# ESCAPE TO THE WEST

## August 13, 1961 Berlin

**Photographer: Peter Leibing**

**On the night of August 13, 1961, after months of rumour as young, skilled workers continued to leave the German Democratic Republic for the West, soldiers, policemen and the Workers' Militia set up an "anti-fascist protection barrier" across Berlin. In the first few days of the Berlin Wall, gaps in construction allowed a few people, including border guards, to escape.**

This picture of a young East German border guard seizing his opportunity to escape in the first days of the Berlin Wall became an iconic image in the West, though not in the East where guidebooks to Berlin right up to the dismantling of the Wall continued to ignore its existence.

Konrad Schumann was nineteen when he was sent to guard the border. On the morning of August 13 he was stationed on Bernauer Strasse in the Wedding district of Berlin where, as can be seen in the picture, the "wall" was as yet just a barbed-wire barrier. Western photojournalists shooting the wall got the picture of a lifetime when Schumann, in his black boots, helmet and smart DDR uniform and carrying a rifle, plucked up the courage to leap across the barrier. Film footage shows how this soldier thrust his weapon from him in mid-leap.

The picture became a classic because it captures the contrast between freedom and constraint; like all the greatest, most influential journalistic photographs, it is artful by coincidence. There could not be a more poetic or articulate image of the wall. Here is a young man flying through the air, suspended for a moment in limbo between East and West. The dilapidated building to his right is a reminder of Berlin's wartime scars. Behind him a small crowd watches, but they don't look like they will follow.

This is a perversely joyous image. It suggests not the coming years of division but the final futility of the wall. In the 1960s, images like this made Berlin an implausibly glamorous place in the West, and gesture politics like John F. Kennedy's "Ich bin ein Berliner" speech in the city in 1963 were accompanied by photo opportunities on a platform overlooking the wall. So while the wall was officially invisible in the East, it became a romantic backdrop for the West, from films like *Funeral in Berlin* to records like Lou Reed's *Berlin*. This picture helped to define the wall in the eyes of the West, but it was not until popular protest in the DDR itself became irresistible that Konrad Schumann's act enjoyed its final sequel.

J.J.

Ann Tusa. *The Last Division: Berlin and the Wall 1945–89*. London, 1996.

# HUNGARIAN UPRISING

## October 23, 1956 Budapest

**On October 23, 1956, Hungarian students marched to present a petition to the Soviet power expressing the nation's discontent. Among other demands, they asked that the statue of Stalin in Budapest be destroyed. The crowd marched to Parliament and tore down the statue. Stalin's legs held fast, but the head toppled to the ground: this moment marked the beginning of the uprising.**

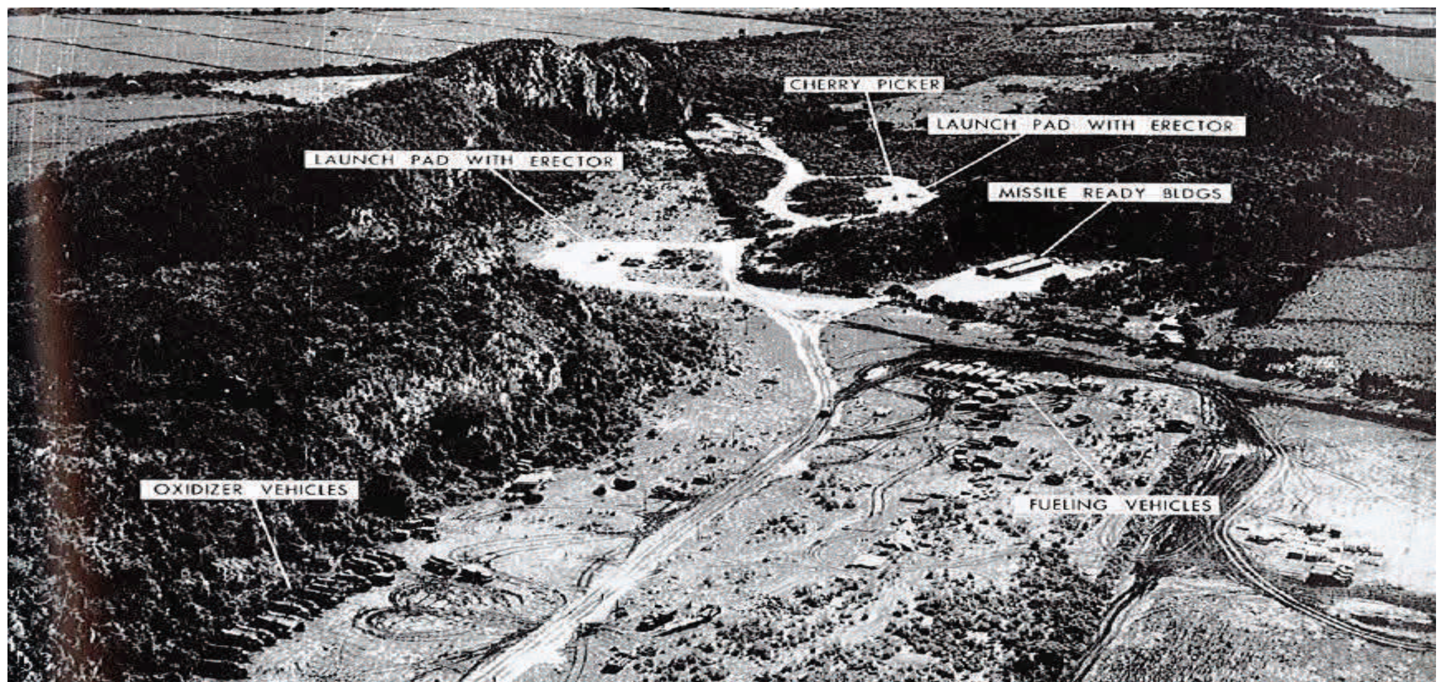
Against a background of political subjugation and economic hardship, a group of students drew up a petition stating a number of popular demands: these included a call for political freedom, fundamental economic reform, return to the rule of law and the development of a more equitable relationship between the USSR and Hungary. Aside from these standard demands the petition requested that Imre Nagy be made premier, Soviet troops be withdrawn, the hated statue of Stalin be removed, and a gesture of solidarity be made to Poland by placing a wreath at the foot of the statue of the celebrated General Bem.

The laying of the wreath was planned for October 23, 1956, and was accompanied by an uneventful march. The crowd then split, with some making their way to the statue of Stalin. Erected on the site of a bombed-out church and made of bronze that had been melted down from statues of Hungarian royalty, the statue was a symbol of Soviet control. In the first act of violence of the uprising, the crowd pulled down the statue. Here we see the crowds moving past the toppled head of Stalin, marking the sense of freedom that the citizens of Hungary felt as they opposed Soviet domination. This photograph communicates in a single moment the surge of a revolutionary movement.

The formal qualities of this photograph further accentuate the symbolism of this image—we can see individuals in the street casually glancing at the toppled head. In the background an angled pole seems to bisect Stalin's head. The space around the head gives the impression that individuals are cautiously approaching this fallen symbol of an age now past. This action was firmly linked to Eastern European cultural and political uprisings—starting with Eisenstein's portrayal in the film *October* of people toppling a statue of the Tsar. The depiction of toppled statues in Eastern Europe has become firmly established as a starting point in revolution.

L.L.F

Nigel Swain. *Hungary: The Rise and Fall of Feasible Socialism*. London, 1992.



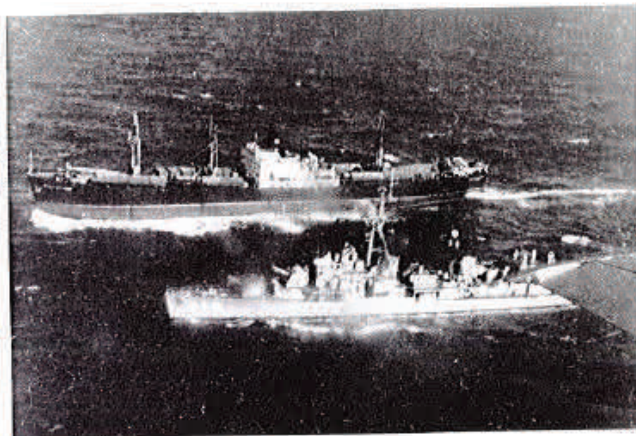

# CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

## October 15, 1962 Cuba

Photograph: U.S. Air Force

**Photographs taken from a U2 reconnaissance plane show Russian medium-range SS-4 missiles stationed in western Cuba on October 14, 1962. When more missiles are spotted on Russian freighters in the Caribbean, U.S. president John F. Kennedy imposes a blockade and issues Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev an ultimatum to withdraw the missiles. The world is on the brink of nuclear war.**

In 1962 the confrontation between the Cold War superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, reached its most dangerous peak with the Cuban Missile Crisis. Democrat John F. Kennedy had moved into the White House in 1961, bringing with him consultants from the Rand Corporation and Harvard. It was the beginning of a new political philosophy. Its proponents understood Soviet-American relations as a military rivalry, an arms race both in nuclear and in conventional weapons, but also as a political and ideological race that had an impact on U.S. internal politics. In terms of nuclear strategy, the Americans moved towards what they called a "flexible response." Khrushchev had observed Kennedy's restraint during the failed invasion in the Bay of Pigs (April 16–17, 1961) and the building of the Berlin Wall (August 12–13, 1961). In the summer of 1962 he began stationing medium-range missiles on Cuba in an attempt to compensate for the U.S. superiority in long-range missiles. U.S. reconnaissance cameras discovered the installation only after some time, on October 15. By October 16, the CIA had analyzed the photos and laid them on Kennedy's desk. The first idea—to carry out an air raid on the missile installations—was abandoned after it became clear that no one knew whether an air raid could guarantee that the installation would be fully destroyed or whether nuclear warheads had already arrived in Cuba.



On October 22, 1962, Kennedy imposed a blockade. In front of the United Nations Security Council, American Ambassador Stevenson displayed the photographs to force his Soviet counterpart, Zorin, into an admission of their presence and danger. According to former CIA photographic analyst Dino Brugioni: "The photos made a considerable impact. They proved the Russians were lying. Thanks to those photos, Kennedy could command unconditional national and international support. But the photos also had a long-term impact. They were proof positive that reconnaissance could offer tactical advantages and this was the beginning of deterrence politics." Indeed, Khrushchev was impressed by the seriousness of the American response and withdrew the missiles. In turn, Kennedy assured the sovereignty of Cuba and withdrew American missiles from Turkey. As a consequence of these events, a crisis management program ("Hot Wire") was formed. Ultimately the crisis led to the signing of treaties on disarmament and the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons. E.I.

Jerome Kahan and Anne Long, "The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Study of Its Strategic Context" in *Political Science Quarterly* 4 (1972).

# THE END OF THE PRAGUE SPRING

## August 21, 1968 Prague, Czechoslovakia

Photographer: Libor Hajsky, CTK

**Young men stand on a military bus that they have just tipped over, and are waving the Czechoslovakian flag at Soviet T-55 tanks that have invaded the city. Hordes more demonstrators are on the back of a truck and on the roof of a bus behind it. In a gesture of determined solidarity the people of Prague have used vehicles to block the advance of the military convoy on the city center. The experiment of a Socialism with a human face threatens to collapse under Soviet military pressure.**

When the five Warsaw Pact states bore down on Czechoslovakia on August 21, 1968, the campaign for a peaceful reform led by Communist Party secretary Alexander Dubček and supposedly sanctioned from "up high," was brought to an abrupt end. Dubček and his supporters wanted to build a more democratic and humane socialist society. To this end they were in favour of greater participation in government, civil liberties such as freedom of the press, market mechanisms for a more vital economy and removing ideological strictures from foreign policy. Soon the population at large began to participate in the political and social content of these reforms. They set in motion a dynamic movement, the Prague Spring. By February 1968 the Central Communist Party in Moscow was openly critical of the movement, and in mid-July, relations between the parties broke down. The Soviet leadership under Leonid Brezhnev announced that is was a "common duty" to ensure the safety of socialism. Warsaw Pact manoeuvres in Czechoslovakia were used as an open threat, but Dubček refused to yield. On August 17, the decision to invade was made. Gustáv Husák, a party hard-liner, replaced Dubček. These events presaged the implosion of "real socialism" that was to follow in the Soviet bloc countries twenty years later, from 1989 onwards.

In Libor Hajsky's photo groups of people have surrounded the tanks to vent their feelings and opposition at close range to the armed soldiers. Both sides avoid any escalation and the situation remains calm. In Czechoslovakia's second largest city, Bratislava, Ladislav Bielik's photo that became a symbol of the crushing of the Prague Spring was taken on the same day: the demonstrator who rips open his shirt in front of a tank, ready to die, thrusting his chest into the sights of the gun. More than 100 people are killed during the uprising, but the most prominent victim of the invasion by troops of the Warsaw Pact states will be the student Jan Palach, who douses himself with petrol in Prague and dies five months later as the result of his burns. The day of his funeral is to become a silent protest across the country against the occupation.

The Hungarian uprising of 1956 (see p. 84f.) even convinced many communists in western Europe of the inhumanity of the Soviet system. The crushing of the Prague Spring similarly enraged students outside the Iron Curtain who marched through the streets of university towns in sympathy, chanting "Dubček! Dubček!" After 1968, Dubček withdrew from public life and lived in obscurity. He wrote his memoirs and died in 1992—living long enough however to witness the changes in Eastern Europe.

E.I./P.S.

Jitka Vondorva and Antonin Bencik, eds. *The Prague Spring, 1968*. Budapest, 1995.