



When Intelligence Made a Difference

— COLD WAR —

The Cuban Missile Crisis

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Editor Note: This article is an abridged version of a 208-page digital monograph of the same title now available on AFIO's website¹. The manuscript includes many additional details of the intelligence aspects of the Cuban Missile Crisis together with numerous images and a bibliography. In the interest of brevity, sources for this article are not footnoted. Footnotes appear in the manuscript. For readers who desire a hardcopy of the full manuscript it is available through Amazon and other booksellers.

Former Director of Central Intelligence Richard Helms once said "... the Cuban Missile Crisis was really an intelligence crisis. The threat appeared only through intelligence sources. Only those sources confirmed that the threat had gone away." While Helms identified the two key questions, the intelligence challenge was about much more than just discovering nuclear missiles and confirming they left. There were other dimensions of the overall threat that the Kennedy administration needed to understand to resolve the crisis.

This is the story of what American intelligence knew, when it knew it, and how it knew what the Soviets were doing in Cuba prior to and during the crisis—and what we now know, 60 years later, from Russian writings and statements, of what the Soviets were actually doing in Cuba.

While the U-2 photographs deservedly get the credit for finding the evidence of nuclear missiles in Cuba, it was but one of many sources that contributed to answering the questions that the administration posed to then Director of Central Intelligence (DCI), John McCone. The intelligence that made a difference to President Kennedy came from all sources: clandestine human agents, refuge interrogations, communications intercepts, electronic means, overhead photography, and open sources. McCone had the temperament, and the drive to bring all intelligence

sources—those at the national level and those from the intelligence components of the military services—together to paint the intelligence picture for senior policymakers at a time of severe national crisis and extreme leadership stress.

McCone, like Kennedy, believed that the DCI should be the chief intelligence officer in the U.S. government and he acted as such during the Cuban Missile Crisis. He thought that he could best serve the President by ensuring that the community, not just CIA, provided the most accurate and timely intelligence possible. McCone recognized that DOD "owned" the intelligence elements in the military services, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and the National Security Agency (NSA), but he believed that much of what they did was "national" in character and therefore something with which he should be concerned.

The Intelligence Challenge

The single most defining feature of the Soviet's Cuban adventure, Operation Anadyr, was its extreme secrecy—enveloped by measures to conceal, mislead, deceive, cover up and lie—that was integral to each and every aspect of the plan. The Soviets had long used such measures to conceal their actions and intentions, but in Anadyr it went to extremes. Anadyr was executed brilliantly by the Soviets, and but for one fatal flaw would have succeeded in presenting President Kennedy with a *fait accompli*—nuclear missiles stationed in his neighborhood ready and able to deliver a devastating nuclear strike against most any part of the United States.

Moscow has always had a flair for concealing secret information and for deceiving its adversaries in what is known in Russian as *maskirovka*. Soviet preparations for and execution of critical aspects of their deployment of nuclear missiles to Cuba under Operation Anadyr is a case study in Russian *maskirovka*.

Soviet planning for Anadyr that began in the spring of 1962 was done under a strict need-to know. No communications about the proposed, planned and actual Soviet deployments were sent, even by coded message; everything was hand-carried by members of the small group of senior officials who were directly involved. The Soviets even misled their own officials about the objective of the operation by naming it Anadyr, promoting a false allusion of an exercise in the far north of Russia.² To aid in concealing the true

1. https://www.afio.com/publications/monographs/HEITCHUE_The_Cuban_Missile_Crisis_Monograph_2022.pdf

2. Anadyr is a town in the far northeast of Siberia on the Bering Sea near the Arctic Circle.

destination—Cuba—from its own units, some were outfitted with winter clothing and equipment.

The secrecy and deception associated with Anadyr was highly effective until indications of the nuclear missiles were seen on 14 October 1962. The Soviets made no attempt to conceal their sites from overhead reconnaissance, even though they were well aware of the American U-2 spy plane and its photographic capabilities. The failure to hide the sites and the missiles is attributable to the Soviets following standard procedure—Soviet missiles deployed in the USSR were not camouflaged and there was little thought given to camouflaging them in Cuba.

Khrushchev's attempted *fait accompli* failed. Anadyr was to have remained secret until the missiles were operational—a cheap, but temporary righting of the strategic imbalance, the deterrence of an American invasion of Cuba, and the reemergence of the Soviet Union as a major player on the world stage.

The Early Period; 16 – 22 October

Tuesday morning, 16 October 1962, President Kennedy was told of the nuclear missiles that the Soviet Union had installed in Cuba. On 22 October, Kennedy would go on nation-wide television to announce it to the American public and the world. The crisis abated Sunday morning 28 October with the Soviet agreement to remove the missiles. Those thirteen days between the beginning and the end of the crisis, immortalized in Robert Kennedy's book *Thirteen Days*, were a supreme test of U.S. intelligence as it sought to understand what Khrushchev was doing in Cuba using every possible means. What follows are the questions that President Kennedy and his advisors asked, or should have asked of intelligence, and *how*, and *how well*, the intelligence community answered them. In answering the “how well” we are able to compare the intelligence of the period with what we now know the Soviets were actually doing in Cuba at the time based on subsequent Russian revelations.

Khrushchev's Intentions?

Post-mortems of intelligence performance in the crisis tend to highlight the failure of Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) 85-3-62 that judged it unlikely the Soviets would introduce strategic offensive weapons into Cuba, although it did not entirely dismiss the possibility.

In preparing the SNIE, the estimators searched for information indicative of possible Soviet nuclear

weapons being deployed to Cuba, but lacking hard evidence they concluded that the military equipment piling into Cuba indicated a Soviet attempt to give Castro a formidable defensive capability to deter U.S. military moves to overthrow him. The estimators gave thought to how the Soviets might perceive American attitudes to basing strategic missiles in Cuba and concluded that the Soviets would have estimated that the American people and government would be outraged by such action, leading the estimators to the judgment that the Soviets would not undertake the great risks involved.

Once nuclear missiles were discovered, Sherman Kent, who as Director of the Office of National Estimates (ONE) was responsible for the erroneous estimate, realized that the estimate of the Soviets understanding of the mood of the United States and its probable reaction was wrong. “We missed the Soviet decision to put missiles in Cuba because we could not believe that Khrushchev could make such a mistake.”

The U.S. “failure” to predict Soviet missiles going to Cuba sits alongside the Soviets real failures: first, the inability to accurately assess the American response to the missiles and, second, the belief that they would remain undiscovered until they were operational. The Soviet misestimation cannot be attributed to the KGB or GRU³, but rather to Khrushchev himself who operated as his own intelligence analyst.

What the ONE estimators failed to see, McCone saw clearly—the Soviets had deployed offensive missiles to Cuba. McCone's beliefs had no evidentiary basis and received little or no acceptance elsewhere in the community. They were apparently a reflection of his instincts and fears, and did not influence the estimators.

What are Those Ships Carrying?

Soviet shipping to Cuba began to increase dramatically in mid-July 1962, leading intelligence analysts to conclude that something unusual was happening. Arms shipment to Cuba had averaged about two shiploads a month during the first half of 1962, but jumped to 125 voyages involving military cargoes in the three months between the last days of July and mid-to late October. The Soviet pattern had changed so dramatically and abruptly that U.S. leadership could have concluded that the armaments being delivered represented more than could be justified for the defense of the island nation.

3. KGB: Committee for State Security of the USSR. GRU: Soviet military intelligence

The U.S. was unable to definitively ascertain the types of weapons the Soviets were shipping despite intelligence that was collected through communications intercepts, maritime surveillance, and human sources when the ships were approaching Cuba or in port being offloaded. Photographs of ships bound for Cuba were acquired from a variety of sources, especially U.S. Navy ships and aircraft, and were sent to the experts at the National Photographic Interpretation Center (NPIC) in Washington.

Despite the lack of definitive evidence that nuclear missiles were being carried by the Soviet ships, there were indications to that effect. Photographs of ships at sea showed that some were riding high in the water, indicative of a cargo that took up a lot of space but was not very heavy—like a big missile empty of fuel. Furthermore, the ships that sailed to Cuba after mid-July included a group of large-hatch ships, the only Soviet-flag vessels capable of transporting large missiles out of sight below decks.

NSA routinely monitored Soviet ship radio traffic in the North Atlantic in conjunction with Britain's GCHQ⁴ and Canada's SIGINT agency. Intercepts provided intelligence on daily ship positions, tonnages, destinations, and cargoes, as well as Soviet attempts to deny or falsify this information. This led NSA analysts to conclude that there was something secret and unusual going on, although exactly what was unknown.

Are There Offensive Missiles in Cuba?

CIA agents in Cuba and Cubans who fled to the U.S. were in positions to see the movement of Soviet military equipment in Cuba and reported this information as soon as they were able. Agent reports were delayed because the information had to be concealed in secret writing and mailed to accommodation addresses used by the CIA for secret communications. Other reports were delayed because refugees needed to make their way to the U.S. and then report their sightings.

Soon after Castro's triumphant arrival in Havana, the intelligence community had been flooded with reports of Soviet weapons and missile installations on the island of Cuba. To process the flow of information, CIA established a Joint Interrogation Center at Opa Locka near Miami. The Center was known as the Caribbean Admission Center and manned by trained interrogators from the military and CIA. Opa Locka

4. Government Communications Headquarters responsible for signals intelligence in the United Kingdom

did not operate like a typical CIA station. It was overt and drummed up business by listing its phone number in the local telephone book.

By September 1962, the volume of agent and refugee reporting had become very large. A substantial proportion of these reports concerned defensive missiles, but CIA and DIA analysts recognized and correlated the first authentic reports of Medium Range Ballistic Missile (MRBM) equipment and took action.

An agent report of 7 September grabbed the attention of Ted Shackley, chief of CIA's Miami station (cryptonym JMWAVE). The secret agent had been recruited under the Mongoose covert action element at CIA and in secret writing conveyed information about a mountainous area near San Cristóbal where "very secret and important work" believed to involve missiles was in progress. What made this agent report intriguing was that it coincided with the refugee reports that described large missiles last seen heading west from Havana.

CIA had increased the frequency of Cuban overflights beginning in May 1962, but the first hard evidence of the nature of the Soviet buildup—the discovery of SA-2 surface-to-air missile sites in the western part of the island—did not come in until the U-2 flight of 29 August.

The discovery of the SA-2 sites made the administration far more cautious when considering Cuban overflights. Concern that a loss of a U-2 over Cuba would cause another major diplomatic crisis⁵ led Secretary of State Dean Rusk and National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy to restrict the Agency's plan to overfly Cuba, greatly reducing the collection of photographic intelligence at a critical time. Not only had the cautiously-designed mission plans limited coverage, but Caribbean weather at the time further reduced the opportunities for coverage of Cuban targets by overhead reconnaissance.

In early October, President Kennedy, at the urging of DOD and the Air Force, shifted responsibility for Cuban U-2 overflights from CIA to the Air Force. Henceforth missions would be flown by Air Force Strategic Air Command (SAC) pilots. Acting DCI U.S. Army General Marshall Carter reacted strongly to the Air Force takeover, and argued against changing command and control at such a crucial time. He told Deputy Secretary of Defense Gilpatric "To put in a

5. Two years previously, on 1 May 1960, CIA pilot Francis Gary Powers' U-2 was shot down by a SA-2 missile near Sverdlovsk in the USSR resulting in a major international embarrassment for President Eisenhower. Also, on 8 September 1962 a U-2 flown by a Nationalist Chinese pilot was shot down over the Peoples Republic of China.

brand-new green pilot just because he happens to have on a blue suit and to completely disrupt the command and control and communication and ground support system on 72 hours' notice to me doesn't make a God damn bit of sense, Mr. Secretary." Carter was clearly disappointed and concerned over the abruptness of the change and he told McCone that the immediate turn-over was "a hell of a way to run a railroad." McCone then told Carter: "If that's the way they're going to run the railroad, let them run the goddamn thing."

By 14 October the weather over Cuba had cleared, and the first SAC overflight of the island by Major Richard Heyser took place in a U-2C "borrowed" from the CIA⁶. The film was rushed to NPIC for interpretation and by the evening of 15 October, experts had found evidence of MRBM's in the San Cristobal area. Senior officials were immediately notified and on 16 October, DDCI Carter (McCone was away from Washington) briefed the President.

Have you Found the Nuclear Warheads?

President Kennedy often asked McCone and NPIC chief Arthur Lundahl that question. The answer was always *no*, but today, thanks to retrospective research, and statements by former Soviet officials, we know there were nuclear weapons in Cuba, where they were located, when they arrived in Cuba and when they were withdrawn. While *direct* evidence concerning the presence of warheads has never been found, and given the limitations of overhead photography and Soviet security measures, probably could not have been, there is now little question that the USSR did have a nuclear capability in Cuba.

While U.S. intelligence did not observe nuclear warheads it had accumulated numerous indicators in the form of "signatures" that resembled those of nuclear facilities and equipment that NPIC had seen in the USSR. At each of the MRBM and IRBM (Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile) sites photo interpreters found either nuclear warhead storage bunkers or construction activity indicating they were being planned. One of the features of nuclear installations in the Soviet Union was heavily guarded security fencing, and it was believed that Soviet security officials would exercise even more caution and physical security when nuclear weapons were deployed to Cuba. In its search for nuclear weapons indicators in Cuba, NPIC photo interpreters looked for, but didn't find evidence similar

6. CIA's U-2 "C"-model, with an upgraded J-75 engine, could cruise over 74,000 feet altitude, making it less vulnerable than the Air Force version of the aircraft that flew lower. (See the U-2 vignette in the digital version on the AFIO website.)

to what they had seen in the USSR, the reason being that, curiously, those indicators didn't exist.



WE BLOCKADE CUBA ARMS

Red Ships Face Search or Sinking



On 22 October 1962 President Kennedy announced the U.S. discovery of medium range nuclear missiles capable of striking major American cities and imposed a U.S. naval blockade, aka "quarantine," of Cuba. Thus opened the public phase of the Cuban Missile Crisis that for the next six days threatened to precipitate a nuclear war between the two superpowers. (Image source: Woodstockwisperer.info.)

Do the Russians Know?

Between the discovery of MRBM missiles on 15 October and President Kennedy's announcement on the 22nd, those few U.S. officials who knew wondered whether the Soviets knew of the U.S. discovery. The secret of the missile discovery had been extremely tightly held and special precautions had been taken to avoid creating the appearance that something out of the ordinary was happening in Washington. Secrecy was paramount and Kennedy would not disclose to anyone who lacked a rigid "need to know" what the U-2 had discovered. Had the discovery been widely known within the government, it would have leaked, and had it leaked, the administration's diplomatic initiative, achieved by making a countermove when unmasking Soviet duplicity, would have been lost. As it turned out, this was perhaps the best kept secret in American history, but only barely.

Soviet intelligence provided Moscow little warning of the impending crisis. In the days immediately

preceding Kennedy's blockade speech, the Soviets detected unusual activity but could not determine the exact reason for it. The Soviet Presidium appears not to have had any advance warning of Kennedy's speech to the nation on Monday, 22 October. Khrushchev didn't know until then that the Americans knew everything. He became very angry not only about the quarantine that Kennedy announced, which he interpreted as an act of war, but at the Soviet generals for failing to hide the missiles.

What Should We Do with MONGOOSE?

On the morning of 16 October, the same morning that the President was informed of the missiles, Robert Kennedy was holding a meeting of senior officials which he opened by expressing "general dissatisfaction of the President" with Operation Mongoose. He pointed out that the covert action had been underway for a year, that the results were discouraging, that there had been no acts of sabotage, and that even the one which had been attempted had failed twice. General Edward Landsdale was the operational director of Mongoose, but the moving force behind it was Attorney General Robert Kennedy. In January 1962, the younger Kennedy had declared that Castro was the administration's top priority and that no time, money, effort or manpower was to be spared to push for Castro's overthrow. Mongoose operators were unable to deliver on the Kennedy demands, but their intelligence-gathering operations did assist the discovery of the Soviet missiles.

The Height of the Crisis: 22 — 28 October

The days between Monday, 22 October and Sunday, 28 October were days of high drama and extreme anxiety in the White House. Events appeared to be spinning out of control and a conflict seemed almost unavoidable, a conflict that could well erupt into all-out war. During this critical week Khrushchev's ships were streaming steadily toward the Quarantine line; The Soviet air defense system in Cuba became operational and immediately thereafter shot down a U-2C killing the pilot Air Force Major Rudolf Anderson; Castro ordered Cuban anti-aircraft batteries to operational status, and they began to fire on low-level U.S. reconnaissance planes; a U.S. U-2 from Alaska had inadvertently strayed into Soviet air space causing the U.S. to fear that Soviet leaders would view it as a reconnaissance mission ahead of an American attack; Foxtrot submarines had been discovered near

the ships transporting Soviet weapons and supplies to Cuba; construction at the Soviet MRBM sites had appreciably accelerated; and Khrushchev decided to play tough demanding the dismantlement of American-controlled missile bases in Turkey in exchange for removing his missiles in Cuba. As Kennedy and his Executive Committee (ExComm) struggled to assess the situation and decide a course of action, U.S. intelligence played a key supporting role by providing answers to critical questions.

Are the Surface to Air Missiles Operational?

Fear of Soviet SA-2 missiles played a major role in planning U-2 missions to overfly the island. Though SAM sites had been seen as early as late August, they did not become operational until late October. Understanding the operational status of the SA-2 sites largely depended on intercepting emissions from the radars⁷ that were associated with the SA-2 missile by electronic intelligence (ELINT) sources. Those sources were the USS *Oxford*, a converted WWII Liberty ship which operated under the technical direction and control of NSA, and SAC's RB-47H aircraft that had been operating around Cuba in search of SA-2 radar signals.

Around midnight on Friday, 26 October a SPOON REST radar came online, was picked up by the *Oxford*, and immediately reported to NSA. Major Rudolf Anderson, Jr., who had flown several Cuban U-2 missions, was flying one the morning of Saturday, 27 October, a tragic day that would be remembered as "Black Saturday." Word reached Washington that evening that Anderson had been shot down.

The order to attack Anderson's U-2 was given by Lt. General Stepan Grechko, the commander of Soviet air defenses in Cuba. Grechko had brought the entire air defense radar network into full combat mode the night before and was following Anderson's U-2 in real time since before it entered Cuban air space. Grechko had tried—unsuccessfully—to reach his superiors, but unable, he made the decision to fire on the intruding airplane. Khrushchev, who only learned about the shoot down from a Pentagon report, was furious as he knew that Kennedy would have no choice but to oblige his military leaders with some form of retaliation.

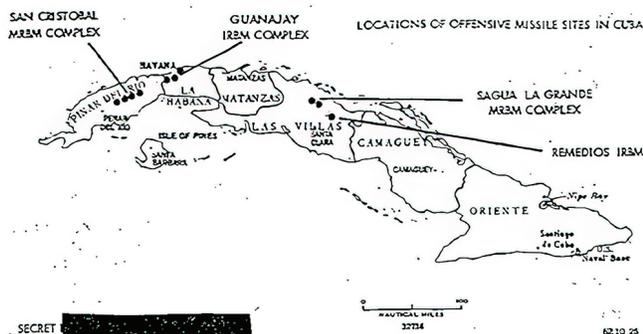
Are the MRBM's Operational?

Senior U.S. officials were desperate to know the readiness status of the MRBM missiles. The longer

7. SA-2-associated radars were SPOON REST, a long-range target acquisition radar, and FRUIT Set, a target tracking and missile control radar.

it took to reach operational status the more time to decide a course of action. The members of ExComm were racing against the clock: as soon as the launching pads were ready, the threat of nuclear attack would be real and the Soviet position would be reinforced. A surgical strike against the Soviet missiles could be considered *only* if none of the missiles were operational because otherwise some local Soviet commander might panic, and assuming that the Soviet Union itself was under attack, take matters into his own hands.

Two intelligence sources contributed to answering the question of the operational status of Soviet MRBM forces in Cuba: photographs from low-level reconnaissance missions and information provided by Colonel Oleg Penkovsky of the GRU, a spy for CIA and the British MI-6. Among the secret information he provided were the operational manuals for missiles of the type that the Soviets were deploying in Cuba. That information was particularly useful to intelligence analysts as they estimated how close the Soviets were to achieving a nuclear strike capability. Intelligence analysts determined that at least some of the Soviet MRBM's in Cuba could have been launched at the U.S. during the critical week of 22-28 October.



Soviet MRBM and IRBM sites in Cuba. On 27 October 1962 construction of the MRBM sites was complete and at full combat readiness with all 24 MRBM launchers able to deliver a strike against the U.S. The construction of the IRBM sites was never completed; U.S. intelligence estimated that the IRBM sites would have become operational between late November and mid-December. (Image source: CIA documents.)

How is Moscow Reacting?

Following the President's speech, U.S. military attachés of the American Embassy in Moscow made a concerted effort to observe the situation as the crisis unfolded: How was Moscow managing the crisis internally and were there any indicators of Soviet preparations for hostilities? Were government offices being evacuated? Were civil defense measures being taken? Were the number of trucks on the street day and night normal? The attachés of the three services pooled their efforts, sending daily a joint report to Washington.

Throughout the entire period of the crisis, the attachés had seen nothing in Moscow that reflected the serious external tension. Even with the benefit of hindsight, the attachés could not point to any unusual Soviet behavior during the month of October.

One of NSA's major jobs, especially during the crisis period, was watching Soviet military force readiness levels. Though not apparent to the U.S. military attachés in Moscow, following Kennedy's Oval Office speech on 22 October, Soviet forces went into an extraordinarily high state of alert. However, Soviet offensive (i.e., nuclear) forces avoided assuming the highest readiness stage, as if to ensure that Kennedy understood that the USSR would not be the first to launch nuclear missiles.

Will Khrushchev run the blockade?

In his 22 October speech, President Kennedy announced that a proclamation was to be signed the next day and would contain a period of grace, at the end of which a blockade, aka quarantine, of Cuba would be imposed. Institution of the blockade presented the first test of will between the President and Premier Khrushchev. Khrushchev's first reaction came on 23 October in a letter mildly admonishing the U.S. for interference in the internal affairs of the Republic of Cuba, the Soviet Union, and other states. His second letter on 24 October took a more defiant position. "You, Mr. President, are not declaring a quarantine, but rather are setting forth an ultimatum and threatening that if we do not give in to your demands, you will use force." "No, Mr. President, I cannot agree to this."

The morning the quarantine went into effect reports told of the Russian ships coming steadily on toward Cuba. Then came the disturbing Navy report that a Russian submarine had moved into position between the Russian ships. Robert Kennedy wrote: "I think these few minutes were the time of gravest concern for the President." Shortly thereafter, McCone told the president at the morning's ExComm meeting that six ships previously on their way to Cuba had stopped or had turned back toward the Soviet Union. A short time later, the report came that the twenty Russian ships closest to the barrier had stopped and were dead in the water or had turned around, news that brought a great sense of relief to the President and the ExComm.

Can We Prove There Are Missiles in Cuba?



Director of Central Intelligence John McCone leaves the White House after an ExComm meeting. (Image source: McCone history, CIA archive.)

On Thursday, 18 October, NPIC chief Arthur Lundahl was briefing the President on the latest U-2 photography. The President questioned Lundahl if the uninitiated could be persuaded that the U-2 photographs showed offensive MRBM facilities. Lundahl stated “probably not; we must have low-level photography for public consumption.” The president agreed, but those missions were delayed for several days so that the Soviets would not be tipped off that the U.S. government knew their secrets; President

Kennedy was playing for time while strategies and options were being debated.

On 23 October U.S. Navy pilots took off on missions codenamed Blue Moon to obtain photographs of the MRBM site at San Cristobal. Those photographs showed the missile assembly equipment, the fuel-tank trailers, the missile erector sites and the launchers themselves. (These were the pictures that Ambassador Stevenson used on 25 October when he confronted Soviet Ambassador Zorin at the UN Security Council.) The Air Force was anxious to get in on the action and on 24 October, pilots of the Tactical Air Command (TAC) flew their first missions.

During the crisis, Navy and Air Force pilots flew many missions over Cuba, flying at near-supersonic speed a few hundred feet above the ground under intense enemy ground fire. The Cuban gunners were inexperienced, and that may have saved U.S. pilots from being shot down.

What are those Submarines Doing?

As part of Operation Anadyr, the Soviets in early October deployed submarines to Cuba from Northern Fleet waters. The deployment was unusual and assumed additional significance because, in the past, the USSR had seldom deployed even a single submarine in the Western Atlantic. The U.S. Navy began detecting signs of increased Soviet submarine activity in the Atlantic as early as 13 October, and began increasing the readiness of its anti-submarine warfare (ASW) forces.

The Soviet submarines were identified as Foxtrot (NATO classification) diesel-electric attack boats, but the mission of the naval part of Operation Anadyr, named Kama, was unclear to U.S. intelligence: would they bring nuclear warheads to Cuba; would they establish a submarine base in Cuba; were they to protect the Soviet merchant ships and attack U.S. ships enforcing the quarantine. We now know the answer, but at the time the administration didn't, and thinking they were possibly bringing nuclear warheads to Cuba, the Soviet submarines were included in the quarantine order.

Secretary McNamara, concerned that lack of a standard means of signaling Soviet submarines to surface could lead to weapons unnecessarily being used against a Soviet submarine, and Vice Admiral Griffin, Deputy for Fleet Operations, devised a unique set of signals that could be used to signal Soviet submarines. The special “Submarine Surfacing and Identification Procedures” were broadcast widely, including to the Soviet Union, in a Notice to Mariners. Both Kennedy and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara assumed that the Soviet submarine captains had been informed about the new procedure and that they understood the meaning of the new signals. But, had they been told by the Soviet naval authorities and did they understand? (This question is explored in the digital version on the AFIO website.)

Of the four Foxtrot subs that secretly left for Cuba in early October, the U.S. Navy detected and closely tracked three. Only one escaped intensive U.S. surveillance. (In the digital version the author explains how the U.S. navy detected and tracked the Foxtrot submarines.)

The Ending

In his private letter to Kennedy of 27 October Khrushchev outlined a path to resolve the crisis that the White House saw as a positive step. But that private message was shortly followed by a public message



Ambassador Adlai Stevenson (far right) described U.S. photos showing Soviet missiles in Cuba at the United Nations on 25 October 1962. An NPIC official stands next to the easels where the photos are displayed. Soviet Ambassador Valerian Zorin denies U.S. claims of offensive missiles in Cuba and is humiliated by the evidence presented by Stevenson. (Image source: Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs.)

in which Khrushchev sought the removal of the U.S. Jupiter missiles in Turkey in exchange for his in Cuba. President Kennedy viewed the trade as not unreasonable; the Jupiters were obsolete and had little military utility. Importantly, Kennedy saw the trade as the way to end the crisis. He also saw that not being willing to give up the missiles in exchange for a peaceful ending to the crisis was an indefensible position for the United States, and he argued his point of view strongly with ExComm. But the members almost universally disagreed. In their view, an abrupt removal of the missiles would send a grave message to the European allies and threaten the NATO pact.

Following the ExComm meeting on the night of 27 October, Kennedy called together his closest advisors. Together, they agreed that the President would respond to the earlier conciliatory Khrushchev letter of 27 October while ignoring the second public message, and that Robert Kennedy would be dispatched to meet with Soviet Ambassador to the U.S. Anatoly Dobrynin. The junior Kennedy told Dobrynin that in due course the U.S. would remove the missiles from Turkey, but

only on condition that the deal not be revealed even in the highest American and Kremlin political councils. The secret pact remained so for many years.

By 28 October, Khrushchev had evidently had had enough of his high-risk, low-profit adventure and he agreed to dismantle the offensive weapons and to return them to the Soviet Union. On 1 November the Soviets began dismantling the long-range missile sites and withdrawing the MRBM's and their associated equipment. The question for U.S. intelligence was then ensuring the missiles were gone. The withdrawal operation was notable for its rapidity and its overtness, especially in comparison to the ultra-secret Anadyr operation.

On 2 November, missiles and equipment began appearing at the port of Mariel and on 5 November, missile equipment was noted moving into the port of La Isabella. By 10 November all 42 missiles had been loaded and were at sea enroute back to the USSR.

Intelligence Misses

Throughout the crisis, President Kennedy held firm to his objective—the removal by one means or another of the Soviet strategic missiles. American intelligence did its part in supporting Kennedy in meeting his objective. Former DCI Helms was noted at the beginning of this story as saying the Cuban Missile Crisis was about discovering the missiles and confirming that they left. In this, American intelligence did its job well. It is fair to say that intelligence made a difference, perhaps the difference in bringing the crisis to a successful end.

At the same time, U.S. intelligence missed and misjudged important aspects of the Soviet venture in Cuba. Those errors did not materially affect the peaceful resolution of the crisis that was accomplished through diplomatic means. But during the crisis military options were very seriously considered by ExComm and included an air strike and an air strike followed by an invasion. Soviet General Anatoli I. Gribkov explained what might have happened if U.S. air strikes and an invasion had been launched. “Under combat conditions, in the terrible disorder of the battlefield, there is an outside possibility that an enterprising Soviet commander could have put a low-yield *atomic* [emphasis added] warhead on a short-range cruise missile. If such an officer had also found a target for that weapon, it is hard to believe he would have waited long for approval from higher authority before firing. It is impossible to know what the U.S. response to such an act would have been.”

A review of U.S. intelligence performance during the crisis reveals: The size, composition and organization of Soviet forces on the island were seriously underestimated; intelligence and U.S. ASW forces hunting Soviet submarines didn’t know, and possibly could not have known, that those submarines were equipped with *nuclear-armed* torpedoes in addition to conventionally-armed ones; and most significantly, intelligence did not confirm the presence of tactical *nuclear* weapons on the island, and may have underplayed the possibility of their existence with U.S. forces consequently unprepared in an invasion. In his Foreword to Robert Kennedy’s book *Thirteen Days*, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. made an astounding statement: “No one in Washington dreamed that the Soviet soldiers might be equipped with tactical nukes.” At the 1992 Havana conference on the crisis,⁸ McNamara said the presence of Soviet tactical weapons in Cuba

8. See digital version for details of this and other Cuban Missile Crisis conferences.

created an added element of danger, which some of us had not anticipated [emphasis added] “It horrifies me to think what would have happened in the event of an invasion of Cuba!”

The presence in Cuba of tactical nuclear weapons remained a closely held Kremlin secret for more than three decades as was the presence of 42,000 Soviet troops.

Final Thoughts

Answering the “Why” Question

Why did Khrushchev take the gamble that ended so badly? Most scholars cite three motivating factors: first, he felt a strong need to support the Communist cause in Cuba and feared the country was threatened by the Americans; second, he sought to correct the imbalance in strategic nuclear armaments, and putting Soviet missiles in Cuba promised a cheap and quick, even if temporary, way of accomplishing that; and third, he sought to improve the political position of the Soviet Union, strengthening the Communist cause. While there is broad agreement about these motivations, which was the most important in Khrushchev’s calculations? (In the digital version, the author examines Khrushchev’s motivations.)

Assessing U.S. Intelligence

Operation Anadyr proved to be an especially difficult target for U.S. intelligence. Extreme security measures permeated every aspect of Soviet plans that, for the most part, were brilliantly executed. The Soviets successfully moved vast numbers of personnel and equipment⁹ thousands of miles from home to a foreign land without their true intentions being known. Where Anadyr failed was that the Soviets did not prevent the U.S. from discovering the missiles once they were installed in Cuba.

So how well did U.S. intelligence perform as it sought to penetrate the secrets of Anadyr? Many scholars have ventured to answer the question. One of those was CIA historian David Robarge, who in an “Intelligence Matters” podcast on 13 October 2021 said the U.S. earned an A-minus. (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cia-chief-historian-david-robarge-on-pivotal-global-events-intelligence-matters/>) This author,

9. The digital version includes a translated Top Secret memorandum from the Soviet Ministry of Defense to Khrushchev, dated 24 May 1962, listing in detail the troops, weapons, equipment and instructions for Operation Anadyr.

rather than assigning a summary grade, answers the question (in the digital version) in the context of each of the challenges that the US intelligence community faced. In which did it do well? In which did it do less well? And where did it fail?

Khrushchev's Miscalculation

Khrushchev is to blame for the Cuban Missile Crisis, even though a predicate—the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion—had been laid by the U.S. that was viewed by the Cubans and Soviets alike as seriously threatening the island nation. And while he was responsible for the crisis, he at least had the good sense to end it on what were essentially U.S. terms. He did so because he, like President Kennedy, greatly feared the horrific power of nuclear weapons. Both men fought to end the crisis before it spun out of control into a war that neither could win.

But Khrushchev's miscalculation had cost him heavily. He had been shown to be a liar, as being willing to sacrifice an ally, and as a much less cool and capable man in a crisis than his principal adversary. He had not changed the balance of strategic military power, even temporarily, and the inferior Soviet position was now plain for all to see. The attempt to redress the imbalance in a political sense had also failed, and Khrushchev had weakened his bargaining position in world affairs. He had broken even in only one respect: he still had his "socialist" Cuba, his foothold in the Western Hemisphere; and even here it was made clear that his foothold could be maintained only with American sufferance.

The principal sources of intelligence that together made a difference in the Cuban Missile Crisis were clandestine human intelligence, signals intelligence,

overhead reconnaissance, and photographic interpretation. The digital version of this article includes vignettes, stories within the main story, that highlight the role that each discipline played, significant personalities, and the story of the mysterious ABC Newsman – KGB backchannel, where the author tries to answer the questions of what really happened. Was it an important factor in resolving the crisis, or not, or something else?

This article and its related monograph have been reviewed by CIA's Prepublication Classification Review Board to ensure they contain no classified information.

Regis Heitchue began his agency career in CIA's Directorate of Science and Technology. He was involved in many innovations in technical means of collection. Since retiring in 2000 he has served as a consultant to CIA, the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA), the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) and the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO). At the Bush School of Government & Public Service, he taught intelligence and national security studies.

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