

October 1, 1962

**Roberto Ducci, 'I capintesta' [The Big Bosses]
(excerpts)**

Citation:

"Roberto Ducci, 'I capintesta' [The Big Bosses] (excerpts)", October 1, 1962, Wilson Center Digital Archive, (Milano: Rusconi, 1982). Pages 142-48 from the chapter "La notte che non scoppiò la Guerra nucleare" [The Night when the Nuclear War did not Break Out]. Translated by Leopoldo Nuti. <https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/115423>

Summary:

In the early pages of the chapter, Ducci describes how by 22 October 1962, he had just arrived in Brussels as member of a delegation which included the top echelons of Italian foreign policy: Foreign Minister Attilio Piccioni, Undersecretary Carlo Russo, Secretary General of the Ministry Attilio Cattani, and a number of other key dignitaries, including himself, who at the time was at the head of the Italian delegation which negotiated the possible accession of the United Kingdom to the European Economic Community. They had all gone to Brussels for a week of meetings between the Six members of the EEC, and were engaged in a preparatory meeting for the work ahead, when the news spread that the situation between the US and Cuba was deteriorating and that President Kennedy was about to give an important speech.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Leon Levy Foundation

Original Language:

Italian

Contents:

Translation - English

Ducci was another of the key Italian diplomats of the postwar period. Among his many important assignments, he chaired the Committee that drafted the 1957 Rome Treaties, was posted as Ambassador to Helsinki (1958-62), Belgrade (1964-67), Vienna (1967-70) and London (1975-80). Between 1970 and 1975 he was appointed Director General for Political Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Ducci did not keep a Diary but wrote a book of memoirs [I capintesta (Milano: Rusconi, 1982)] which fully reflects his witty, incisive and lucid understanding of Italian foreign policy and international affairs. The following pages (142-48) come from the chapter "La notte che non scoppiò la Guerra nucleare" (The Night when the Nuclear War did not break out) and vividly describe the atmosphere among some of the key Italian diplomats after Kennedy's speech of 22 October. In the early pages of the chapter, Ducci describes how by 22 October 1962, he had just arrived in Brussels as member of a delegation which included the top echelons of Italian foreign policy: Foreign Minister Attilio Piccioni, Undersecretary Carlo Russo, Secretary General of the Ministry Attilio Cattani, and a number of other key dignitaries, including himself, who at the time was at the head of the Italian delegation which negotiated the possible accession of the United Kingdom to the European Economic Community. They had all gone to Brussels for a week of meetings between the Six members of the EEC, and were engaged in a preparatory meeting for the work ahead, when the news spread that the situation between the US and Cuba was deteriorating and that President Kennedy was about to give an important speech.

While arguments often discussed were thrown around the table in the big dining room - with limited interest and attention - [Ambassador to Brussels Antonio] Casardi entered the room and whispered something in the ear of the minister. The President of the Council, Amintore Fanfani, was on the line from Rome and wanted to talk to the hon. Piccioni. Mumbling something in his thick Roman accent, ("And what does he want now?"), Piccioni stood up without enthusiasm and followed the ambassador in his study. We learned afterwards that Fanfani was furious, as he had placed several calls to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs searching for the Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs, the secretary general, the General Director for political affairs, and so on, without finding any of them; and as a first reaction he unleashed his wrath on the Minister of Foreign Affairs who had taken all of them with him to Brussels. He told him that a few minutes before he had received the US Ambassador, Freddie Reinhardt, who had asked to meet him to deliver him a message from Kennedy. [...] Fanfani asked Piccioni to try and get in touch with the authorities of the other European countries to find out how they intended to react to Kennedy's decision, a decision which, by provoking the most serious crisis for world peace since the time of the Korean war, could lead to a confrontation with nuclear weapons between the superpowers, and involve all of Europe.

Piccioni told us that our meeting was over; all of those who had not been invited to dine at the Embassy were not encouraged to stay. We found him gloomier, but still affable and not nervous at all. Those of us who stayed were consulted by him mostly to discuss how we could implement Fanfani's directives. It was a dead afternoon, if one did not know what was going on across the Atlantic - the dramatic gravity of which many in Europe continued to ignore. As a starter we tried to get in touch with the Belgian authorities: from Rue de la Loi they informed us that the President of the Council was gone, at the Quatre Bras Palace neither [Foreign Minister Paul-Henri] Spaak nor his deputy, Fayat, could be found. Then Casardi called Dirk Stikker, the former Dutch Foreign Minister who had been appointed Secretary General of NATO, at his private residence in Paris: he had gone to the country. Brosio was given the task to find him and ask him if he intended to summon an extraordinary meeting of the Atlantic Council - even our best ambassador at the time had not been informed about the ultimatum. Time went by, spent in disappointing efforts to show ourselves that we were not completely reduced to impotence, until the wife of the ambassador told us that dinner was ready.

[...] Every once in a while, the waiter whispered something in the ear of the Ambassador, then either he or one of us left the table and went to talk on the phone. Stikker had been found: no, the Americans had not proposed an extraordinary meeting of the North Atlantic Council yet, and none of the other European Allies had requested it. Then Brosio called to tell us that De Gaulle, after having received the American Ambassador, had let the word spread around that France would stick together with President Kennedy, following its loyal duty as an ally. The Belgians had not much to say, their Council of Ministers had been summoned for the next morning. As the waiters were about to serve a dessert called an "ice bomb," one of Fanfani's counselors called from Rome: we told him what little we had learned, and he assured us that he would refer it immediately to the President, who was at his desk in Palazzo Chigi. [...]

After coffee, Piccioni told us he would have liked to play a hand or two of bridge, which was his favorite game. I sat at his table: he played with an inner passion, as a Tuscan peasant, and he clearly showed pleasure in having good cards in his hand. The man I was teamed with, at least once for that evening, had been the pupil of [Founder of the Italian Catholic Party Partito Popolare Don Luigi] Sturzo, the companion and the dolphin of [Italian Prime Minister Alcide] De Gasperi, but also someone who in World War One had volunteered as a pilot in the Air Force and had been the instructor of [Italian World War I aircraft ace] Francesco Baracca; and the man who was said to have been a great speaker, the best together with [President of the Republic Giovanni] Gronchi, of the whole Catholic Party [...] At around eleven p.m. he was called to the phone once again: Fanfani wanted to talk to him. "God knows what he wants: wait for me here." We did not wait for him at the gaming table, and followed him in the study. We gathered around him and heard his replies to the President of the Council, who was still in Palazzo Chigi. From them, and from what Piccioni told us afterwards, we could form a good picture of their dialogue. Fanfani had talked with a half dozen foreign ambassadors in Rome and with four or five of our own ambassadors abroad. He had even managed to get in touch with someone at the White House, where they had confirmed to him what Reinhardt had told him a few hours before. "You did well, Amintore," said Piccioni on the phone, "we have already informed you about what we were able to find out from here. What? No, ... I would not say so...". Fanfani wanted to send someone to Washington immediately to recommend, to exhort, to motivate... "No, I cannot, I have the meetings here..." Fanfani insisted, said that otherwise he would send Russo, together with Fornari, who was Director General for Political Affairs. "If you really think it is necessary... Then, tomorrow..." The "no" from the President of the Council was so energetic that leaped out of the microphone and reached our ears: no, immediately or with the first available aircraft which would enable them to catch the Pan American flight from Rome at one pm the next day.

We did not go back to the gaming table. We started looking for a flight to Rome, while Russo and Fornari were snorting. There was one bound to Congo which was making a stopover in Rome, leaving at six am. Piccioni decided that this was the one that the two should catch, and told them so by spreading his arms, as if to signify that as far as he was concerned it was totally useless. In the meantime someone had found a powerful radio, and we were assured that it would allow us to listen to Kennedy's speech. We gathered around that technological wonder, which would reveal to us what was going to be our fate. It was almost midnight, and from the device came a sequence of whistles and booms, as it always happens when one tries to tune in on a short wave length. Finally we found an American radio station: with the appropriate tone it announced that the President of the United States was about to speak to the American people. We all lent our ears, even Piccioni who did not speak any English: we were not about to listen to an oracle, but directly to one of the Gods, armed with the lightning which can incinerate the world. Kennedy's voice, which was always high-pitched, came out meowing and broken, interrupted by a frequent fading which seemed to push it farther away into the ether. We did not understand much, not even Virginia [the Ambassador's wife] who had joined us: and this inability totally disheartened us, for the first time since we had realized the gravity of the crisis.

Something immense was happening, but outside of us and in the name of a logic which we could understand as correct but from which we felt excluded. We understood, even if we did not share it, Fanfani's agitation: but who was luckier, he, to whom the possibility to act somehow gave the impression to be in, inside the story (which on the contrary was being written in a completely different place), or Piccioni, who accepted being out with great equanimity? Luckiest of them all was certainly De Gaulle, who did not hesitate for a moment in placing France side-to-side with the US in the hour of its supreme risk. After several attempts to improve the reception, Casardi raised his questioning eyes towards the Minister. "Let's go to bed," said Attilio Piccioni, "the ball now is in Moscow's court."

Russo and Fornari left after three hours of sleep; during the rest of the day, others left Brussels as well. Those who stayed accompanied Piccioni to the meeting with the Ministers of the Six, where we discussed the regime of Cyprus' tomatoes and potatoes in a Common Market enlarged to the UK. The news got worse by the hour: Moscow had not replied to the ultimatum, the US armed forces were being placed in a state of alert [...]

The morning after, I went upstairs to the second floor of the Embassy, where Piccioni's apartment was located. In the corridor I met to my great surprise Mr. Pace, the minister's valet, who was carrying two large suitcases. When I asked him, he replied with a Roman accent thicker than usual, which revealed his disappointment at the news "Don't you know? They informed us we must go back to Rome. But I say, couldn't they leave us here? What are we going to do in Rome, save the world? When will they ever realize that we have very little to say?" ...

The Italian Foreign Ministry assesses the causes and consequences of the crisis (December 1962)

[From a background paper prepared for the Italian Delegation at the December 1962 meeting of the North Atlantic Council:]

[...] Point 1. Analysis of the international situation.

1) Trends of Soviet policy

The Cuban Crisis

The motivations that pushed the Soviet leaders to the Cuban adventure probably have their roots in the fact that by 1962 they had come to share the Western assessment of the strategic nuclear balance of power between the blocs: that is, that the balance is favorable to the West.

To re-balance the situation, the Russians had two options:

1. To overcome the Americans in the production of ICBMs and SLBMs based on submarines: a slow and expensive way for which the Soviet economy has less resources than the American one
2. To deploy IRBM launching pads next to the American territory.

Cuba seemed to offer the conditions required to adopt the second option. If the initiative had succeeded, the Soviet opportunities for an initial atomic strike would have grown so much as to reduce considerably the American capacity to retaliate, and with it, the effectiveness of the "deterrent."

It is also possible that Khrushchev intended to use the bases in Cuba for a trade-off against Berlin in the next few months.

The critical mistake the Soviets made in their calculation was about the American reaction, which turned out to be much different and much sterner than they had

foreseen.

The Russians realized immediately that an American air strike against the bases in Cuba, with the consequent loss of Soviet lives, or an American landing, with the overthrowing of Castro's regime, would have left them with no other choice between a nuclear war - which they are not willing to face - and accepting a defeat much worse than the withdrawal of the missiles.

By accepting the latter, the Russians have actually decided to cut their losses. (The Soviet attempt to obtain in return the removal of the Turkish bases was promptly withdrawn, thanks to the American firmness.)

The fact that the Soviets gave in, however, must be interpreted as a withdrawal but not as a weakening or a substantial change in their military posture or political intentions. (And even the withdrawal was skillfully used by the Russians, stressing its peaceful nature.)

Furthermore, if it is true that the Cuban crisis has confirmed the role attributed to conventional weapons by Atlantic strategy, as the timing of the American actions was clearly based on the possible use of these weapons, it is also true that in other areas a conventional balance of power might as well turn out to be more favorable to the Russians. Hence the need not to draw any general conclusions about the Soviet attitude.

The situation of Soviet inferiority in terms of strategic nuclear weapons, which was at the origin of the Cuban affair, has not been modified. In order to get out of this situation, therefore, we must expect the Russians to step up their defense program, which as a consequence will produce a worsening of the population's economic conditions. In the meantime, the Soviet government will probably continue to negotiate partial disarmament measures in order to gain time, but without searching for a real and definitive détente in its relationship with the West.

The domestic consequences of the Cuban issue inside Russia seem to be rather modest, if there are any at all. Khrushchev seems to be in full control of the situation without the need to adopt any specific measure against old and new opponents. Even the position of the USSR as the leader of the satellite countries does not seem to have been shaken after Cuba, as demonstrated by Khrushchev's convocation of all the leaders of those countries in order to impose his own leadership and break any possible resistance (see the energetic purge in Bulgaria).

In the Sino-Soviet context, on the contrary, Khrushchev's redeployment in the Caribbean has reinvigorated the diatribes between the two countries, even if a break such as the one with Albania does not necessarily seem imminent.

In conclusion, the Cuban affair has demonstrated:

- a) The audacity and the unscrupulousness of the Soviet Prime Minister, as well as his self-control and his exceptional speed in recovering
- b) The possibility that the Russians might drop their customary caution if the prize at stake seems to them a large one and if they overrate their chances of success
- c) That world peace and security are indivisible and that any crisis hotbed, even outside of the NATO area, has immediate repercussions in the area of Atlantic commitments: hence the necessity to strengthen the consultations inside NATO in order to focus on those potential hotbeds

d) The necessity for the West to adopt a firm and united stand in time of an emergency

e) The serious danger for peace at any time when one tries to alter the balance between the blocs: which confirms the validity of the Western position on a gradual and balanced disarmament.

[...]