

***REFLECTIONS
ON THE
CUBAN MISSILE
CRISIS***

RAYMOND L. GARTHOFF



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Cuban Missile Crisis

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Cuban Missile Crisis**

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Foreword

OVER THE twenty-five years since the Cuban missile crisis, much has been written about the crisis itself and the lessons that can be learned from it. Yet there remains much that has not been addressed, and even today new facts about the events and deliberations continue to emerge.

In this book Raymond L. Garthoff, a participant in the crisis deliberations in the U.S. government, reflects on the nature of the crisis, its consequences, and its lessons for the future. He presents a number of facts for the first time and provides a unique combination of memoir, historical analysis, and political interpretation. He gives particular attention to the aftermath and “afterlife” of the crisis and to its bearing on current and future policy.

The author also supplies a dimension of analysis usually neglected: the crisis as experienced by the Soviets, and the lessons they appear to have drawn from it. He emphasizes the need to include this integral element of the picture not only to broaden historical perspective, but particularly to understand the interaction of American and Soviet policymaking in the events leading up to the crisis, in the confrontation itself, and in the subsequent development of U.S.-Soviet relations.

Raymond Garthoff, now a senior fellow in the Brookings Foreign Policy Studies program, wishes to acknowledge his appreciation to many colleagues involved in the missile crisis, and other students of the episode, with whom he has on various occasions discussed aspects of the subject. He wishes also to express appreciation to the National Security Archive for making

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BRUCE K. MACLAURY
President

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Contents

Introduction: Purpose and Perspective	1
Stage 1: The Soviet Decision	5
Stage 2: The U.S. Decision	23
Stage 3: The Confrontation	32
Stage 4: The Settlement	61
Stage 5: The Aftermath	84
Stage 6: The Afterlife	94
Conclusions: The Long-Term Legacy	107
Appendix: Memoranda, October–November 1962	129
Index	153

INTRODUCTION

Purpose and Perspective

DO WE NEED more reflections on the Cuban missile crisis? The historical event itself was sufficiently important, and the twenty-fifth anniversary is a suitable occasion to redirect attention to the crisis and the lessons we can learn from it. I raise the question nonetheless because so much has already been written on the subject, including a spate of anniversary articles that have recently appeared and others yet to come. Moreover, the past decade has seen the declassification and release of numerous documents related to the crisis, again with more to come, and they complement—and in some cases modify—the picture of the Washington deliberations that has heretofore rested principally on the memoirs and reminiscences of a number of the key participants.

For perfectly natural reasons, commentary on the crisis in this country has focused almost entirely on *the American experience* of the event and the lessons we Americans have learned, or should learn, from it. In addition, the main reason so much attention has been given to the crisis is that it has rightly been regarded as the most intensive, dangerous, and climactic crisis of the cold war, and has thus become a unique historical source for the study of *crisis management*.

For various reasons, mainly the unsatisfactory outcome from the Soviet standpoint, the event has received much less attention in the Soviet Union, although in recent years there has been renewed interest. In the Soviet Union it is known as the “Caribbean crisis” rather than the “Cuban missile crisis”—a difference stemming from more than mere Soviet preference not to highlight the role of their missiles, as shall be shown. The paucity of Soviet

discussion has contributed to the relative American slighting of the Soviet role, but it has not been the main cause. The primary reason has been the intensity of the American decisionmaking experience, above all to the participants, who have dominated the discussion not only directly but also by providing the extensive record used by political scientists and historians—a biasing factor compounded by the release of extensive declassified documentary sources on the American handling of the crisis.

Many events bearing on the unfolding of the crisis have not been adequately taken into account in histories and analyses, and indeed in some cases have not even been known. I shall provide new information on a number of events affecting the course and outcome of the crisis that have been neglected or unknown.

I was a participant in the missile crisis, as a staff-level adviser in the State Department with experience in Soviet affairs, intelligence analysis, and politico-military affairs. While playing only a supporting role in the crisis policymaking, I was privy to facts about several developments during the crisis that have not heretofore been published, including information not known to more senior participants who have written about the crisis.

In sum, the first aim of this study is to broaden the historical analysis. A second is to supply both new information and a somewhat different perspective, bringing in Soviet perceptions to a larger extent than has been done. A third is to contribute to the fund of memoir material, including a number of analytical and action memoranda I wrote during the crisis, now declassified, that are noted in the discussion and the texts of which are appended. Finally, I shall discuss the direct and indirect consequences of the Cuban missile crisis in the months and years following its resolution, also an important subject that has been given too little attention.

One principal objective of this volume is to address the *interaction* of American and Soviet perceptions and actions in entering the crisis, and in resolving it. The lack of appreciation of such interaction will become apparent in later discussions of the differing retrospective evaluations of the crisis and lessons drawn from it by the two sides. The very title of this study—and all other American

accounts—draws attention to an important difference in Soviet and American perceptions and perspectives. Any reference to this subject in the United States is routinely to the “Cuban missile crisis” of October 1962. The crisis is often seen as having lasted thirteen days (October 16–28), from the time Washington discovered construction was under way in Cuba on launch facilities for Soviet medium-range missiles, to the day Chairman of the Council of Ministers Nikita S. Khrushchev formally agreed to withdraw missiles from Cuba and President John F. Kennedy pledged not to invade that country. Fuller accounts also include the period from October 28 to November 20, when intensive negotiations more completely spelled out and modified the settlement that had been reached, the U.S. naval quarantine was lifted, and the special alert status of the military forces of the two countries ended.

Soviet accounts of the “Caribbean crisis” emphasize the persisting American hostility to Castro’s rule in Cuba, the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion by American-armed Cuban emigrés in April 1961, and an alleged continuing American threat to invade Cuba. The more immediate crisis itself is seen as beginning, not on October 16, but on October 22, with President Kennedy’s announcement that the Soviet Union was installing medium-range missiles in Cuba and his demand that they be removed, accompanied by a naval quarantine to prevent any further shipment of offensive arms to Cuba. That marked the beginning of an intensive six days of deliberation in Moscow. The resolution of the crisis in principle on October 28 is stressed, with little attention to the subsequent three weeks of negotiation before it was in fact settled.

Several things should be said about the underlying differences in perspective. First, contrary to claims often made in both countries, neither holds a monopoly on the truth. Both have some legitimate basis for attributing different values to different facts, and even to the same facts. The facts themselves, of course, however well known, interpreted, or ignored, are the same for both.

Another point I would make about the difference in perspective is that even today the crisis is not sufficiently understood. Analysts

on both sides have focused on how the experience of the crisis has made successive leaders more prudent and more sharply aware of the need to avoid actions that could bring us again to the brink of war. But there is inadequate understanding in the United States as to why that event is called the “Caribbean crisis” in the Soviet Union, and how it could be seriously regarded as stemming even in part from *American* actions. There is inadequate understanding in the Soviet Union as to why it is properly thought of in the United States as a crisis brought about by the secret introduction of *Soviet* missiles into Cuba. And in both countries there is insufficient attention to and understanding of the whole process of interaction, involving not only differing perspectives but differing frameworks of relevant reality—or different sets of facts. Very different base levels of openness on source material in the two countries compound the problem of trying to achieve some sort of integrated political and historical perspective.

To broaden the context of the analysis, I categorize the crisis in terms of six stages: (1) the developments before October 16, 1962, including the Soviet decision in the late spring to deploy medium-range missiles in Cuba; (2) October 16–22, the period of intense secret internal deliberation and decision within the U.S. government; (3) October 22–28, the superpower confrontation and negotiation climaxing in an agreement basically resolving the crisis; (4) October 28–November 20, the clarification, implementation, and also modification of the basic agreement, including crucial Soviet-Cuban negotiation over some issues; (5) the aftermath of the crisis, in particular the impact on U.S.-Soviet relations for the year until the assassination of President Kennedy on November 22, 1963; and (6) the “afterlife” or resurrection of the issue of possible Soviet offensive arms in Cuba, other than missiles, that arose on several occasions in the 1970s. Finally, I turn to the long-term legacy of the crisis, its importance in its own right, and the light it sheds in retrospectively evaluating the crisis itself and drawing lessons from it.

STAGE 1

The Soviet Decision

SOVIET ACCOUNTS of the “Caribbean crisis” stress many indications that after the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961, the leaders of the United States continued to seek ways to remove Fidel Castro and communism from Cuba. That is generally true. Most Soviet accounts, however, while more or less correctly noting various U.S. political, covert, and military actions in 1961–62, incorrectly conclude from that evidence that there was a policy and firm plan for a new invasion of Cuba by the United States’ armed forces.¹ No doubt a military contingency “plan” was on file (the United States in 1941 even had a “war plan” for conflict with Great Britain), but there was no political decision or intention to invade Cuba before October 1962.

Nonetheless, it has since been revealed on the basis of congressional investigations and declassification of secret documents that the Kennedy administration was responsible after November 30, 1961, for sending sabotage and diversionary units of Cuban emigrés on raids into Cuba (under a covert action plan called “Operation Mongoose”) and even for plotting to kill Castro.

It was not unreasonable for Castro and the Soviet government to be concerned over the possibility of intensified U.S. hostile action against Cuba in 1962.

1. I. D. Statsenko, “On Some Military-Political Aspects of the Caribbean Crisis,” *Latinskaya Amerika* (Latin America), no. 6 (November–December 1977), pp. 108–17. Major General Igor D. Statsenko was one of the senior commanders of Soviet forces in Cuba in 1962. At that time, he had been freshly promoted to one-star general officer rank and was only forty-five years old. Some years later he was retired into the reserve with the same rank.

According to Nikita Khrushchev's unofficial but authenticated memoir (published in two volumes, in 1970 and 1974, in the United States under the title *Khrushchev Remembers*)², he first thought of stationing Soviet long-range missiles in Cuba in May 1962: "We were sure that the Americans would never reconcile themselves to the existence of Castro's Cuba. They feared, as much as we hoped, that a Socialist Cuba might become a magnet that would attract other Latin American countries to Socialism. . . . It was clear to me that we might very well lose Cuba if we didn't take some decisive steps in her defense. . . . It was during my visit to Bulgaria [May 14–20, 1962] that I had the idea of installing missiles with nuclear warheads in Cuba without letting the United States find out they were there until it was too late to do anything about them." Khrushchev stated, as he had officially in December 1962 to the Supreme Soviet after the crisis, that the rationale for the missiles was to deter an American invasion of Cuba. "The main thing was that the installation of our missiles in Cuba would, I thought, restrain the United States from precipitous military action against Castro's Government." But in his memoirs he added an important point not made in the official Soviet statements in 1962 or in later Soviet commentaries: "In addition to protecting Cuba, our missiles would have equalized what the West likes to call 'the balance of power'." And he went on to spotlight a psychological-political consideration: "The Americans had surrounded our country with military bases and threatened us with nuclear weapons, and now they would learn just what it feels like to have enemy missiles pointing at you; we'd be doing nothing more than giving them a little of their own medicine."³

We do know, from contemporary reporting in *Pravda*, that while in Bulgaria Khrushchev strongly criticized the installation of

2. Strobe Talbott, ed. and trans., *Khrushchev Remembers*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970, 1974). The authenticity of the taped Khrushchev memoirs was initially subject to skepticism in scholarly circles, but expert analysis comparing the voice prints with recorded Khrushchev statements established beyond doubt the authenticity of the memoirs. He may not, of course, have told the whole truth, or even remembered everything accurately, but his memoirs remain a very useful source.

3. Talbott, ed. and trans., *Khrushchev Remembers* (1970), pp. 492–94.

American intermediate-range missiles in Turkey.⁴ A few days later he also criticized a statement by President Kennedy that the United States might under certain circumstances be the first to resort to nuclear weapons, an assertion the Soviets interpreted as representing American rhetoric supporting coercive use of its strategic nuclear superiority.⁵

Khrushchev's claim that the idea was his own has not been established; most, but not all, American analysts believe it likely (as do I). Castro has, on different occasions, made contradictory statements as to whether the initiative was Soviet or Cuban. The most plausible account by Castro was given in an interview with *Le Monde* several months after the crisis, in which he stated that the Soviets proposed stationing the missiles in Cuba "to strengthen the socialist camp on the world scale." He then added: "Since we were already receiving a large amount of assistance from the socialist camp, we decided that we could not refuse. That is why we accepted them. It was not in order to ensure our own defense, but primarily to strengthen socialism on the international scale."⁶ He made the same points publicly in 1965, after Khrushchev's ouster, declaring that the Soviets had proposed the missile deployment, and despite the "risk," he had accepted the missiles "for the sake of strengthening the socialist camp"; this speech was published in *Pravda*.⁷ Castro has attributed the idea to the Soviets on several other occasions as well.⁸

Precisely when the decision was made is also not known, but it

4. "Celebration of Fraternal Friendship on Bulgarian Soil, Speech by Comrade N. S. Khrushchev," *Pravda*, May 17, 1962.

5. "Rally of 250,000 Working People in Sofia in Honor of Soviet Party-Government Delegation, Speech by Comrade N. S. Khrushchev," *Pravda*, May 20, 1962.

6. Claude Julien, interview with Castro, "Kennedy-Castro," *Le Monde*, March 22, 1963.

7. "The Struggle against Imperialism Demands Unity and Solidarity of Revolutionary Forces, Speech by Fidel Castro at a Meeting at the University of Havana," *Pravda*, March 18, 1965.

8. For example, see Tad Szulc, "Castro on John Kennedy and the Missile Crisis," *Los Angeles Times*, April 15, 1984, an article based on an interview with Castro.

was probably in May or June, possibly slightly earlier or later.⁹ (It could not have been much later given logistical and operational considerations.) The visit of Cuban Defense Minister Raul Castro to Moscow in early July may well have been in part related, although that visit could simply have involved consultations on the flow of other Soviet arms that were being sent to Cuba in large quantities by the mid-summer of 1962.

In his memoirs Khrushchev emphasized that the Soviet decision was, “from the outset, worked out in the collective leadership. It wasn’t until after two or three lengthy discussions of the matter that we decided it was worth the risk to install missiles on Cuba in the first place.” That statement is probably true, although to date nothing in the published Soviet literature bears directly on the leadership decision to place missiles in Cuba. Khrushchev also said: “I had wanted my comrades [in the Party Presidium] to accept and support the decision with a clear conscience and a full understanding of what the consequences of putting the missiles on Cuba might be—namely, war with the United States.”¹⁰ I find that assertion unconvincing. Khrushchev in retrospect may have wished to recall that the risks of a serious crisis were foreseen, weighed, and accepted. Perhaps. But I, for one, doubt it. Certainly he did, however, want to ensure collective responsibility for the decision.

Again, there is nothing in the published Soviet literature, nor do we in the West have any other reliable source of information, about the calculations of the Soviet leadership in making this decision.¹¹

9. Soviet-Cuban relations had been troubled in the first months of 1962, although even then the leaders of both countries probably wished to improve them. In March Castro had purged from the leadership an orthodox and Soviet-trained Communist party leader, Anibal Escalante. Military shipments from the Soviets for the first half of 1962 were reduced. Cuban interest in joining the Warsaw Pact was rebuffed. But from June on, relations visibly improved. Military aid grew enormously. Contacts increased on a wide range of subjects. And speeches by Castro and other Cuban leaders showed a new confidence.

10. Talbott, ed. and trans., *Khrushchev Remembers* (1970), pp. 498–99.

11. Former Soviet diplomat Arkady Shevchenko, who defected in 1978, has described the reactions of some Soviet officials to the crisis. In 1962 he was in the Soviet delegation to the Committee on Disarmament in Geneva, and he states that the Soviet mission there received no instructions or information throughout the crisis. Later, in Moscow, he heard that the idea of sending the missiles to

Obviously it was decided to install the missiles, and to do so in secrecy. The decision to undertake the action in secrecy, rather than publicly announcing it in advance, had a more significant effect on the American reaction and the whole course of events than may have been appreciated in Moscow at the time, or even in retrospect.

While inquiries continue into the Soviet motivation for placing missiles in Cuba,¹² there is a general consensus that the principal motivation was to redress the publicly revealed serious imbalance in the strategic nuclear balance.¹³ No other explanation satisfactorily accounts for the action. Uncertainties remain as to whether Khrushchev would have overplayed his hand in attempting to use a suddenly disclosed new position of strength to buttress, for example, renewed demands on Berlin, or for some other objective. No doubt the Soviet leaders hoped and even expected that such a dramatic increment to their strategic military power would have political and military dividends for an activist Soviet foreign policy. But the strongest motive that would have led to a consensus among the Soviet leaders on taking a risk in the Cuban missile venture was almost certainly a perceived need to prevent the United States from using its growing strategic superiority to compel Soviet concessions on various issues under contention. Forty Soviet medium- and intermediate-range missile launchers in Cuba, while

Cuba was Khrushchev's and not that of the Soviet military (or the Cubans), and that there were no contingency plans on how to react to American advance discovery and demand for the withdrawal of the missiles. He also doubts that Anatoly Dobrynin or even Andrei Gromyko knew about the missiles before the crisis. All of that is quite plausible, indeed likely, but Shevchenko's second- and third-hand account is of little corroborative value. See Arkady N. Shevchenko, *Breaking with Moscow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), pp. 115–19, 154, 198.

12. The most current is an article by Richard Ned Lebow, "Khrushchev and the Cuban Missile Crisis," forthcoming.

13. There is no need here to recapitulate the many articles dealing with this subject. One of the first and best is Arnold L. Horelick, "The Cuban Missile Crisis: An Analysis of Soviet Calculations and Behavior," *World Politics*, vol. 16 (April 1964), pp. 363–89. There is also extensive discussion of Soviet motivations and actions in the most comprehensive overall analysis of the crisis, Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), esp. pp. 40–56, 102–17.