

**FIDEL CASTRO, GLASNOST,  
AND THE CARIBBEAN CRISIS**

by **Georgy Shakhnazarov**

In October 1987, Harvard University hosted a symposium on the Caribbean Crisis (or Cuban Missile Crisis) in which Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, Theodore Sorensen, and other prominent veterans of the Kennedy Administration took part; I was one of three Soviets who also participated, along with Fyodor Burlatsky and Sergo Mikoyan. At the conclusion of that interesting discussion it was agreed to advance a step further the historical study that had been jointly launched.<sup>1</sup>

The next "round" of this study was held in Moscow in January 1989.<sup>2</sup> The Soviet Political Science Association and the Institute of World Economy and International Relations invited U.S. former officials and scholars, and on the Soviet side A. Gromyko, A. Dobrynin, A. Alexeev, O. Troyanovsky,

S. Khrushchev, E. Primakov and many other people who were involved in the events of 1962 to attend the conference.

The Moscow conference turned out to be particularly interesting thanks to the participation of an authoritative Cuban delegation led by Sergio del Valle, a member of the Cuban government who in 1962 had been the Cuban army chief of staff. This article describes how this unprecedented Cuban involvement in an East-West historical investigation became possible, and Fidel Castro's personal role in that decision. On 7 November 1987, only a few weeks after the Harvard discussions, the Soviet Union celebrated the 70th anniversary of the October Socialist Revolution. Foreign delegations were led by the "first persons," and Fidel Castro was among them. At that time I was a deputy chairman of the CPSU Central Committee department responsible for relations with Cuba, and I had an opportunity to talk with the Cuban leader several times in his residence, the mansion at the Leninskie Gory.

During our meetings, I told him about our discussions with the Americans, and asked him if he thought it would be a good idea for the Cubans to join the process in order to present the maximum amount of reliable information about this dramatic episode in Cuban and world history.

Fidel thought for a moment, stroking his beard with a familiar gesture. Then he said: "It is not only a good idea, but it is a necessity. There are so many myths and puzzles about those events. We would be able to help, to give information about the events in which we were immediate participants. But nobody has invited us."

Then I requested an invitation for the Cubans to the Moscow conference. Fidel promised to send a delegation and he delivered on his word. More than that. He positively responded to the idea to hold a "third round" in Cuba, and indeed a conference was held, with Fidel's active participation, in Havana in January 1992.<sup>3</sup>

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tion, in which they depicted the planes flying above them, the Yanquis sticking their tongues out at them, and their planes and guns covered with cobwebs. And we realized once again to what extent the men who were supposed to be very experienced in struggling against the imperialists were actually totally oblivious to imperialist mentality, revolutionary mentality, our people's mentality, and the ultra-demoralizing effects of such a passive—more than passive, cowardly—attitude.

So we warned Mikoyan that we were going to open fire on the low-flying planes. We even did him that favor, since they still had the ground-to-air missiles and we were interested in preserving them. We visited some emplacements and asked that they be moved given that they were not going to shoot and we did not want them destroyed, because we were planning to open fire on the planes.

We recall those days because of the bitter decisions that had to be made.

1. [Ed. note: Castro is here alluding to his exchange of correspondence with Khrushchev of 26-31 October 1962 (esp. Castro's letters of October 26 and 31 and Khrushchev's letter of October 30), first released by the Cuban government and published in the Cuban Communist Party newspaper *Granma* on 23 November 1990, and published as an appendix to James G. Blight, Bruce J. Allyn, and David A. Welch, *Cuba On the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis, and the Soviet Collapse* (New York: Pantheon, 1993, 474-91.)

2. [Ed. note: It is not clear what lengthy letter Castro is referring to here, or whether it has been made available to researchers: a lengthy letter reviewing the crisis and its impact on Soviet-Cuban relations, dated 31 January 1963, from Khrushchev to Castro was released at the 1992 Havana conference.]

3. Soviet Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan arrived in Havana on 2 November 1962. The first meeting with the Cuban leader was on November 3. By the account here, Mikoyan notified the Cubans on about November 5 or 6 that the IL-28s would be removed. Declassified contemporary documents, however, including Kennedy-Khrushchev correspondence and Castro-Mikoyan conversation minutes, suggest that Mikoyan informed Castro about Moscow's acquiescence to Kennedy's demand to remove the IL-28s only on November 12.

4. It is not clear to what Castro is referring. Central American bases were used for training Cuban exiles in 1960 and 1961, and for launching the Bay of Pigs invasion. There is evidence that plans also were made for creating a Nicaraguan and Costa Rican base, but there is not clear evidence on whether they were used. See Fabian Escalante Font, *Cuba: la guerra secreta de la CIA* (Havana: Editorial Capitán San Luis, 1993), 180; Warren Hinckle and William Turner, *Deadly Secrets* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1992), 165-166.

5. In fact, U.S. estimates were never more than half of that number. See Dino A. Brugioni, *Eyeball to Eyeball: The Inside Story of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Random House, 1991), 308. Also see "'Soviet Military Buildup in Cuba,' 21 October, 1962," in Mary S. McAuliffe, ed., *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962* (Washington: Central Intelligence Agency, 1992; HRP 92-9), 258.

6. In 1968, Carlos Rafael Rodriguez had ministerial rank and was involved in foreign commerce. He had been an official of the Cuban communist party (which was called the Popular Socialist Party) before the 1959 revolution, and had served in the government of Fulgencio Batista (as part of a popular front) in 1944, and headed the Institute for Agrarian Reform from 1962-64. In the 1970s he became a Vice President of Cuba and a member of the Political Bureau of the Cuban Communist Party.

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### CASTRO AND GLASNOST

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After discussing all the logistical and organizational problems related to the project, the Cuban leader began to recall those troubled days of October 1962 when the fate of the humanity was played out in the game between Moscow, Washington, and Havana. And even though Castro repeatedly spoke on this topic later, that conversation contained a series of statements and judgments that shed some light on the development and outcome of the 1962 crisis, and on Fidel Castro's perspective on it:

#### "I Know Something About The Caribbean Crisis"

(Notes from a conversation with Fidel Castro, 5 November 1987)

#### Some Details and Specifics of the Crisis Situation.

In October [1962] the American planes began low flights above the Soviet launching sites for the nuclear intermediate range missiles and the anti-aircraft launchers. At that time the anti-aircraft missiles had the range of more than 1,000 meters. Paired ground-to-air launchers were used for protection of those anti-aircraft launchers, but they could not provide effective protection. We gave an order to add hundreds of additional anti-aircraft launchers to protect those launchers. Additional launchers were in the Cuban hands. That way we wanted to protect the Soviet nuclear and anti-aircraft missiles that were deployed in Cuba. Low overflights by the American planes represented a real threat of an unexpected attack on those objects. At my meeting with the Commander-in-chief of the Soviet forces in Cuba [Gen. I. A. Pliyev] I raised the question of the serious danger that the American overflights represented. That meeting occurred on the 25th or the 26th. I told him that the Cuban side could not allow the American planes to fly at such low altitudes over the Cuban territory any more. I even sent a letter [dated October 26] to Khrushchev about that. In that letter I told the Soviet leader about my concern with the situation that had developed. I said that we should not allow the Americans to deliver a first strike at the Soviet objects in the Cuban territory, we should not allow the repetition of the events that led to the World War II. At that time the crisis situation already existed.

On the day when the American planes appeared again, we gave orders to all Cuban anti-aircraft batteries to fire. The planes were driven off by the defensive fire. However, not a single plane had been shot down. Later on the same day

[October 27] a spying plane, U-2, appeared in the air above the island. We don't know any details, but it happened so that the plane was shot down by a Soviet anti-aircraft missile over the eastern part of the country.

I don't know in what manner they reported that to Khrushchev and to the General Staff of the Soviet armed forces, however, I doubt that the order to shoot down the plane was given by the Commander-in-Chief of the Soviet troops in Cuba [Pliyev]; that decision was most probably made by the commander of the anti-aircraft missiles, or even by a commander of one of the batteries. Khrushchev, however, accused us of shooting down that plane in his letter.

To be sincere, it was possible that we were to blame since we opened fire at the American planes first, because we were so decisively against the American overflights. But the biggest mistake probably was that you, having installed those missiles, still allowed the Americans to fly over the launching sites. Those overflights were nothing else but preparation for a sudden American invasion of Cuba. I cannot blame the Soviet comrade who shot the U-2 for what he did because I understand his psychological condition very well. He saw that the Cubans opened fire at the American planes, and he decided to fire a missile at the U-2. I heard that many years later he was decorated for that act.

It is interesting that the former Soviet Ambassador in Cuba, [Aleksandr] Alekseev, wrote in his memoirs that I was trying to avoid the collision. For the sake of historical objectivity I must say that that was not so. In my letter to Khrushchev after we had deployed the anti-aircraft batteries and mobilized our people to repel the aggression I expressed my hope that we would be able to preserve peace. I wanted to show Khrushchev that I was not in an aggressive mood. At the same time I wanted to inform him about my concern with the possibility of an American first strike, not even excluding a possibility of a nuclear strike against Cuba.

At the same time I suggested to the Soviet Commander-in-Chief in Cuba [Pliyev] to disperse the nuclear warheads, so that they would not have been completely destroyed in case of an American attack. And he agreed with me.

One more question concerned the public statements made by the Soviet leadership and the coverage of the events in the organs of mass media. I sent two emissaries to Moscow [on 27 August-2 September 1962—ed.]—I think they were Che Gevara and [Emilio] Aragones—who had to propose that Khrushchev make public the military agreement between the USSR and Cuba. Publicly the Soviet leaders claimed that there were no offensive weapons in Cuba. I insisted that we should not allow the Americans to speculate with the public opinion, that we should make the agreement public. However, Khrushchev declined.

The American leaders, Kennedy in particular, reacted to the Soviet statements very negatively. They thought they were deceived.

We, however, never denied the presence of the Soviet missiles in Cuba. In all their public statements Cuban representatives stated that the question of presence of weapons in Cuba was a sovereign business of the Cuban people, that we had the right to use any kind of weapons for the defense of the revolution. We believed that those statements of the Soviet leaders did harm to the prestige of the Soviet Union in the eyes of the general public, since at the same time you allowed U-2 flights over the Cuban territory that took pictures of the missiles stationed there.

At that time the question of the withdrawal of the Soviet missiles had not been raised yet. However, the aggravation of the situation forced Khrushchev to make that decision. We, on our part, thought that Khrushchev had rushed, having made that decision without any consultation with us. We believe that the inclusion of the Cuban side in the negotiations would have made it possible to get bigger concessions from the Americans, possibly including the issue of the American base in Guantanamo. Such rush resulted in the fact that we found out about the Soviet-American agreement from the radio. Moreover, the first statement said that American missiles would be withdrawn only from Turkey; in the second the mentioning of Turkey was dropped.

When I visited the Soviet Union in 1963, Khrushchev read several letters to me. The American letters were signed by Thompson, but the real author was Robert Kennedy. In Khrushchev's response he spoke about the missiles in Turkey and Italy. There were certain threats in Kennedy's letter. In particular, he wrote that if the Russians did not accept their proposals, something would have happened. In response to that Khrushchev stated that something would have happened indeed if the Americans undertook any actions against Cuba in disregard of the agreement, and that that something would have been incredible in its scale. That meant that if the Americans had dared to violate the agreement, a war would have begun.

Probably Khrushchev did not anticipate that the interpreter who read the originals would have mentioned Italy, but the original letter mentioned the withdrawal of missiles from Turkey and Italy. Later I asked the Soviet side to give explanations of that issue, but they told me that the agreement mentioned only Turkey.

We couldn't help being disappointed by the fact that even though the Soviet part of the agreement talked only about the missiles in Cuba and did not mention other types of weapons, particularly IL-28 planes, subsequently they had been withdrawn on the American demand. When Mikoyan came to Cuba, he confirmed to us that the agreement only provided for the withdrawal of the Soviet missiles. I asked him what would

happen if the Americans demanded a withdrawal of the planes and the Soviet troops. He told me then: "To hell with Americans!"

However, in 24 hours the Soviet planes and the majority of the troops were withdrawn from Cuba. We asked why that had been done. The troops had been withdrawn without any compensation from the American side! If the Soviet Union was willing to give us assistance in our defense, why did they agree to withdraw the troops, we were asking. At that time there were six regiments with 42,000 military personnel in Cuba. Khrushchev had withdrawn the troops from Cuba even though it was not required by the Soviet-American agreement. We disagreed with such a decision. In the end, as a concession to us the decision was made to keep one brigade in Cuba. The Americans knew about that brigade from the very beginning, but they did not discuss it.

Many years later, in 1979, before the Non-aligned Conference [in Havana in September 1979] American Senator [Frank] Church announced that a Soviet brigade was deployed in Cuba. Then our Soviet comrades suggested that we rename it into a training center. We were against it. However, before we had a chance to send our response, a [Soviet] statement had been made that denied the American Senator's claim and said that there was a Soviet military training center in Cuba.

At the time of the crisis President Kennedy was under a great pressure, but he defended the official Soviet position. However, when he was shown the photos of the Soviet missiles in Cuba, he had to agree that the Soviets lied to him.

On the question of nuclear warheads in Cuba I can tell you that one day during the crisis I was invited to a meeting at the quarters of the Soviet Commander-in-Chief in Cuba at which all the commanders of different units reported on their readiness. Among them was the commander of the missile forces, who reported that the missiles had been in full combat readiness.

Soon after the Reagan administration came to power an American emissary, Vernon Walters, came to Cuba. We talked extensively about all aspects of our relations, and in particular, he raised the question of the October crisis. Trying to show how informed he was, he said that, according to his sources, nuclear warheads had not yet reached Cuba by the time of the crisis. I don't know why he said that, but according to the Soviet military, the nuclear missiles were ready for a fight.

I don't know what Khrushchev was striving for, but it seems to me that his assurances about the defense of Cuba being his main goal notwithstanding, Khrushchev was setting strategic goals for himself. I asked Soviet comrades about that many times, but nobody could give me an answer. Personally, I believe that along with his love for Cuba Khrushchev wanted to fix the strategic

parity in the cheapest way. When the Soviet comrades proposed to us to deploy the nuclear missiles in Cuba I did not like the idea, but not because of the military risk; because from the political point of view we would have been seen as a Soviet military base in Latin America. We were ready to accept the risk of an American military invasion of Cuba in order to avoid the political harm to the prestige of the Cuban revolution. But at the same time we understood that the Soviet Union needed that measure to ensure their own security. We knew that we had suffered a big political damage at the very time when we were dreaming about a revolution in all Latin America, but we were ready to make sacrifices for the Soviet Union.

I cannot take the credit for the resolution of the crisis. More likely, I believe, the major role belongs to Khrushchev who caused that crisis by his stubbornness, and then resolved it. I did not know what was the real correlation of forces at that time, how many missiles did Khrushchev have. Khrushchev told me that after the missiles would have been deployed in Cuba, Kennedy would have to swallow it, and that later the Soviet leader was going to introduce the Fleet in the Baltic Sea (probably a mistake in the notes—should say “introduce the Baltic Sea Fleet”). I thought that Khrushchev’s actions were too risky. I believe that it was possible to achieve the same goals without deploying the missiles in Cuba. To defend Cuba it would have been sufficient to send six regiments of Soviet troops there, because the Americans would have never dared to open military activities against the Soviet troops.

Now I understand that the actions undertaken by Khrushchev were risky, if not to say irresponsible. Khrushchev should have carried out a policy like the one Gorbachev is carrying out now. However, we understand that at that time the Soviet Union did not reach the parity which it has now. I am not criticizing Khrushchev for pursuing strategic goals, but the choice of the timing and the means for achieving the goals was not good.

When I [Shakhnazarov] said that Americans had to and did abide by the agreement reached during the Caribbean crisis throughout the whole period after the crisis, Castro responded: yes, indeed, it was so. That is why I don’t think I have a right to criticize Khrushchev. He had his own considerations. And it really doesn’t make much sense to replay the history guessing what could have happened if...

Fidel Castro supported the idea of publishing memoirs of the participants of those events and added that he would be willing to take part in the discussions of the subject himself. “I know something about the Cuban crisis,” he said with a smile.

1. The organization and results of the 1987 Cambridge conference are described in James G. Blight and David A. Welch, *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reex-*

*amine the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989; Noonday Press of Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1990).

2. On the 1989 Moscow conference, see Blight and Welch, *On the Brink* (1990 ed.).

3. On the 1992 Havana conference, see James G. Blight, Bruce J. Allyn, and David A. Welch, *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis and the Soviet Collapse* (New York: Pantheon, 1993).

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## MIKOYAN’S TALKS

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The documents lend credence to the reminiscences of the historic participants—Nikita Khrushchev, Fidel Castro, former Soviet Ambassador in Cuba Aleksandr Alekseev.<sup>5</sup> They reveal that the fraternity between Cuba and the USSR was badly fractured. While the Kremlin leadership, faced with a severe danger, preferred geostrategic pragmatism to ideological commitments, the Cuban revolutionaries sprung up in fierce defense of their national sovereignty and revolutionary “legitimacy.” From the Soviet perspective, that of a superpower, the most important fact was that Castro had, in his letter to Khrushchev of October 26, advocated a preemptive nuclear strike against the United States if it invaded Cuba.<sup>6</sup> This notion, considered dangerous and irresponsible in Moscow, became an excuse completely to exclude Cuba from the U.S.-Soviet secret talks to resolve the crisis. Some of the Soviet leaders, gathered at the height of the crisis on 27 October 1962 at Novo-Ogarevo governmental dacha near Moscow, may even have feared that the Cubans, like Ulbricht, could push them all over the brink.<sup>7</sup> John J. McCloy, a representative of the Kennedy Administration, told Mikoyan, in New York on November 1, that “he was reassured by the presence of Russian officers [in Cuba during the crisis]. The Cubans could open fire without thinking ... But the Russians would think first.”<sup>8</sup> Khrushchev himself was forced to explain to Kennedy that the Cuban leaders were “young, expansive people—in a word, Spaniards.”<sup>9</sup>

Mikoyan’s trip was triggered by Alekseev’s cables from Havana. The Soviet ambassador alerted the Soviet leadership that Moscow’s actions had endangered Soviet-Cuban friendship. Khrushchev was particularly upset to learn that a rapprochement

was in progress between Cuba and the People’s Republic of China.<sup>10</sup> The continuing pressure of the United States for more Soviet concessions indeed corroborated this impression.

Mikoyan was Khrushchev’s closest friend and most loyal ally. As had his predecessor—Stalin dispatched Mikoyan on a delicate mission to Mao in January 1949—Khrushchev frequently used Mikoyan as a troubleshooter and personal diplomatic emissary: to Hungary (October 1956), to West Germany (March 1958), to the United States (January 1959), and to talk to the anti-Khrushchev demonstrators during the Novocherkassk riots in south Russia (June 1962). Important from the Cuban viewpoint, Mikoyan had been the last in the Soviet leadership who belonged to the “old guard” of the Bolshevik revolutionaries. He had known all great revolutionaries of the century, from Lenin to Mao Zedong. And he was the first to embrace the Cuban revolution after his trip to Cuba in February 1960, at a time when the Kremlin still felt ambiguous about the Cuban revolution and its young, non-Marxist leaders. Castro, for all his anger, let Mikoyan know on November 3 that he remembered his role. Khrushchev sometimes said, Castro joked, that “there is a Cuban in the CC CPSU. And that this Cuban is Mikoyan.”

What both sides felt and understood during the talks was no less important than their “formal” written content. For the third time, since the Stalin-Tito split (1948) and the Sino-Soviet quarrel (since October 1959), there was an open conflict of perspectives and interests between the USSR and another communist regime. And both sides were fully aware of this. Fidel Castro said (as quoted to Mikoyan by Ernesto “Che” Guevara): “The United States wanted to destroy us physically, but the Soviet Union has destroyed us de jure [*iuridicheskii*; juridically, legally] with Khrushchev’s letter”<sup>11</sup> it is not clear whether this comment referred to Khrushchev’s letter of October 27, with its offer to swap Soviet missiles in Cuba for U.S. missiles in Turkey, or his letter to Kennedy of October 28, agreeing without consulting Castro beforehand to withdraw the Soviet missiles from Cuba under UN inspection. But in any case, both actions enraged and offended Castro, who reminded Mikoyan, on November 4, that after the Spanish-American war (1898), when