

Chapter 16

The Cuban Missile Crisis and New Narratives of the Cold War

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The 13-day Cuban Missile Crisis was the most melodramatic and dangerous moment of the Cold War and in some ways scholars and the general public have taken it as a microcosm of the conflict as a whole. Even the names by which we know it are different on opposite sides of what Winston Churchill once named “the iron curtain.” The Soviets named their operation ANADYR, after a river in Siberia half a world away from its real object, and, even today, Russians know it as “the Caribbean Crisis.”

Even today, the American public and, especially, politicians construct a memory of the Cold War as a consequence of Soviet aggression. The so-called “Munich analogy” prevailed in American and western thinking. The United States had to lead the “free world” in resisting that aggression, lest the USSR get the impression that they could continue and expand it to the point where only another World War could stop them. Especially during the Kennedy administration, and especially during the crises over Berlin and Cuba, American leaders took every Soviet action as “a test of our resolve.” However, as more and more of the original documentary record becomes available, and especially as the archives of the Soviet Union and its former client states open up, one finds oneself looking at a very different narrative and coming to grips with very different questions. What the Soviet leadership was thinking was quite different from what the American leadership thought it was thinking. Of equal or greater importance, what the Soviets were thinking was different from what the American leadership told the American *public* it was thinking. The Soviet leadership and public were equally clueless about the Americans.

Nevertheless, even in this new narrative, the Caribbean crisis *remains* emblematic of the Cold War. The critical factors throughout the conflict, from 1943 to 1991, were American economic superiority, American strategic advantage over the USSR, and, at least through the Khrushchev years, efforts by the Soviets to deliver on the promises of a better material life made by the Communist Party to their own people. In a way perhaps not so different from Dwight Eisenhower’s “New Look” reliance on nuclear weapons and covert operations, the Soviets sought to leapfrog American leads in bomber strength by building up its strategic ballistic missile forces and by cultivating friendships in new nations then emerging from the colonial rule of the Americans’ European allies. As Dwight Eisenhower had once suggested they should be, the Soviets were afraid of American mili-

tary strength and what the United States might do with it. Bluster and bluff on Khrushchev's part substituted for advantages the USSR didn't have and a global military reach Khrushchev was unwilling to pay for. The trouble was that catch-up turned out to be the most dangerous game of all in the nuclear age.

The very clear understanding of their strategic weakness on the part of the Soviet leadership went almost completely unnoticed by their American counterparts. The Americans' great economic power, their advanced technology, their initial leads in nuclear weapons and launch vehicles, and their geographic advantages sat in the forefront of Soviet thinking throughout the 1950s. American U-2 spy plane flights over Soviet territory flaunted this strength even as they uncovered the USSR's weakness. At the same time, Khrushchev in particular believed that the Soviet Union could gain strength by currying allies in the developing world, where many nations were just emerging from more than a century of European colonial rule. For its part, the United States regarded Latin America as a sacrosanct sphere of influence. Stalin had respected that position. Khrushchev did not. The Soviets did not create Castro's revolution, but they were nonetheless willing to embrace it. The United States refused to tolerate a quasi-Socialist regime, a Soviet client state, in the western hemisphere. Before 1962, two administrations had unleashed diplomats, economic sanctions, spies, propagandists, assassins, agents, and even a miniature army to get rid of it.

The spectacular failure of the American-sponsored invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in 1961 actually encouraged the Kennedy administration to think about going after Castro again, by any means necessary, including the use of overt military force if it came to that. Kennedy had, after all, attacked Eisenhower's record with Castro and Cuba during the 1960 presidential campaign. Now he wanted to make sure that Khrushchev and the American electorate both understood that he was a tough and resolute leader of the United States' side of the Cold War. Neither the Cubans nor the Soviets learned about or understood all aspects of the planning for Kennedy's continuing campaign against Castro; but in the contexts of what they feared and what their ideology taught them, they knew enough to be afraid. The CIA's infiltration and sabotage campaign, Operation MONGOOSE, was not yet a prelude to a full-scale landing in mid-1962; but it might have been. American naval exercises for such a landing clearly signaled what might be on the horizon. Getting wrong the difference between American capabilities—even American contingency planning—and actual American intent represented a Soviet intelligence failure. It was, however, a failure easy to understand, and Cuban and Soviet intelligence erred on what they thought was the side of prudence.

At the same time (and from their point of view, more significantly), the Soviet leadership had to confront their substantially weaker position in the strategic nuclear confrontation with the Americans. Their shorter-range rockets could devastate Western Europe but they had a ballistic missile strike force capable of striking the United States only one-tenth the size of the force with which the United States could strike them. Meanwhile, Khrushchev could sit on the beach beside his villa on the Black Sea and visualize across the water the Jupiter missiles the Americans had emplaced through NATO in Turkey. These were rockets that could strike the Soviet Union in ten minutes. Khrushchev

and his colleagues might quite literally never know what hit them. And as early as 1959, Dwight Eisenhower had compared such a NATO base with Soviet missiles in Mexico or Cuba that might warrant anything from serious concern to direct military action. By early 1962 those missiles, fifteen of them, were operational. So were others in Britain and Italy.

Khrushchev's proposal was a stroke that was bold and imaginative, but not at all prudent. Properly respectful of the destructive power of thermonuclear explosions, and convinced that such weapons could never actually be used, Khrushchev moved, in the spring of 1962, to kill two, or even three or four, birds with one stone. The Americans would eventually discover launch sites for about forty medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles with one-megaton warheads, along with a squadron or so of obsolete, but nuclear-capable bombers, surface-to-air missiles to protect them, and a contingent of Soviet technicians to operate the complex. What Khrushchev actually sent was a powerful, integrated military force of 42,000 (about the same size as the American command in South Korea) that could maintain and launch the land-based ballistic missiles, support patrols in American waters by Soviet missile-launching submarines, and defend Cuba from an American invasion. In addition to the strategic rockets, bombers, and anti-aircraft equipment, the Soviet weapons included motorized infantry regiments, tanks, and short-range cruise missiles tipped with tactical nuclear weapons. Most of these last warheads were small; the largest were only about the size of the bomb that had destroyed Hiroshima.

ANADYR's success required that the ballistic missiles remain undetected until they became operational at which point action to remove them could lead to their launch. Other Kremlin leaders had warned Khrushchev of the general risks he was running, and military advisers had warned specifically that American aerial reconnaissance would most likely discover the installations before they were ready to fire. The failure of Khrushchev's gamble instantly created two dilemmas: once the United States discovered the missiles the administration had to decide what to do about them. A week later, Kennedy and his aides had made their decisions and the Soviet Presidium had to decide what to do in response to American demands that were far more rigorous than Khrushchev had anticipated. Neither government *wanted* to back down; each realized (to a degree) that both of them *had to* back down. Both were painfully aware that one wrong move (whether deliberate, miscalculated, or simply accidental) could begin a global thermonuclear war.

After gathering his senior advisers (collectively named the "Executive Committee of the National Security Council" or "ExComm"), Kennedy initially intended to send an air strike to destroy the missiles where they lay. Gradually, the American leadership realized that bombing alone could not guarantee the destruction of the entire complex; and ExComm began to talk about a full-scale invasion of Cuba projected to cost over 18,000 casualties. The actual costs would likely have been far higher than that; intelligence had substantially underestimated the forces—tactical nuclear weapons and relatively large conventional ground forces—that would have opposed an American landing. However, even the underestimated resistance gave ExComm pause. Diplomacy was never a first

option. Kennedy feared that opening with a diplomatic move would make him look weak. However, ExComm discussed diplomatic solutions, including proposals to remove the American missiles in Turkey in trade for the Soviet missiles in Cuba, throughout the first week of the crisis. For several reasons, Kennedy did not like the idea of “trading” the missiles in Turkey for those in Cuba. Only as Kennedy and his aides realized that a direct assault was unworkable did they allow themselves to accept the less immediately violent course of a naval blockade. The “quarantine” provided a show of military force sufficient to impress both the Soviets and American Cold War politics, while providing some room to think between drawing the guns and firing them.

The Soviets first realized on October 22nd that the Americans had found them out. It was the morning before Kennedy announced the discovery of the missiles and the blockade intended to force the USSR to remove them. Although some of their nuclear weapons in Cuba were already operational, they had, surprisingly, made no plans for how to use them if the United States actually attacked the island. Led by Khrushchev, the Presidium, the collective leadership of the Soviet Communist party, debated as heatedly as ExComm had for the previous week, and then backed down. The longest-range missiles and some of the warheads were still at sea. Defying Kennedy’s blockade might start a war, but even if it did not, the US Navy might well capture some of the USSR’s most advanced military technology while it was still crossing the Atlantic. They continued to deny Kennedy’s charges in public, but the Americans had the military and geographic advantage. And they had photographic proof that they presented to a live, televised session of the United Nations Security Council.

To defend Cuba against an American attack, the Soviets and the Cubans could have made do with what they had already had there: the strategic rockets—with their one-megaton warheads—250,000 Cuban troops, 40,000 Soviet troops and their nuclear backups, and the anti-aircraft installations, but they didn’t. Kennedy’s flat-out refusal to tolerate the missiles in Cuba had had exactly, and immediately, the impact he wanted, although, perilously, he didn’t know it. The idea of a Soviet strategic base was instantly dead. As for his ally, Khrushchev would better have followed the instincts that told him that no one could actually *use* nuclear weapons. The Americans had not been willing to use them to defend their position in Berlin and (to Fidel Castro’s infuriated dismay) Khrushchev was not willing to use them to defend Cuba. Khrushchev’s problems were now two-fold. First, how could he descend from the limb he had climbed out on, without his country losing too much face? Secondly, he, like Kennedy, had to keep the crisis from spinning out of control and igniting a war no one wanted.

It is ironic, and frightening, that the most dangerous moment of the crisis came *after* the Soviets had agreed to the United States’ principal demand, but before the United States realized it, and before the deal had actually been closed. The situation was so tense in Washington on the evening of Saturday, October 27th, that the American Secretary of Defense wondered if he had seen his last sunset.

Khrushchev had on October 26th written to Kennedy offering to remove the ballistic missiles in return for a simple pledge that the US would not invade Cuba. Before

Kennedy had a chance to respond, however, Khrushchev sent a second letter received on the morning of October 27th adding to his price a demand to trade for the American missiles in Turkey. While ExComm and the President wondered if the Soviets were double-crossing them, or if hard-liners had deposed Khrushchev, a Soviet anti-aircraft commander, without authorization, shot down a U-2 with a surface-to-air missile. With the possibility of a peaceful solution apparently receding, the American military began to implement more of their contingency plans for an invasion of Cuba. Soviet forces were preparing to repel them, although without authority to use their nuclear weapons.

It was all the result of confusion, but then so was the eventual resolution of the crisis. After he had sent his first letter, Khrushchev interpreted an article by the American columnist Walter Lippmann proposing a Turkey-Cuba missile swap as Kennedy's signal that he was willing to make such a trade. Upset and angry, and unaware of all the circumstances, Kennedy chose to accept Khrushchev's first, lower-priced proposal. Shaken by the unauthorized missile firing, Khrushchev chose to accept Kennedy's deal before things got completely out of hand. At the same time, however, Kennedy, equally disturbed, sent his brother Attorney General Robert Kennedy to Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin to accept the missile swap, *provided* that the agreement to do so was kept secret. Khrushchev, understanding that he had at last gotten lucky, broadcast his acceptance on Radio Moscow at mid-morning 28 October (Washington time). The two countries had to clean up some details over the next month (some of them serious); but it was over.

Since the missile swap was kept secret, and implemented months later, no one ever successfully accused Kennedy of appeasement. Since he had cleared up the strategic threat, he looked good because he "stood up to the Russians" successfully, especially on Cuba. Since he had cleared up the strategic threat without war, he looked good to other Americans because he had stood up to the "hard liners," who had argued for immediate and risky military action. (We do not yet know much about the counterparts debating in the Kremlin.) Kennedy had given himself the Cold War credibility that allowed him to argue for peaceful relations between his country and the USSR in a commencement address at Washington's American University in June 1963.

Seen by most Americans as an act of Soviet aggression in their own backyard, ANADYR was actually Khrushchev's attempt to redress the endemic weaknesses of Soviet military power while, secondarily, defending the Castro regime. It seems to me that, from a military standpoint Kennedy's pledge was a more effective shield for the Castro regime than an isolated outpost, even a large and nuclear-armed outpost, might have been. (Remember, if you will, the fate of the American-occupied Philippines in the five months after Pearl Harbor.) Khrushchev had given the United States a "taste of its own medicine" and he had eliminated the Turkish missiles that he considered humiliating as well as threatening. In that sense he could and did argue that he had won. But the strategic base in the western hemisphere was more important and he had lost it, as he had lost considerable face in the Kremlin. Eventually, he lost his job and his successors replaced his foreign policy of assertive, blustery bluffs masking weakness with long-term, expensive plans to eliminate the weakness in reality.

The Soviets had taken enormous risks to create what they saw as a long overdue capability to strike the United States with nuclear weapons and the magnitude of those risks sobered all the leaders who survived it. Influential factions within the American and Soviet leadership came to realize that (like nuclear tests) competition for nuclear advantage might become more dangerous than even their most mortal enemies. Even when all parties wanted to keep a crisis from escalating, miscalculation, mischance, or communications failure would always threaten to send it spiraling out of control. The US and the USSR had approached such a disaster closely enough that both sides came to appreciate that the crisis itself was too dangerous ever to repeat. The world after ANADYR would not again come so close to nuclear war.

The global brush with death brought no respite to the Cold War (in fact, some arms buildups grew faster); but it did mark a turning point in the superpower conflict. Thereafter, the United States and the Soviet Union could sign some agreements that had never before been in reach, and negotiations to place controls on nuclear weapons began and became institutionalized—although consummation would take nearly a decade. In the United States, John Kennedy's apparent victory, without war, earned him a reputation for Cold War management that despite critics who said he was either too reckless or too meek, eventually overshadowed the failures of his early months in power and the disaster of the Bay of Pigs. The resolution to the confrontation contributed to the success of Kennedy's abbreviated third year in office; and it remains a central element of his historical reputation. The crisis' drama made it one of the most studied aspects of Kennedy's presidency, or any other. The initial public record (from only one side) made it, literally, a textbook case study in American public decision-making and crisis management. However, it was a one-sided case study based on mythology and the impossibility of admitting, in either Washington or Moscow, that the peaceful resolution depended very largely on two somewhat reckless men who, *in extremis*, abandoned ideology in favor of their shared preference for life over death.

In Moscow, Khrushchev's retreat from the confrontation was a principal reason the Presidium unseated him as its leader. His colleagues regarded him as too reckless and too clever in seeking to bluff the United States. Recognizing, as Khrushchev had, that the USSR held a weaker hand than the Americans, his successors proceeded to abandon bluff for a new deck of cards, ships, and aircraft, and more missiles in quantities that created "parity" with the United States within a decade of the crisis. And this may be why the peace was preserved.

October 1962 highlighted the fact that a nuclear arms race creates situations defying what many still see as "common sense." Neither military secrecy nor military superiority guarantees a nation's safety any longer. The threat from nuclear weapons is so great that one country's superiority only makes it imperative for that country's adversaries to overcome it, by any means possible. The effort alone can lead to the possibility of destruction. Secrecy, if successful, can conceal—anything. Since the adversary firing first would have the advantage in a nuclear exchange, ignorance and fear can together create the temptation to "pre-empt" an adversary's first strike with one's own.

Under the circumstances that prevailed during the Cold War, national survival relied on a “balance of terror.” Peace depended on two things: a situation in which both adversaries possessed roughly equivalent arsenals, so that if either one of them started a fight they would face “mutually assured destruction”; and an international regime that—through diplomacy or technology—allowed even the most bitter enemies to see what each other was doing all the time. Since these insights are counterintuitive, and since they run counter to traditional military thinking, they became and remained controversial elements over American political debates about nuclear arms control and nuclear preparedness until the Cold War was over and even more recently.

This new narrative of the Missile Crisis differs markedly from both the standard and revisionist interpretations offered from various American historians. Yet its role as an emblematic microcosm remains. Most notably, the story suggests that partisans of both the Soviet and western side of the Cold War are wrong in their Manichean explanations of it. It would be a mistake to discount the role of ideology, as Vladislav Zubok emphasizes in his histories of Soviet foreign policy. It would also be a mistake to attribute an ideological motivation to only one side. Both superpowers believed in their own missionary faiths. Both sides believed in their respective manifest destinies. And, of course, both sides believed in the traditionally defined national interests that also motivated them as those interests appeared modified by the marriage of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. Neither really won and neither really lost, which is a good thing. But, most important, politicians then and now (there and here) notwithstanding, neither was truly innocent.

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