Once more on the brink: Sixty years since the Cuban Missile Crisis

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This past weekend marked a critical anniversary. On October 22, 1962, sixty years ago, US President John F. Kennedy delivered a nationwide televised address announcing that the Soviet Union had deployed nuclear missiles in Cuba, just 90 miles from the Florida Keys.

During the week that followed, the world stood on the brink of nuclear war. Much has been written about the events of October 22-28, 1962, uncovering facts that reveal just how close the world came to a civilization-ending catastrophe.

Both Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev were keenly aware, as Robert Kennedy observed, that while the leaders "had initiated the course of events," they "no longer had control over them."

On October 27, just five days after Kennedy's speech, US Navy destroyers began dropping depth charges on the Soviet submarine B-59 near Cuba with the aim of forcing it to surface. Unbeknownst to the American warships, B-59 was armed with a nuclear torpedo. As one officer on the submarine described it:

> They surrounded us and started to tighten the circle, practicing attacks and dropping depth charges. They exploded right next to the hull. It felt like you were sitting in a metal barrel, which somebody is constantly blasting with a sledgehammer.

The captain of the boat, Valentin Grigoryevich Savitsky, ordered the ship's nuclear torpedo to be armed. "We're going to blast them now! We will die, but we will sink them all—we will not disgrace our Navy," Savitsky yelled.

The firing of the nuclear torpedo was only averted by chance, however, because the chief of staff of the brigade, Vasili Arkhipov, was aboard the submarine and countermanded the order. Daniel Ellsberg observed in *The Doomsday Machine*:

> Had Arkhipov been stationed on one of the other submarines, there is every reason to believe that the carrier USS Randolph and several, perhaps all, of its accompanying destroyers would, within minutes of the agreement by Savitsky and [his second in command], have been destroyed by a nuclear explosion…
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> The clear implication on the cause of the nuclear destruction of this antisubmarine hunter-killer group would have been a medium-range missile from Cuba whose launch had not been detected. That is the event that President Kennedy had announced on October 22 would lead to a full-scale nuclear attack on the Soviet Union.

The United States and the Soviet Union narrowly averted catastrophe 60 years ago. That outcome was attributable both to the horrific memory of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which had taken place just 15 years before, and the fact that both Khrushchev and Kennedy had no doubt that nuclear war threatened the destruction of human civilization.

While the world was nearly brought to the brink 60 years ago, the actions of Kennedy and Khrushchev look positively restrained when seen in the light of the present war.

Putin, having massively miscalculated the degree of

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NATO's commitment to war in launching the invasion, has been pushed into a corner, threatening to use nuclear weapons to prevent a Russian defeat.

The Ukrainian government, staffed with far-right forces and whose actions, if the US press is to be believed, are not fully under the control of its American paymasters, could at any moment launch a provocation on an even greater scale than the August 20 murder of Daria Dugina outside Moscow.

And the NATO powers, beset by economic, social and political crises to which they have no solution, are rapidly escalating their involvement in the conflict.

Powerful forces within the US political establishment are pushing for a direct NATO intervention and are looking for some pretext, whether real or concocted, to intervene. In an interview with the French newspaper *L'expresse*, former CIA director David Petraeus was asked, "What is the red line beyond which NATO must become more involved in the conflict?"

To this Petraeus replied, "I think it is possible that Russia could take an action in Ukraine that would be so shocking and so horrific that the United States and other countries might react … as a multinational force."

It was unclear what action Petraeus was referring to, but a hint was provided by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who said that any attack by Russia on the Ukrainian leadership should prompt an attack on Russia by the US and NATO.

"Look, if you hit Bankova [the street in Kyiv where the presidential office is located] there will be a strike on where you are," Zelensky said. "If you do this, then in a second, regardless of the result of your attack, there will be a strike on the decision-making center of your state."

Earlier this month, Zelensky called for NATO to carry out preemptive strikes on Russia to prevent the "possibility of Russia using nuclear weapons."

On Friday, CBS documented the deployment of the US Army's 101st Airborne division to the border of Ukraine, concluding, "If the fighting escalates or there's any attack on NATO, they're fully prepared to cross the border into Ukraine."

Even in a scenario where NATO does not dramatically increase its involvement in the war, this winter threatens cold, hunger and starvation not only for the direct combatants in the war, but for the working classes of the whole world confronting surging food and fuel prices.

But more and more, the intervention by the working class will become the decisive factor in the crisis. In an article headlined, "As Inflation Stalks Europe, Leaders Shudder," the *New York Time*s warned, "The downfall of Britain's prime minister served as a warning to all of the political peril that awaits those who fail to address the erosion of living standards, no matter the cause."

It warned that "strikes and protests over the rising cost of living proliferate, ushering in a period of social and labor unrest not seen since at least the 1970s."

The politicians in Washington, and the oligarchs in Moscow have shown themselves completely uninterested in averting the looming disaster. To a pandemic that has already killed 20 million people, they have added a war that raises the danger of a nuclear conflagration. Whatever the immediate outcome of the present war, no way out of the social catastrophe created by the crisis of capitalism is possible barring the intervention by the working class.

In a meeting held on October 9, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality called for the development of a mass movement of workers and youth against war. Around the world, there is a growing intersection of the eruption of class struggle by the working class and the perspective of socialism; this powerful movement provides the social force for the development of a global movement against war.

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