

Sir Humphrey Trevelyan Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 09/13/67
Administrative Information

Creator: Sir Humphrey Trevelyan
Interviewer: Joseph E. O'Connor
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Biographical Note

Deputy Under Secretary, Foreign Office, United Kingdom (1962); British Ambassador to Iraq (1958-1961), Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (1962-1965). In this interview, Trevelyan discusses United States and Soviet Union relations, the Test Ban Treaty, and the Cuban Missile Crisis, among other issues.

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Sir Humphrey Trevelyan – JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

SIR HUMPHREY TREVELYAN

September 13, 1967
London, England

By Joseph O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'CONNOR: Sir Humphrey Trevelyan, I hoped that you might talk to us a little bit about the Test Ban Treaty. You arrived in Moscow in November, 1962, and shortly thereafter began a renewed effort to engage the Soviet Union in negotiations for a test ban.

TREVELYAN: First, one has to remember that in the summer or autumn of 1962 a proposal for a limited test ban treaty, on the lines

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which were eventually agreed, had been made in Geneva to the Russians and had been refused by them. The negotiations after the Cuban crisis in the first months of 1963, in New York, Geneva, and elsewhere, were conducted on the basis of proposals for a complete test ban treaty, including underground tests, the discussions being concentrated on the number of inspections which would be allowed by the Russians. It was my impression...

O'CONNOR: Can I interrupt you just briefly, here? Many people have commented that the Cuban missile crisis had something to do with making the Soviet Union more amenable to a test ban negotiation. Do you feel that this is true, or not true? Some people have said, in effect, that the Cuban missile crisis softened up

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the Soviet Union in a sense.

TREVELYAN: I think I better come back to that later, if you don't mind.

O'CONNOR: Alright, fine.

TREVELYAN: Yes. Let's just go through this one.

O'CONNOR: Alright.

TREVELYAN: It was my impression at the time that the Russians genuinely believed, probably as a result of remarks made by Mr. [Arthur B.] Dean at Geneva, that the Americans would agree to a test ban treaty on the basis of three inspections, and that they were considerably upset when [Nikita S.] Khrushchev made his proposal for a treaty on those conditions, and they were not accepted by the Americans. In any case, even if they had been accepted, the negotiations might well have broken down at a later stage because the Russians also had the impression, at that time, as far

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as one could judge, that it was principally a political question for the Americans, and that only more or less formal inspections would be required by them. During the early months of the year, our impression was that Khrushchev was not particularly interested in a test ban treaty. He described it as being of only purely humanitarian interest and did not seem to regard it as a matter of great importance. Though this, of course, may have been partly a negotiating tactic. I shouldn't say negotiating tactic, part of a general conversational tactic. In April, our opinion in the Embassy was that it was not the right time to make a fresh initiative for a test ban treaty since Sino-Soviet relations were still in the state of flux, and we believed that the Russians would not, for some

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months at any rate, be prepared to take any political action which, like a test ban treaty, would upset the Chinese. However, Mr. [Harold] Macmillan took the initiative obtaining President Kennedy's agreement, which resulted in the proposals — I should say they were not definite proposals — the approach made jointly by the Prime Minister and President, which were put to Mr. Khrushchev by Ambassador [Foy D.] Kohler and myself. We were not sanguine of a positive response to these proposals. And the response was much as we had expected. Mr. Khrushchev, in effect, said to us, "Gentlemen, what is there in this for me?" Sometime between April and June it seemed likely that the Russians reconsidered their position on the test ban treaty in the light of their developing relations with the

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Chinese. Certainly by the end of June, and possibly before, they seemed to have come to the conclusion that it would be politically advantageous for them to have a test ban treaty. By this time it was fairly clear that there was no possibility for an early improvement of Sino-Soviet relations, which were then very bad. And they must have calculated that it would be politically advantageous to them to take an initiative which would give them the sympathy and support of practically the whole of the developing countries and would politically isolate the Chinese. They must have also considered the economic aspects. A continuation of testing in the atmosphere would probably have led to a whole new generation of atomic weapons with astronomical expenditure. And by this time the Russians

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must have been seriously concerned at the problem of allocating resources between agricultural and industrial developments and arms production and the research necessary for it. On June 12, President Kennedy made his speech at the American University. It was my impression at the time, both from the official reactions in the Soviet press and from what I heard from senior Soviet officials, that this speech had a very marked effect upon Soviet official opinion. It seemed to me that, perhaps, for the first time they began to feel that President Kennedy, whatever the difference in fundamental positions between the Soviet Union and the United States, was someone who was genuinely working for a detente and with whom they could do business. It is impossible to say

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exactly how far this affected their thinking on the test ban treaty, nor whether they had made up their mind to take a new position on it before this speech or not; but I think it probable that it had a very considerable effect upon their thinking at this point. Towards the end of June it became clear, both from articles in the press and from what was said to Mr. Harold Wilson, that the Russians might be willing to consider a limited test ban treaty on the lines which they had rejected in 1962. This, in my opinion, was not the result of discussions between Mr. Khrushchev and Mr. Harold Wilson, but I consider that Mr. Wilson came at a time when the Russians had come to a new position, and that Mr. Khrushchev felt it politically advantageous to give him some indication

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of this. In any case, Mr. Khrushchev would never have made a decision individually on a matter of this importance in discussion with any foreign politician. This must have been a matter which had been decided in the collective at the top. From this time it became clearly worthwhile to negotiate for a limited test ban treaty, and I believe that there was little doubt from that time that a treaty could be successfully negotiated. It is difficult to recall at this stage exactly how one's own opinion developed, but looking back, I feel that this must have been our opinion before the beginning of the negotiations. Certainly during those negotiations I expressed the opinion that in spite of difficulties which arose on various points, there was no real doubt that a treaty would be obtained. You may say that in

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these circumstances, and given the way in which the Russians negotiate, there was nothing very much for the delegations to do. This, I think, is wrong. There were numerous difficult points which had to be negotiated, and in handling these I was full of admiration for the way in which Ambassador [W. Averell] Harriman carried on the negotiations. It was clear to us that he, quite naturally, could not carry on those negotiations entirely in accordance with his own personal opinion. He had also to take into account the opinion of Congress and the conditions — and this was most important — on which it would be likely that the Administration could obtain the ratification of the treaty by Congress. And, in my recollection, such points of difficulty as arose largely stemmed from this.

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You asked me about the Cuban missile crisis, and the effect on the Soviet relations with the United States. This, and the previous Soviet failure to carry out a forward policy over Berlin, showed them that risky gambles of the type of the Cuban gamble could not be repeated without their facing again the unpleasant alternative of either risking a nuclear war or having to capitulate. It may well have been that as a result of this experience a school of thought, by no means universal among the Soviet hierarchy, pressed for a different policy to try and see if, at least, some limited detente in Europe could be obtained with the Americans on terms, naturally, favorable to Soviet interests. And that this also was one of the elements in Soviet thinking which led them towards a limited test ban treaty.

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It was, indeed, clear during the negotiations that they wished to use this as a means of moving towards the kind of measures in Europe which they wanted, one of their major points during the negotiation being to move towards a non-aggression pact between NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization] and the Warsaw Pact.

You also asked me about the general impression in the Soviet Union of President Kennedy. I consider that as a result of the Cuban crisis they felt that President Kenendy was a man who could be relied on in a serious crisis to take a reasonable point of view, while not being a man who would be ready to give way to Soviet blackmail. I have already mentioned the further effect of the speech to the American University, and I have no doubt at all that the

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murder of President Kenendy was a serious shock to them, and that they deplored it, and considered it to be against their own interests. I think that the first reactions to that event were probably quite genuine because I believe that, in this case, their calculations were that President Kennedy was a man who, whatever the compulsions on American policy from the economic and political position of the United States as seen through the spectacles of the Marxist doctrine, was a man with whom they could negotiate.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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