

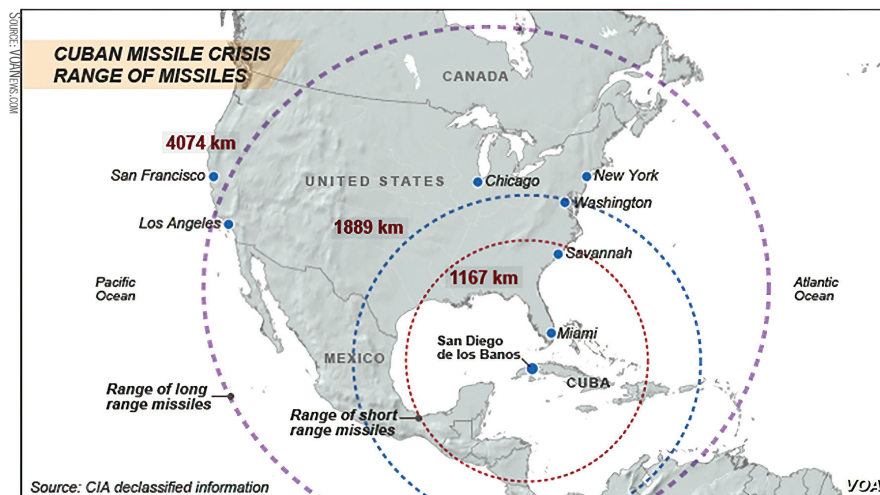
When Intelligence Made a Difference

— COLD WAR —

Soviet Deception and the Cuban Missile Crisis

by Robert M. Clark

In 1960, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev was facing a serious threat that had to be dealt with. During 1958 and 1959, the US had deployed its Jupiter MRBMs in Turkey and Italy, posing a strategic threat for which the Soviets had no adequate response. Their ICBMs capable of reaching the US were still in development. And though the Soviets had their own supply of MRBMs, those posed no threat to the US if based in the USSR.¹



Cuban Crisis, missile range

Cuba, however, offered an attractive option for a fait accompli. If the Soviets could somehow place their nuclear-equipped SS-4 and SS-5 missiles in Cuba, they could counter the US strategic edge.² To do so,

1. A Medium Range Ballistic Missile (MRBM) is defined as having a range of from 1,000 to 3,000 kilometers (620 – 1,860 miles); an Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile (IRBM) of 3,000 to 5,000 kilometers (1,860 – 3,410 miles); and an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) of over 5,000 kilometers (3,410 miles). (Source: www.armscontrol.org.)
2. The SS-4 was judged to have a range of 2,000 kilometers, and the

though, would require concealing the deployment until the missiles were combat-ready. Khrushchev believed that the US government would do nothing about the deployment if it did not recognize what was happening until the missiles were in Cuba and on combat ready status. To do that, the Soviet military created an elaborate deception program to conceal the missile deployment. It almost succeeded.

The Deception

A robust deception plan must include four elements. First, the plan has to be based in some part on truth, to show some appearance of legitimacy. And, there must also be denial, deceit, and misdirection, to lead the opponent away from the full or actual truth toward a false picture (in deception terminology, the “story”) of what is happening.³ The Cuban deception had all four elements.

Truth The story for the missile deployment was that the Soviet shipments to Cuba contained only nonmilitary cargo. Automobiles, tractors, and harvesters were placed on the top decks so that imagery of the ships would convey the impression that they had only agricultural equipment and consumer goods aboard. Upon reaching Cuba, this materiel was unloaded in the daytime. Radio Moscow regularly reported that the Soviet Union was supplying Cuba with machine tools, wheat, agricultural machinery and fertilizer.

Denial COMINT denial was carried to the extreme: no electronic communications about the operation, even encrypted ones, were permitted. All details were hand carried. For IMINT denial, military cargo was loaded onto the ships under cover of darkness. Upon reaching Cuba,

the concealed weaponry was unloaded only at night (after the top deck was unloaded) and moved directly to the deployment bases along back roads, again during darkness.

SS-5 a range of 3,200 to 3,700 kilometers. (Source: www.atomicarchive.com.)

3. Robert M. Clark and William L. Mitchell, *Deception* (Los Angeles: Sage/CQ Press, 2019)

Deceit It is standard practice, of course, to attempt to deceive the opponent. But the Soviets took it one step farther: they deceived their own troops and even senior military leaders who might be HUMINT targets. The operation was designed to appear to be a military exercise in northern Russia. It was given the code name ANADYR (a river in the Russian north). Soviet military units designated for the Cuban assignment were informed that an exercise would be held in a cold region and outfitted with winter equipment. Missile experts assigned to the project were told that they would be working on ballistic missiles in the Soviet arctic test range at Novaya Zemlya. Officers and missile specialists traveled to Cuba as irrigation and agricultural specialists or machine operators. The ships' captains made false declarations when exiting the Black Sea and the Bosphorus. They altered the cargo records and declared tonnage well below what was being carried. They often listed Conakry, Guinea, as their destination before proceeding to Cuba.⁴

The diplomatic channel was also used to deceive. During September, Soviet diplomats gave repeated assurances to top US officials (including President John Kennedy) that they had no intention of putting offensive weaponry in Cuba.⁵

Misdirection A view of the top decks on ships headed for Cuba conveyed the impression that they were carrying only agricultural cargo. But the most innovative misdirection was one that few intelligence services would attempt: The Soviets leaked information about the deployment to mask it.

Prior to 1962, Cuban émigrés and defectors had provided false intelligence reports of ballistic missiles being hidden in Cuba. Other refugees had made similar claims in newspaper reporting. Soviet intelligence saw an opportunity to misdirect by adding to that flood. They funneled accurate details about the missile deployment through counterrevolutionary Cuban organizations in the United States. They knew that CIA and DIA analysts did not regard the groups as credible; and in fact, those analysts dismissed the subsequent stream of reports about missiles in Cuba – a few of which were valid – as just being more of the same.⁶

4. James H. Hansen, "Soviet Deception in the Cuban Missile Crisis," *Studies in Intelligence*, 46, no. 1 (2002), <http://www.cia.gov/csi/studies/vol46no1/article06.html>.

5. *ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

Uncovering the Deception

The operation was not executed to perfection; deceptions almost never are. There were some flaws, and in the end the effort unraveled.

In 1961, COMINT analysts at the US National Security Agency began to see a troubling trend. They were intercepting messages about a number of Soviet ships headed for Cuba. The cargo manifests were blank, causing suspicion that the shipments could be carrying cargo of military significance. Other ships appeared to be heading for Cuba after reporting another destination and declaring less cargo than the ships could carry. Meanwhile, separate NSA intercepts indicated that the Cubans were unloading ships at night and taking unusual precautions to keep the deliveries secret. In one communication, Cuban port authorities mentioned the arrival of tanks; in others, Cubans discussed "highly unusual aircraft" and radars.⁷

During 1962, the pattern of suspect deliveries continued, and US leadership became concerned. If the military deliveries were purely for defensive purposes, that was a problem, but not one that called for military action; Cuba had the right to defend itself. If offensive weapons were being delivered, that was another matter entirely. But during August and September of that year, two developments spurred US intelligence into taking a closer look at just what was in Cuba:

- The freighter *Poltava* was observed enroute to Cuba on September 15. The Soviets were known to rely on large-hatch ships such as the *Poltava* to deliver ballistic missiles.
- On September 28, imagery showed a row of crates on the deck of the freighter *Kasimov* enroute to Cuba. NPIC imagery analysts quickly identified the crates; they were identical to ones used in shipping the fuselages of IL-28 medium bombers.

The discoveries prompted top US leaders to order U-2 reconnaissance flights over Cuba. The resulting imagery exposed the deception. The Soviets had a standard way of building a missile launch facility, and they kept that design intact in building the Cuban sites. On October 15, NPIC analysts received U-2 imagery of a facility at San Cristobal, and immediately identified it as an SS-4 launch site.⁸ The Cuban missile crisis was underway.

7. NSA Center for Cryptologic History, "NSA and the Cuban Missile Crisis," https://www.nsa.gov/about/cryptologic-heritage/historical-figures-publications/publications/coldwar/assets/files/cuban_missile_crisis.pdf

8. Dino Brugioni, *Eyeball to Eyeball: The Inside Story of the Cuban Mis-*

On October 22, President Kennedy announced a naval “quarantine” of Cuban ports to prevent further deliveries. After several days of tense negotiations, the President and Premier Khrushchev agreed to a solution that resulted in the Soviets withdrawing the missiles and bombers from Cuba.

Aftermath

Intelligence successes seldom make the headlines; it's usually failures that appear in the media. The Cuban missile crisis is a notable exception. It nevertheless has occasionally been called an intelligence failure. After all, four times in the nine-month period leading up to October 15, US National Intelligence Estimates assessed that Soviet activities in Cuba were meant to deter an American attack there, not to establish an offensive base in Cuba.⁹

But the best intelligence effort will fail against a well-crafted deception, and the Soviet effort was exceptionally well executed until its final stages. Prior to the crisis, CIA and DIA received approximately 3,500 HUMINT reports, mostly from Cuban refugees, about Soviet missiles in Cuba. CIA Director John McCone later estimated that only six of them were accurate.¹⁰ Faced with a mass of misleading raw intelligence, analysts had to rely on Soviet traditional behavior patterns in making judgments. Before 1962, the Soviets had

never deployed nuclear weapons outside their direct control, and US analysts assessed that they would not do so by deploying nuclear warhead-equipped missiles in Cuba. As CIA Board of National Estimates Chairman Sherman Kent was later to observe, “No estimating process can be expected to divine exactly when the enemy is about to make a dramatically wrong decision.”¹¹

The fact is that US intelligence did make a difference. It detected the deception and identified the deployment so that policymakers could act in time – that is, before the missiles could reach operational status.

Robert M. Clark is the author of several books on intelligence. His latest is *Deception: Counterdeception and Counterintelligence* with William L. Mitchell, CQ Press, 2019.

Editor's Note: In the next issue of *The Intelligencer*, we'll examine a later case where the opponents had better success with deception: the Pokhran nuclear test of 1998.

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sile Crisis (New York, NY: Random House, 1990), 73.

9. Amy Zegart, “The Cuban Missile Crisis as Intelligence Failure,” The Hoover Institution, October 2, 2012, <https://www.hoover.org/research/cuban-missile-crisis-intelligence-failure>.

10. Ibid.

11. Sherman Kent, “A Crucial Estimate Relived,” CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1964, <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/sherman-kent-and-the-board-of-national-estimates-collected-essays/gcrucial.html>.

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