The Kremlin understood that Ochab needed more than the concession on coal to retain control. Political pressure was growing within Poland to lessen its dependence on Russia. In September Ochab had requested that the Soviets withdraw their KGB advisers from the Polish Ministry of Internal Affairs. The Kremlin agreed to this request the same day it signaled its willingness to accept a higher coal price.

Meanwhile in Hungary the situation seemed, if anything, to have deteriorated even more than in Poland. As in Poland, the Hungarian leaders found they could not reform fast enough for the intelligentsia in the street. Moscow had tried to save the situation by forcing the removal of the hard-line party boss Mátyás Rákosi in July. But Rákosi's successor was the weak-willed Ernő Gerő, who was so unsure of himself that he spent half of his short tenure in office outside Hungary, conferring with Tito in Yugoslavia, Mao Zedong in Beijing, and Khrushchev in the Crimea.

Gerő underestimated the extent of Hungarian dissatisfaction with the Communist Party. Consequently the steps he took to calm the situation led instead to an acceleration of political change. In a desperate attempt to buy some legitimacy in the coffeehouses, Gerő permitted the remains of Lazlo Rajk to be reburied in Budapest. Rajk was a Hungarian Communist pioneer who had been executed in 1949 in the wave of purge trials that washed over Eastern Europe just after the war. In the tense atmosphere of 1956 Rajk became a popular symbol of the injustice of Hungary's Stalinist regime. His posthumous return on October 6 touched off the largest political demonstration in Eastern Europe since the Soviets had established their iron rule.

The sight of thousands of Hungarians marching silently but eloquently in the streets of Budapest traumatized Gerő. "The situation in the country is significantly more complicated and acute than I had imagined," he confessed to the Soviet ambassador, Yuri Andropov. "The reburyal of Rajk's remains," he said, "has dealt a massive blow to the party leadership, whose authority was not all that high to begin with." In the summer Gerő had described the problem as limited to the Hungarian intelligentsia. Now the discord had spread to a major portion of the country's workers and peasants. Not long after the demonstration for Rajk, the popular Imre Nagy, the Hungarian Gomulka, had his membership in the Hungarian Communist Party restored. Khrushchev now faced a serious challenge in two of his Eastern European client states.

As the leaves changed colors on the trees in Washington, the Eisenhower administration watched the events in Eastern Europe with interest but made...
no serious attempt to assist the democratic forces in either Poland or Hungary. While Eisenhower hoped to avoid any foreign policy challenges before the November election, if there was going to be a problem, he expected that it would be over the Suez Canal, not the future of Poland or Hungary.

The White House received some disquieting intelligence from the Middle East in early October that suggested that the situation was still unstable there. A U-2 flown in early October detected that Israel had recently acquired between fifty and sixty of the French-made Mystère IV-A jet fighters. According to the 1950 Tripartite Declaration governing actions by the three Western great powers in the Middle East, the French were supposed to inform the United States and Great Britain of any arms sales to either the Arab states or Israel. France had admitted to selling Israel twenty-four, not sixty of its top-of-the-line fighters. At least one of America's NATO allies was not telling the truth about its military activities in the region.

Despite this suspicious buildup in Israel, the administration held to the view that tensions were actually decreasing in the region. The British and the French seemed to be negotiating in good faith at the United Nations, and there were no traces of any Soviet, Egyptian, or Israeli misbehavior. By October 10 the CIA was telling President Eisenhower that “deliberate initiation of full-scale Arab-Israeli hostilities [was] unlikely in the immediate future.” More dramatically, two weeks later, on October 24, the watch committee set up within the U.S. intelligence community to alert the administration to changes in the Middle East spoke in terms of the “receding danger of hostilities over the Suez Canal.”

The U.S. intelligence community would be of little help to American policymakers in unraveling their allies’ plans for Suez. The most important decisions by the French and the British were now occurring in secret closed door meetings to which Americans were not invited and at which they did not have any spies.

Even before the start of the Suez discussions at the Security Council, the French had returned to the path toward war with Egypt that they had abandoned at the time of the London Conference. Frustrated by the pace of events in the region and unsure whether the Eden government could be trusted to act, Guy Mollet had turned to the Israelis in late September to design a two-pronged attack with the goal of toppling Nasser. On September 30 a high-level Israeli delegation, led by Foreign Minister Golda Meir and Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, arrived in Paris to confer with their French counterparts. The Israelis were prepared to launch an attack on Egypt with French assistance, so long as they could ensure that London would not go to Jordan’s assistance if hostilities also began along the Jordanian-Israeli border. The French, in turn, declined to be involved in a simultaneous attack on Egypt but promised additional tanks and half-track vehicles for the Israeli Defense Force. The two sides set October 20 as D-day for an Israeli attack.

Securing British support remained a precondition for the French to commit any of their forces. In early October the British government was more divided over whether to proceed with military action than at any time since Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal. The protracted diplomacy of the summer and fall seemed to have taken a toll on official support for attacking Egypt. Two prominent cabinet members were now opposed to using force to resolve the issue of the canal. The foreign secretary, Selwyn Lloyd, who was never comfortable with a military solution, now saw real hope in the talks at the UN. In mid-October he believed he had reached an agreement with his Egyptian counterpart on a set of six principles to guide the settlement of the crisis, including the all-important Egyptian promise to insulate the canal from domestic politics. Lloyd’s preference for a peaceful settlement of the matter was also shared by the British defense minister, Walter Monckton. He had overseen a revision of the Suez military plan that postponed any possible British landing in Egypt until at least the spring of 1957.

Eden, however, was as committed as ever to war. Egyptian flexibility at the United Nations, which had allowed Lloyd to craft the mutually acceptable six principles, threatened the prime minister’s goal of overthrowing Nasser. On October 13 Eden instructed his foreign minister to accept the French suggestion that a poisonous amendment be added to this diplomatic settlement to make it unacceptable to Nasser. The French proposed requiring that Egypt also accept the U.S.-British-French plan endorsed by a majority at the London Conference in August and already turned down once by Nasser in September. Later that day Britain introduced the amended version of the diplomatic deal as a resolution before the UN Security Council. As expected by Eden and the French, the Soviets vetoed the amended Security Council resolution on behalf of the Egyptians, and the entire diplomatic process stalled.

As he was scuttling the UN negotiations, Eden turned to the rank and file of the Conservative Party for moral support. Out of nostalgia for the empire, the party faithful had never wavered in its support for a forceful policy to rid Egypt of Nasser. On October 13 Eden told a cheering audience at the Conservative Party conference, “We have refused to say that in no circumstances would we ever use force. No responsible government could ever give such a pledge.”

Information from British intelligence also strengthened Eden’s determination. A major assessment dated October 11 had echoed his belief that if Nasser
were to get away with keeping the Suez Canal, Britain's position in the Middle East would soon collapse. It was considered only a matter of time before Nasser's supporters in Iraq, Jordan, and the Persian Gulf succeeded in sweeping away any pro-Western governments and increasing Cairo's and Moscow's influence in the region.

On October 14 a French delegation arrived in London to discuss British participation in the Israeli-French plan to attack Egypt and remove Nasser. Eden was no friend of Israel's. He had once sided with Arabists in the Foreign Office who had opposed supporting the establishment of the state of Israel. However, the British prime minister had already made up his mind that he could no longer postpone the war. The French explained the existing plans for a two-country operation and the reasons why Great Britain should turn it into a tripartite attack. They suggested that hours after Israel had launched its attack, the British could join the French in ordering the Egyptians and the Israelis to withdraw their forces from the canal zone. Then an Anglo-French force should occupy the canal zone. The world would be told that the goal was to protect freedom of navigation through the Suez Canal. In fact the French assumed that this coordinated action would bring about the downfall of Nasser and his regime. Despite the misgivings of his foreign secretary and minister of defense, Eden agreed to include Great Britain in the operation.

Eden's embrace of the French strategy broke the last barrier to large-scale military action against Nasser. The British having indicated their willingness to meet with the Israelis, the French invited their allies to meet in Paris on October 21 to discuss the coordinated attack. It was also decided to keep the conspiracy a secret from the United States and, of course, the Soviet Union.

Khrushchev was in Warsaw as the French prepared for the meeting in Paris. The situation in Poland was extremely dynamic. Within days of regaining his membership in the Polish Politburo, the independently minded Gomulka had become the most influential figure in the Polish government. Ochab had been forced to resign, and Gomulka's actions since taking the reins from his pro-Soviet predecessor had transformed Khrushchev's worries into alarm. "Poland might break away from us at any moment," he later recalled thinking at the time. Besides the removal of the KGB men in Polish security, a request that the Soviets had already accepted, the Poles were now demanding the firing of Soviet Marshal Konstantin Rokossovsky, whom Moscow had earlier compelled them to appoint their defense minister.

Khrushchev believed that Soviet troops might be necessary to keep Poland in the Warsaw Pact. But he would first lead a high-level delegation to confront Gomulka and the Polish Communist leadership directly. This would be Gomulka's chance to demonstrate his loyalty to the Soviet bloc. If Khrushchev did not get the assurances that he required, his troops would enter Warsaw the next day. In preparation for the attack, two battle divisions were ordered to assume a holding position a hundred kilometers outside the Polish capital city.

On October 19, accompanied by Presidium members Molotov, Mikoyan, Kaganovich, and Zhukov, Khrushchev arrived in Warsaw. Gomulka had refused to issue a formal invitation to the Soviets, an act that Khrushchev later described as "like spitting in our face." Once the Soviets arrived, the Poles had no choice but to meet. Aware of the force waiting in the wings, the Poles then opted to show some deference. Gomulka spoke of Polish-Soviet solidarity and pleaded with Khrushchev to call off the use of Soviet troops. "Everything will be in order here," he said reassuringly, "but don't allow Soviet troops into Warsaw, or it will become virtually impossible to control events."

Khrushchev wavered over whether to be satisfied with what Gomulka and the others in the Polish government told him. At first he seemed to think the crisis was resolved and told his longtime ally Mikoyan that upon reflection the use of troops would be a mistake. But no sooner had he arrived back in Moscow late on October 19 than he appeared to have changed his mind. "We've decided our troops should enter Warsaw tomorrow morning after all," Khrushchev told a surprised Mikoyan.

Thanks to some expert delaying by Mikoyan, who was strongly against the use of Soviet troops, the attack on the Polish people did not happen. Mikoyan knew Khrushchev very well. Although he had a penchant for bold and aggressive strokes, the Soviet leader could be dissuaded from acting rashly, if given the chance to take a deep breath and think the matter through. At a Presidium meeting two days later, on October 21, Khrushchev opted to take Gomulka at his word. "We need to display patience," he said. Soviet troops were taken off alert.

While conflict was averted in Poland, Israel's prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, arrived in Paris to plan the coordinated attack on Nasser, with whom he had strong grievances. The Israeli leader was eager to put an end to the attacks by Egyptian irregular forces, known as fedayeen, across the border into Israel. He also hoped that military action would open to Israeli shipping the Suez Canal and the Strait of Tiran, both of which fed the Israeli port city of Eilat. His trip, like that of the Secretary Lloyd, was kept secret. The meetings
were to take place at a private home in the fashionable suburb of Sèvres, well beyond the scrutiny of the international press or any lucky Soviet or U.S. spies.

Ben-Gurion was uncomfortable about having to rely on the British, in large part because he blamed them for having obstructed the creation of the state of Israel. In an effort to maintain a relationship with the Arabs, the British had deliberately slowed the emigration of Jews to Palestine, which remained under British mandate until 1948. Christian Pineau, the French foreign minister, was insistent that the Israeli leader overlook his past differences with the British. "The English," he said, "are incapable of acting without a pretext." Ben-Gurion understood that he had to provide the pretext as the price for British military participation.

While Ben-Gurion felt discomfort and suspicion, the British representative at Sèvres experienced disgust and didn't mind showing it. Lloyd, who had opposed Eden's decision, behaved in front of the other delegates as if he had a "dirty smell under his nose." It was commonly known that he preferred a peaceful solution to the crisis and was in Sèvres only because Eden had told him to go. When Ben-Gurion asked him why the English didn't just settle with Nasser at the UN, the foreign secretary parroted Eden's thinking: Any diplomatic settlement over the Suez Canal was unacceptable to Great Britain because it meant that Nasser remained in power. Getting him out was Eden's chief objective.

The uncomfortable English gentleman's words satisfied Ben-Gurion. Convinced now that London meant business, the Israelis agreed to the complex French plan. It would begin with an Israeli attack on Egypt, followed by an Anglo-French bombing campaign and an allied landing in the canal zone. The parties quibbled over the length of the delay between the Israeli attack and the intervention by the Europeans. Ben-Gurion wanted almost no gap at all. He had lived in London during the blitz, when Hitler's Luftwaffe bombed the city, and feared the effects of Arab bomber sorties against Israeli cities before the French and British established air supremacy. The British had other concerns and hoped instead for a three-day delay. They compromised and agreed on a thirty-six-hour delay. As the meeting ended on October 22, Israel promised to attack exactly a week later, on October 29.

However, the Kremlin collected some good information about the movements of French and British units in and around Cyprus. Marshal Zhukov presented each member of the Presidium with a special report on those military movements. The GRU, the military intelligence service, had detected French and British reinforcements in the region, but could not provide any sense of Paris's and London's intentions.5

Further evidence of how far Moscow's thoughts were from the possibility of a near-term attack came in the Kremlin's preparations for the visit of Syrian President Shukri Quwatly.6 The visit, which had been planned for some time, was due to begin October 30. In its outlines of Syria's needs, Soviet intelligence made no mention of the possibility of Middle East conflict.

Quwatly was expected to request a friendship treaty with Moscow and a huge loan for economic development.

The Egyptians themselves were encouraging the Soviets to believe that the crisis had passed. Even after the collapse of the negotiations with the French and the British in New York, the Egyptian government informed the Soviets that it was no longer concerned about a Western attack on the canal. "It is in large measure settled," Egypt's el-Kouni told the Soviet Foreign Ministry on October 16.7 The Egyptians were now using terms like "we won" to explain the fact that nearly three months had passed since the nationalization and the French and British still seemed tied up in diplomatic knots.

Nasser was much more concerned about events in Jordan than he was about any Western attack on his country. Criticizing King Hussein as being as inept as King Farouk, the Egyptians worried that Jordan's domestic instability would provoke outside interference from the West or its allies. Nasser's specific concern was that his great regional rival, Nuri al-Said of Iraq would be invited to send battalions into Jordan to protect Amman from an Israeli attack.

The Kremlin was cool when the Egyptians tried to interest the Soviet Union in Jordan.8 Grateful that the threat of a European war with Egypt had receded, Moscow was not particularly interested in looking for a new source of contention with London or Paris. The Kremlin counseled steady nerves. Cairo was talking about sending a joint Egyptian-Syrian military force to Jordan to bolster the country. Moscow wanted nothing to occur that could give the British a pretext to send more troops into the Middle East. With the Suez Canal lost, London might be considering using Amman as its new strategic center in the region.

As events unfolded, Moscow's understanding of the Suez situation suffered from a lack of any insight into British intentions. Tom Driberg had returned in mid-October to assure Guy Burgess that Eden did not have it in
him to resort to force to deal with Nasser. In conveying this information to the Soviet leadership, Burgess had added a note of reserve. He did not think Driberg's optimism was entirely justified. However, with Soviet intelligence unable to detect any evidence to the contrary, the Kremlin, especially Khrushchev, allowed itself to be optimistic about Eden. Khrushchev did not believe that the British would go to war with Egypt. He had convinced himself that the struggle between East and West, which was how he interpreted aggression against his Egyptian ally, would be restricted to political and economic competition in the nuclear age.

In the week between the secret conclave in Sèvres and the Israeli attack, Hungary so preoccupied Khrushchev that he had little opportunity to test his assumptions about the Middle East. Just as it was gaining confidence in Poland's Władysław Gomułka, the Kremlin lost whatever respect it had for Hungary's Ernő Gerő. Events in Poland had emboldened the leaders of the Hungarian democracy movement to challenge the ineffectual Gerő. On October 22, students at Budapest's Technical Institute published a list of sixteen demands, including the withdrawal of all Soviet troops from Hungary, the nomination of Imre Nagy as Communist Party leader, the organization of national multiparty elections by secret ballot, and the "reconsideration" of the entire Soviet-Hungarian relationship. The next day, amid chants for "national independence and democracy," students tore down the huge statue of Stalin that dominated the city's main square. The revolt radiated outward from the capital, making a pitched battle break out between Soviet troops and a large group of armed Hungarian freedom fighters in a section of the capital. The Soviet Army was using tanks as well as infantrymen to crush the revolt. Suslov reported that there had been 3,000 Hungarian casualties, 600 of whom had died. The Soviet Army had itself lost 350 people in battle. Meanwhile Gerő had resigned amid the bloodshed and been replaced by Nagy. Khrushchev's note takers did not write an account of the meeting, and it is certain that no one in the room thought to use these words to describe what the Soviet Army had just done in Budapest. Nevertheless, Suslov's report had a chilling effect on the discussion.

Operation Wave began the next day. Moscow had already placed its two mechanized divisions in Hungary on alert when it seemed that the Warsaw Pact was poised to launch a crackdown in Poland. On October 24 thousands of men from these units were sent into Budapest. In addition, portions of a mechanized division in Romania and one in the Ukraine were brought into Hungary to maintain security outside the capital city. To provide reliable reporting for the Kremlin and to test Mikoyan's theories about Nagy's capacity for leadership, Mikoyan and Suslov were also sent to Budapest.

The staggering toll of crushing the Hungarian freedom movement came home to the Soviets on October 28. Suslov, who had by then returned with Mikoyan, reported that on October 24 Soviet forces had opened fire on a group of demonstrators, killing at least 70 of them. Following this massacre, relations between the Hungarians and the Soviet Army reached a new low. The Hungarians began flying mourning flags, and on October 26 a pitched battle broke out between Soviet troops and a large group of armed Hungarian freedom fighters in a section of the capital. The Soviet Army was using tanks as well as infantrymen to crush the revolt. Suslov reported that there had been 3,000 Hungarian casualties, 600 of whom had died. The Soviet Army had itself lost 350 people in battle. Meanwhile Gerő had resigned amid the bloodshed and been replaced by Nagy. Khrushchev's note takers did not write the words "atrocities," "innocent victims," and "war crime" in the official account of the meeting, and it is certain that no one in the room thought to use these words to describe what the Soviet Army had just done in Budapest. Around the room there was scant thirst for additional blood. Following Suslov's report, only the aged Marshal Kliment Voroshilov defended the use of force. "Let's not be in a rush to withdraw the troops," said the Kremlin veteran. "The U.S. intelligence services are working harder than Comrades Suslov and Mikoyan." But Voroshilov was soon drowned out by other leaders calling for a withdrawal from Budapest. Earlier in the day the newly installed regime of Imre Nagy had called for a cease-fire followed by a withdrawal of Soviet troops. Khrushchev held the majority view that this new government
reports that Israel had attacked Egypt. For more than a week the White House
PRESIDENT EISENHOWER was not completely surprised when he received
secure compliance. 29
French forces would "intervene in whatever strength may be necessary to
Israelis did not comply with these demands within twelve hours, UK and
key positions at Port Said, Ismailia and Suez. 28 If either the Egyptians or the
Britain announced their intention to mount a "temporary occupation . . . of
the Suez Canal. To protect the rights of neutral shipping, France and Great
joint ultimatum. The Israeli ambassador in London received his copy at 4:15
P.M., and his Egyptian opposite number ten minutes later. France and Great
Britain called on both parties to cease firing and to withdraw ten miles from
the Suez Canal. To protect the rights of neutral shipping, France and Great
announced their intention to mount a "temporary occupation . . . of
key positions at Port Said, Ismailia and Suez. 28 If either the Egyptians or the
Israelis did not comply with these demands within twelve hours, UK and
French forces would "intervene in whatever strength may be necessary to
secure compliance." 29

PRESIDENT EISENHOWER was not completely surprised when he received
reports that Israel had attacked Egypt. For more than a week the White House
had been watching the buildup in the region closely. On October 20 the CIA
had started daily U-2 flights over the eastern Mediterranean. For a few days
there had been some disagreement over whether to interpret Israeli troop
movements as preparation for an attack on Jordan or Egypt. But by October
28, with Israeli tanks and armored personnel carriers clearly headed south
toward Egypt, not east toward Jordan, the president had become persuaded
that Israel was going to attack Egypt.

Eisenhower had also suspected that his French and British allies were
making trouble. The spy photographs had revealed an ominous buildup of
British and French military assets on the island of Cyprus. As these photo-
graphs had been developed and shared with the White House, Eisenhower
noticed a dramatic decline in diplomatic messages from the French and the
British. The president had been unsure about the extent of their collusion
with Israel, but this silence had not been reassuring.

As soon as he learned that Israel had attacked Egypt, Eisenhower informed
his advisers that U.S. policy would be to do whatever was necessary to restore
peace in the region. By the letter of the Tripartite Declaration of 1950, the
United States was obliged to go to Egypt's defense if it was attacked by any of
the signatories. France and Great Britain were parties to that declaration, and
Eisenhower made it clear that the United States would honor its pledge to
Egypt, even at the risk of confronting the British and the French. "In these cir-
cumstances," the U.S. president declared, "perhaps we cannot be bound by
our traditional alliances. 30 He informed his national security team not to
provide any economic support to Great Britain—in particular not to defend
the pound sterling in foreign currency markets—if it turned out that the
British were colluding with the Israelis. 3 This decision later had dramatic
consequences. He also wanted a letter sent to Eden that assured the British
that the United States believed it would have to support Egypt if asked under
the Tripartite Declaration. 33 Finally Eisenhower wanted the U.S. delegation at
the United Nations to table a resolution that day calling for a cease-fire. Some
delaying tactics employed by the British and the French late in the day on
October 29 postponed discussion on Eisenhower's UN resolution for another
twenty-four hours, but his other requests were acted on immediately.

Eisenhower's decisiveness stemmed from a deep concern that only the
Soviet Union could benefit from a conflict between the West and an Arab
nation. The possibility that France and Britain might have enlisted Israeli
assistance for their scheme just increased Eisenhower's pessimism about the
effect of the conflict on Western influence in the Middle East. 31 It also
increased his anger. He suspected that Paris and London had assumed that
he would have to tolerate an attack on Nasser because he needed the Jewish vote in November. American Jews, if they voted as a bloc, tended to vote Democratic, so this assumption was ludicrous. Eisenhower, however, let it be known that whatever the electoral consequences, he planned to oppose this war. “I don’t care in the slightest,” he told his top advisers, “whether I am re-elected or not. We must make good on our word.” He said that though he doubted the American people would “throw him out in the midst of a situation like this.” If they did, “so be it.”

The French and British ultimatum the next day proved the conspiracy and validated Eisenhower’s sense of betrayal. Since late July he had urged French Premier Guy Mollet and British Prime Minister Anthony Eden in every way he knew how not to do anything rash before the election. Eisenhower would probably have looked askance at European aggression in the Middle East after November 6, but he had left no doubt of what his reaction would be up to that time. Eastern Europe was also on Eisenhower’s mind. The bloodshed in Budapest on October 24 and October 26 was tragic evidence of what the West had been saying all along about the bankruptcy, moral and otherwise, of the so-called people’s republics. London’s and Paris’s descent into imperial nostalgia over the Suez threatened to undermine the stark contrast that Eisenhower wished to present between the civil West and the brutal East.

Following the Israeli attack, Cairo expected to hear from Khrushchev, but there was only silence. Early on October 30, before the British and French announced their ultimatum, Nasser’s closest aide, Ali Sabri, conveyed a message to Khrushchev through the Soviet Embassy. “With every hour the situation gets worse and is becoming very dangerous.” Nasser wanted “unofficially” to request military assistance to help Egypt defend itself against the three armies, Britain, France, and Israel. Sabri added that Nasser was impatient for a response to this unofficial sounding. If Moscow indicated a willingness to support Egypt, a formal request would follow.

Soviet Ambassador Kiselev tried to be helpful to the Egyptians. Although lacking any instructions from Moscow, he asked, “Given the fact that the situation might provoke a third world war, in practical terms, what kind of support does Nasser have in mind?” Sabri had prepared a response: “The deployment of naval vessels close to Egyptian shores would be a major step.” He added, “Egypt especially needs the help of an air force.” Nasser wanted Sabri to raise the possibility of Soviet volunteers, especially pilots, participating in the defense of Egypt.

Nasser did not wait for the response to repeat this request in a letter to the Kremlin. “The enemy is relying solely on air power,” he wrote. “We desperately need air support for our troops.” Nasser wanted the Soviet Air Force to intervene on the side of Egypt. He suggested that Soviet volunteers flying MiGs carrying the Egyptian insignia be sent to Egypt. “We will prepare air bases and let you know regarding their location.”

Khrushchev ignored both Egyptian requests for Soviet military intervention. He decided to take a chance on Nasser’s being able to survive this military crisis on his own. Soviet intelligence believed the Egyptians militarily a match for the Israelis and thought the Egyptians would be in grave danger only if the Western Europeans got involved. Khrushchev clung to the comforting assumption that an Anglo-French attack on Egypt was unlikely. Faced with U.S. opposition to the use of force against Nasser, about which Khrushchev knew from intelligence sources, the British would restrain themselves in Egypt. Soon after the announcement of the Anglo-French ultimatum, Soviet intelligence had reassured Khrushchev that the Europeans were indeed not colluding with Israel against Egypt. Instead the GRU predicted that the British and presumably the French “were preparing to assist Egypt in isolating the Canal from Israel or any other aggressor.” Lacking any inside information on Britain’s military objectives, and still captive to the portrayal of a weak prime minister provided by Burgess’s and Maclean’s sources, Khrushchev opted to take the Western powers’ ultimatum at face value and let Nasser be protected by the Western Europeans or the United States.

It was uncharacteristic of Khrushchev to abandon an ally in danger. Hungary was the reason for his behavior toward Nasser at the end of October 1956. The Soviet leader was incapable of managing two military crises simultaneously, at least not these particular crises. The problems in Hungary were so overwhelming that Khrushchev concluded he had no choice but to set his Egyptian allies adrift and hope for the best.

The day the Israelis began their attack on Egypt, Soviet troops, including additional units from outside Hungary, were mobilizing for a possible return to Budapest to crush any renewal of the anti-Soviet revolt. On October 30, as news arrived of the Middle East ultimatum from the French and the British calling on both Egypt and Israel to withdraw from either side of the Suez Canal, Khrushchev was agonizing over what to do next in Hungary. Khrushchev revealed his indecision that day to Mao’s representative in Moscow, Liu Chiao Chi. “The troops must stay in Hungary and Budapest,” was the advice of the Chinese representative. But Khrushchev was not so
Throughout October 30 the discussion among the Kremlin leaders involved much more than the decision to use force or not in Hungary. The actions of the Nagy government were calling into question a basic Soviet assumption about the stability of the highly centralized alliance system that the Kremlin had imposed upon Eastern Europe. In both Poland and Hungary Moscow had initially blamed any instability in the streets on the weakness of the local Communists. In Poland the Kremlin had then wondered if Gomulka was encouraging this disorder. But Khrushchev had since been reassured that Gomulka was a true Communist who understood that he needed friendship with Moscow. At this point in the Hungarian crisis the Kremlin did not know what to think about Nagy or the movement that seemed to have brought him to power.

A hothouse environment prevailed in the Kremlin as Shepilov, Zhukov, and Khrushchev began discussing the phenomenon of national communism. “We will have to contend with national communism for a long while,” observed a depressed Shepilov.40 “This is a lesson for us in the military-political sphere,” added Zhukov. Stalin had used this phrase to sentence Tito to death. This form of communism implied more differentiation in how socialism was implemented and a more distant relationship with Moscow. For Stalin the phrase had been shorthand for anti-Sovietism. Khrushchev and his associates, however, were not yet prepared to give up on managing foreign Communist leaders who were also strong nationalists.

It will be recalled that Khrushchev in particular had not liked how Stalin dealt with the Yugoslavs and believed that there was more that united Communists than set them apart. On October 30 others of the Kremlin elite shared enough of this basic optimism about fellow Communists that they became very creative in trying to work out the problem of national communism. Ultimately Khrushchev spoke for most in the room when he announced that there should be a complete overhaul of the way Moscow managed its Eastern European allies, which up until this point had been treated like colonies. As of 1956 Soviet troops were stationed in Poland, Romania, and Hungary without any legal basis. In Hungary, for example, this troop deployment was initially justified by an agreement with Budapest that allowed for the Soviet Union to protect the supply lines to its occupying forces in Austria. But the occupation of Austria had ended in mid-1955, and Soviet troops were still in Hungary.

Under the threat of the complete collapse of the Warsaw Pact, the Kremlin began considering how it might reduce its military and security presence in each of the socialist countries. Khrushchev had already permitted the Poles to send its KGB advisers and Soviet officers packing. If the relationship were to become less imperial, Moscow would have to tolerate the same independence in Budapest and start negotiations with Poland and Romania to reduce its troops there as well.

A sense of unreality pervaded the discussion. Despite the fact that by calling for multiparty elections, Nagy was breaking a key unspoken rule for leaders in the socialist bloc, Khrushchev believed that a Soviet declaration of a new style in the handling of the satellites would be enough to bring him and the Hungarian rebels home to the Soviet Union. There can be no other way of explaining this hastily improvised policy than as a function of Khrushchev’s belief that other Communist leaders shared his intense devotion to their faith. Nagy might well resent the symbols of Soviet power, but Khrushchev argued that he would not do anything to undermine the existence of a socialist Hungary. This was a test of Khrushchev’s assumption that even the most independent socialist regime, such as Yugoslavia and perhaps now Hungary, would ultimately choose to ally itself with Moscow.

A few hours after the meeting ended, Moscow received the first signs of how wrong this assumption about Nagy was. Over Hungarian Radio in the afternoon of October 30, Nagy announced the end of the one-party state in Hungary and called for multiparty elections. The next morning he was to declare his government’s decision to remove Hungary from the Warsaw Pact. Khrushchev’s other key assumption on October 30 was that the United States would step in to contain the Western Europeans before they attacked Nasser. For at least a brief moment this assumption appeared validated. Late in the day, just before Britain and France’s twelve-hour ultimatum would have lapsed, the United States introduced a resolution at the UN Security Council calling for an immediate cease-fire in the Sinai. For the first time in the Cold War, the Soviet Union found itself on the same side as Washington in a dispute with the Western Europeans. The Soviet ambassador at the UN supported the U.S. resolution. But the British, who as one of the five permanent members had a veto over all Security Council resolutions, used their veto to kill their American ally’s proposal. Both the British and the French offered the feeble excuse that the UN was not the proper place to solve the problems of the Middle East. Nevertheless, the Americans were now on record as opposing war in the Middle East.

The events of October 31, 1956, however, overturned Khrushchev’s basic assumptions about how to manage the challenges in both Hungary and
Egypt. Two shocking pieces of news hit at precisely the same time. From Hungary came word that despite Khrushchev’s expectations, Nagy was now calling for withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact. Meanwhile hundreds of miles away, on the pretext that Israel and Egypt had violated the London and Paris ultimatum, squadrons of British and French aircraft had started bombing Egyptian cities and airfields. Soviet intelligence, which only the day before had assured Khrushchev that Britain would not come to Egypt’s aid, now began providing increasingly dire descriptions of the losses to Egyptian weaponry, much of it Soviet made and as yet unpaid for.41

These events left the Soviet Union without a strategy to cope with either crisis. The realization that he had so badly misjudged the situations in both Egypt and Hungary left Khrushchev extremely defensive and belligerent. He called the Presidium into session and angrily called for defiance: “If we depart from Hungary, it will give a great boost to the Americans, English and French—the imperialists. They will perceive it as weakness on our part and will go onto the offensive. We would then be exposing the weakness of our positions. Our party will not accept it, if we do this. To Egypt they will add Hungary. We have no other choice.”42 Britain’s and France’s attack on Egypt upset Khrushchev’s calculations in Hungary. A day earlier Khrushchev had been prepared to take a risk that Nagy would quell the revolt in Hungary and resume good relations as a Communist ally of the Soviet Union. Now he could no longer tolerate any uncertainty over Hungary’s future in the Soviet Empire. Khrushchev’s personal prestige and that of the Soviet Union would not recover if Moscow were to lose two allies in quick succession. Moreover, with the world in crisis, he could ill afford to appear to be retreating in Europe, even if his intention was eventually to restore Soviet power through political means.

Khrushchev decided to deal with the Hungarian problem first and harshly. The previous day’s Presidium decision not to use force was immediately overturned, as was the new policy on relations with the socialist bloc. All but Mikoyan, who still hoped to find a peaceful way out of the crisis in Hungary, joined the majority in voting for the largest military assault on European civilians since the end of World War II.

The Presidium discussion was bloodless. It was one of concepts—power, party, stability, and prestige—and not of the fate of human beings. The result, however, was anything but bloodless. The Kremlin ordered the Soviet Army back into Budapest and authorized the use of lethal force against civilians who resisted the reimposition of Moscow’s imperial control over the country. It is one of the great tragedies of the twentieth century that the alter-

native policy toward Eastern Europe was never tested. Eventually the Kremlin might well have determined that there was no choice but to use tanks. Still, who can tell what might have happened in Budapest had the situation been allowed to develop over an additional week or two? Arguably, the Soviet reaction might then have been even more ferocious. But other outcomes might have prevailed.

Regarding Egypt, Khrushchev painfully chose continued inaction. Besides his desperation over Hungary, what may have restrained him was a real fear that Soviet intervention in Egypt could spin out of control. The Soviet Union could not afford to risk fighting a two-front war. Were he to agree to the Egyptian request for Soviet air power, for example, Soviet pilots would soon find themselves firing on the British and the French and perhaps later U.S. pilots.

Khrushchev was not even willing to attempt a sustained political strategy that would at least show solidarity with the Egyptians. Earlier in the day the Kremlin had received an urgent request for some public diplomacy from the Soviet ambassador in Cairo. “Any declaration,” Kiselev advised the Kremlin, “would lift the spirits of the Arabs.” It was the opinion of both KGB and Soviet diplomatic representatives in Cairo that Moscow’s inactivity was harming the Soviet position in the region. They noticed a tendency in the Egyptian press to “exaggerate the peaceful role of the USA in the current events and to hush up our efforts to condemn the Anglo-French intervention and those directed to a liquidation of the conflict.” The Soviet ambassador said that Egyptians were criticizing the Soviet Union for getting Nasser to take Soviet advice and, now that Egypt was in this critical situation, for remaining silent. Kiselev wanted Moscow to start an immediate propaganda campaign to attack the United States for its hypocrisy in pleading for peace while apparently allowing its NATO allies to commit aggression against a sovereign state.43 In response to Kiselev’s request, Pravda published a statement the next day that blamed France, Britain, and Israel for colluding against the nationalist aspirations of the Arab world but did not suggest a specific response.44

For the next three days Khrushchev preoccupied himself with the details of the Soviet-led counterrevolution in Hungary and acted as if he had written off the huge Soviet investment in the Middle East. He flew to the Polish-Soviet border to brief Gomulka, then went to Bucharest to meet with the Romanians and the Czechs and to Sofia for discussions with the Bulgarians. Finally, on November 3, the eve of the Soviet assault on Budapest, he visited with Tito in Yugoslavia. The Presidium met in his absence, but there was no discussion of anything but Hungary. The Kremlin was absorbed with planning the post-Nagy regime. János Kádár, a member of Nagy’s government, was secretly in Moscow
and would proclaim a new government on the heels of the Soviet advance. In this second Soviet assault on Budapest, which started on November 4, there were twenty-thousand Hungarian casualties, including Imre Nagy, who fled to the Yugoslav Embassy but was later turned over to the Soviets.45

Moscow left the Egyptians to fend for themselves until after the assault had begun on Budapest. On November 4 the Kremlin issued its first official protest of the Anglo-French military intervention, a toothless call for a cease-fire. Four days into the Western attack, Nasser's military situation was grim. The superiority of Western pilots and equipment had decimated the Egyptian Air Force. The Soviet military estimated that the Egyptians had lost twenty-nine of their forty-eight IL-28 light jet bombers and seventy-six of their eighty-six Soviet-made MiG-15B fighters. Western air attacks on the Egyptian Army were equally successful. On November 2 alone, European planes had destroyed fifty Egyptian tanks and were now systematically destroying Egyptian weaponry. What couldn’t be destroyed from the air the Israelis were capturing or destroying on the ground. The Soviets had reports that the Israelis had captured the matériel from two whole artillery battalions in the Sinai after Nasser had abandoned the entire eastern bank of the Suez Canal.46

On the morning of November 5, when Khrushchev received reports that eleven hundred British and French paratroopers were landing in Egypt, he did not sink into a deeper depression over the future of his Egyptian ally. Instead he reacted to this development as if it were a personal challenge and once more demonstrated a capacity for dramatic, unpredictable behavior. It is not known for sure why a week into the Mideast war Khrushchev finally chose to act decisively on behalf of his Egyptian ally. A possible explanation is that he had always wanted to do something but that so long as the Hungarian matter was unresolved, he refused to assume the risks inherent in acting in the Middle East. By November 5, however, the crackdown was in full swing in Budapest and Hungarian resistance was quickly collapsing. This freed him to contemplate strong action somewhere else.

Whatever the immediate cause, the result would be a grandiose act of desperation. With the situation dire for Nasser and a Soviet conventional counterattack in the Middle East unacceptable to Moscow, it seemed to Khrushchev that he had to find a way to scare France and Britain into a cease-fire. As he had in the discussion of Poland on October 21, he dominated his Kremlin equals in explaining how this might work. He wanted the Soviet Union to rally the world behind a concerted effort to save Nasser. “We should go to the General Assembly or the Security Council,” Khrushchev stated. “We should present an ultimatum and blame the aggressors.”47

For the first time since the London Conference, Middle East policy was now the main focus of the Kremlin. Moscow shrugged off its earlier passive acceptance of Egyptian despair, and there was a new energy behind Khrushchev’s words. He had decided not to give up. But what could the Soviet Union do? It was later said that during Syrian President Quwatly’s visit on October 30, Marshal Zhukov had brought out a map to prove to the Syrian leader that there was no way the Soviet Union could defend Egypt. That scene may have been apocryphal, but on November 5 Khrushchev understood there was little in the way of military support that the Kremlin could give. “We would prefer cooperation,” he said to his colleagues, “but if not we can send the fleet.” As he well knew, the Soviet fleet could not hold its own in a struggle with France or Great Britain. He had been the one who advocated spending less money on a surface fleet so as to be able to invest in future submarines.

A bluff was the only real alternative if Khrushchev wanted to compel the Europeans to accept an immediate cease-fire. From Western newspaper reports, Khrushchev was aware that the West was watching very closely the development of a Soviet medium-range ballistic missile, the R-3-m. Once deployed in the European part of the USSR, these missiles could theoretically strike targets in London and Paris. As in the case of the Soviet long-range bomber fleet, Western estimates far exceeded Soviet capabilities. Soviet trials of the R-3-m, their first missile to carry a nuclear warhead, had begun as early as January 1955. Although the CIA began reporting in 1956 that the Soviets had this missile, called the SS-3 by NATO, the final stages of development and deployment of this missile would not take place until much later.48 There were no R-3Ms on combat duty in November 1956.49

Without any real military options, Khrushchev believed he had no choice but to exploit Western fears of Soviet nuclear capabilities. Nuclear bluff was risky, but Khrushchev was now determined to rescue Nasser. He suggested that the Kremlin send threatening messages to the French, the British, and the Israelis. At the same time, he wanted to explore the possibility of working with the United States to achieve a cease-fire. Washington was saying publicly that it opposed what its allies were doing in the Middle East. Extending the offer of an unprecedented joint Soviet-American intervention for peace would test U.S. intentions. If this offer were rejected, at least Khrushchev would have smoked out Eisenhower’s real sympathies and gained a propaganda victory.
The Kremlin unanimously approved the strategy. Telegrams would be sent to the United States and to French and British leaders, as well as to India’s Nehru to build support in the third world, and an explanatory communication to Nasser. Although Khrushchev dictated the tone and even some of the phrases, all the messages were prepared to go out under the signature of the Soviet president, Nikolai Bulganin.50

At fifteen minutes before 10:00 P.M., Moscow time, on November 5, Moscow radio broadcast Bulganin’s message to Prime Minister Eden: “In what position would Britain have found herself had it been attacked by more powerful states possessing all types of modern weapons of destruction?” Bulganin added, “We are full of determination to crush the aggressor and reestablish peace in the East by using force.”

In Washington, where it was the early afternoon, Eisenhower expressed concern when he heard about Moscow’s threats to the Europeans. Observing that Khrushchev and his Kremlin colleagues “were scared and furious,” the president explained, “there is nothing more dangerous than a dictatorship in this state of mind.”51 He did not take seriously Khrushchev’s proposal that the superpowers should work together to stabilize the situation in Egypt. His principal concern remained that Moscow should not gain additional influence in the Middle East. The messages from Moscow only caused Eisenhower to redouble his efforts to compel the British and French to accept a cease-fire agreement lest the Soviets be given a pretext for further action.

The French government took the Soviet threat seriously. U.S. Ambassador C. Douglas Dillon was called in to see French Prime Minister Mollet and Foreign Minister Pineau. French and British paratroopers had easily captured the town of Port Said at the northern end of the canal, and Egyptian military resistance was melting away, yet the French government seemed to understand that time was running out on the Suez operation. Paris had every reason to believe that Bulganin’s message would mandate some form of response from Washington, and there was every possibility that the United States would want the French and the British out of Egypt. To forestall a hasty American demand, Mollet and Pineau told Dillon that they were ready to accept a cease-fire, perhaps as early as the next day, but under certain conditions. They asked that the UN Security Council resolution be sponsored by the United States, not by the Soviet Union. France also wanted the right to occupy the canal until “it is functioning normally” and was considering calling for “free elections” in Egypt to ensure that the final settlement of the Suez problem would be negotiated with someone other than Nasser. The French were clearly not yet ready to abandon their objectives. They hoped the United States would help them achieve what they could not by force of arms.52

Anthony Eden also sensed that the operation was doomed. Although we cannot be certain, it appears that Moscow’s threatening message was not Britain’s greatest concern on the morning of November 6. The issue of the moment was the possibility of a financial crisis triggered by events in the Middle East. This had come about because of a central flaw in the British operation, the amount of time required to capture the canal and, it was hoped, to cause Nasser’s removal. It had been eight days since Israel launched its attack, six days since the start of the air campaign, and two days since British and French paratroopers had landed near Port Said. Over this period foreign currency traders had become concerned about Britain’s future oil supply and began dumping their holdings in British sterling. Just two days earlier Nasserist forces in Syria had sabotaged a key oil pipeline that ran through that country, and the Egyptians had begun to sink ships in the Suez Canal, the other main oil route to Britain.

Having assumed that the Americans would reluctantly support any military action against Egypt, the British had never considered how they would manage the economic consequences of the operation. International sales were now placing immense downward pressure on the value of the pound sterling. As part of the international financial system established in the aftermath of World War II, national currencies were pegged to a fixed value by international agreement, and when changes occurred in the demand for its money, a country was obliged to respond by buying or selling either bonds denominated in its own currency or gold reserves. The British were hard pressed to cope with the steep decline of the pound that followed the invasion, but they were confident that the U.S. Treasury would step in to help them defend the pound by buying it up in currency markets. But Eisenhower had already decided to let British currency sink. Every day that the military operation continued, the British were hemorrhaging gold and dollars, hard currency they desperately needed to purchase oil from Venezuela and the other non–Middle Eastern oil producers. By the morning of November 6, it was becoming clear to the chancellor of the exchequer, Britain’s finance minister, Harold Macmillan, that without U.S. assistance, the British government could not afford the war. Since that support was not forthcoming, Macmillan concluded that Britain had to end its little Egyptian war.53

Macmillan had been a strong hawk. He had also allowed himself to become entangled in the web of misconceptions that guided Eden’s policy toward Suez. He too had believed that when push came to shove, the United
States would back its allies. During the Second World War he had been Eisenhower's political chief in liberated Algiers. Just a month before hostilities broke out in Egypt, Macmillan had stopped in Washington to take the temperature of his old wartime comrade on a British assault against Egypt. He left assuming he had Eisenhower's understanding, if not blessing for military action. He was mistaken.

Eden knew the writing was on the wall when Macmillan turned against the action. Calling a cabinet meeting in the morning to decide what to do next about the Suez action, the prime minister curiously relegated to the back burner the problem of how to respond to the Soviets. A veteran Foreign Office diplomat, Patrick Reilly, who was being trained for a future posting as British ambassador in Moscow, was assigned the job of writing the response to Bulganin. Besides having at his disposal a fine set of ideas that the current British ambassador, William Hayter, had cabled that morning, Reilly had no other guidance. It seemed that replying to Moscow was an afterthought in a busy day.

British intelligence was not taking the Kremlin's nuclear threat nonchalantly. Chester Cooper, the CIA station chief in London, recalls a tense meeting of Britain's Joint Intelligence Committee to which he was invited on November 6. The gathered British intelligence chiefs had only one significant question for the American: "Do the Soviets have missiles that could reach London?" When Cooper reported that the Soviets did not, everyone in the room visibly relaxed.

The British cabinet decided that morning to seek a cease-fire in Egypt despite not having achieved its objective. With the decision made, Eden had the Foreign Office summon Reilly to complete the draft response to the Russians. London wanted Moscow to know that it no longer had any reason to be alarmed. The Suez operation was about to end. Reilly was told to bring the draft to 10 Downing Street after lunch.

Reilly, who had been personal assistant to the chief of British intelligence in World War II, had witnessed some dramatic discussions in his career. But on November 6, 1956, he found a listless prime minister and a distracted foreign minister. Eden took the draft and played with it for a while. Scoring a sentence here and a word there, he was like the child pushing an unwanted vegetable from one side of his plate to another. Reilly's immediate boss, Selwyn Lloyd, was even less interested in what Britain ought to tell the Soviets. Reilly later described the foreign secretary as obsessively nattering about how he had to speak to the Venezuelan ambassador that afternoon—about oil, no doubt. Reilly was surprised that he was asked to wait in the room, while Eden placed a call to Guy Mollet. With the support of the cabinet behind him, Eden was asking the French to accept a cease-fire that day.

In Paris the American Douglas Dillon was in Mollet's office suggesting that the French leader call Eden when the call came through. Mollet's subsequent conversation with Eden ended French resistance to an unconditional cease-fire.

For the British and the French, November 6 brought a tremendous anticlimax to the events since Israel launched its attack. The only sound was that of the air being let out of British and French imperial pretensions in the Middle East and the simultaneous inflation of Soviet self-confidence. Delighted by the turnaround and unaware of the backstage role that Washington had played in pressing Eden to stop the war, the Soviets indulged themselves in believing that it was fear of their power, especially their nuclear weapons, that had been central to the demise of the Anglo-French military operation.

For Khrushchev, the Anglo-French collapse and the eventual withdrawal of their forces and those of Israel from Egypt was a satisfying personal victory. It was nearly miraculous that Egypt had been spared. Only a week earlier Khrushchev faced the prospect of losing his key ally in the developing world as the price for restoring order in his Eastern European empire. But events had ultimately moved in Khrushchev's favor. Besides vindicating the risky policy that Khrushchev had been advocating in the Middle East since 1955, Nasser's survival demonstrated the utility of the nuclear bluff for the weaker superpower in international politics. Now it seemed to Khrushchev that he had found in the nuclear bluff an effective way to weaken Soviet adversaries on the cheap. Ironically the problem of Egyptian defense, a challenge that since July 1956 had produced ample evidence of the limits of Soviet power, served to give Khrushchev an inflated sense of what he could do abroad.