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'Russians love their children too': American women's letters to Nikita Khrushchev and Nina Khrushcheva during the Cuban Missile Crisis

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses hundreds of letters that US women wrote to Nikita Khrushchev and Nina Khrushcheva during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The sense of imminent nuclear threat prompted many women to engage with Cold War politics and directly address world leaders. Drawing on their traditional gender roles as mothers and wives, letter-writers were emboldened to confront political leaders about matters of war and peace, advocate for cross-border dialogue and stress Americans' and Soviets' shared humanity. Through the prism of letters, the article explores the impact of the Cuban Missile Crisis on US society, the importance of letter-writing in female political activity and women's understanding of the Cold War.

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Introduction

On 2 October 1960, the New York City Police department responded to a potential bomb threat against Nikita Khrushchev at the Soviet headquarters in the United Nations. The source of commotion was a gift-wrapped package, addressed to the Soviet premier, that ostensibly contained an apple pie. The police deemed the package too heavy for a pie, and upon further examination, determined that it contained metal and wires. When the bomb squad opened the package, they discovered that along with the promised apple pie, it also contained a locket inscribed with the Ten Commandments and toy rockets holding brief messages of peace and disarmament. It didn't take long before the authorities and the press traced the sender - Virginia McCleary - a housewife from Lulling, Texas. McCleary explained that the package to Khrushchev was part of her letter-writing campaign that urged world leaders to promote peace. She believed that gifting Khrushchev with an apple pie 'would do some good' and invited him to join her in a debate on 'the merits of Communism versus the American system

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of government'. Having determined that McCleary's package was not a bomb, the police forwarded it to Nikita Khrushchev.¹

Virginia McCleary's efforts to appeal to Khrushchev's conscience did not end there. On 25 October 1962, while the world was holding its breath during the Cuban Missile Crisis, she again sent him a letter. Invoking her authority as a mother, and appealing to Khrushchev's heart, she asked him 'to help make it possible that my voice, and the voices of other mothers, might be heard, BEFORE men ask us to sacrifice our loved ones in another war, over Cuba, Berlin, or anywhere else'.²

McCleary's letters to Khrushchev were infused with anxiety about the state of the world and an urgent sense of her personal responsibility to do something about it. On both occasions, her efforts to appeal to Khrushchev depended on expressions of intimacy and traditional gender roles. Baking an apple pie was emblematic of homemaking, and specifically associated with US domesticity. Letter-writing had been an important staple of women's political activity since the early republic. In combining these two currents of femininity, McCleary tried to engage the Soviet premier by means of establishing intimacy – by cooking for him and writing him a letter – as if he were a friend and not the leader of a hostile superpower. Both the pie incident and the later letter reveal McCleary's beliefs about what courses of action were available to a woman and a mother who was deeply distressed to find the world on a brink of nuclear war, and who wanted to do something about it.

US citizens first learned about the events in Cuba from President John Kennedy's address to the nation, which was broadcast on radio and television on 22 October 1962.³ Fear and nuclear anxiety, as well as concerns about a confrontation between the world superpowers, peaked after the speech and remained high for several weeks.⁴ Kennedy's address prompted many in the US to put pen to paper and write to Nikita Khrushchev. Hundreds of letters arrived in Moscow, where they were labelled and subsequently filed in state archives. Many letters were dated 22 October, or shortly after, and their authors explicitly stated that they had been moved to write by the president's speech. Letters written on 22 October offer insights into Americans' immediate reactions to the events in Cuba. Written before their authors had time to discuss the news with friends and neighbours or drown in expert commentary on mass media, these letters convey the authors' raw emotional responses to the unfolding crisis: anger and fear, as well as hope that their letter would have the power to avert a nuclear war. The letters to Khrushchev continued through the following week. On 29 October, the *New York Times* broke the news of Khrushchev's own letter to Kennedy, which offered to withdraw the missiles from Cuba in exchange for the removal of US naval bases from Turkey.⁵ This news

¹'Texas Pie Sets Off Khrushchev Bomb Scare', *The Honolulu Advertiser*, 2 October 1960, 1, 4; 'Bomb Sent to Khrushchev is Nothing but Pie', *The Buffalo News*, 1 October 1960, 1; Murray Illson, 'Pie for Khrushchev Halts Traffic Here: Pie for Khrushchev Intercepted, Bomb Squad Finds It Is', *New York Times*, 2 October 1960, 1.

²Virginia McCleary, Houston, Texas, 25 October 1962, F. R5446, Op. 96, D. 1307, L. 23-5, Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (State Archive of the Russian Federation) (GARF), Moscow, Russian Federation.

³John F. Kennedy, 'Radio and Television Address to the American People on the Soviet Arms Build-up in Cuba', 22 October 1962, White House Audio Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/address-during-the-cuban-missile-crisis#:~:text=In%20his%20speech%20the%20President,hope%2C%20around%20the%20world.%E2%80%9D>, accessed 1 January 2024.

⁴Tom W. Smith, 'Trends: The Cuban Missile Crisis and U.S. Public Opinion', *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (Summer 2003), 265-93. see esp. 266-68.

⁵Seymour Topping, 'Khrushchev Letter Offers Deal on Removal of Bases', *New York Times*, 28 October 1962.

triggered another wave of US citizens' letters to Khrushchev, mainly thanking him for his efforts to resolve the conflict peacefully. The stream of letters continued through November and December, although their topics gradually shifted from a focus on the Cuban crisis to other pressing international issues, such as the arms race or the nuclear test ban.

This article analyses hundreds of previously unexamined letters that US women wrote to Nikita Khrushchev and his wife, Nina Khrushcheva, during the Cuban Missile Crisis and immediately thereafter. Although both women and men wrote to Nikita Khrushchev, women's letters stand out due to their large numbers and their unique content. We had access to 217 letters explicitly addressing the Cuban crisis. Of these, 44% were authored by women; 22% by men; 5% by couples and mixed groups; and 17% by children.⁶ Very few male correspondents identified themselves as fathers. Women, on the other hand, frequently spoke about motherhood, their children, or their desire to have children in the future. Unlike male correspondents, female letter-writers explicitly stated that they were motivated to write to Khrushchev by their love for their children and the importance they attached to family. It was only women's letters that referred to Nikita and Nina Khrushchev and other Soviet people as fellow parents; and only women said they hoped that American and Soviet people had the same dreams and the same anxieties for their children's futures. Only women sent letters to Nina Khrushcheva.

Our analysis of women's letters to Nikita Khrushchev and Nina Khrushcheva makes several historiographical contributions. First, it fills a lacuna in the history of the impact of the Cuban Missile Crisis on US society. A great deal of scholarship has been dedicated to decision-making, intelligence and diplomacy before, during and after October 1962.⁷ The impact of the Cuban crisis on people throughout the US, who experienced it in their homes, far away from the corridors of power, is much less explored. Even the few available studies of Americans' responses to the Cuban Missile Crisis, rarely examine women in a systematic fashion.⁸ Yet, unlike previous instances of superpower confrontation, the Cuban crisis drew in millions of Americans, who followed its contours through Kennedy's speeches, newspaper pages, radio broadcasts and television news. Understanding women's responses to United States' first close brush with nuclear war is important given the special place they occupied in the Cold War imagination. Official and popular rhetoric positioned the family home as an island of

⁶We used the author's self-identification to determine what demographic group they belonged to. Female correspondents explicitly self-identified as women or as mothers, wives, sisters and grandmothers. Children always mentioned their age or self-identified as schoolchildren. Heterosexual couples jointly authoring a letter explicitly declared so and signed both names, or 'Mr' and 'Mrs'. Male authors were identified by their first names and by the prefix Mr. It was impossible to establish the gender of the author in 26 letters – 12% of the overall sample.

⁷For a very small sample of an extensive literature, see: Sheldon M. Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still: Inside the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis* (Stanford University Press, 2005); Raymond Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis: Revised to Include New Revelations from Soviet & Cuban Sources* (Brookings Institution Press, 2011); Sergo Mikoyan, *The Soviet Cuban Missile Crisis: Castro, Mikoyan, Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Missiles of November* (Stanford University Press, 2012); Jonathan Colman, *The Cuban Missile Crisis: Origins, Course and Aftermath* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016); Michelle Getchell, *The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Cold War: A Short History with Documents* (Hackett Publishing, 2018); Serhii Plokhly, *Nuclear Folly: A New History of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Penguin Books, 2021); Max Hastings, *Abbyss: The Cuban Missile Crisis 1962* (William Collins, 2022).

⁸There are two excellent studies dedicated to popular reactions to the Cuban Missile Crisis: Alice L. George, *Awaiting Armageddon: How Americans Faced the Cuban Missile Crisis* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004) and Leonardo Campus, 'Missiles have no colour: African Americans' reactions to the Cuban Missile Crisis', *Cold War History* (2014) 15, no. 1, 49-72. Both George and Campus significantly expanded our understanding of how the events in Cuba reverberated through the lives of people in the US. Campus's contribution focuses on African Americans. Neither of these impressive studies explores women's responses to the crisis in a systematic fashion.

safety in the age of nuclear threat. Women, especially mothers, figured as the custodians of domesticity and familial values, and as a critical buffer against the dual menace of nuclear war and communist subversion.⁹ In October 1962, nuclear anxieties that had been harboured for years materialised into an actual threat, with Soviet missiles pointed at US homes. Our work shows that during the Cuban crisis, the fear of nuclear war was so palpable that it compelled many women to directly appeal to the leader of the rival superpower and engage in Cold War politics for the first time in their lives.

Second, our work demonstrates that the act of letter-writing was an important form of female participation in Cold War politics, often practiced by women with no prior experience of political activity. The extent and the nature of women's participation in Cold War politics varied a great deal and was shaped by racial and class backgrounds, geographical regions and political alignments.¹⁰ The majority of letters examined here capture the voices of 'ordinary' women who did not previously belong to political parties or groups, did not participate in domestic or international peace activism, and were not involved in any form of citizen diplomacy. Based on what the letter-writers said about themselves, we assume that most of them were white women of middle- and lower-middle class backgrounds. None of the authors mentioned their race or colour. Most correspondents described themselves as housewives. The next most frequently mentioned occupational categories were teachers and students. Many letter-writers explained that they had taken little interest in foreign relations before the events in Cuba and that writing a letter to Nikita Khrushchev was their first foray into political action.

Letter-writers argued that their responsibilities as mothers and wives entitled women to power and influence in international politics. Some correspondents purposefully withheld their name and revealed nothing about their identity in order to impress upon Khrushchev that they were speaking on behalf of all women. At the same time, many women addressed him in personal and intimate terms, using the language of friendship and family, and often referred to him as a friend, a father and a grandfather, rather than the leader of an enemy nation.

Letter-writing mirrored the broader dynamics of women's engagement with Cold War politics.¹¹ The emergence of nuclear weapons drew many women into political activism

⁹On nuclear fear in US society and Cold War domesticity, see the classic Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988). Danielle Moon, *Daily Life of Women during the Civil Rights Era* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011), 115-7; Dayo F. Gore, 'Gender, Civil Rights, and the US Global Cold War', in Ellen Hartigan-O'Connor and Lisa G. Materson (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of American Women's and Gender History* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 621.

¹⁰Moon, *Daily Life of Women*, 111-2, 127-57; Michelle Nickerson, 'Women, Gender, and Conservatism in Twentieth-Century America', in Ellen Hartigan-O'Connor and Lisa G. Materson (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of American Women's and Gender History* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 536-7; Jacqueline Castledine, 'Cold War History as Women's History', in *U.S. Women's History: Untangling the Threads of Sisterhood*, edited by Jacqueline Castledine, Leslie Brown, and Anne Valk (Rutgers University Press, 2017), 83-97; Mary Brennan, *Wives, Mothers & the Red Menace* (University Press of Colorado, 2011); Kristen Ghodsee, *Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War* (Duke University Press, 2018), 76-96; Dayo F. Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York University Press, 2011), 46-129; Erin M. Kempker, *Big Sister: Feminism, Conservatism, and Conspiracy in the Heartland*. (University of Illinois Press, 2018), 15-37; Amy Swerdlow, 'Ladies' Day at the Capitol: Women Strike for Peace versus HUAC', *Feminist Studies* 8, no. 3 (Autumn 1982), 493-520; Jacqueline Castledine, *Cold War Progressives: Women's Interracial Organizing for Peace and Freedom* (University of Illinois Press, 2012).

¹¹In the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, the discussion of women's involvement in politics was intertwined with Cold War politics and became a contentious issue, which divided political observers, women's literature and popular press. Some commentators praised and encouraged women's political activity because they believed that it distinguished the democratic United States from the totalitarian Soviet Union. Others disagreed and considered all women's activism undesirable, suspicious and suggestive of Bolshevism. See: Joanne Meyerowitz, 'Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958', *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 4 (March 1993), 1467-69; Ghodsee, *Second World, Second Sex*, 76-96; Gore, 'Gender, Civil Rights, and the US Global Cold War'.

for the first time in their lives, especially to initiatives focused on promoting peace and preventing nuclear war. Framed in gendered terms by women, activists, politicians and popular culture, peace advocacy was perceived as an inherently feminine political concern – a form of political activity for which women were especially well-suited in their capacity as mothers, wives and the keepers of family homes.¹² Some organisations and activists considered the struggle for peace a duty that united women across ideological and national boundaries and emphasised the importance of fostering connections and mutual understanding across borders.¹³ Our analysis contributes to scholarship on women, gender and peace, and shows that the association between womanhood, motherhood, peace-making and letter-writing extended beyond activist circles. Even women who did not participate in peace organisations embraced the idea that preventing war was a responsibility that united all mothers and translated it into political action by writing a letter to Nikita Khrushchev or Nina Khrushcheva.

Finally, Cuban crisis letters offer interesting and rare insights into the ways that these women perceived the Cold War, and especially the Soviet Union. As they discussed the events in the Caribbean, many women were moved to put forward their ideas as to what prompted the conflict in the first place; to explore the political culture of the USSR versus the US; and to speculate about the Soviet people – their natures, their feelings, their motivations and their lives. Letter-writers' considerations of these questions were shaped by the ongoing crisis as well as years of prior accumulated experiences, knowledge and understanding. Written at a time when fears of nuclear war were at their peak, the letters show a complex and multifaceted understanding of the Soviet Union. On the one hand, much of what letter-writers believed about the Soviets aligned closely with official Cold War rhetoric and the stereotypes that dominated their representations in US popular culture. On the other hand, it was a nuanced image of the Cold War adversary that combined criticism with compassion, and where fears of a hostile foreign power coexisted with unwavering hopes in Americans' and Soviets' shared humanity.

Women's letters to Nikita Khrushchev and Nina Khrushcheva were steeped in traditional understanding of gender roles. Letter-writers were profoundly shaped by a Cold War culture that celebrated domesticity and considered letter-writing and peace-making as forms of politics uniquely suitable for wives and mothers. The legacy of these letters – the emphasis on friendship and intimacy in foreign relations and unwavering hopes in American's and Soviet shared humanity – lasted long after 1962. Over the next thirty years, these ideas would continue to inspire and animate those who hoped to establish dialogue and promote mutual understanding between the two nuclear superpowers.

¹²Robbie Lieberman, *The Strangest Dream: Communism, Anticommunism, and the U.S. Peace Movement, 1945-1963* (Syracuse University Press, 2000), 104. Petra Goedde, *The Politics of Peace: A Global Cold War History* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 128-61; Meyerowitz, 'Beyond the Feminine Mystique', 1467-9; K. A. Cuordileone, "'Politics in an Age of Anxiety': Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949-1960", *The Journal of American History* 87, no. 2 (September 2000), 515-45, Gore, 'Gender, Civil Rights, and the US Global Cold War', 625; Brennan, *Wives, Mothers, and the Red Menace*, 31-4.

¹³Goedde, *The Politics of Peace*, 128-61. For example, Women Strike for Peace (WSP) organised letter-writing campaigns to John Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev, as well as to Jaqueline Kennedy and Nina Khrushcheva, underscoring the importance of US and Soviet mothers talking directly to one another. See: Goedde, *The Politics of Peace*, 229.

Letter-writing and women's political activism

Before moving on to discuss the letters, we want to establish letter-writing as an important form of political activism often practiced by women. Throughout US history, letter-writing has performed a broad array of social functions, many of which were assigned on a gendered basis and associated specifically with women or men. For instance, men were usually in charge of business correspondence, while women's letter-writing focused on household responsibilities and sustaining familial and social ties. Women's investment in maintaining familial connections through letter-writing rose in tandem with the growing levels of literacy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹⁴ As literacy rates increased, letter-writing came to play a central role in women's political activism, mainly among white women of the middle- and upper-middle classes. The ideology of separate spheres, which emphasised women's domestic roles as wives, mothers and sisters, while positioning them as moral custodians of the nation, also significantly influenced women's political letter-writing.

Given their limited access to other avenues of political participation, letter-writing became a vital form of women's political activity. Many women developed and articulated their political beliefs through the exchange of letters with fellow female correspondents (whom they had never met in person). Intimate forms of address, central to women's social and familial correspondence, infused epistolary political activism and empowered correspondents to seek ideas or advice from women outside of their direct social circles, and to establish intimate bonds of friendships through letters. In their political correspondence women often addressed each other as sisters united in a shared goal.¹⁵ Letters helped maintain contacts with fellow campaigners, shape political views and coordinate action. In addition, letters often became a means to apply pressure on political candidates, elected representatives and officials. Thus, letter-writing emerged as both a hub for the development of women's politics and a mechanism for their implementation. It is not a coincidence that women's participation and letter-writing played a central role in both the abolitionist and the woman's suffrage movements.¹⁶

The US Civil War gave an additional boost to both general literacy and women's epistolary responsibilities. To bridge the gaps created by frontlines and political divisions, more and more in the US turned to letters. Women, particularly mothers and wives, were seen as responsible for writing to the fighting men and using letters to preserve morale and family ties.¹⁷ Political letter-writing further flourished in the 20th century, spurred by the continuous spread of education and the advent of radio. It was radio hosts who first called on their listeners to write letters to the studio and to politicians, a practice that was subsequently encouraged by politicians themselves because it offered a means to assess public attitudes to legislation and policies. Letter-writing thus became an important and popular form of engagement

¹⁴Konstantin Dierks, *In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 238-49.

¹⁵Mary T. Freeman, 'The Politics of Correspondence: Letter Writing in the Campaign Against Slavery in the United States', PhD diss., Columbia University, 2018, 170-3. Columbia Academic Commons <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/D8281R37>.

¹⁶Freeman, 'The Politics of Correspondence', 170-3.

¹⁷Christopher Hager, *I Remain Yours: Common Lives in Civil War Letters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 15, 255-7.

and participation in local and national politics.¹⁸ President Franklin Roosevelt, and his wife Eleanor, were notable proponents of political letter-writing. Both had symbolically entered the intimate spaces of US homes – the former with his ‘fireside chats’ on the radio and the latter with highly popular newspaper columns addressing women. Both invited audiences to get in touch, received unprecedented amounts of citizens’ correspondence and made an effort to answer many of the letters.¹⁹

During the Second World War, letter-writing remained central to the perception of women’s domestic and social responsibilities. Maintaining communication between soldiers and their families was considered essential for the morale of the troops. The US government actively supported private correspondence between US soldiers and their families, implementing technologies that enabled the transmission of letters without disrupting military communications. Letter-writing to soldiers on the front lines became one of the ways in which women were expected to contribute to the war effort. US media, wartime propaganda and films reminded women that ‘writing is fighting too’. Women wrote hundreds of letters, including to soldiers they had never met; organised letter-writing campaigns among schoolchildren, churchgoers and businesses; and started ‘letters to soldier’ columns in their local newspapers. Women even wrote letters to General MacArthur, where they talked about helping the war effort and praying for him and all US soldiers. Wartime letter-writing campaigns emphasised traditional gender roles, positioning women as nurturing and kind figures whose letters would bring the essence of home to the front and remind men what they were fighting for. In all, letter-writing was recognised as a crucial contribution to the war effort, uniquely suited to women.²⁰ To be sure, this particular contribution was regarded as a ‘soft’ effort; a complement to male authority and military structure.

Given the historical importance of letters in US politics, and especially in women’s private, public and political lives, the epistolary response to the Cuban Missile Crisis is not surprising. In many ways, women’s letters to Nikita Khrushchev and Nina Khrushcheva followed the established traditions of female epistolary activism and ‘soft’ involvement in world affairs. Their letters foregrounded traditional gender roles and often drew on a language of intimacy usually associated with, and central to, women’s political correspondence. At the same time, this soft, and ostensibly unthreatening form of engagement used familial language and emotions to advance a different view of world politics, one that would be driven and shaped by women’s lived experiences and wisdom.

Give peace a chance

Sitting down to write to the leader of a powerful adversary nation whose missiles were pointing at US homes, most women began by introducing themselves. These introductions rarely mentioned the authors’ names, occupations, or where they lived (these came later, or at the end of the letter). Instead, they began by stating that they were reaching out

¹⁸Leila Sussmann, ‘Mass Political Letter Writing in America: The Growth of an Institution’, *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (1959), 203–12.

¹⁹Cathy D. Knepper, *Dear Mrs. Roosevelt: Letters to Eleanor Roosevelt Through Depression and War* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2004), xiv–xxiv.

²⁰Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, ‘“Writing Is Fighting, Too”: The World War II Correspondence of Southern Women’, *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (1992), 436–58.

to Khrushchev in their capacity as mothers, sisters and wives. Many letters began with a disclaimer, where the correspondent described herself as 'a humble woman', 'a mother', 'a mere housewife', and assured Khrushchev that she did not know much about 'big politics'. Letter-writers maintained that because of their position as custodians of future generations, women had a responsibility to address the leaders of a world facing a nuclear war and try to prevent it. 'Nothing must crush our magnificent planet, not even the dominant masculine urge to follow through their plan even at the cost of destroying a world', wrote a woman from Los Angeles. 'As we give birth, so may we save our countries, all lands & all peoples from the holocaust of war and extermination'.²¹

Many of the letter-writers foregrounded traditional feminine roles in styling their messages. They explained that their experiences at home, on the playground, or in school (many were teachers) equipped them to propose solutions to the conflict, which they then put forward in their letters. Correspondents addressed Khrushchev as mothers and educators might, by imploring, cajoling, encouraging, or instructing him to do the right thing to prevent nuclear holocaust. Several letters spoke to Khrushchev in didactic language as if he were a recalcitrant child and proposed playground strategies for resolving the Cuban crisis. 'I don't have an earth-shaking solution to the problems of our world but I do have a practical suggestion. Why doesn't everybody get together, abandon formalities, and have an old-fashioned discussion of disarmament? Neither side wants war, I am sure of that', wrote a correspondent from Talladega, Alabama.²² In proposing ways out of the conflict, letter-writers presented solutions borrowed implicitly or explicitly from the nursery or the classroom and that stemmed from their lived experience. In the aftermath of the Cuban crisis, women wrote to praise Khrushchev for withdrawing the missiles and defusing the conflict, often using the same terms one would use to praise a child's good behaviour. 'It is not always the one who is conquered that leave [sic] the scene of the battle. Sometimes it is the winner because he is so intelligent that he realizes the troubles at hand and decides to put an end to the battle'.²³ The emphasis correspondents placed on 'good' or 'bad' behaviour, censure and praise, echoed the popular parenting books of the time.

Several correspondents wielded their role as educators or maternal leaders to give a wayward Khrushchev a lesson in manliness, teach him how to 'behave like a man', and to resolve conflicts in a 'manly' way.

As you know, a small boy needs a lot of toys, needs to show off all his tricks and feats of skill to try to prove he is big and important. On the other hand, the greatest man and most sought after and most revered is the man who gives the most and in so doing, people give him all in return. If you, of your own will broke [sic.] down the iron curtain, gave the conquered peoples their freedom, joining the Common Market of Europe as a partner and cooperating in the UN for the good of the world, you would prove yourself the greatest man in the nuclear age creating prosperity and peace, instead of causing destruction. Do not be afraid of this. Kindness is the strongest force in the world to change enemies into friends.²⁴

Along with recommending specific policies, the author wanted to impress upon Khrushchev that generosity and kindness were the true markers of manhood, and she

²¹Ruth Colborn Greenbine, Los Angeles, California, 23 October 1962, F. F5446, Op. 96, D. 1306, L. 15-6, GARF.

²²Martha Hanes Smith, Talladega Alabama, 26 October 1962, F. R5446, Op. 96, D. 1307, L. 22, GARF.

²³Mrs. Joseph A. Hartman, New York, New York, 24 October 1962, F. R5446, Op. 96, D. 1306, L. 54, GARF.

²⁴25 October 1962, F. R5446, Op. 96, D. 1307, L. 61, GARF.

urged him to behave ‘like a man’. Like many other correspondents, the author of this letter claimed that she was entitled to give this advice because she was a mother and a wife. ‘There is no need to sign this Margaret, Gretchen, or Marie’, she concluded. ‘I speak for all the mothers and sisters and sweethearts in the world who love their men – including Mrs Khrushchev.’²⁵

Other letters, dispatched after the conclusion of the Cuban crisis, sought to reassure Khrushchev that his masculinity was intact

I would like to congratulate you on your taking what, to some of the unthinking people of America might be a step backward but in reality, is a great step forward for all of mankind. As Mr. Kennedy said it was an act of true statesmanship and took the courage of a truly big man to do such a thing. I feel that this letter is written on the behalf of the majority of our American women.²⁶

Surprisingly, advice on manliness and manly actions was especially widespread in letters addressed to Nina Khrushcheva. Here, US women appealed to Khrushcheva as a wife and a mother and urged her to prevail upon her husband to end the crisis. Correspondents invariably reminded Khrushcheva that as a wife, it was her duty to ensure that her husband acted in an honourable and sensible way, and when he failed to do so, to set him on the right course. Many letter-writers were moved to lecture Nina Khrushcheva on her responsibilities as a wife and world politics, and even tried to shame her into action.

When you visited Washington you and your husband were wined and dined; look how your husband returns hospitality. You then told the American people that you can’t control your husband as perhaps American women can their husbands. Do you mean to tell us, Mrs Khrushchev, that the only influence you have on your husband is to share the same bed with him and to have his children? Surely an educated woman like you must be able to influence your husband for good. Or do you mean to convince us that a communist has not conscience, no morality or integrity as your husband has shown throughout his premiership? [...] I would be ashamed of being a communist and the wife of such a boor as your peasant husband is, who goes into the United Nations and bangs with shoes on the table. [...] I want to close with these few words to you personally, if my opinion were not a lot better of you, I would not write you. If I have offended you in speaking frankly of your husband, you ought not to be angry at the truth as others see him.²⁷

The correspondent reminded Nina Khrushcheva that as a wife, she was judged for both her husband’s actions and his politics. A wife’s domain, according to this letter-writer, extended beyond homemaking and childbearing, but also included *educating* her husband on how to act honourably and morally, that is, to be kind in return for US hospitality, to behave politely at the UN and to change the Soviet political structure.

While some letter-writers lectured Nina Khrushcheva on world politics and berated her for neglecting her obligations as a wife, others tried to appeal to her better feminine self and evoked female camaraderie to remind her of the responsibilities that she shared with other wives and mothers around the world.

I address you because the women of Russia, I believe, feel the same about the Cuban matter as the women of America [...] It, therefore behooves [sic] all of us women to let the cement

²⁵25 October 1962, F. R5446, Op. 96, D. 1307, L. 61, GARF.

²⁶Mrs. Mary Ann Thompson, Charlotte, North Carolina, 29 October 1962, F. R5446, Op. 96, D. 1308, L. 50, GARF.

²⁷October 1962, F. R5446, Op. 96, D. 1307, L. 101-2, GARF.

of deep friendship between us harden until we can convince our men that nothing of consequence matters now except one thing: elimination of all warlike equipment + movement + a standing together upon . . . permanent peace. What matters capitalism or communism or socialism when survival + simple existence are in the picture? The majority of men are so constituted that they are blinded to the great issues [. . .] Their myopic vision so hinders them that in their blindness we all could perish!²⁸

This letter positioned women as uniquely able to address each other across national boundaries because of their special roles as mothers and wives. This privileged position was especially important now that men's folly had brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. Correspondents who appealed to Nina Khrushcheva as a mother and wife argued that women connecting across the Cold War divide and talking sense into their men was the only way to prevent nuclear holocaust. Whether angry or sisterly in tone, the letters to Nina Khrushcheva were premised on the idea that promoting peace was a principal feminine duty and a responsibility shared by all women across the world.

US women who reached out to Nikita and Nina Khrushchev upheld and embraced the traditional gender roles and the associated understanding of masculinity and femininity: 'level-headed' men engaged in business and politics, while 'emotional' women managed household affairs and maintained family and social ties.²⁹ However, during the Cuban Crisis it appeared that the world's future was threatened by angry, fear-driven men. Women were compelled to step out of their circumscribed area of action and used letter-writing to demand their voices be heard.

I wish to apologize to you for the actions of President Kennedy and a portion of our lawmakers! I just telegraphed Kennedy stating that Cuba is no threat to the United States and not worth risking a war over. It was folly to initiate a blockade on Cuba. We must be guided by reality and not fear and hysteria. Continue to work for disarmament under international agreement and an immediate discontinuation of atomic testing. Let our two great countries negotiate peacefully and work hand in hand. I have written President Kennedy repeatedly stating these same objectives. I am heart sick over the thought of another war – a war too horrible to realize the consequences. I want my young son to grow in a world free from strife [sic] and tension, something I have never known. Sincerely yours for the sake of humanity!³⁰

Thinking of her son's future, this correspondent appealed to Kennedy and Khrushchev, urging the leaders to remain calm and not give in to fear and hysteria. In this emotionally charged situation, the author invoked her role of wife and mother in an attempt to conciliate the enraged and agitated men. Female correspondents were cognisant that in writing to Khrushchev they stepped into the masculine domains of international relations and nuclear warfare. To reconcile their crossing of gender boundaries, letter-writers stressed that they had no other choice. They saw the world spiralling towards nuclear war because of men's recalcitrant behaviour and failure to avert the crisis.

In the process of writing a letter to the Khrushchevs, US women advanced a version of Cold War femininity where women must step in, demand greater agency in world affairs and directly engage with world leaders and international politics. Drawing power and

²⁸Ruth Colborn Q., Los Angeles, California, 23 October 1962, F. R5446, Op. 96, D. 1306, L. 15-6, GARF.

²⁹On gendered views of emotions in international politics see: Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker, 'Emotions, Discourse and Power in World Politics', *International Studies Review*, no. 19 (2017), 492; Neta C. Crawford, 'The Passion of World Politics: Propositions on Emotion and Emotional Relationships', *International Security*, no. 24(4) (2000), 117-8.

³⁰Ramona Nagel, Glencoe, Minnesota, 23 October 1962, F. F5446, Op. 96, D. 1306, L. 21, GARF.

authority from their traditional roles as mothers and wives, letter-writers argued that they were sensible and mature; that they could distinguish between important and mundane; and that they were expert at reconciling intransigent parties. Most importantly, women claimed that they understood best the consequences of war because they gave life.

Confronted with the prospect of nuclear destruction, women stepped outside the traditional domestic realm and became politically active for the first time in their lives. In letters to Khrushchev, women drew on their traditional roles as peacekeepers, conciliators and givers of life to demand a say in world politics. Using traditionally female forms of political action, they wielded their position as mothers and wives to ‘speak truth to power’ in international relations, offer alternative to policies designed by men, and advocate for peace, not just within their own community, but on the world stage. These demands were consistent with the tendency to consider peace advocacy as a feminine cause and the history of drawing on traditional gender roles to engage women in international politics at times of external threat.³¹

Sympathy for the devil

Establishing intimate, albeit one-sided, human contact with Nikita Khrushchev was a crucial aspect of the US women’s letters. The lion’s share of correspondents attempted to engage Nikita Khrushchev the person, not the leader, and speak to his heart. Creating a sense of intimacy took several forms. Many women told Khrushchev about their own children – their names and ages, their favourite things, and what they were like. Often, they attached photos or drawings of their children. Others confided their hopes and fears for their children’s futures to the premier. When discussing their children, women addressed Khrushchev using familiar and personal terms, as if he were a close friend: ‘I have sent you a Christmas card last year, it was entitled a ‘Child’s dream’ because I thought you would enjoy seeing it. I should enjoy meeting you in the future but doubt my ever getting to Russia. Please always feel free to visit us if you are ever here in USA’.³² Some women added the Khrushchev family to their annual Christmas cards roster, or invited them to come and visit, thus symbolically drawing the Khrushchevs into their intimate circle of family and friends.

Many correspondents appealed to Khrushchev’s identity as a father and a grandfather; stressed their shared mutual desire to see their children and grandchildren grow up in happiness and peace; and begged him to abort the operation in the Caribbean for the sake of US and Soviet children alike. ‘When I look at a picture of you and your grandson, little Nikita, it is a grandfather I see, not a politician, and it is to a grandfather’s heart that I address this letter’ – wrote Virginia McLeary in her second appeal to Khrushchev’s emotions.³³ Likewise, in their letters to his wife, correspondents sought to establish intimacy by stressing their common roles and responsibilities as wives and mothers.

³¹Robbie, *The Strangest Dream*, 104; Goedde, *The Politics of Peace*, 128-61; Brennan, *Wives, Mothers, and the Red Menace*, 6, 31-4.

³²Mrs. Joseph A. Hartman, New York, New York, 24 October 1962, F. R5446, Op. 96, D. 1306, L. 54, GARF.

³³Virginia McLeary, Houston, Texas, 25 October 1962, F. R5446, Op. 96, D. 1307, L. 23-5, GARF.

I have never met your husband. I did see you both on TV when you visited our country and that is my reason for writing you. You look like such a nice person that I'm sure you would have a good influence on your husband [...] Please tell your husband to just look after his people in Russia and there will be no trouble – I've come to the conclusion that it is up to the mothers of this world to prevent the next horrible war.³⁴

As these quotes demonstrate, the images of Khrushchev and his family – frequently circulated both by US press and Soviet propaganda – prompted female letter-writers to address Nikita and Nina Khrushchev on intimate terms.

Many correspondents mentioned that they had seen the Khrushchevs on television during their official tour of the US or came across photos of the Khrushchev family in the press. Correspondents explicitly referred to these images, as well as Khrushchev's straightforward and friendly demeanour, and stressed repeatedly that he 'seemed like a nice man', someone that they could talk with, or open their heart to. Many women wrote that seeing photos of the Khrushchev family made them realise that he was a dedicated family man, and that Nina was a doting mother and grandmother. The very opportunity to 'look into' the Khrushchev family through photographs, newsreel footage and personal testimonies created emotional bonds that some letter-writers hoped to make reciprocal by attaching photographs or hand-drawn sketches of their own families.

Correspondents intuitively understood that the 'humanisation' of the Khrushchevs occurred through visual images. Writing to advocate for peace and life, women attached images of their own families to underscore their shared humanity and appeal to Nikita and Nina's concerns as spouses and parents. Such an intimate, personal style of writing fit with the ways that female correspondents understood traditional gender roles and their own place in the political culture of the Cold War. Their letters initiated intimate heart-to-heart conversations with Khrushchev – the head of a family, or Nina Khrushcheva – a mother and wife. In this way, letter-writers brought global politics into the private sphere – the domain where they were most comfortable.

These attempts to establish intimacy with Khrushchev reveal unexpected insights into the successes enjoyed by Soviet international propaganda and the way it was aided by US media culture. Through his endeavours to promote Soviet viewpoints abroad, Khrushchev became the first Soviet leader to make a concentrated effort to reach out to the people of the US and engage them directly. The scope and extent of his interactions with the US press were unprecedented for a Soviet leader. Khrushchev readily gave (and at times initiated) interviews to editors of leading US newspapers and popular political pundits.³⁵ He was the first Soviet leader to be featured on the television programme, *Face the Nation*, and thus 'had appeared in America's living rooms – real, robust, and unthreatening'.³⁶ The famous 1959 'Kitchen Debate' showed Khrushchev – friendly and humorous – explaining the advantages of everyday life under socialism. Although his immediate interlocutor was then-Vice President Richard Nixon, the real targets of Khrushchev's remarks were not politicians, but the common people.³⁷

³⁴Hazel De Lapper, 22 October 1962, F. R5446, Op. 96, D. 1306, L. 88, GARF.

³⁵Dina Fainberg, *Cold War Correspondents: Soviet and American Reporters on the Ideological Frontlines* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 47-75; 115-9.

³⁶Daniel Schorr, *Staying Tuned: A Life in Journalism* (Simon & Schuster: Kindle Edition, 2001), Kindle Locations 1642-3.

³⁷Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, 'The Kitchen Debate – transcript', U.S. Embassy, Moscow, Soviet Union, 24 July 1959, Central Intelligence Agency website, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/1959-07-24.pdf>, accessed 1 January 2024.

Khrushchev's efforts to engage the American people culminated in his highly publicised official state visit to the US in 1959. Nikita Khrushchev became the first Soviet leader whom the US public saw in flesh and blood. Huge crowds met him everywhere he went. Those who were unable to see Khrushchev in person had plenty of media reports to rely on. A sizeable press pool, which accompanied the Soviet leader on his 13-day visit, delivered daily images of Khrushchev's travels, filed reports on his impressions of the US, and thus turned it into one of the most important media events in post-war history. The daily barrage of news captured Khrushchev behaving as an engaged guest who expressed interest, shook hands, spoke plainly and cracked jokes. Khrushchev did not shy away from displaying his emotions. Media coverage often showed him expressing happiness, frustration, excitement and anger. Since Khrushchev's entire family joined him on this historic state visit, Americans were able to see Khrushchev not only in his capacity as a head of state and politician, but also as a husband, a father and a grandfather.³⁸ The frequent references to Khrushchev's state visit in the Cuban crisis letters suggest that these images and the impression of his humanity struck a chord with US audiences and left a lasting imprint on their memories.³⁹

While intimacy underpinned US women's efforts to engage the Khrushchevs, it also played an important role in correspondents' efforts to make sense of the Cuban crisis and articulate ways to resolve it. Many attributed the events in the Caribbean to *an absence* of intimacy between the US and Soviet people and suggested that Khrushchev's policy must have been rooted in Soviet fear and suspicion of the US. Bridging the intimacy gap between the two nations and promoting mutual understanding frequently emerged as the proposed way forward. Some correspondents wrote in Russian, others mentioned that they were studying Russian or trying to read more about the Soviet Union in order to understand it better. 'I have been studying the Russian Language and hope, one day, to be able to correspond with one of your countrymen in his own tongue. (Russian is a very difficult and challenging language, for me)', wrote Bettie Dallam from California.⁴⁰ Letters described the process of *achieving intimacy* as a personal and a national self-education project, with learning about each other and changing their ways the desired result. Several correspondents mentioned US-Soviet cultural exchanges as the blueprint for such initiatives. Those who urged Khrushchev to pursue a diplomatic solution imagined it as an intimacy-building exercise where the two sides would get together and calmly resolve their disagreements in a constructive dialogue.

Many women pointed out that if Khrushchev would get to know the American people better, he would realise that the US meant no harm to his country. This in turn, would impress upon him that there was no need to station missiles in Cuba and would also prevent any future hostilities.

³⁸Peter Carlson offers an excellent and detailed account of Khrushchev's US visit, based, among other things, on contemporary media coverage of the tour. Carlson shows clearly how Khrushchev's trip became the media event of the year. See: Peter Carlson, *K Blows Top: A Cold War Comic Interlude, Starring Nikita Khrushchev, America's Most Unlikely Tourist* (Public Affairs, 2009).

³⁹Even Khrushchev's reported shoe banging episode in the United Nations (which letters rarely mentioned) could have been interpreted as yet another sign of his humanity – evidenced in his display of emotions and tantrums.

⁴⁰Bettie Dallam, Ventura, California, 14 November 1962, F. R5446, Op. 96, D. 1311, L. 27, GARF.

There is no reason for you to be on the defensive [...] the majority of Americans have no intention of thwarting your country or trying to take it over. We are not a nation of people without faults or mistakes but I think in all our efforts their aims are only for peace among nations. I think it could be tragic for all people to be the same under one nation, for each nation is exciting and distinct in its own way. Each has its individuality and contribution to make. One last thing – I mean this letter well and to no offense [sic] to you.⁴¹

Whereas some correspondents evidently hoped that by engaging Khrushchev directly they would help him gain a better understanding of the American people, others believed that intimacy would develop if Khrushchev (and the Soviets more broadly) embraced liberal values. Allowing everyone the freedom to choose their form of government emerged as a common prescription for world peace. ‘All we need is to tear down all the walls and let people live as they wish. If they want to live under Communist rule, let them. If they want to live a Democratic life, let them[...] if people know they are free to live the way they choose, there would be no more war, walls or races to who is ahead of who’.⁴² The author envisioned a global order built on intimacy, a world without walls or rivalries. Her suggested pathway for achieving that vision was self-determination and political freedom – core tenets of US liberalism.

Crucially, not all letter-writers assumed that it was Khrushchev or the Soviets who should alone bear the responsibility for change and for creating intimacy between the two nations. Some correspondents admitted that they personally, and all Americans collectively, needed to learn more about the Soviet Union and get to know it better. Others (a minority) acknowledged that the US had its own faults and underscored that both superpowers should work hard to find paths for coexistence.

You know, I meet foreign students, I listen to your debates in the UN and I can understand why some nations dislike us so much. We are loving and peaceful as long as the trouble is in someone else’s backyard, but when we are directly concerned we are as defensive and warlike as anyone else regardless of the language we use or the more subtle pressure we may try to exert. Some, reading these thoughts might suggest I find some other country if this one does not suit me. I love this land, its beauty and its freedom to write letters like this one. But I’d like to live here a while longer to see where we can go in space exploration and to what degree we can learn to live together in one world.⁴³

‘Russians Love Their Children Too’

In their efforts to propose ways out of the Cuban crisis, correspondents were often moved to explain how the conflict came about in the first place. Letters to the Khrushchevs often contained lengthy segments that articulated the authors’ understanding of the events in Cuba and how they fit into the overall history of US-Soviet relations. The bulk of letters squarely blamed the conflict on the nature of Soviet power and ideology. Many women mentioned communists’ aversion to freedom; their compulsion to impose their ideology onto others; and their general intolerance of democracy. The introduction of communist regimes in Eastern Europe or the construction of the Berlin Wall frequently featured as examples of the Soviet lust for power:

⁴¹Sandra Housel, North Manchester, Indiana, 22 October 1962, F. R5446, Op. 96, D. 1306, L. 10, GARF.

⁴²Marian Kendall, Lodi, New York, 23 October 1962, F. R5446, Op. 96, D. 1308, L. 12-5, GARF.

⁴³Mary Spangental, Richmond, Virginia, 23 October 1962, F. R5446, Op. 96, D. 1306, L. 39-41, GARF.

My question is why do you want communism to control the world? Just because your people are happy with it does not mean that people in other countries will be. If people are willing to accept it, that is perfectly fine, but it is not good to use force. I am not trying to be sarcastic, but I truthfully would like to know why you want communism to dominate. There is one other thing that I am interested in, and that is Berlin. Why must there be constant conflict between your country and mine? Why must there be a wall around East Berlin? Why? Don't you think that each country should have their own form of government?⁴⁴

It was not a coincidence that many letters mentioned Soviet ambition 'to control the world'. That particular view of Soviet foreign policy had been promoted by the US government, Sovietology, mainstream media, and popular culture since the late 1940s, and would have been very familiar to the women who came of age during the Cold War.⁴⁵ President Kennedy's 22 October address on the Cuban Missile Crisis called on Khrushchev 'to abandon this course of world domination', and made this demand the centrepiece of the US government's narrative of the conflict.⁴⁶ In the segment addressing 'the captive people of Cuba', Kennedy said he was devastated to see how their 'fatherland fell under foreign domination'. The Cuban people can't wait to be 'truly free', he concluded: 'free from foreign domination, free to choose their own leaders, free to select their own system, free to own their own land, free to speak and write and worship without fear or degradation'.⁴⁷

As they reflected on the significance and gravity of the Cuban Missile Crisis, letter-writers rarely mentioned Cuba itself, and did not discuss it as a fully-fledged participant in the conflict. They did not write to Khrushchev about Cuban children or mothers, nor did they attempt to link the three nations through fear of nuclear war and responsibility to the next generation. Echoing the US government and media narratives of the crisis, women's letters were premised on the assumption that the Cuban people were denied the right to choose or reject the communist form of government and barred from information that could have revealed its flaws. Featuring the USSR as the main culprit, both Kennedy's speech and the letters that his female compatriots sent to the Khrushchevs, construed the Soviet Union as what David Foglesong called, 'the dark double' of the United States.⁴⁸ While the former was depicted as an interventionist dictatorship forcing its ideology upon others, the latter was portrayed as a champion of freedom and self-determination:

We know that you are arming Cuba and we know the ultimate purpose of your communist ideology. You must also have some understanding of our form of government and our aims. We do not wish to impose our ideology on the people of the world. We love our country and our way of life and we know it is successful. Are you jealous of our happiness and success? Why else do you seek to destroy us instead of attempting to live with us as neighbors in this large world?⁴⁹

⁴⁴Louise Bianco, 21 October 1962, F. R5446, Op. 96, D. 1306, L. 49-51, GARF.

⁴⁵Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism and the Atomic Age* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); Scott Lucas, *Freedom's War: The American Crusade against the Soviet Union* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); Joanne P. Sharp, *Condensing the Cold War: Reader's Digest and American Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 83-106; Cyndy Hendershot, *Anti-Communism and Popular Culture in Mid-Century America* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2003); David S. Foglesong, *The American Mission and the 'Evil Empire'. The Crusade for a 'Free Russia' since 1881* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 107-54; David C. Engerman, *Know Your Enemy: The Rise and Fall of America's Soviet Experts* (Oxford University Press, 2009); Fainberg, *Cold War Correspondents*, 47-75, 112-40.

⁴⁶Kennedy, 'Address on the Soviet Arms Build-up in Cuba', 22 October 1962.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

⁴⁸Foglesong, *The American Mission*, 1-6.

⁴⁹Mrs. May Rognan, Seattle, Washington, 24 October 1962, F. R5446, Op. 96, D. 1306, L. 81-2, GARF.

Like many others, this correspondent channelled her familiarity with the political culture of the Cold War and Kennedy's speech. As the President had reminded the nation on 22 October, 'Our history – unlike that of the Soviets since the end of the World War II – demonstrates that we have no desire to dominate or conquer any other nation or impose our system upon its people'.⁵⁰ Both the official narrative of the US government and the personal narratives crafted by US women glossed over Cuban agency in the conflict and described the Missile Crisis as a standoff between the US and the USSR, respectively representing 'true freedom' and 'world domination'.

It is not surprising that when confronted with the threat of Soviet missiles pointed at their homes, US women embraced their government's perspective on the events, or that they imagined the USSR as intent on world domination. What is surprising, however, is, that even under these circumstances, all the letter-writers expressed an unwavering conviction that in spite of their ideological differences, Americans and Soviets were essentially one and the same – people who wanted peace and who loved their children. 'This letter is a plea from a housewife with two small children. Please – we do not want war! I know that people like myself in your country must feel the same way as they look at their children and young husbands and think of losing them in a senseless, insane, totally destructive war'.⁵¹ Even during what looked like the brink of nuclear confrontation, letter-writers maintained that Soviet citizens shared their fears of nuclear war and their hopes for a peaceful life, and that it was possible to appeal to their universal humanity.

The focus of these appeals was Nikita Khrushchev, imagined by his correspondents in many different, and not entirely consistent, ways. In women's letters, Khrushchev figured both as an individual person and a stand-in for communism and the Soviet Union. He could be a ruthless dictator, a fool, a danger, a child, a grandfather, a father or a friend. Regardless of how each letter-writer imagined Khrushchev, she endeavoured to appeal to his private conscience as a family man and to his universal human nature, hoping this would prevail over his public identity as the head of the communist dictatorship. To imagine this possibility, one had to believe that Khrushchev was indeed a fellow human being, and that in some essential way, he was *like me* and therefore could be reasoned with, and made to listen, *by me*.

If I could be there personally, I would beg and plead with you to never at least, use this horrible means of doing anything. You are a family man, who I know, loves his children and grandchildren, too. I, a mere woman, love them too and would do anything in this world to keep ALL their lives and others' too. [. . .] I hope that my humble plea is heard. I have seen many countries and people and consider them only by their inside, not their outer appearance. If I could do something to help peace I will. I have great faith that you will see my letter and feel honored to have a reply if you can spare the time.⁵²

The underlying assumption of universalism, the faith in the possibility of appealing to Khrushchev's basic humanity, permeated every letter, even those that berated Khrushchev personally, or denied any commonality between Americans and Soviets.

⁵⁰See note 46 above

⁵¹See note 49 above

⁵²Brigitta Rasmussen, October 1962, F. R5446, Op. 96, D. 1307, L. 43, GARF.

Did Nikita Khrushchev or Nina Khrushcheva ever read these letters? Available evidence shows that Khrushchev was certainly aware of letters sent to him by ordinary people from all over the world. For instance, after his 1959 visit to the US, Khrushchev publicly mentioned letters from abroad, including from the US.⁵³ Some of these letters were printed in Soviet newspapers and many were included in *Face to Face with America* – a flattering book about the visit published shortly after its conclusion.⁵⁴ An overview of letters received during the Cuban crisis was compiled and sent to Khrushchev, yet we are unable to ascertain whether he read the letters discussed here.

Conclusion

The Cuban Missile Crisis letters to Nikita Khrushchev and Nina Khrushcheva capture the voices, hopes and fears of US women confronting the threat of nuclear war. These women came from different professional and social backgrounds and exhibited different levels of prior engagement with Cold War politics. Some reported that until the events in Cuba, they had taken no interest in foreign affairs and knew nothing about the Soviet Union. Others described themselves as having a long-standing interest in the international situation and US-Soviet relations. Many women ventured into political letter-writing for the first time. Others had written to Khrushchev before. What united these different women was their shared and urgent sense of responsibility to save the world from nuclear disaster.

The letters reveal how US women wielded traditional gender roles to demand that the responsibility to future generations takes priority over Cold War politics. Their responsibilities as mothers and wives, their ability to give life, women argued, made their perspective on global matters vitally important at such a crucial time.

At the same time, the letters reveal that many women experienced the Cuban Missile Crisis as an intimate and personal event that directly influenced their lives as they were confronted with the possibility of nuclear war. Female correspondents projected these emotions onto the Soviet people. In the imaginations of the letter-writers, the Soviet people shared their values of family and the sanctity of life and were likewise deeply concerned about their children's futures. Focusing their hopes on Nikita Khrushchev and Nina Khrushcheva, female correspondents addressed them in intimate language and personal terms, as fellow parents and grandparents, imploring them to take care of their families and find a way to resolve the crisis. Careful reading of these letters shows how multifaceted and complex was their understanding of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Cold War more broadly. The US government's narrative of the crisis, dichotomous views of the Soviet Union and the US, and harsh censure of communism, coexisted with unwavering faith in Americans and Soviets' shared humanity and commitment to peace. The hopes in humanity's power to prevent mutual destruction had a long-lasting influence. In the early and mid-1980s, when it seemed as if the world was yet again facing a nuclear faceoff between the two superpowers, these hopes were

⁵³See for example, M.A. Kharlamov, O.V. Vadeev, *Face to Face with America: The Story of N. S. Khrushchov's Visit to the U.S.A., 15-27 September, 1959* (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1960), 614-6.

⁵⁴Kharlamov and Vadeev, *Face to Face with America*. The book featured specially selected letters, rather than a representative sample.

expressed by a broad range of antinuclear movements that were often fronted by women and children. In 1985, *Russians* – a hit song written and performed by one of the world’s best-selling musical artists, Sting – pleaded with world leaders to prevent mutual destruction by emphasising the shared humanity of people on both sides:

We share the same biology, regardless of ideology

But what might save us, me and you

Is if the Russians love their children too⁵⁵

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⁵⁵Sting, ‘Russians’, A&M Records, 1985, Vinyl.