

XIII

THE KENNEDY - KHRUSHCHEV CORRESPONDENCE

Friday, September 29, 1961, was a lazy fall day in Newport, Rhode Island. The President and his family were there for a brief vacation at the Narragansett Bay-front home of Mrs. Kennedy's mother and stepfather, Mr. and Mrs. Hugh D. Auchincloss.

I held a press briefing that morning at the Newport Naval Station. The big story of the day was Richard Nixon's decision to run for governor of California against incumbent Pat Brown—a miscalculation that was to wipe him out in 1964 as a presidential contender. The correspondents were looking for a White House angle.

"Does the President have any reaction to Mr. Nixon's announcement?"

"He does not," I replied.

"As a Californian, do you have a reaction?"

"No."

"Not even as a patriotic American?"

"No."

(The question was later put to the President directly at a press conference in Washington. What advice would he have given Nixon? "I would have been happy to tell him my opinion," JFK answered, "but he never asked me for it." Nixon, of course, wasn't a man to accept advice, much less solicit it. If he had, the President would have told him he was out of his mind. "He's only running to stay alive politically," he said to me after first learning of Nixon's decision. "He hasn't a chance of winning, but even if he did the risks are too great for the advantages he might win.")

After the briefing, I took off for an afternoon round of golf. When I got back to my quarters at the naval station, I had a call waiting from

Georgi Bolshakov in New York City. He said it was urgent that he see me immediately and he was willing to charter a plane and fly up that evening.

I told him to hold off. I would call him back within an hour. We had twenty or thirty correspondents with us at Newport and I knew that a sudden appearance by the Russian editor might cause a minor sensation on a slow news day. I put in calls to the President and to Dean Rusk, who was conferring with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrey Gromyko on Laos and Berlin that afternoon in New York. Their best guess was that Bolshakov had a Soviet response to JFK's memorandum on the Laotian crisis that I had read to him and Kharlamov just four days earlier. But they agreed with me that he should not be seen in Newport. I got back to him in New York. He was most unhappy when I told him the earliest we could meet would be at three-thirty the following afternoon at the Carlyle Hotel in Manhattan.

"If you knew the importance of what I have," he said, "you wouldn't keep me waiting that long."

Bolshakov had a flair for the conspiratorial—and why not? Editing the magazine *USSR* and serving as an interpreter for visiting Russian officials were but two of his chores in Washington. He was also, according to the CIA, a top agent for the KGB, the Soviet international spy network.

I flew to New York the next day and met Secretary Rusk who was winding up his conference with Gromyko. We met at Rusk's suite at the Waldorf-Astoria. He was most eager to find out what Bolshakov had up his sleeve. If it was the Kremlin's answer on Laos, why all the mystery? Gromyko could have given that to him at their meeting that day. I left for the Carlyle after promising to call Rusk immediately after my session with the Russian spy. Bolshakov was at my door at exactly three-thirty. He had two newspapers under his arm. Hidden in the fold of one of them was a thick manila envelope. He took his time opening it.

"Here," he said. "You may read this. Then it is for the eyes of the President only."

It was a twenty-six-page personal letter from Nikita S. Khrushchev to John F. Kennedy—the beginning of a secret correspondence that has no known parallel in the history of modern diplomacy. (The letters are now in the archives of the Kennedy Library. Their publication at a future time would depend on many factors—the state of U.S.-Soviet relations, possible injury to statesmen who may still be alive, and the risk that their publication might foreclose such personal and confidential exchanges between heads of state in the future.)

Khrushchev's first letter was a direct response on Laos but sections of it also dealt with the highly volatile situation in Berlin. Khrushchev was now ready to back off from the unconciliatory positions he had taken at Vienna. He saw no reason why negotiations in good faith could not pro-

duce settlements in both Southeast Asia and Germany. He was willing, if JFK was, to take another look at positions that had been frozen hard through fifteen years of cold war.

It was the most hopeful overture from Khrushchev since the release of the RB-47 pilots eight months earlier. I read the letter twice while Bolshakov sat smugly on the edge of the bed savoring my surprise. This first of many personal letters the Russian Premier was to write the American President was remarkable not only for its contents but for its candor. In contrast to the sterile gobbledegook that passes for high-level diplomatic correspondence, Khrushchev wrote with almost peasant simplicity and directness. He said, in effect, that you and I, Mr. President, are the leaders of two nations that are on a collision course. But because we are reasonable men, we agree that war between us is unthinkable. We have no choice but to put our heads together and find ways to live in peace.

Bolshakov had spent an entire night translating the letter from the Russian. But he also gave me the original in Russian to permit a comparison by our own translators. I was to deliver the letter to the President personally and to regard it as highly confidential. The only Russians in the United States who knew of it, Bolshakov said, were himself and Gromyko. Not even the Soviet ambassador to the United States, Mikhail Menshikov, had been told. The only Americans who knew were the President, the Secretary of State, and myself.

But Bolshakov had still another surprise for me. My recommendation to Mikhail Kharlamov that an important Soviet editor interview President Kennedy had been brought to the attention of Premier Khrushchev. He was all for it. Either Aleksey Adzhubei or Pavel Sutukov of *Pravda* would fly over for that purpose within the next two months.

This was great news. But I told Bolshakov we would expect the interview to run in full in the Soviet Union, and after agreement on our part that the Russian translation was accurate. He saw no difficulties.

Two minutes after Bolshakov was out the door, I had the President on the line at Newport. "Get that letter over to Dean Rusk as quickly as possible," he said, "then bring it up here to me."

The Secretary of State was not at the Waldorf-Astoria but would be back at seven-thirty. I was waiting for him. He also read the letter twice but did not want to give JFK a snap reaction. It was agreed that he would take the letter to Washington that night and have a State Department messenger return it to me at seven-thirty the next morning at the Northeast Airlines terminal at La Guardia, where I would be waiting for a plane to Providence. I gave it to the President two hours later on his return to the Auchincloss' from church. Immediately after reading it, JFK spoke to Rusk in Washington. They agreed that I should contact Bolshakov and inform him that the President would respond promptly, probably within