

The Cuban Missile Crisis: The Soviet View

By Sherry Nay



Sherry Nay

Sherry Nay grew up in Powell, Wyoming, east of Yellowstone Park and close to the Montana border.

After earning a bachelor's degree at what is now Northern Colorado University, she taught at Wasson High School in Colorado Springs. After getting an MA from the University of Colorado, she spent two years in Colorado Springs working for the Social Services department before moving to Nyack, New York. She got her Ph.D. from Rutgers University in Russian History.

She was an adjunct professor at several colleges in the New York area, including Montclair State University and Rutgers, teaching Western Civilization as well as Russian history.

She and her family moved to Fairfax in 2004. While there she taught at George Mason University. Her husband, Ed Acker, and she moved to Winchester in 2011. In retirement, she still enjoys history, including family history and genealogy. Ed and Sherry have two daughters.

October 27, 1962. This was the day in history in which unclear orders, misunderstood intentions, and brinkmanship could have caused the end of civilization as we know it. This is not an overstatement. American missiles with nuclear bombs were ready. Soviet missiles with nuclear bombs were ready. Soviet submarines armed with nuclear torpedoes thought they were being attacked. Orders to their commanders had not been received. Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces were on full alert. The United States armed forces were on Defcon 2, the readiness step next to nuclear war.

Many now alive remember the Cuban Missile Crisis, possibly for distinct moments such as Adlai Stevenson's "until hell freezes over" speech at the UN, or simply for the atmosphere of dread and how scared we all were. For others, the most vivid images may be from the film *Thirteen Days*, starring Kevin Costner. *Thirteen Days* hardly touches, though, on what was happening with the Russians, and subsequent American historiography does not do much better. The purpose of this paper is to broaden the understanding of the Cuban Missile Crisis by discussing it from the Soviet point of view.

* * *

The Soviet leaders were living in a society whose revolution had been a rebuke to their past. Nevertheless, they still carried their history in their thoroughly Russian souls—a history of invasions from all sides, beginning with the Mongols who hung around for two and a half centuries, and continuing with later invasions of Poles, Lithuanians, Swedes, and Turks. In more recent memory, there had been Napoleon, World War I, and the

devastating German invasion of World War II.

This history produced an ongoing search for security and a desire to avoid war. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev had personally experienced the invasion of his village by the Austrians in World War I; during the German invasion of World War II, he was at the decisive and deadly battle of Stalingrad. Interestingly, both Khrushchev and Kennedy served on the allied side during the war. Both lost close family members—Kennedy a brother, and Khrushchev a son.

Cold war rivalry, with its history of ideological, political and military competition, played heavily on the minds of Soviet leaders, Khrushchev no less than his predecessors. This rivalry created the context of Khrushchev's decision to place missiles in Cuba. In all likelihood, the two foremost reasons motivating Khrushchev were, first, to save Cuba and its revolutionary government from a perceived upcoming invasion by the US, and second, to redress an unfavorable nuclear balance.

Having Cuba as an ally was seen as political profit to the Soviet leaders. Furthermore, many Soviets strongly related to the Cuban revolution. Khrushchev's son-in-law said that Khrushchev viewed Castro as a "modern day Lenin" (Khrushchev 406). There had been a great deal of the romantic revolutionary spirit in Russia in 1917, and Castro was rekindling this in a profound way. Commitment to the survival of the Cuban revolution formed an important part of the emotional connection to Cuba. The early ties strengthened, and the two countries became bound to each other.

Khrushchev now had an ally who not only represented the march of world socialism, but also was in the backyard of the United States.

The U. S. saw and understood what the Soviets saw. In diametric opposition, they were hostile to everything Castro stood for. While the Soviets were embracing Castro, the Americans were contemplating how to rid themselves of him. An overt attempt was made in April of 1961 with the unsuccessful Bay of Pigs invasion, carried out by Cuban exiles but supported by the U. S. Following this fiasco, the Kennedy administration continued with activities to unseat Castro through sabotage, wrecking the economy and fomenting counter-revolution. Khrushchev was convinced that there would be another invasion, this time by American armed forces. As the months went by, there was plenty of evidence that this could be true.

So why send in something as provocative as missiles with nuclear warheads? Prior to the missile decision, Khrushchev had spoken with his military advisers about the possibility of Cuba, with Soviet support, successfully thwarting an American conventional attack. The advisors said it was impossible. Therefore, nuclear missiles would be used as a deterrent to an American attack.

The second major motivation was to redress the glaring imbalance in deliverable strategic nuclear weapons. The United States and the USSR had long been playing the dangerous poker game of nuclear one-upmanship. Khrushchev was a great bluffer in this game. He once claimed that the Soviets were putting out missiles like hot dogs. In actuality, the USSR could not catch the U. S., but having missiles in Cuba strengthened its strategic position, provided a psychological boost, and created the appearance of parity given the presence of American missiles in Turkey, a nagging problem to the Soviets.

* * *

Khrushchev had a dacha on the Crimean Peninsula where he entertained many visitors, including Americans, and from which he had a clear view of the Black Sea, extending to the shores of Turkey. More than once he reflected on the American missiles that had been placed there, even musing about whether a missile was aimed at the dacha. Keenly aware that the USSR was surrounded by American naval and air bases, Khrushchev frequently told his associates that the Soviets would give the U. S. a little of their own medicine by having nearby missiles aimed at them.

The extraordinary and massive operation began in July.

Khrushchev's decision to place missiles in Cuba went beyond tit-for-tat, however. Like Kennedy, he had domestic pressures to act tough and pursue an aggressive foreign policy. He was also facing opposition to reforms at home, even opposition to his de-Stalinization program, and a highly visible and successful foreign policy action would help secure his domestic political position. Defending Cuba would also boost his leadership of international communism. The Chinese were constantly challenging him by calling him "soft". Khrushchev had already placed himself and the Soviet Union as the supporter of former colonies in their struggles for independence, and the defense of Cuba further demonstrated the strong commitment of this support.

Knowing that the United States would do everything in its power to prevent deployment of the missiles, Khrushchev decided to do it in secret and present the U. S. with a *fait accompli*.

It is surprising that a person as anti-war as Khrushchev would do something so provocative, but he was absolutely convinced that the U. S. would not respond with either conventional or nuclear war, explaining to his associates time and again that the U. S. did not want nuclear war and would not risk it with a military response. The missiles would be placed in Cuba as a deterrent to an American conventional attack. In 1961, when the U. S. had placed in missiles in Turkey, the USSR did not respond by creating a crisis. Khrushchev hoped that it would be the same with the U. S. when missiles were placed in Cuba.

The extraordinary and massive operation began in July. In addition to the long and medium range ballistic missiles, the Soviets sent short-range missiles, bombers, nuclear warheads, and over 42,000 soldiers and supplies. During July and August Khrushchev remained calm, always answering colleagues' questions about the dangers with the same assurance that America would not even consider nuclear war. But at the same time, he hoped to distract the Kennedy administration from focusing its attention on the heavy shipment activity and on Cuba itself. Khrushchev used the Berlin issue as a diversion.

Scholars never fail to quote Khrushchev's quip about the Berlin issue, "Berlin is the testicles of the West, every time I squeeze, the West jumps" (Furshenko, *Khrushchev's Cold War* 414). The "squeezing" as a diversionary tactic first took place when Khrushchev mentioned Berlin as he was bidding the American Ambassador Lewellyn Thompson goodbye in July. In August, Khrushchev told UN Secretary General U Thant that the USSR intended to sign a separate treaty with the East Germans, thus enabling them to cut off access routes to West Berlin. In early September, Khrushchev brought up Berlin to American Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall (in the Soviet

Union on a goodwill mission), again threatening to sign a separate peace treaty. He also mentioned the recent deployment of American missiles in Japan, telling Udall that he was tired of living with the everyday threat of American missiles close to the USSR.

On September 4, President Kennedy, responding to domestic critics about “softness,” warned the Soviets that the gravest issues would arise if evidence of foreign combat forces, ground-to-ground missiles, or other offensive weapons was found in Cuba. Khrushchev now had even more concern about discovery. He responded with orders to hasten the delivery of the missiles but continued to maintain that all weapons in Cuba were defensive, still betting that Kennedy would not want a crisis before the coming congressional elections.

In spite of heightened anxiety, Khrushchev carried on with his normal activities. He was out of Moscow from September 26th to October 10th, this time visiting the Soviet republic of Turkmen. Four days after his return to Moscow and unbeknownst to him, the American U-2s snapped the photos that conclusively revealed the missiles in Cuba.

* * *

From October 18th to the 22nd, as the now famous ExComm meetings of Kennedy and his advisors were taking place, the Soviets were still unaware that the missiles had been discovered. They continued denying their presence. Khrushchev, however, was extremely worried that the massive number of both Soviet and American ships northeast of Cuba could trigger a crisis.

Khrushchev knew his anxiety was warranted when on October the 22nd he got the news that Kennedy would be making an important speech to the nation. Khrushchev immediately commented to his son that he thought

it probable that the missiles had been discovered. As Khrushchev feared, Kennedy’s speech informed the nation about the missiles. Kennedy also explained that the first response would be a quarantine of Cuba.

On the one hand, Khrushchev was initially relieved to know that the quarantine meant that the situation had not yet descended to war. On the other hand, he continued to play the game by hastening the completion of the missile construction site and putting Soviet forces into combat readiness. His concerns about confrontation at sea heightened, and he furthermore did not want to risk the U. S. capturing the strategic technology that was on board the ships. Those ships furthest from Cuba were ordered to turn back; others in the Atlantic halted. Five ships close to Cuba and the four submarines were to continue on.

On Wednesday, October 24th, Khrushchev invited William Knox, an important American businessman who was visiting the Soviet Union, to his office. Khrushchev then explained, with both toughness and reassurance, the points that he wanted Knox to deliver to Kennedy. His reassurance was that the missiles were under strict Soviet control—his first public admission that they existed. He brought up the Jupiter missiles now in Turkey. His bluster was his statement that if freighters were attacked, retaliatory measures would be taken, possibly sinking American ships. Knox took the message to Kennedy the next day.

Thursday the 25th, was momentous in several respects. First, this was the famous day in which UN ambassador Adlai Stevenson confronted Valerian Zorin, the Soviet Ambassador to the UN. Before the world, Zorin (possibly himself unaware of their existence) denied that there were Soviet missiles in Cuba. Stevenson then produced the U-2 photos for Zorin and the world to

see, totally humiliating Zorin, and the Soviet Union for that matter. The blame for this humiliation, of course, lies at the doorstep of Nikita Khrushchev.

The same day, Walter Lippman in his *New York Times* column proposed that a just trade could be made by the Soviets taking their missiles out of Cuba for the U.S. taking theirs out of Turkey.

It was also on Thursday that a Soviet tanker reached the quarantine line. Close by, an America destroyer challenged it by flashing light. The Soviet ship responded by giving its name and destination. Kennedy let it pass and go on to Cuba, explaining that he did not want to push Khrushchev into a corner.

Finally, Khrushchev also made a major turn in his thinking on Thursday. Acutely aware of possible escalation to nuclear war, even if inadvertent, and now convinced that Kennedy was not going to accept the missiles in Cuba—he had intelligence information from several sources that the U. S. was preparing to attack the island—Khrushchev was ready to compromise. He sent a letter to Kennedy proposing that the missiles could be removed if Kennedy pledged not to invade Cuba. This letter arrived at the State Department on the 25th.

* * *

The climax of danger occurred on what is now called Black Saturday, the 27th of October. Two potentially disastrous events took place midday: an American U-2 was shot down over Cuba, and an American U-2 accidentally strayed into Soviet territory in the Far East. Either side could have reacted in a way precipitating an escalation.

That same day, Khrushchev received a letter from Castro that seemed to him

to advocate for an immediate missile strike against the U.S. Appalled and scared by this letter, he was further disturbed to learn the Cubans had begun firing at low flying American U-2s.

Another perilous drama was taking place in the ocean about 500 miles from Cuba. The U. S. Navy was aware that there were four Soviet submarines in the area, but did not know that each sub carried a nuclear torpedo, or that the commanders were under almost unbearable physical and emotional strain. On one of these subs, a Commander Savitsky had not been able to communicate with Moscow for forty-eight hours. The ventilation system had broken down, and temperatures were reaching up to 120 degrees. Nerve-wracking explosions of practice depth charges were all around the sub. He knew that planes were overhead. Fearing they were under attack, for a moment he considered arming the nuclear torpedo. As far as he knew, World War III had started. After many tense hours, unable to stay below any longer and with the calming influence of his fellow commander, he surfaced.

That evening, a final and crucial meeting took place between Robert Kennedy, JFK's envoy, and the Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin. The USSR agreed to take the missiles out of Cuba. The U. S. agreed not to invade Cuba and to remove the missiles in Turkey, provided that the removal of the missiles in Turkey was to remain secret. The next morning, Khrushchev announced that the missiles were being dismantled.

* * *

In both the USSR and America, there was a gigantic sigh of relief, but for the Soviets the crisis was not over. A real mission impossible lurked ahead. Although the Soviets didn't have Martin Landau or Tom Cruise, they

had someone even better, namely Anastas Mikoyan, the most knowledgeable, experienced, and level-headed man in the Soviet leadership. He was sent to Cuba to placate the furious Castro.

When Mikoyan arrived on November 2nd, Castro was understandably livid. He had been largely ignored throughout the October crisis and certainly had not been consulted about removing the missiles. Unknown to the Americans, a hundred tactical nuclear weapons and nuclear warheads remained in Cuba. Since these were not considered offensive weapons, Khrushchev had felt no obligation to remove them.

Mikoyan initially proposed to Castro that those missiles would remain in Cuba and the Cubans would be trained in their use. While difficult negotiations continued, the crisis was also ongoing with the United States. The "quarantine" remained in effect while verification of missile removal remained unresolved. Castro refused to allow inspections, so the U. S. kept up its low flying U-2 flights for photographic surveillance. Castro considered this an invasion of Cuban territorial rights, threatened to shoot down the U-2 planes, and in fact did fire at some of them. At the same time he planned on revealing, through the UN, the existence of the sizeable amount of military hardware, including the tactical nuclear missiles.

Mikoyan and Khrushchev feared Cuban irresponsibility with nuclear weapons. By November 21st, they were certain that the weapons should not remain in Cuba. Mikoyan told Castro that there was a secret Soviet law which specified that the Soviets could not keep nuclear weapons outside of the Soviet Union—a law he made up in the heat of the moment. The Presidium subsequently passed such a law, and the Soviets never again placed nuclear weapons outside their own borders. All nuclear weapons were then removed from Cuba.

Khrushchev, at great political cost, also remained true to his pledge that he would not reveal that Kennedy had agreed to remove the missiles from Turkey.

Because of the averting of nuclear catastrophe, Kennedy's handling of the Cuban missile crisis has often been called his finest hour. This can also be said of Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev. He, too, was instrumental in saving the world from a potential nuclear disaster.

Works Cited

- Allyn, Bruce, James G. Blight, and Daniel Welch, eds. *Back to the Brink: Proceedings of the Moscow Conference on the Cuba Missile, January 27-28*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1992.
- Beschloss, Michael. *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev 1960-1963*. New York: HarperCollins, 1991.
- Blight, James G., and Welch, David A. *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis*. New York: Noonday Press, 1990.
- Cold War International History Project Bulletin nos.1,3,5, 8-9,10, 11, 14-15, 17-18. Web: www.wilsoncenter.org/program/cold-war-international-history
- Dobbs, Michael. *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War*. New York: Vintage Books, 2009.
- Fursenko, Aleksandr, and Naftali, Timothy. *One Hell of a Gamble: The Secret History of the Cuban Missile Crisis*. New York: Norton, 1997.
- _____. *Khrushchev's Cold War: The Inside Story of an American Adversary*. New York: Norton, 2006.
- Khrushchev, Sergei N. *Nikita Khrushchev and the Creation of a Superpower*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000.
- Mikoyan, Sergo. Edited by Savranskaya, Svetlana. *The Soviet Cuban Missile Crisis: Castro, Mikoyan, Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Missiles of November*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012.
- National Security Archive. *The Cuban Missile Crisis*. Web: www.NationalSecurityArchive.org
- Taubman, William. *Khrushchev: The Man And His Era*. New York: Norton, 2003.

*The publication of this article is funded by
The Torch Foundation*