

Nikita Khrushchev at the National Press Club, September 16, 1959



Nikita Khrushchev with William H. Lawrence of the New York Times, 1959 NPC President, September 16, 1959. Photo by Benjamin E. Forte, News Associates, Inc. National Press Club Archives

Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev (1894-1971) spoke at a National Press Club luncheon the day after he arrived in Washington on the first visit by a Soviet leader to this country. The talk was televised nationally and broadcast over Voice of America radio to Russia, the first such broadcast in ten years that the Soviets did not jam. Press Club officials insisted that no screening of questions by the Soviets would occur. The sometimes combative question-and-answer session gave Khrushchev a foretaste of American reactions to his policies, ideology, and rhetoric that he was to hear voiced during the fifteen-day visit to Washington, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Des Moines, and Pittsburgh, prior to talks with President Dwight D. Eisenhower at Camp David.

Khrushchev's visit signaled fragile hopes by leaders of both countries for a thaw in Cold War relations. Following Josef Stalin's death in 1953, Khrushchev had emerged victorious from a Kremlin power struggle and become First Secretary of the Communist Party, then Premier in 1958. Formerly one of Stalin's most loyal underlings, Khrushchev in February 1956 denounced his mentor's "grave abuse of power" in a four-hour secret speech during a closed session of the 20th Party Congress. His charge that Stalin was responsible for "mass arrests and deportation of thousands and thousands of people, and executions without trial or normal investigation" precipitated a momentous shift within Soviet society as de-Stalinization efforts took hold. His policy of reform included ridding the party of old-line conservatives; closing concentration camps; decentralizing

industrial administration; fostering advances in science and technology; initiating new agriculture, housing, and education programs; allowing greater freedom of expression for artists and the intelligentsia; and toning down Cold War rhetoric. Whereas Stalin's insistence on the inevitability of a new world war helped initiate the Cold War, Khrushchev's doctrine of "peaceful coexistence" and "peaceful competition" with the West indicated an inclination to end it. Yet in the same year that he denounced Stalin's brutality, Khrushchev's forces crushed the Hungarian Revolution leaving more than 20,000 casualties.

Khrushchev's invitation to visit the U.S. came about through a misunderstanding. On November 27, 1958, he issued an ultimatum to the powers overseeing the western sector of the divided city of Berlin. He demanded that unless a peace treaty would be initiated within six months, the Soviet Union unilaterally would sign a treaty with East Germany that would give it control over access roads into Berlin and end Western occupation rights in the city. Historians have offered numerous conjectures to explain his motives. Persuasive accounts argue that he was trying to halt the installation of nuclear-capable weapons in West Germany and force the West to recognize East Germany's sovereign rights before West Germany grew powerful enough to take control of a unified Germany.

Reactions to the move varied. While some U.S. military leaders urged armed confrontation should Khrushchev carry out his threat, Eisenhower remained calm. British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan visited Khrushchev in February 1959, then told Eisenhower that the British "were not prepared to face obliteration for the sake of two million Berlin Germans, their former enemies."

Khrushchev revoked his deadline after a foreign ministers' conference in Geneva was planned. When Eisenhower saw no significant results coming from Geneva, he decided that to "break the logjam," he would invite Khrushchev, who desired a U.S. visit, to Washington and an extended tour of the U.S. on the condition that progress in the ministers' conference warranted a meeting and a Big Four summit. The invitation was conveyed to Khrushchev, however, without conditions. When Khrushchev accepted, Eisenhower reluctantly agreed despite his initial view that such a visit would serve no constructive purpose. Khrushchev in contrast looked at the invitation as a "breakthrough" achieved by pressuring the West.

The visit served to give the American public its first prolonged encounter with the Soviet premier. He was heckled by protesters, insulted by conservative businessmen, goaded by the mayor of Los Angeles, and belligerently challenged by labor leaders. Khrushchev responded in kind, often aggressively lashing out with colorful invective and threatening to cut the trip short. When asked at the National Press Club luncheon about the intervention in Hungary, Khrushchev testily replied that he had explained Soviet actions numerous times, but still "the question of Hungary has stuck in some people's throats as a dead rat. He feels that it is unpleasant and yet he cannot spit it out." Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge characterized the luncheon as a "disrespectful and immature performance" due to this and a few other such provocative questions on

Khrushchev's infamous supposed threat to the West, "We will bury you," and his complicity in Stalin's terror campaign. Yet as the trip continued, the public, seeing Khrushchev's earthy humanity and eagerness to meet them, grew cautiously supportive.

The culminating Camp David meeting produced only modest results. Following tense moments and tough exchanges, Khrushchev agreed, in Eisenhower's words, "not to force the Western powers out of Berlin," while Eisenhower assured the Soviet leader that the U.S. was "not trying to perpetuate the situation" there and agreed to a future Big Four summit to discuss Berlin, disarmament, and other issues. Over national television, Khrushchev wished his American "friends" "Goot-lock," then returned to Moscow, where he reported that Eisenhower "sincerely wishes to see the end of the Cold War." After an American U-2 spy plane was shot down over Russia in May 1960 as the Big Four summit was about to commence, the meetings were abandoned and the chance for *détente* with the West was lost.

-- Alan Gevinson, *Special Assistant to the Chief,*
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