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(U)Cryptologic Almanac 50th Anniversary Series

(U)A Reconsideration of the Role of SIGINT during the Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962

(Part 1 of 4)

(U) In the late summer of 1962, the Soviet Union secretly attempted to install a large number of nuclear-armed Intermediate and Medium Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBM/MRBM) on the island of Cuba. Cuba had recently undergone a revolution led by Fidel Castro, who had overthrown the dictator, Fulgencio Batista. Initially, Castro, while sympathetic with socialist aims, had kept his distance from the Cuban Communist Party and was ambivalent to overtures from Moscow. However, facing American political opposition, and ideological pressure from his more radical brother, Raoul, and Che Guevara, Castro slowly came to accept Soviet offers of aid. Following the failed American-supported invasion by Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961, Soviet offers of military and economic aid, once a trickle, became a torrent. The United States kept up the rhetoric of confrontation. Rumors of invasion and provocative military moves by Washington convinced both Havana and Moscow that an invasion was likely. At the same time, the CIA was ordered to begin a program of assassination, subversion, and sabotage against Castro, called Operation Mongoose. Certain of American hostility in Cuba and at other flashpoints around the globe, such as Berlin, and aware of the ring of U.S. IRBMs in Turkey and Europe aimed at the Soviet Union, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev came up with a risky counter: ballistic missiles in Cuba.

(U) The Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 was about as close as the two superpowers - the United States and the Soviet Union - would ever come to a nuclear exchange during the Cold War. The chance for mutual annihilation lay in the constant chance for a misunderstanding or miscalculation in the respective command structures that could force an all-out war. Both sides nearly lost control of events because of ill-considered actions by subordinates. On 28 October, the Soviets shot down a high-altitude photoreconnaissance U-2 over Cuba. And during the middle of the crisis, another U-2 flight strayed over the northern USSR, an incident that could only be interpreted as provocative by Moscow. (It was: the Soviets scrambled fighters to intercept; the U.S. responded with its own fighters allegedly armed with nuclear-tipped missiles. Fortunately, the U-2 avoided the Soviets and the fighters never engaged.)

(U) In the end, President Kennedy and Soviet Premier Khrushchev avoided a nuclear

holocaust. Kennedy's steadiness in the face of constant calls for an assault on Cuba by conservative politicians and the military, and his willingness to bargain away the Soviet missiles in exchange for outdated U.S. Jupiter missiles in Turkey were critical elements. Khrushchev's rational choice to back off from the confrontation early in the crisis and seize the offers for an exchange made by Kennedy proved equally crucial. Still, it was, to quote a famous general from another war, "a damned close run thing."

~~(S//SI)~~ For our interests it might well be asked how SIGINT performed during the crisis. With the currently available information, from both classified and unclassified sources, this question can be answered more accurately than before. For a more complete understanding of SIGINT's role, three questions need to be asked: What did American SIGINT detect of the Soviet missile buildup that began in September 1962? What role did American SIGINT play during the crisis? And, as a comparison, what did communist SIGINT provide Moscow during the crisis? This latter question, previously unapproachable, can now be answered somewhat in light of records releases by various Russian ministerial archives. Each question will be handled in a separate posting. A fourth posting will review the general effectiveness of American SIGINT during the crisis.

~~(S//SI)~~ **What did American SIGINT detect relative to the Soviet missile buildup in 1962?**

(U) Why did the Soviets do it? President Kennedy called Moscow's action "a goddamn mystery." A number of reasons have been put forward to explain why the Soviets installed the missiles in Cuba. These include a Soviet desire to settle the status of Berlin, then a city occupied by the forces of the Soviet Union, United States, Great Britain, and France; to achieve a more favorable worldwide "correlation of forces"; and to protect Cuba from an American invasion. While these reasons explain why the Soviets might put missiles in Cuba, they necessarily do not answer why they finally did it. That final reason rests with the personality of Premier Khrushchev. Khrushchev was more aggressive and confrontational with the West than Stalin was. He realized both the danger and usefulness of nuclear weapons in Cold War policy, and how, with them, he could press an advantage or control the West's reactions.

(U) Using recently released records from numerous Russian archives, including those of the Russian foreign ministry, the Office of the President of Russia, and the foreign and military intelligence services, we now know that in early 1962, Khrushchev was convinced that the political and military situations were dangerous for Moscow. He believed the President Kennedy meant to invade Cuba (JFK actually was considering various invasion options at the time) and that he would not negotiate a settlement on the status of Berlin. Furthermore, the United States had its own IRBMs (Thor and Jupiter missiles) in Great Britain, Turkey, and Italy pointed at the USSR. What Khrushchev wanted was some way to threaten the United States the same way the U.S. threatened the Soviet Union. The idea of placing missiles in Cuba seemed to be just the solution. In a picturesque metaphor,

typical of him, Khrushchev confided in Defense Minister Rodion Malinovsky, that the missiles would be like "throwing a hedgehog at Uncle Sam's pants."

(U) On 21 May 1962, Khrushchev first proposed the plan, known eventually as Anadyr, to the Soviet Presidium, which approved it. The Cubans were informed as early as 29 May by a special Soviet delegation, which flew to Havana. Anadyr was much larger than the ballistic missiles. In essence, the Soviets intended to establish a multiservice presence, a sort of group of forces, in Cuba that included five nuclear armed missile regiments - three R-12 (SS-4) and two R-14 (SS-5) regiments; four regiments of motorized infantry and two battalions of armor; a MIG-21 fighter wing; 42 IL-28 (Beagle) light bombers, two cruise missile regiments (probably SS-N-2); and twelve SA-2 units with 144 launchers. Total manpower of this force would have been around 50,000 men. This force would be under the command of Soviet General Issa Pliyev, a former cavalry officer who was known to follow the toughest orders. (In early June of 1963, General Pliyev had been in command of Soviet troops who killed 23 rioting Soviet workers in the town of Novocherkassk.) The Soviets also dispatched nuclear-armed battlefield missiles, including the FROG-3. At the same time, Moscow contemplated building a submarine base to service early ballistic missile submarines, either the Hotel-class SSBN or the Golf-class SSB, both of which carried the SS-N-5 missile. However, the naval base plan was postponed.

(U) The Soviets took a number of measures designed to cover the operation. The captains of the merchant ships were given secret orders to be opened in the presence of the ship's political officer. Only then would they learn that Cuba was their destination. Many were told that if they were in danger of being boarded by foreign forces, they were to take "all measures" to protect the personnel and sink the ship. Military officers, including Pliyev, were given aliases and false passports.

(b)(1)
(b)(3)-50 USC 403
(b)(3)-18 USC 798
(b)(3)-P.L. 86-36

~~(S//SI)~~ By July, the Soviet men and equipment for Anadyr were beginning to depart Black and Baltic Sea ports for Cuba. Since late 1961, there had been a steady increase in the number of Soviet merchant ships sailing to Cuba. This had been noted in numerous SIGINT reports during the summer. However, over the next two months certain curious aspects of the Soviet shipping to Cuba caught the eye of analysts. For one thing, many of the merchant ships were carrying loads well below their capacity - in some cases only 25 percent.

As it turns out,

unbeknownst to SIGINT, this aircraft carried the Soviet delegation charged with informing Castro of the decision to send in the nuclear missiles. In early September, the Cuban Public Works Ministry ceased all road building activity, except in the western part of the island.

[REDACTED]

~~(S//SI)~~ This sampling of SIGINT product illustrates that the scale of the Soviet effort simply could not be missed. In fact, all American intelligence reporting pretty much outlined the huge conventional buildup occurring in Cuba. However, contrary to implicit suggestions made in publications such as the recent Year in Defense Review, none of this SIGINT reporting even hinted at the presence of the ballistic missiles. The strands of evidence [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] were buried away in the deluge of reports. Even the odd behavior of the two ships that transported the nuclear warheads for the missiles, the Soviet icebreaker Indigirka and the freighter Alexandrovsk, elicited no special attention in the SIGINT reports. In fact, one NSA report included [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] when, in reality, the ship was carrying Pliyev and about 2,500 Soviet troops. Meanwhile, the technical research ship, the USS Oxford, patrolling off the coast of Cuba, did not monitor any communications related to the missile construction. Finally [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] although reported, were not construed as unusual by the SIGINT analysts. Instead, NSA reports compared these periods of dormancy to similar stretches of inactivity that occurred in the late 1950s.

~~(S//SI)~~ On 11 September and 14 October, the Soviets appeared to place their forces on alert. Previous classified histories of the crisis claim [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The evidence for this claim comes from studies issued in July and December 1963. However, this interpretation of the Soviet reactions is not correct. On 11 September, the Soviets were responding to President Kennedy's 7 September call-up of 150,000 reservists to active duty for 12 months because of the "international situation." [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] was, in reality, a large-scale exercise in the Far East that began before 14 October and lasted until 19 October.

(U) In early October 1962, the consensus in the American intelligence community was that the Soviets would not risk installing ballistic missiles in Cuba. Ironically, in mid-September 1962 a Special National Intelligence Estimate (85-3-62, 19 September 1962) raised this possibility and then dismissed it as "incompatible with Soviet practice to date and with Soviet policy as we presently estimate it." One man did not accept this view. In

the end it was his judgment that would set in motion the Cuban missile crisis.

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