and Khrushchev had shown neither flexibility nor tact. Later, Khrushchev described Mao as a nationalist, 'and at least when I knew him he was bursting with an impatient desire to rule the world.' He added: 'Mao may be a nationalist, but he's no fool.... The slogans of the Chinese are very alluring. You're mistaken if you don't think the seeds of these ideas will find fertile soil in our country.'

Bolshevik radicalism is imprinted on the whole of Khrushchev's foreign policy, even though it is also indisputable that he wanted peace and sought it in his own way. This did not prevent him from embarking on risky policies, from flexing his muscles and from interfering in the affairs of sovereign states.

Speaking to the General Secretary of the Italian Communist Party, Luigi Longo, on 22 January 1957, he asked rhetorically: 'Did we do the right thing in Hungary? We think we did absolutely the right thing. As for the Soviet people, the crushing of the counter-revolution in Hungary was greeted by them, and especially by the army, with general relief.' He believed it was his right to decide what was good for another nation, and to take measures accordingly. The intervention in Hungary was no exception. Diplomacy, with the threat of force in the background — as in the case of Poland in October 1956 — was a favoured form of argument with the Soviet leaders. Paradoxical and contradictory, Khrushchev was an exemplary exponent of this approach. The initiator of major, unilateral Soviet arms reductions, he could speak of turning out missiles like sausages and of 'burying' the West, and still imagine that his political opponents would become more compliant.

He never spoke of the 'world proletarian revolution', but believed that the victory of socialism on a global scale was possible without war. To the end of his life he remained a Stalinist, if an unconscious one, yet it was he who had delivered a mortal blow against that particular form of totalitarianism. This paradox was constantly apparent in his diplomatic activity. His ideas sometimes perplexed his own diplomats, as well as his adversaries.

In 1955 the heads of government of the USSR, the USA, France and Britain met in Geneva. Khrushchev was accompanied by Bulganin, Molotov and Zhukov. The Soviet delegation shocked the assembled statesmen with their provocative declaration of a desire to enter NATO. Alone with his companions later, Khrushchev was gleeful at the patent discomfiture he had caused the Western powers. His reckless initiatives in diplomacy, however, more than once pushed the world towards the brink of nuclear conflict. Such an occasion was the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

**Operation Anadyr**

The public was surprised that Khrushchev did not hasten back to the USSR after his visit to the United Nations in September 1959. He turned the trip into an ideological event. Wherever he was taken in the USA, he lectured and hectored, whether in interviews or press conferences, with businessmen or public figures, accusing America and its 'stooges' of imperialism. He thought he had made a good impression, but in fact the effect was the opposite. For all his peace-loving rhetoric, he only managed to reinforce the West's suspicions.

Within two years, the Americans would see for themselves that their suspicions had been justified. The US administration soon realized that Soviet foreign policy had not changed fundamentally, despite the death and discrediting of Stalin. The incompatibility of the capitalist and socialist camps, or the imperialist and anti-imperialist worlds, as Khrushchev would put it, was transferred to the newly created arena of post-war international politics, the UN and the media, by Khrushchev's openly demonstrative style. Khrushchev's constant refrain of the 'liquidation of the capitalist system as the fundamental issue of social development' by the spread of Marxism-Leninism through the world and the support of the developing countries was now backed by the growth of Soviet economic power and its nuclear might.

The revolution in Cuba in 1959 led by the thirty-two-year-old Fidel Castro was not expected by the Soviet leadership, but that small country, so close to the USA, soon became the object of Moscow's intense interest. It liked Castro's anti-American stance, and was especially encouraged by the strategic mistake committed by the US administration: instead of trying to exert its influence on the young regime, it adopted a hostile attitude, then declared an economic blockade, thus pushing Castro into the arms of the Soviet Union. The landing of Cuban dissidents at the Bay of Pigs on 17 April 1961 only assisted...
In August 1961 one of Castro's aides, Blas Roca, brought an important letter to Moscow. Khrushchev read the translation and marked a number of significant passages. Havana was proposing to proclaim the socialist character of the Cuban revolution and form a Marxist party, and was asking the Soviet Union to express its solidarity with Cuba 'against attacks and threats of military attack on our country by the United States'. Castro also wanted to discuss 'ways of co-ordinating our sugar production with demand in the socialist camp'.

The more Cuba showed a desire for close relations with the USSR, the more militant the USA became. Soviet intelligence warned of the real possibility of US military intervention, and these reports no doubt played a part in the formulation of an unusually audacious scheme in Khrushchev's mind. Gromyko recalled that on a flight back to Moscow from Bulgaria in 1962, Khrushchev had raised the issue of Cuba: 'The situation forming around Cuba at the moment is dangerous. It is essential that we deploy a certain quantity of our nuclear missiles there for its defence, as an independent state.' After a pause, Gromyko replied: 'I have to say quite frankly that taking our nuclear missiles to Cuba will cause a political explosion in the United States.'

In April 1962, during one of his regular and frequent meetings with Defence Minister Malinovsky about forthcoming tests of a new missile system, Khrushchev interrupted Malinovsky's report on the latest missile site with an unexpected question: 'What about putting one of our hedgehogs down the Americans' trousers?' he asked. 'According to our intelligence we are lagging almost fifteen years behind the Americans in warheads. We cannot reduce that lead even in ten years. But our rockets on America's doorstep would drastically alter the situation and go a long way towards compensating us for the lag in time. What does the Marshal think of that?'

Malinovsky replied that he and the Chief of Staff, Marshal Zakharov, had discussed this very question among themselves on two occasions. But he thought it was more a political than a military question. Khrushchev, not wanting to say more at that time, told Malinovsky to discuss it again in a small circle and to report his findings to the Presidium in a month's time.

The meeting took place on 24 May 1962. No minutes were taken, apart from one page of notes recorded by Colonel-General S. Ivanov, head of the Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff and Secretary of the Defence Council. His notes state: 'the question of assistance to Cuba was discussed . . . N.S. Khrushchev gave the report. Comrades Kozlov, Brezhnev, Kosygin, Mikoyan, Voronov and Polyanovsky spoke, all the other members of the Presidium supported and approved the decision. 1) Full and unanimous approval of enterprise “Anadyr” (subject to receiving F. Castro’s agreement); 2) A commission to be sent to Fidel Castro for talks.'

The meeting agreed that it was not only strategically sensible to give Cuba military assistance, but also to establish a powerful bridgehead on America's doorstep from which virtually the whole of US territory would be accessible to Soviet missiles in the event of a conflict.

To ascertain Castro's response to these notions, a delegation consisting of S. Rashidov, Marshal S. Biryuzov and a number of Defence Ministry officials would be sent to Havana. At 11 a.m. next day, the Commission, as it is described in the notes, was in Khrushchev's office to receive instructions, and by the end of the month had arrived in Cuba. After meeting Castro and his brother Raoul on their first day, the Soviet delegation met them again on the next day, this time augmented by Che Guevara, Osualdo Dorticos and Ramiro Valdez. It was a brief meeting, and the Cuban leadership announced that they were willing to receive Soviet missiles in Cuba.

This was reported to the Presidium on 10 June, after the delegation had returned. Khrushchev did not want to shoulder all the responsibility himself, and therefore ensured that it was the decision of the entire Presidium. As at all such meetings, there were no objections. On a single sheet of notes, Ivanov wrote: '10.6.62. A session of the Presidium took place . . . After hearing Comrades Rashidov and Biryuzov on the results of their trip, the essentials of the problem were discussed, and then R.Ya. Malinovsky read out a note, to which all voted “in favour”.

Malinovsky's note read: 'To the chairman of the Defence Council,
Comrade N.S. Khrushchev (of special importance; the only copy). In accordance with your instructions, the Ministry of Defence proposes: to put a Soviet forces Group on the island of Cuba consisting of combined arms under the sole command of a group headquarters, subordinate to Commander-in-Chief Soviet forces in Cuba. Missile forces (a division of five missile regiments) was to form the core, and the timetable, delivery, financing and even clothing were all specified. Khrushchev insisted that the transport of this large number of Soviet forces across the ocean be carried out in absolute secrecy, and checked up on the progress of preparations almost every day. The General Staff had suggested the operation be called 'Anadyr', a settlement in the Arctic region of Magadan, to disguise its real destination. A number of ships were ostentatiously loaded with skis and sheepskins to enhance the effect.

As early as 26 May Malinovsky had confirmed the list of generals and other officers who would be involved in the operation. Only ten people were fully informed of the scale of the forthcoming expedition. Khrushchev was elated. He had not felt like this since his days as a member of the Military Council at Stalingrad and Kursk during the war. Then, however, he had been carrying out Stalin's will, whereas now it was he who was generating the ideas and exercising the decisive will needed to bring off this vast enterprise, which required huge resources and a great concentration of forces. He was involved at every phase and concerned with every detail, and saw Malinovsky two or three times a week. On 4 June, an advance reconnaissance group of 161 men was sent to Cuba to form the backbone of the future headquarters staff. The last minute, Khrushchev replaced Pavel Dankevich as Group Commander-in-Chief with General Issa Pliev, Northern Caucasus Military District at the time of the events in Novocherkassk. The reconnaissance group were ordered to carry out their work 'in the strictest secrecy'. They would be 'transported by plane as Soviet agricultural experts, in the guise of engineers and technologists in irrigation and land improvement'.

Khrushchev confirmed the composition of the Group: 51st Rocket Division (consisting of five regiments with R-14 and R-12 installations), 10th and 11th Anti-Aircraft Missile Divisions, a fighter-aircraft regiment, two guided-missile regiments, a helicopter regiment, four motorized-rifle regiments, a coastal-missile regiment, a mine and torpedo regiment, and various rear and other units. It had also been intended to send a squadron of submarines and a squadron of surface naval ships, but in the course of the operation this decision was altered. Overall, the plan was to land more than fifty thousand Soviet servicemen on Cuba. Shipments began in the middle of July from a number of Soviet ports. Cargoes of tractors and other agricultural machinery were loaded, and more than eighty merchant ships were involved in the operation.

The ships' manifests stated that their cargoes were to be delivered to ports in Africa and Latin America. At fixed points on the ocean and in the presence of specially selected personnel, ships' masters were to open sealed packets which revealed their true destination. They were to pass through any straits only in darkness, and the crews were to be kept in their stuffy quarters almost throughout the voyage, and only allowed to take a breather on deck at night. Nuclear warheads for all types of missile would be carried on the Indigirka, Lena and Alexandrovsk. Sixty strategic R-12 and R-14 missiles, with their ancillary parts, were to be delivered, and indeed forty-two of them arrived in Cuba before the US imposed its blockade.

Khrushchev kept his eye on the operation from wherever he happened to be. On 5 October he called Colonel-General Ivanov on his special line from Tashkent to ask how the transport was going. Ivanov replied: 'The Indigirka arrived on 4 October. There has been no buzzing by aircraft. Twenty-two [ships] have yet to leave. Twenty are at sea. The transport Alexandrovsk is loaded and ready to go. I request permission for her to depart.' 'The transport Alexandrovsk may leave. Where are the Lena and IL-28?' 'At sea.' 'All clear. Thank you. I wish you luck.'

Khrushchev's deputy while he was out of Moscow was Frol Kozlov. On 5 October Malinovsky reported to him: 'In accordance with the plan for the enterprise "Anadyr", as ratified by the Presidium of the Central Committee of the CPSU, the second batch of special ammunition is ready for shipment. There are sixty-eight units of special ammunition, namely: twenty-four warheads for R-14 missiles, and forty-four warheads for FKR missiles have been loaded on the Alexandrovsk at Severomorsk. Three automatic 37mm guns with 1200 shells each have been fitted on the Alexandrovsk for self-defence. The
captain has been given permission to open fire only in the event of a
blatant attempt to seize the vessel or to sink her.99

Khrushchev had approved an instruction to install two 23mm coaxial anti-aircraft guns on each vessel for self-protection, and 'in the event of an open threat of seizure of our ship, the captain and chief of marines must take steps for the organized abandonment of the ship by the crew in all available lifesaving resources and [then] to sink the ship.100

The attention of Soviet intelligence had long been concentrated on Cuba. On 23 June 1961, before the idea of putting missiles on the island had matured in Khrushchev’s mind, the Soviet military intelligence resident in Havana reported that a terrorist action, called ‘Condor’, had been organized against Castro and his brother by the Cubans Nelson Gutierrez and Marcelino Balida, aided by a Puerto Rican known as ‘Negrete’. The action was tentatively planned to take place on 26 July. Knowing that Castro wore an armoured vest, the plan was to shoot him in the head.101 Khrushchev reported all this to the next meeting of the Presidium on 24 June 1961, and it was agreed that the Soviet Ambassador in Havana should warn Castro at once.102

Malinovsky’s reports on Operation Anadyr covered not just the logistics, but also the operational and strategic issues. General Pliev had been told that the ‘tasks of Soviet forces in Cuba are to prevent the enemy from landing on Cuban territory, whether by sea or air, and to turn the island into an impregnable fortress. Missile forces, who constitute the basis of defence for the Soviet Union and Cuba, must be ready on a signal from Moscow to launch nuclear-missile strikes on important targets in the United States. Missile-carrying submarines must be ready on a signal from Moscow to launch nuclear-missile strikes on important coastal targets in the USA.’ Marshal Zakharov suggested that Pliev be given discretion to use tactical nuclear weapons even without Moscow’s permission. Malinovsky objected, however, and Pliev was given no such discretion.

The situation, then, was that Khrushchev was fully prepared to carry out nuclear strikes against the United States. He must have known that this would unleash a nuclear war. What did he expect to gain from it? The US, after all, had at least fifteen times more nuclear warheads than the USSR.

We should perhaps not judge him by today’s standards. Since 1917 the Soviet leadership thought in Comintern categories, such as ‘the inevitable demise of capitalism’ and ‘the historical correctness of Communism’. Khrushchev genuinely believed that the Soviet Union was the most democratic system, that it was axiomatic that it would overtake the USA and that the precise date for the completion of the Communist society was so sure that it could be put into the Party programme. Even his proposals on disarmament were utterly unrealistic. At the Fifteenth Session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 1960 he proposed that all nuclear arsenals and other weapons of mass destruction be destroyed within four years: this was plainly an ideologically inspired move, and not based on rational calculation. A rejection from the West was anticipated, so that the Soviet propaganda machine could yet again ‘unmask aggressive imperialistic circles’.

Marshal Zakharov reported on 25 September that everything was going according to plan. To date, 114 ships had sailed for Cuba, some of them twice, ninety-four had arrived and thirty-five remained to go. Embarkation schedules had been tightened and would be fulfilled by 20 October, with disembarkation in Cuba completed by 3–5 November. In view of the fact, the report continued, that a fleet of surface naval ships would attract the attention of the whole world, which would not be in the interests of the Soviet Union, it was suggested that such a fleet should not be sent to Cuba for the time being. On the other hand, Zakharov continued, not less than sixty-nine submarines carrying eighty-eight torpedoes, including four nuclear warheads, would be despatched. A nuclear-torpedo submarine would escort the transport Alexandrovsk, staying immediately underneath the ship during the most sensitive stretches of the crossing in order to maintain secrecy. The despatch of submarines and the Baltic and Black Sea Fleets, however, was postponed on the day of this report. The changes were noted and approved by Khrushchev.103

The greater part of Soviet forces on Cuba were in place when photographs taken by an American U-2 spy-plane of the western and central areas of Cuba yielded sensational information. The experts decided, having analysed the pictures, that medium-range Soviet missiles had been installed in Cuba. A report was sent at once to President Kennedy. For several days American security chiefs assessed
the information and tried to formulate an effective response. Moscow was not aware until 22 October that Khrushchev's secret plan had been discovered, by which time forty-two nuclear missiles were in Cuba.

Kennedy's radio and TV speech of 22 October shocked the American public: 'in the course of the last week indisputable evidence has established the fact that at present on that imprisoned island a number of launchpads for offensive missiles are being built.'

For the first time the Americans felt the chill of fear. Separated from the rest of the world by great oceans and surrounded by friendly, weak neighbours, they had not until then had a real sense of the nuclear danger. Bomb-shelters and deep cellars were built, and canned and dry goods stocked for the worst. The press added fuel to the fire by pointing out which towns and cities were within range of missiles from Cuba. The resultant hysteria helped to push the administration into taking decisive measures.

On 24 October Kennedy imposed a naval blockade, euphemistically called 'quarantine', on Cuba. The same day, Moscow replied with a statement to the effect that if the USA unleashed a nuclear war, the USSR 'would carry out the most powerful retaliatory strike'. Khrushchev rejected Kennedy's charges and accused the USA of preparing to launch a dangerous undertaking. Soviet diplomats in Washington continued to reassure everyone that there were no offensive weapons in Cuba. A war of nerves began.

The Pentagon seriously considered launching an air strike against the missile sites. Had this gone ahead, it is possible that Moscow, not being fully aware of the intended scale of such bombing, might have approved retaliation. Twenty or 25 per cent of Soviet missiles could have found their targets, and in the first – and no doubt last – assault, ten or twelve nuclear devices would fall on American cities.

The leaders of the two most powerful countries were prepared to take the most awesome actions. Khrushchev did not leave his office for several days. The armed forces of both states were put on full battle-readiness. The irrevocable could occur at any moment. Kennedy remained cool, and at 1.25 a.m. on 25 October he sent a letter to the Soviet Embassy addressed to Khrushchev. It was transmitted at once to Moscow:

Respected Mr Chairman,

I have received your letter of 24 October and much regret that it seems you still do not understand what has motivated us in this affair [i.e. the blockade]. Our government received totally clear assurances from your government and its representatives, both publicly and through unofficial channels, that no offensive weapons were being sent to Cuba. If you will look again at the statement published by TASS in September, you will see how clear that assurance was. All these public assurances were false and your forces have recently begun establishing a complex of missile bases in Cuba. I hope your government will undertake the necessary measures to restore the pre-existing position.

Yours sincerely, John F. Kennedy.

Khrushchev at once summoned a meeting of the Presidium. The members sat in silence as the outwardly calm First Secretary began by reading an urgent communication from Soviet intelligence in Washington, stating that 'the President has apparently taken the decision to invade Cuba today or tomorrow night.'

The Presidium remained silent. Khrushchev then read Kennedy's letter and, surveying the long table, asked: 'What shall we do?'

It was agreed not to give way to American pressure, and to give a tough reply. By the small hours of 26 October, Khrushchev's reply was ready. It ran to eight pages and consisted of Khrushchev's own dictated thoughts. He was still naïvely trying to educate the US President ideologically. Some of his assertions are simply astonishing:

Respected Mr President,

I have received your letter of 25 October. From your letter I sense that you have some understanding of the existing situation and a sense of responsibility. I appreciate that ... I think you will understand me correctly if you are really concerned about the benefits of peace. Everyone needs peace: both the capitalists, if they have not lost their senses, and more so the Communists who are people who are able to value not only their own lives but, more than that, the lives of other peoples. We Communists are against any wars between states and we have defended the cause of peace since we came into the world.

So much for the moral argument. As for the military aspect of the conflict:

Your arguments about there being offensive weapons in Cuba are completely groundless. You, Mr President, are a military man and should
understand that it is hardly possible to launch an offensive, even if one
has a vast quantity of missiles of all ranges and force on one's territory
... To make an offensive with such missiles, even nuclear missiles of
100 megatonnes, is impossible, because it is only people, troops, who
can make an offensive ... You surely do not think that Cuba can
advance on the United States or that even we together with Cuba can
advance against you from Cuban territory? You surely do not think
that? How can it be? We do not understand this.

Amazingly, not a single member of the Presidium, no marshal or
general, pointed out that Khrushchev's letter would make him an
object of ridicule. The Bolshevik tradition was still in force: no one
could contradict the leader. If Khrushchev decided that nuclear
weapons were not offensive weapons, so be it. As for what he told
the US President, he could say that black was white: 'I assure you
that the ships that are on their way to Cuba are carrying the most
innocent, peaceful cargoes.'

Khrushchev then gave himself a way out of the impasse by declaring
that, if the USA would state that it would not send its troops to Cuba,
'the need for our military experts on Cuba would fall away'. Perhaps
as a face-saving gesture, or out of sheer bravado, he closed the letter
by rejecting Kennedy's measures as aggressive, and adding: 'If you
have done this as the first step towards launching a war, well, all
right, evidently there is nothing else we can do but to accept your
challenge.' He communicated through diplomatic channels that the
USSR would remove the missiles if the US promised not to invade
Cuba, and a face-saving formula was found that enabled Khrushchev
to depict a humiliating retreat as an unqualified victory.

After Khrushchev's letter had been sent, Malinovsky received a
cipher from Pliev - code-named 'Pavlov' - stating that an attack by
US strategic air forces was expected 'on the night of 26 or at dawn
on 27 October'. Pliev reported: 'The decision has been taken that in
the event of attacks on our locations by American aircraft we shall
use all available means of anti-aircraft defence.' Malinovsky - signing
himself 'Director' - wrote on the report: 'Send to Comrade N.S.
Khrushchev. I suggest Pavlov's decision be ratified.' The report was
delivered to Khrushchev at once, but it seems he did not approve it
until six days later, on 27 October. A few hours after that, another
memo from Malinovsky arrived on his desk, reporting that at 18.20
Moscow time on that day a U-2 reconnaissance plane had been shot
down by two 507 anti-aircraft missiles over the Chukotka Peninsula
in the far eastern part of the USSR.

The Americans were close to hysteria. Generals were demanding
an immediate strike against Soviet missile installations. That Saturday
was fateful for the whole world. If Kennedy's nerve had failed him
and a strike had been carried out, the greatest catastrophe in human
history would have taken place. But through his brother Robert, the
President contacted Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin and told him that
if the missiles were removed from Cuba, there would be no invasion.

The Presidium spent the entire night of 28 October in Khrushchev's
office. The leader, having made up his mind to withdraw, read cable
after cable from Soviet intelligence, from which it emerged that to
delay would be tantamount to war, since the Americans were bound
to launch a strike. Again, a collective letter was composed there and
then. It was not well done, as none of the Party leaders ever wrote
their own reports or speeches, and knew only how to put together
directives.

The country was sleeping, completely unaware that its leaders had
brought it to the very brink of disaster and were now feverishly trying
to drag it back from the edge. There was no time to encode the letter
to Kennedy, and it was already being sent by radio in clear text while
the final pages were still being corrected at the long table.

The vital passage of the disjointed message read:

In order to complete the liquidation as soon as possible of the dangerous
conflict for the cause of peace, to give reassurance to all peoples thirsting
for peace, to pacify the people of America who, I am sure, also want
peace, as do the peoples of the Soviet Union, the Soviet government, in
addition to orders given earlier for the cessation of further work on
the construction sites for the deployment of weapons, has issued a new
order for the dismantling of the weapons which you call offensive, for
them to be packed up and sent back to the Soviet Union.

The letter was full of pathetic propaganda, such as: 'Our people
are contented with the fruits of their peaceful toil. They have achieved
huge successes since the October revolution, created the greatest
material, spiritual and cultural treasures.' Even as the seconds were
ticking away, ideological rhetoric had to have its place.
The Kremlin had retreated. Years later, Khrushchev would tell himself that he had scored 'a great victory ... we had been able to extract from Kennedy a promise that neither America nor any of her allies would invade Cuba.'

For the more hard-headed Gromyko, the gain for the Soviets had been a promise from the Americans to remove their rockets from Turkey.

There followed Castro's anger at having been sidelined and not even informed in advance of the Soviet climbdown; detailed discussions on the withdrawal of Soviet forces; the dismantling and destruction of the launchpads; and the humiliating inspection by the US of ships carrying the missiles back to the USSR.

General Ivanov was receiving a stream of cables which no one even dreamed of showing Khrushchev. For instance, from the master of the motor-ship Volgolks:

At 08.00 on 9 November, American destroyer No. 878 was following in our wake. It approached to within thirty metres of our port side, lay a parallel course and suggested we remove the tarpaulins from the missiles on the port side of our forward deck. The tarpaulins were removed completely at their request, after which the destroyer asked us to partly remove the tarpaulins from five missiles on the after-deck. At 08.25 the destroyer crossed to the starboard side, looked at the partially exposed missile-heads on the starboard side of the after-deck, then asked us to take the tarpaulin completely off a missile on the starboard side of the forward deck, which we did. The missile markings on the hermetic covers had been preliminarily sealed on the missiles on the forward deck, the missile stabilizers had been concealed by personnel [standing in front of them] during visual inspection and photographing from the destroyer. Throughout all this, an American plane, LR 143176, circled low over the ship. The visual inspection was finished at 09.25, the destroyer raised the “Thank you” flag and called over the loudhailer in Russian: ‘I wish you a safe return to your Motherland.’ The destroyer then lay a course in our wake and accompanied us until we altered course away from Cuban shores. The crew of the motor-ship Volgolks, both during the culmination of the Cuban crisis and throughout the voyage, was engaged on carrying out ship's duties, looking after the ship and upholding the honour of the Soviet sailor.

In the end, both Khrushchev and Kennedy had shown common sense and agreed to avoid the worst. Those two weeks of October 1962 have gone down in history as one of the climaxes of the confrontation between two different worlds. Perhaps the crisis enhanced the world's awareness of the fragility of life in the nuclear age and the priority of human values over ideological myths.

In October 1964, however, when Khrushchev was removed as First Secretary, the report given at the Central Committee plenum on his activities stated: ‘In one of his speeches, Comrade Khrushchev declared that if the USA touched Cuba we would launch a strike against it. He insisted that our missiles be sent to Cuba. This provoked the most serious crisis, bringing the world to the brink of nuclear war; the organizer of this most dangerous venture himself was greatly alarmed. Having no other way out, we were forced to accept all the demands and conditions dictated by the USA, right down to the humiliating inspection of our ships by the Americans.’

Of course, the order to send missiles to Cuba had been signed by every member of the Presidium, but it was Khrushchev's idea and his authority, and therefore his ‘comrades-in-arms’ thought it only proper that he should be the one to drink the cup of shame.

Following the Cuban crisis, there was growing, if muted, discontent with Khrushchev among the rest of the Presidium, in top military circles and among orthodox Communists. Jokes circulated about his ignorance, the new slums he had built - dubbed khrushchoby, a pun on the word for slums, trushchoby - his great maize campaign, his promise to overtake America, the three medals of Hero of Soviet Labour he had awarded himself, his hydroponics programme, his humiliating withdrawal from Cuba, and much, much more.

It is normal for a leader to be feared or cursed or criticized, but when he is laughed at and made the butt of jokes, his time is up. After the sinister giants Lenin and Stalin, it seems that in the end Khrushchev was somehow too lightweight a figure for the public, an insufficiently standard leader. As a reformer he was not understood, while many were simply not willing to forgive him for exposing the personality cult.

For two more years after Cuba, Khrushchev tried to speed up the rate of reform, but the engine failed to start. He knew that change in society was needed, but he tried to effect it using old Bolshevik methods, though his comrades saw his acts as a dramatic departure from Marxism-Leninism. He was completely isolated, even though he dwelt within a huge crowd of ‘Leninists’.