



Inside Nikita Khrushchev's Secret Bunker

Eastern Europe is filled with historically significant sites from the Cold War, but a unique one is “Bunker 42,” a facility buried deep under central Moscow. Fifty-three years ago, at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev huddled with his

generals in the bunker's command center ready to order a nuclear strike against the United States. Such an order would have triggered massive retaliation—and Armageddon. Thankfully, this didn't happen, and today the bunker hosts only harmless, curious visitors.

Earlier this year Chicago-based thriller author A.C. Frieden visited Bunker 42 for his Cold War literary research. Officially known as the “Tangansky Protected Command Point” during its operational years, the underground complex is located 2 km (1.3 miles) from the Kremlin. From there it's a short walk along the scenic east bank of the Moskva River, though the Moskvoretskaya embankment can be windy and cold in fall, as it was in late October 1962, when the USSR and the U.S. were on the brink of nuclear war. During the 12-day Cuban Missile Crisis, Khrushchev traveled to and from the bunker in his armored Zil limousine and used one of several secret entrances into the complex.

Access to the complex today is from a nondescript, yellow-colored two-story building a couple blocks east of the river. Now visitors are greeted by a green metal door adorned with a red star. From there a tour guide takes them through a short passageway, past a tiny souvenir booth, and on through the first of several reinforced steel and concrete doors. The corridor then leads to the stairwell that descends 12 floors below ground (the deepest point is about 65 meters, or 212 feet). The air becomes noticeably stuffy below the seventh floor, but the temperature doesn't change much. Upon reaching the bottom, approximately 7,000 square metres (75,000 square feet) of once-secret, heavily reinforced galleries and tunnels await.

Construction of the bunker was started by Khrushchev's predecessor, Joseph Stalin, who wanted a hardened military facility to protect the Soviet Union's senior leadership in case of a nuclear attack by the United States. By the end of 1951, construction was in full swing. Government engineers employed the same techniques, materials and machinery that were being used to build the Moscow Metro system. In fact, to help conceal the bunker's development, many workers were disguised as metro construction staff and accessed the site through the nearby metro tunnel between the Kurskaya and Taganskaya stations.

The complex was finally completed in 1956 and featured four large reinforced tunnels, or “blocks,” connected to numerous smaller tunnels and separated by blast doors. There were also extensive food and water storage spaces, air filtration systems, medical quarters, galleys, communications and command rooms as well as living quarters designed to keep approximately 3000 military and government personnel alive for three to four months in the event that a nuclear attack destroyed the city aboveground.

The facility would probably have survived a limited nuclear conflict, but any surface detonation of a large-yield nuclear warhead within a radius of 800 meters (a half-mile) would have likely killed most or all of those inside. The bunker remained operational into the 1960s and periodically received upgraded equipment. But when the Soviet military began building newer, deeper facilities on the outskirts of Moscow later that decade, Bunker 42 lost its relevance and was no longer maintained. It was declassified in 1995.

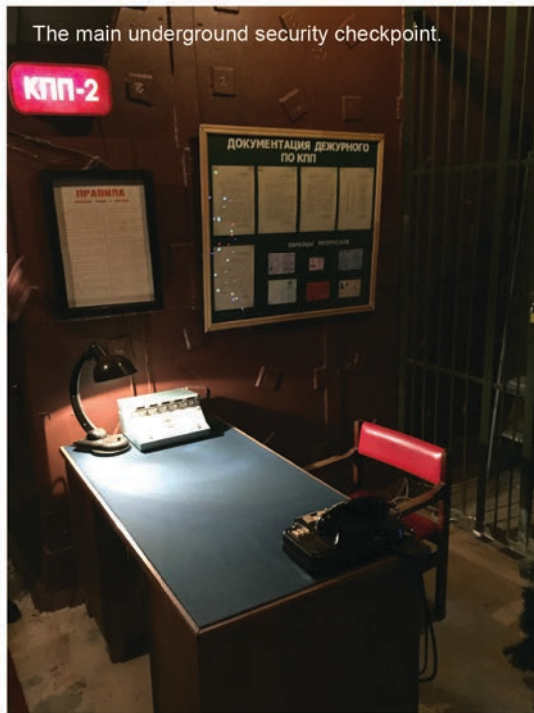
In 2006, the Russian government sold the complex to a private company, which turned it into a museum and entertainment facility after many years of renovations. Today, visitors have access to about 30 percent of the underground complex, which now also showcases a wide range of Soviet-era military artifacts, including a prototype of the USSR’s first atomic bomb, encrypted communications hardware of the time, Soviet propaganda posters, and other relics. Other parts of the facility serve as a restaurant and conference center, but the remaining areas are in a state of disrepair and not likely to be renovated or repurposed anytime soon.

Frieden has visited many underground military installations across the globe, including recently former nuclear missile bases in Ukraine and Arizona. Also, during his Swiss Army service, he accessed numerous state-of-the-art military bunkers, including two large facilities built deep in the Alps. ⊕

A.C. Frieden stands in the central armor-clad access tunnel connecting the main entry stairwell with the rest of the underground complex known as Bunker 42.



The main underground security checkpoint.



A map of the underground bunker complex.

