

The Kennedy-Khrushchov Secret Correspondence

All told, between the day after John F. Kennedy's election as President of the United States in Nov. 1960, through the days immediately preceding his assassination on Nov. 22, 1963, JFK and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchov exchanged more than 100 secret letters. In recent years, the entire correspondence has been declassified and made available through the U.S. Department of State Office of the Historian, in Volume VI of Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963.

While it is worthwhile to read the entire correspondence, to get a real insight into the statecraft that set the basis for averting thermonuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis of Oct. 1962, the following sampling of President Kennedy's letters to Khrushchov provide an invaluable insight into the awesome responsibilities that Kennedy and Khrushchov shared as the two world leaders who had it in their power to bring an end to humankind.

There is a profound lack of such statesmanship today. We have seen this, most clearly, in the actions of successive Bush and Obama administrations, which squandered away the opportunities posed by the end of the Cold War, and now, once again have brought the world to a near-term threat of thermonuclear extinction.

Use this sampling of the Kennedy-Khrushchov letters as a mirror through which to judge the current crisis of mankind—and the way out.

7. Letter From President Kennedy to Chairman Khrushchov

Washington, February 22, 1961.

DEAR MR. CHAIRMAN:

I have had an opportunity, due to the return of Ambassador Thompson, to have an extensive review of all aspects of our relations with the Secretary of State and with him. In these consultations, we have been able to explore, in general, not only those subjects which are of



U.S. National Archives

August 1961: The Soviet-allied German Democratic Republic (East Germany) began building the Berlin Wall, dividing East Berlin from West Berlin.

direct bilateral concern to the United States and the Soviet Union, but also the chief outstanding international problems which affect our relations.

I have not been able, in so brief a time, to reach definite conclusions as to our position on all of these matters. Many of them are affected by developments in the international scene and are of concern to many other governments. I would, however, like to set before you certain general considerations which I believe might be of help in introducing a greater element of clarity in the relations between our two countries. I say this because I am sure that you are conscious as I am of the heavy responsibility which rests upon our two Governments in world affairs. I agree with your thought that if we could find a measure of cooperation on some of these current issues this, in itself, would be a significant contribution to the problem of insuring a peaceful and orderly world.

I think we should recognize, in honesty to each other, that there are problems on which we may not be able to agree. However, I believe that while recognizing that we do not and, in all probability will not, share a common view on all of these problems, I do believe that the manner in which we approach them and, in particular, the manner in which our disagreements are handled, can be of great importance.

In addition, I believe we should make more use of diplomatic channels for quite informal discussion of these questions, not in the sense of negotiations (since I

am sure that we both recognize the interests of other countries are deeply involved in these issues), but rather as a mechanism of communication which should, insofar as is possible, help to eliminate misunderstanding and unnecessary divergencies, however great the basic differences may be.

I hope it will be possible, before too long, for us to meet personally for an informal exchange of views in regard to some of these matters. Of course, a meeting of this nature will depend upon the general international situation at the time, as well as on our mutual schedules of engagements.

I have asked Ambassador Thompson to discuss the question of our meeting. Ambassador Thompson, who enjoys my full confidence, is also in a position to inform you of my thinking on a number of the international issues which we have discussed. I shall welcome any expression of your views. I hope such exchange might assist us in working out a responsible approach to our differences with the view to their ultimate resolution for the benefit of peace and security throughout the world. You may be sure, Mr. Chairman, that I intend to do everything I can toward developing a more harmonious relationship between our two countries.

Sincerely,
John F. Kennedy

19. Telegram From President Kennedy to Chairmen Khrushchov and Brezhnev

Washington, July 4, 1961.

I wish to thank you personally and on behalf of the American people for your greetings on the occasion of the 185th Anniversary of the Independence of the United States. It is a source of satisfaction to me that on our 185th Anniversary the United States is still committed to the revolutionary principles, of individual liberty and national freedom for all peoples, which motivated our first great leader. I am confident that given a sincere desire to achieve a peaceful settlement of the issues which still disturb the world's tranquillity we can, in our time, reach that peaceful goal which all peoples so ardently desire. A special responsibility at this time rests upon the Soviet Union and the United States. I

wish to assure the people of your country of our desire to live in friendship and peace with them.

John F. Kennedy

22. Letter From President Kennedy to Chairman Khrushchov

Hyannis Port, October 16, 1961.

DEAR MR. CHAIRMAN:

I regret that the press of events has made it impossible for me to reply earlier to your very important letter of last month. I have brought your letter here with me to Cape Cod for a weekend in which I can devote all the time necessary to give it the answer it deserves.

My family has had a home here overlooking the Atlantic for many years. My father and brothers own homes near my own, and my children always have a large group of cousins for company. So this is an ideal place for me to spend my weekends during the summer and fall, to relax, to think, to devote my time to major tasks instead of constant appointments, telephone calls and details. Thus, I know how you must feel about the spot on the Black Sea from which your letter was written, for I value my own opportunities to get a clearer and quieter perspective away from the din of Washington.

I am gratified by your letter and your decision to suggest this additional means of communication. Certainly you are correct in emphasizing that this correspondence must be kept wholly private, not to be hinted at in public statements, much less disclosed to the press. For my part the contents and even the existence of our letters will be known only to the Secretary of State and a few others of my closest associates in the government. I think it is very important that these letters provide us with an opportunity for a personal, informal but meaningful exchange of views. There are sufficient channels now existing between our two governments for the more formal and official communications and public statements of position. These letters should supplement those channels, and give us each a chance to address the other in frank, realistic and fundamental terms. Neither of us is going to convert the other to a new social, economic or political point of view. Neither of us will be induced by a letter to desert or subvert his own cause. So these letters can be free from the polemics of the cold war debate. That debate will, of course, proceed, but you and I can write messages which will



U.S. Army

Fall 1961: Soldiers from the U.S. Army Berlin Command face off against police from East Germany.

be directed only to each other.

The importance of this additional attempt to explore each other's view is well-stated in your letter; and I believe it is identical to the motivation for our meeting in Vienna. Whether we wish it or not, and for better or worse, we are the leaders of the world's two greatest rival powers, each with the ability to inflict great destruction on the other and to do great damage to the rest of the world in the process. We therefore have a special responsibility—greater than that held by any of our predecessors in the pre-nuclear age—to exercise our power with the fullest possible understanding of the other's vital interests and commitments. As you say in your letter, the solutions to the world's most dangerous problems are not easily found—but you and I are unable to shift to anyone else the burden of finding them. You and I are not personally responsible for the events at the conclusion in World War II which led to the present situation in Berlin. But we will be held responsible if we cannot deal peacefully with problems related to this situation.

The basic conflict in our interests and approach will probably never disappear entirely, certainly not in our lifetime. But, as your letter so wisely points out, if you and I cannot restrain that conflict from leading to a vicious circle of bitter measures and countermeasures, then the war which neither of us or our citizens want—and I believe you when you say you are against war—

will become a grim reality.

I like very much your analogy of Noah's Ark, with both the clean and the unclean determined that it stay afloat. Whatever our differences, our collaboration to keep the peace is as urgent—if not more urgent—than our collaboration to win the last world war. The possibilities of another war destroying everything your system and our system have built up over the years—if not the very systems themselves—are too great to permit our ideological differences to blind us to the deepening dangers of such a struggle.

I, too, have often thought of our meeting in Vienna and the subsequent events which worsened the relations between our two countries and heightened the possibilities of war. I have already indicated that I think it unfruitful to fill this private channel with the usual charges and counter-charges; but I would hope that, upon re-examination, you will find my television address of July 25th was more balanced than belligerent, as it is termed by your letter, although there may have been statements of opinion with which you would naturally disagree. To be sure, I made it clear that we intended to defend our vital interests in Berlin, and I announced certain measures necessary to such a defense. On the other hand, my speech also made it clear that we would prefer and encourage a peaceful solution, one which settled these problems, in the words of your letter, on a mutually acceptable basis. My attitude concerning Berlin and Germany now, as it was then, is one of reason, not belligerence. There is peace in that area now—and this government shall not initiate and shall oppose any action which upsets that peace.

You are right in stating that we should all realistically face the facts in the Berlin and German situations—and this naturally includes facts which are inconvenient for both sides to face as well as those which we like. And one of those facts is the peace which exists in Germany now. It is not the remains of World War II but the threat of World War III that preoccupies us all. Of course, it is not normal for a nation to be divided by two different armies of occupation this long after the war; but the fact is that the area has been peaceful—it is not in itself the source of the present tension—and it could not be rendered more peaceful by your signing a peace treaty with the East Germans alone.

On the contrary, there is very grave danger that it might be rendered less peaceful, if such a treaty should convince the German people that their long-cherished hopes for unification were frustrated, and a spirit of na-

tionalism and tension should sweep over all parts of the country. From my knowledge of West Germany today, I can assure you that this danger is far more realistic than the alleged existence there of any substantial number of Hitlerites or revanchists. The real danger would arise from the kind of resentment I have described above; and I do not think that either of us, mindful of the lessons of history, is anxious to see this happen. Indeed, your letter makes clear that you are not interested in taking any step which would only be exacerbating the situation. And I think this is a commendable basis on which both of us should proceed in the future.

The area would also be rendered less peaceful if the maintenance of the West's vital interests were to become dependent on the whims of the East German regime. Some of Mr. Ulbricht's statements on this subject have not been consistent with your reassurances or even his own—and I do not believe that either of us wants a constant state of doubt, tension and emergency in this area, which would require an even larger military build-up on both sides.

So, in this frank and informal exchange, let us talk about the peace which flows from actual conditions of peace, not merely treaties that bear that label. I am certain that we can create such conditions—that we can, as you indicate, reach an agreement which does not impair the vital interests or prestige of either side—and that we can transform the present crisis from a threat of world war into a turning-point in our relations in Europe.

What is the framework for such an agreement? Detailed proposals must be a matter of allied agreement on our side; and formal discussion must wait further exploration of specific items. Your letter indicates, however, that you are concerned over how protracted formal diplomatic negotiations can become, with each side asking for the utmost at the outset, making more statements to the press and using extreme caution in feeling out the other side.

I agree with you that these letters should be able to supplement and thus facilitate such negotiations. We are both practical men and these are meant to be private, frank exchanges. I can tell you, for example, that I recognize how difficult it would be to secure your agreement on a plan to reunify Germany by self-determination in the near future (as desirable as I think that is), just as you recognize that we could not be a party to any agreement which legalized permanently the present abnormal division of Germany. That is one reason why we could not be a party to a peace treaty with the East

Germans alone, even though, as I said at the UN, we do not view as a critical issue the mere signing by you of such a document. What is crucial, however, is the result which you have asserted that such a signing would have with respect to our basic rights and obligations.

I agree with the statement in your letter that our two governments must, in one framework or another, continue our obligations to assist in the unification into one entity of both German states if the Germans so desire. While, as you point out, the method of achieving this goal is properly a subject for discussion among the Germans themselves, this does not excuse us from the responsibility we have assumed since the war to see the country peacefully unified—and this is the reason why we cannot attempt any final legalization as a formal international frontier of the present line of demarcation between the Western and Eastern zones. It also enjoins us against any action which would retard movement across this line—although, not being blind, as you say, we cannot fail to recognize that this line does exist today as the Western limit of East German authority.

Whatever action you may take with East Germany, there is no difficulty, it seems to me, in your reserving your obligations and our rights with respect to Berlin until all of Germany is unified. But if you feel you must look anew at that situation, the real key to deciding the future status of West Berlin lies in your statement that the population of West Berlin must be able to live under the social and political system of its own choosing. On this basis I must say that I do not see the need for a change in the situation of West Berlin, for today its people are free to choose their own way of life and their own guarantees of that freedom. If they are to continue to be free, if they are to be free to choose their own future as your letter indicates in the phrase quoted above, I take it this includes the freedom to choose which nations they wish to station forces there (limited in number but with unrestricted access) as well as the nature of their own ties with others (including, within appropriate limits, whatever ties they choose with West Germany). Inasmuch as you state very emphatically that you have no designs on West Berlin—and I am glad to have this assurance, for it makes the prospects of negotiation much brighter—I am sure you are not insisting on the location of Soviet troops in that portion of the city.

Thus, although there is much in your letter that makes me doubtful about the prospects in Germany, there are many passages which lead me to believe that an accommodation of our interests is possible. But in

our view the situation should be peaceful now, and existing rights and obligations are already clear. What is not clear is how any change would be an improvement. Your letter and earlier aide-memoire, and Mr. Gromyko in his conversations with Mr. Rusk and myself, have made clear what you would hope to gain by a change—a new status for the East German regime, a settlement of frontiers, and relief from what you regard as potential dangers in West Germany—but it is not clear how we in the West are to benefit by agreeing to such a change. It is not enough to say there will be a free city in a city that is already free—or that there will be guarantees of our access when the old guarantees are still binding—or that we can maintain token troops in a city when we have troops there now.

You are, as I said before, a practical man; and you can see that there is no way in which negotiations on that basis could conceivably be justified on our part. We would be buying the same horse twice—conceding objectives which you seek, merely to retain what we already possess. I hope you will give long and serious thought to this question—for the kind of mutually acceptable settlement you mention is possible only if it brings actual improvements, from the standpoints of both parties.

The alternative is so dire that we cannot give up our efforts to find such a settlement. In the weeks ahead, while we are consulting on these matters with our respective allies and you are meeting with your Party Congress, I hope these efforts can continue—both through this correspondence and through other contacts. Let us also both strive during this period to avoid any statement, incident, or other provocation in Berlin which make a proper negotiating climate impossible. For the present, I believe we can agree on Ambassador Thompson as a very acceptable means of continuing the conversation. He knows of this letter; he has my complete confidence, and I am glad that this channel is satisfactory to you. He is in Washington at present, and will return to Moscow after our inter-Allied talks are further under way.

As for another meeting between the two of us, I agree completely with your view that we had better postpone a decision on that until a preliminary understanding can be reached through quieter channels on positive decisions which might appropriately be formalized at such a meeting. This reminds me that your letter also very graciously stated your desire to have me visit your country. If we can reach a reasonable settlement of Berlin and if the international atmosphere im-



Abbie Rowe/White House. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston
President Kennedy meeting with his Ambassador to Moscow, Llewellyn Thompson, in 1961.

proves, I would take great pleasure in such a visit. I visited the Soviet Union in 1932 very briefly, and would look forward to seeing the great changes that have occurred since then.

Let me make it clear that I do not intend to relegate the achievement of complete and general disarmament to a place of secondary importance. I share your conviction that nothing would do more to promote good will among nations and contribute to the peaceful solution of other major disputes. Our agreement on the statement of principles jointly submitted to the UN General Assembly, while barely a beginning on a matter where we remain far apart, at least holds out the hope that we may someday achieve the final stage of such disarmament, verified to remove the fears of any people that devastation may ever again be suddenly rained upon them.

At the same time, however, our attention is urgently needed on those current problems which keep the world poised on the brink of war. The situation in Laos is one example. Indeed I do not see how we can expect to reach a settlement on so bitter and complex an issue as Berlin, where both of us have vital interests at stake, if we cannot come to a final agreement on Laos, which we have previously agreed should be neutral and independent after the fashion of Burma and Cambodia. I do not say that the situation in Laos and the neighboring area must be settled before negotiations begin over Germany and Berlin; but certainly it would greatly improve the atmosphere.

It is now clear that Prince Souvanna Phouma will become the new Prime Minister if an agreement can be reached. But the composition of his government is far from settled, and without assuming either the knowledge or the power to select individual men for individual posts, you and I do have an obligation—if we are to reach our goal—to continue, in your words, using our influence on the corresponding quarters in Laos to make certain that Souvanna Phouma is assisted by the kind of men we believe necessary to meet the standard of neutrality. That standard is not met if the eight posts assigned to Souvanna are filled in a manner which heavily weights the scales in favor of one side or the other.

As you note, the withdrawal of foreign troops from the territory of Laos is an essential condition to preserving that nation's independence and neutrality. There are other, similar conditions, and we must be certain that the ICC has the power and the flexibility to verify the existence of these conditions to the satisfaction of everyone concerned.

In addition to so instructing your spokesmen at Geneva, I hope you will increasingly exercise your influence in this direction on all of your corresponding quarters in this area; for the acceleration of attacks on South Viet-Nam, many of them from within Laotian territory, are a very grave threat to peace in that area and to the entire kind of world-wide accommodation you and I recognize to be necessary. If a new round of measures and counter-measures, force and counter-force, occurs in that corner of the globe, there is no foretelling how widely it may spread. So I must close, as I opened, by expressing my concern over where current events are taking us.

My wife who is here with me reciprocates your good wishes, and we return the wish of good health to you and all your family. As I recall, I shall be seeing your son-in-law again in the not too distant future, and I look forward to talking with him.

I hope you will believe me, Mr. Chairman, when I say that it is my deepest hope that, through this exchange of letters and otherwise, we may improve relations between our nations, and make concrete progress in deeds as well as words toward the realization of a just and enduring peace. That is our greatest joint responsibility—and our greatest opportunity.

Sincerely,
 John F. Kennedy