

American intelligence in the cuban missile crisis history essay



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The Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 brought the world close to a nuclear confrontation between the United States, Cuba, and the Soviet Union. The Cuban missile crisis was triggered by the Soviet deployment to Cuba of medium-range and intermediate-range ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads. It was the result of a variety of things: the Cuban Revolution, the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion, US anti-communism, the insecurity of the Soviet Union, and Cuba's fear of invasion. From the start of the crisis, American intelligence monitored the island's development and was able to collect and analyze information, but it miscalculated the Soviet Union's intentions and motivation for placing nuclear missiles in Cuba. American intelligence, through human intelligence gathering methods, aerial photoreconnaissance, and signal interceptions, was able to discover Soviet missiles in Cuba, and thwart the possibility of a nuclear war. This intelligence provided the U. S with a great deal of information about its enemies' military units, missiles, weapons and strength. The events of the Cuban Missile Crisis revealed the sophistication of the U. S. intelligence community, especially in its ability to collect and analyze information. Human Intelligence (HUMINT) obtained inside information concerning Cuba from Refugees, and important secrets transferred to U. S. Government by Soviet Colonel Oleg Penkovsky. Photographic intelligence (PHOTINT) played an exceedingly important part (the U-2 reconnaissance spy-plane) in taking internal terrestrial images of the Island. Signals intelligence (SIGINT) was used to block communication between Soviet Union and Cubans during the crisis to the advantage of the Americans.

Cuban Missile Crisis Background

Fidel Castro came to power after the Cuban Revolution. At first the U. S. supported Castro, but when he embraced communism, the U. S. attempted to overthrow Castro's rule in Cuba. In April 1961, Americans used CIA-trained and armed Cuban exiles (La Brigada) in the Bay of Pigs invasion but failed. After the failed invasion of the Bay of Pigs, it was evident to the Castro that the U. S. would attack again, causing him to make concessions with the Soviet Union in order to defend Cuba. Consequently, Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev eagerly extended an offer of assistance to the desperate Castro and saw an opportunity to gain a strategic foothold in America's backyard. Castro allowed the Soviet Union to place military bases on the island of Cuba, in exchange for protection against any U. S. invasion attempts. After Castro's approval, Khrushchev quickly and secretly built ballistic missile installations in Cuba in the summer of 1962. When the U. S discovered ballistic missiles presence in Cuba, it elevated tension between the U. S. and the Soviet Union. When the missiles' installation were discovered by intelligence, President John F. Kennedy ordered a naval quarantine (blockade) of Cuba and threatened to invade Cuba; as a result, the Soviet Union pledged to withdraw from Cuba if the U. S. did not invade and finally the Cuban Missile Crisis was resolved.

The American Intelligence Role in the Pre-Cuban Missile Crisis

The Cuban missile crisis started in a series of American intelligence blunders that started under the Dwight Eisenhower administration and continued into the John F. Kennedy administration. The American intelligence agency

devised Operation Mongoose, which was aimed to expel the powerful Castro and his regime. The Operation Mongoose plot included “ economic and political destabilization, propaganda, manipulation, sabotage, assignation plots and direct assistance to anti-Castro Cubans in military training.” During the Cold war, Cuban refugees provided inaccurate inside information about Cuba and Castro, and such information was able to convince the America’s Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to initiate the covert Bay of Pigs operation on April 17th, 1961 to overthrow the Castro communist regime. Cuban exiles, trained by the CIA, staged a botched invasion at Cuba’s Bay of Pigs, but the CIA’s planned invasion ended in complete failure due to miscalculations by the CIA and a lack of resources and support from the American military. U. S. intelligence misunderstood the nature of Fidel Castro’s insurgency and miscalculated the likelihood of his victory.

Operation Mongoose (Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba is a part of this operation) is also partially responsible for initiating the Cuban Missile Crisis as Cuban intelligence was able to discover that America planned to assassinate Castro through Operation Mongoose. Castro was worried about Cuba’s safety; on the other side, the Soviet Union was also worried about losing a valuable ally in Cuba. Moreover, the Soviets had the intention to compensate for Soviet inferiority in ICBMs (intercontinental ballistic missile) and liked to reply to the Americans with a nuclear version of tit-for-tat as noted by Khrushchev’s advisor Fyodor Burlatsky: “ Khrushchev and Soviet Defence Minister R. Malinovsky ... were strolling along the Black Sea coast. Malinovsky pointed out to sea and said that on the other shore in Turkey there was an American nuclear missile base. In a matter of six or seven minutes missiles launched

from that base could devastate major centres in the Ukraine and southern Russia. ... Khrushchev asked Malinovsky why the Soviet Union should not have the right to do the same as America. Why, for example, should it not deploy missiles in Cuba?" However, from the American perspective, installing nuclear-armed Jupiter intermediate range ballistic missiles (IRBM's) in Turkey helped secure NATO's southern flank, which also helped cement relations with Turkey, and enhanced their nuclear deterrent with the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union viewed these missiles and their threat very differently. Nevertheless, U. S. covert attempts to depose the Cuban regime seemed to provoke Cuban and Soviet defences and directly led to the deployment of the Soviet ballistic missiles in Cuba.

It is true that American intelligence played a role in causing the Cuban Missile Crisis, and to a certain extent failed to estimate that Soviet leadership would deploy strategic missiles in Cuba. Furthermore, CIA agents in Cuba or the Soviet Union were incapable to provide solid indication of the Soviet missiles deployment. Some information was received from other Western intelligence organizations, CIA agents on the island and refugees, but little attention was given to the discovery of the missiles. The US military intelligence agencies with some support from Western allies tracked the Soviet arms shipping to Cuba. In July 1962, SIGINT collectors listened to the radio messages to and from the Soviet vessels on their way to Cuba. These messages are interpreted and provided some indication about how Soviet vessels calling on Cuban ports were making false port declarations and declaring less than the known cargo-carrying capacity (Carrying heavy military weapons) , but no real consideration is given due to insufficient

evident. “ Satellite photographic reconnaissance was not directed against Cuba in 1962.” On August 29th a U-2 spy-plane on reconnaissance over Cuba, brought back evidence that SA-2 surface-to-air (SAM) missiles has been installed around San Cristobal, but Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin advised President Kennedy’s closest advisor, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, that the installations were entirely defensive in nature. American intelligence (COMOR-The interagency Committee on Overhead Reconnaissance) decided to send another U-2 spy-plane to take a closer look, but bad weather delayed the flight until October 14th. On September 19th, 1962 American estimators issued Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE 85-3-62) on ‘ The Military Build-up in Cuba’ but failed to estimate what the Soviet Union would do, based on insufficient evidence, Soviet intentions, and the past Soviet behaviour. In fact, Soviet intelligence performed better in the pre-crisis period, and they were able to transport nearly 50, 000 Soviet troops, 100 tactical nuclear weapons, possibly four to six nuclear naval mines and 60 nuclear warheads for the surface-to-surface missile sites in Cuba via covert action.

The American Intelligence Role during the Cuban Missile Crisis

For the United States, the crisis began on October 15, 1962, when photographs from a U-2 reconnaissance aircraft revealed several SS-4 nuclear missiles at San Cristobal, Cuba. The early morning of October 16th, President John Kennedy was informed of the missile installations. Kennedy immediately convened his Executive Committee (EX-COMM), a group of his twelve most important advisors (Such as CIA Director John McCone,

Secretary of Defence Robert S. McNamara, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy) to handle the unfolding crisis.

During the crisis, US intelligence was able to accurately identify the location, operational status of the missile deployment, “ provision of MiG-21 fighters, SA-2 antiaircraft missile systems, 11-28 light bombers, missile torpedo boats, and coastal defence cruise missiles, and the numbers of these systems.” Furthermore, low level reconnaissance allowed discovering the additional military forces, “ in particular four Soviet augmented ground force regiments, each with 31 tanks, and with six to eight Luna rocket artillery launchers” It can be seen that PHOTOINT (currently called Imint- Imaging Intelligence) or aerial reconnaissance really played a vital role in Cuban Missile Crisis. Photoreconnaissance Intelligence had done an incredible job by providing credible evidence of offensive missiles in Cuba (see pictures 1 to 3 on last page of this document, taken from U-2 spy-plane during Cuban Missile Crisis) and helped policy makers and their advisors to make decisions based on solid photographic evidence. “ As McCone indicated, aerial photography was ‘ our best means of establishing hard [firm] intelligence”

HUMIT was also used by interviewing refugees, collecting reports from CIA agents on island, and Soviet secret from Soviet Officer Oleg Penkovsky. American military personnel interrogated unverified refugees from Cuba on American soil, who revealed that they had personally seen a convoy of SS-4 missiles near Havana. But this was not itself sufficient due to the mass of other invalid reports during or before the crisis period. Many reports are provided from agents on the Island about suspicious military movement, possible missiles and other defensive activities in Cuba. Colonel Oleg
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Penkovsky, a Soviet Military Intelligence officer, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and British intelligence (MI-6), all suggested that the Soviets were attempting to put missiles into Cuba but this information was not given credibility until it was subsequently confirmed through aerial reconnaissance. Oleg Penkovsky supplied 111 exposed rolls of film, 99 percent of which were legible. An estimated 10, 000 pages of intelligence reports were produced from his information, which included the top secret operating manuals for the SS-4 and SS-5 missiles. Information from Penkovsky-provided documents was compared with the U-2 photography, and analysts were able to identify positively the specific missiles being placed in Cuba and determine on a daily basis the stage of construction of each missile site. “ This information was critical in enabling the President to know how much time he had to determine and apply a policy of diplomatic and military pressure against Khrushchev before having to take direct military action.” Colonel Oleg Penkovsky’s role in the Cuban missile crisis has been portrayed as of pre-eminent importance to the outcome, and described as Humint’s best source of information during the crisis.

It is true that SIGINT provided no warning of the presence of Soviet nuclear-armed intermediate and medium-range ballistic missiles in Cuba prior to their discovery by U-2 reconnaissance aircraft. The Oxford, officially known as a Technical Research Ship (TRS), proved to be the largest producer of SIGINT during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The collected communications from SIGINT provided a great quantity of information which, when combined with the photographs from the U2 over-flights, provided a very good picture of what was happening in Cuba. SIGINT also helped during the midst of the

crisis, to intercept and triangulate messages and sent to the Command Centre for interpretation, then used by the US government to make further decision and predict future actions of the Soviet Union and Cuba.

Another type of intelligence that was used for the first time was the SOSUS (underwater sound surveillance system). SOSUS plus patrol aircraft was extensively and successfully used during the Cuban Missile Crisis and proved to be an important aspect of U. S intelligence in detecting any possible Soviet submarine movement (especially Soviet Foxtrot class submarines).

“After analyzing all the evidence from different sources of the intelligence and having an intense policy debate with the Executive Committee group members, Kennedy imposed a naval quarantine around Cuba. On October 22, Kennedy publicly announced the discovery of the ballistic missile installations and his decision to quarantine (blockade) the island to prevent Soviet ships from carrying further missile equipment to the island. He also proclaimed that any nuclear missile launched from Cuba would be regarded as an attack on the United States by the Soviet Union and demanded that the Soviets remove all of their offensive weapons from Cuba.

Later, on the 26th EX-COMM heard from Khrushchev that the Soviets agreed to remove the ballistic missiles from Cuba, if the U. S. would guarantee not to invade Cuba. On October 27th, tension increased when a U-2 was shot down over Cuba and Khrushchev demanded the removal of U. S. missiles in Turkey in exchange for Soviet missiles in Cuba. But Attorney General Robert Kennedy suggested ignoring the second letter and contacted Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin to tell him of the U. S. agreement with the

first (not to invade Cuba). Finally, on October 28th, Khrushchev announced that he would dismantle the installations and return the missiles to the Soviet Union. Further negotiations were held to implement the October 28 agreement and it continued in November. Again American intelligence helped to provide evidence to the American government that the Soviets turned their ships back, a fact first learned from SIGINT from radio messages, and soon the Soviets dismantled and withdrew the missiles. The U. S. Navy also played a pivotal role in this crisis, demonstrating the critical importance of naval forces to national defence. Surface and submarine units moved into place to attack any ship crossing the declared line in the quarantine operation.

A week of intensive face-off and direct communications between President Kennedy and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev finally made it possible to alleviate the crisis. The American government and the Communist Bloc both considered the crisis over.

Conclusion

In summary, Espionage has been, and always be a central source of information to support national defense. The performance of US intelligence in the Cuban Missile Crisis was generally good, in some respects outstanding, albeit with a few shortcomings. From the beginning, American Intelligence made all possible efforts to collect, analyze and monitor the Soviet activities and arms build-up in Cuba, but erroneously underestimated the Soviet leader's intention to station nuclear weapons in Cuba. Moreover, the use of U-2 aircraft for aerial photoreconnaissance over the interior of Cuba, Cuban refugee interrogations, and Soviet secrets (manuals for the SS-4 and SS-5

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missiles) provided by Penkovsky's espionage, gave the U. S. excellent intelligence coverage of the status of missile site construction and readiness. American intelligence community worked well during the crisis, and helped policy makers, senior intelligence estimators and analyst to make better decisions and evaluate Soviet reactions based on intelligence-provided evidence. The CIA played a leading role in backing up the EXComm. Intelligence organizations of the army, navy, and air force provided backup to the military planners. Overall, American Intelligence role in Cuban Missile Crisis was good and helped government to resolve crisis.