the great Cold War powers brought the world to the brink of a global catastrophe. President John F Kennedy's famous 'turn back the ships' ultimatum – issued to the Soviet Union's Premier, Nikita Khrushchev, as a last resort – was a moment of high-drama which still resonates with people today. The historiography of the Cuban Missile Crisis is voluminous and tends to coalesce around an analysis of Kennedy's thought processes and decision-making as he moved towards this final act of brinkmanship. This is partly because of the easy access to archival material and first-hand accounts in North America and, until recently, a deficit of source material from the former-Soviet Union. There is also a continued fascination with a young President whose potential was dashed by his assassination in December 1963. More recent publications such as Michael Dobbs' book *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev and Castro on the Brink of War* (Cornerstone, 2008) which drew on Soviet as well as American accounts have broadened the discussion. And, in this, his latest book, Cold War scholar Serhii Plokyh has used a rich source of Ukrainian sources to go even further – bringing fresh insights and an alternative view to the whole topic.

The book runs through the events leading up to and including the Cuban Missile Crisis in chronological order, examining the escalating tensions and the interplay between key decision makers and advisors. Whilst the unfolding drama on the island of Cuba takes centre stage, the crisis is appropriately contextualised in that the author explores other factors which influenced decision at the time. The placement of nuclear missiles in Turkey by the USA was a particular concern for the leadership of the Soviet Union who considered themselves to be at a disadvantage because of the perceived imbalance in intercontinental nuclear missile capability. Khrushchev was keen to

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nurture the communist revolution in Cuba (the first in the western hemisphere) keeping the Americans and Chinese at bay, and President Castro, Cuba's revolutionary leader, was convinced that the Americans were looking to invade – an intent to do so having been demonstrated, albeit unsuccessfully, during the Bay of Pigs operation. As for Kennedy, he was extremely exercised about the threat to Berlin. If the Soviet Union closed the supply-corridor running through East German territory, then the situation could quickly escalate – becoming a major confrontation between the two super-powers. Kennedy was also cognizant of the need to 'look strong and decisive' in the eyes of America's domestic media. Unlike his two main protagonists, he had a fickle electorate to consider.

Of course, the logic underpinning these various strategic imperatives was not necessarily understood by the respective parties at the time. This is hardly surprising given the difficulties that the US and Soviet leaders and officials had in communicating with each other. Official messages could take up to twenty-four hours to be passed from one leader to another and informal leaks could be open to misinterpretation. Ambiguities in command led to disjointed decision making on the Soviet side leaving a degree of uncertainty about what actions had been sanctioned and which ones had not. This was not helped by Castro's bellicose approach or the fact that Soviet commanders on the ground had a good deal of local discretion – even over the use of tactical nuclear weapons. Mutual suspicion meant that very little was taken at face value and after the crisis had passed this continued to rankle – for example in the insistence that the ships taking their deadly cargoes back to Russia should be thoroughly searched below decks.

So, who does Plokhy identify as 'the winners'? The survival of Castro's communist regime points to one, the fact that NATO's missiles were removed from Turkey points to another. As for Kennedy, he played his cards well – but to posit the outcome as his personal triumph is, in the author's opinion, overly simplistic. It's also worth reflecting on the fact that at the time that the ships were forced back, missile sites had already been built on the island of Cuba and tactical nuclear weapons had already been deployed – thus endowing Kennedy's 'turn back the ships' ultimatum with less significance than has hitherto been the case.

Some 80% of the Soviet missiles destined for Cuba were manufactured in Ukraine and a similar proportion of the 45,000 service personnel deployed in Cuba were from the same territory. Furthermore, the ships carrying personnel, provisions and the missiles themselves sailed from Black Sea ports like Odessa and Mykolaiv. It is this that has made the Ukrainian archives such a rich source of information. Factory records, shipping manifests and personal papers from the erstwhile KGB archives have enabled the author to complement the established bank of (mainly western) primary sources with a significant number of hitherto unseen Soviet documents and first-hand accounts.

The broadening of the context, the use of newly discovered source material and the forensic analysis of what went on in 'closed rooms' during the crisis mean that this book makes a material contribution to the readers understanding of the Cuban Missile Crisis. In addition to its utility as an academic resource it is a tension filled and highly accessible narrative that is a pleasure to read.

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