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THE MISSILE CRISIS FROM A CUBAN PERSPECTIVE

HISTORICAL, ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND
ANTHROPOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

Håkan Karlsson and Tomás Díez Acosta



The Missile Crisis from a Cuban Perspective

“Whoever attempts to take hold of Cuba, if he does not perish in the struggle, will gather only the dust of its blood-soaked soil.” That was the spirit of Maceo and that was the spirit of our people. We have been worthy of him in these hard times that we have just gone through, in this confrontation where we were perhaps but a millimeter away from an atomic catastrophe.

—Commander Ernesto “Ché” Guevara de la Serna,
December 7, 1962, in *Cacahual* in a memorial to the Deputy General
of the Liberating Army, Antonio Maceo y Grajales, on the anniversary
of his death in combat (*Obra Revolucionaria*, No. 33 [1962], p. 6)

Previous works on the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) have approached the topic from the point of view of the United States and its allies, while Cuban experiences have still not been sufficiently discussed. This book presents new aspects that have seldom—or never—been offered before, giving a detailed account of the crisis from a Cuban perspective. It also investigates the archaeological and anthropological aspects of the crisis by exploring the tangible and intangible remains that still can be found on the former Soviet missile bases in the Cuban countryside and through interviews that add a local, human dimension to the subject.

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Håkan Karlsson and
Tomás Diez Acosta

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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiv

PART I

The 1962 Missile Crisis: Historical Reflections	1
1 The Threat of a Direct U.S. Invasion of Cuba	3
2 Deployment of Soviet Troops in Cuba	12
3 The Secrecy of the Operation	19
4 Spy Flights and the Cuban Reply	26
5 Facing Enemy Flights	33
6 Fidel Castro's Reflections on the Missile Crisis	40

PART II

The 1962 Missile Crisis: Archaeological and Anthropological Reflections	69
7 Neglected Dimensions and Their Revealing	71
8 The Material Remains and Their Reuse	82
9 Memories and Narratives	96
10 The Use of the Former Missile Bases as Cultural Heritage Resources	127

PART III

Conclusion 131

Conclusion 133

Appendix: Chronology 142

Index 154

Figures

1.1	Sabotage of the steamship <i>La Coubre</i> , March 4, 1960. The ship that carried Belgian weapons meant for the Cuban armed forces was destroyed by two detonations when it was at a key location in the harbor of Havana. The sabotage claimed 101 deaths and 200 injuries.	4
3.1	The base at El Pitirre. U.S. reconnaissance photo from October 14 showing activities of a Soviet nuclear missile regiment.	23
4.1	A Cuban woman on guard in Havana during the crisis.	30
4.2	A Cuban anti-aircraft battery at Malecón, Havana, during the crisis.	31
7.1	Archaeological and anthropological activities in Santa Cruz de los Pinos with the participation of local farmers.	74
7.2	Anthropological activities near the former base in El Cacho.	76
7.3	Map of Cuba marked with the six former Soviet nuclear missile bases where the project has worked.	76
8.1	The demolished hangar at Santa Cruz de los Pinos.	82
8.2	In the center of Santa Cruz de los Pinos there is a crossroads very much referred to in the local tradition. History says there used to be a house standing on the right side of the corner of the street, which is now partially empty. When the missile trailers reached this corner they discovered that the curve was too narrow. This meant that the house needed to be knocked down in the middle of the night.	83
8.3	Photo from the UN Security Council, October 25, 1962.	84
8.4	Low-altitude photo of the hangar in El Cacho during construction on October 23, 1962.	85
8.5	Photo of the hangar at El Cacho in 2015.	86
8.6	Remains of the hangar at El Pitirre.	87
8.7	A Soviet military container in a trash pit at a farmstead in the area of the former base in Santa Cruz de los Pinos.	88

viii *Figures*

8.8	Signatures of Soviet soldiers in a cave inside the base area in El Purio.	90
8.9	Inside the hangar in El Cacho today.	91
8.10	Marston mats used as a bridge.	93
9.1	Anthropological work at the base area in El Pitirre.	96
9.2	A photo that a Soviet soldier gave as a gift to a farmer living close to the former base at El Pitirre. The photo shows the soldier's baby girl.	99
10.1	The remains of the missile hangar at Santa Cruz de los Pinos as a peaceful place.	128

Preface

The Missile Crisis from a Cuban Perspective: Historical, Archaeological and Anthropological Reflections presents the reader with new dimensions and aspects of this well-known world crisis. Despite the numerous works that have been produced describing the military and diplomatic details of the crisis, as well as its influence on Cold War politics, the two themes and dimensions offered in this book have seldom, or never, been presented before:

- First, a historical overview that explains the background and prelude to the crisis from a Cuban perspective.
- Second, an archaeological and anthropological investigation of the material and immaterial remains of the crisis located at the former Soviet strategic nuclear missile bases and among people living in their surroundings in the Cuban countryside.

Many consider the crisis, also called the “Cuban Missile Crisis,”¹ to be the most serious episode that mankind faced in the second half of the past century given that the world had never before been so close to a nuclear war. It is important to note that the crisis did not start with the deployment of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba. After the defeat that the United States suffered at Playa Girón in April 1961,² the desire to destroy the Cuban Revolution by any means became a point of resolve for many high-level authorities and politicians in the United States, resulting in the elaboration of new aggressive plans and the intensification of covert and subversive actions against Cuba. In light of U.S. actions that predicted direct military intervention, the Cuban revolutionary government took measures to increase the country’s defensive capabilities and to create a system of national security so that the United States would have to pay a high political price—as well as a price in human lives—in case they would undertake a direct invasion of Cuba.

This situation was used as a frame for the Soviet proposal of May 29, 1962, to deploy medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs and IRBMs, respectively), of the types R-12 and R-14,³ with

nuclear warheads on Cuban territory. The Secretariat of the National Directorate of the Integrated Revolutionary Organizations agreed to the proposal because it was convinced that such a measure would be an important international contribution by Cuba in strengthening the Socialist bloc and that it would also contribute to the country's defense by dissuading aggression by the U.S. government. As result of this decision, between late July and October of 1962, a strong Soviet military contingent comprising approximately 42,000 men—of all kinds of armaments and forces—was deployed in Cuba. However, the stubborn and inappropriate political handling of keeping the secrecy of the operation of deploying Soviet troops in Cuba by the Soviet directorate was used by the United States to justify the unjustifiable: the use of military action such as the naval blockade of Cuba in peacetime. The Cuban response was quite different. From the beginning, it faced enemy propaganda and aggressive measures approved by the U.S. Congress. Cuban officials operated under the belief that Cuba, as a sovereign and independent country, could use the military equipment for its defense in light of the threats of aggression.

On October 14, a U.S. reconnaissance U-2 plane undertook an illegal spy flight and discovered the sites of the MRBMs in the western region of Cuba. On October 16, President Kennedy was provided the information. High-ranking U.S. political and military officials met for a week to decide the manner by which to eliminate those sites. On October 22, the U.S. president announced his decision to impose a naval blockade of Cuba and to demand the inspection and unconditional withdrawal of Soviet missiles. The crisis had broken out! The Cuban government, attentive to the events and the deterioration of the military situation in the Caribbean, ordered the general mobilization of the country almost an hour and a half prior to Kennedy's announcement. The evening of October 23 Fidel Castro appeared on Cuban radio and the television broadcasting system to explain the existing situation to the Cuban people. The news arriving in Cuba on October 23 indicated that the Soviets would not tolerate the developing U.S. actions.

Those were days of great tension for the whole mankind. The danger against international peace was imminent, and humanity was a short distance from the threshold of nuclear war. Debates in the Security Council of the United Nations had begun. A group of nations, most of which were members of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries, met at the United Nations and requested that Acting Secretary General U Thant act as an intermediary between the countries directly involved in the conflict and to search for and discuss a peaceful solution of the crisis.⁴

However, while many countries were making efforts to diffuse the crisis, the U.S. government increased its threats of an air strike on Cuba, and arrogated, as a right, the violation of Cuban airspace. On October 26, President Kennedy ordered an increase in low-level flights over

Cuban territory from twice a day to 12. The increase in the number of low-level flights over Cuba aggravated tensions. Such actions could not be tolerated because the U.S. flights were gathering information to undertake a surprise air strike. It was also affecting the morale of the Cuban forces, because they had to accept that the United States was continuing to violate the country's airspace with impunity. Because of the danger that low-level flights over Cuba meant for the country's defense, on October 26 Fidel Castro ordered the military to open fire, beginning on October 27, against every enemy aircraft flying at a low level and violating Cuban airspace. The evening of October 26, after adopting all measures and implementing a detailed defense plan,⁵ Fidel Castro decided to draft a message to Khrushchev aimed at exhorting him to keep a firm position and not to make irreparable mistakes in case war broke out.

But what neither Fidel Castro nor anyone else in Cuba knew was that beginning on October 25 Khrushchev and Kennedy were carrying out an exchange of secret correspondence seeking an arrangement between the two superpowers. In Khrushchev's last letter, the Soviet leader unilaterally and without consultation with the Cuban revolutionary government agreed to remove the armaments that the United States considered offensive, with guarantees of verification, in return for a pledge from the U.S. president that the United States would not invade Cuba and would prevent its allies from taking such a step. The Cuban revolutionary government determined that the terms of the arrangement between Khrushchev and Kennedy were not beneficial for Cuba. On October 28, Fidel Castro announced in a public statement the government's position, based on five points, that would make it possible to achieve peace with the United States. Thus, viewpoints differed between Havana and Moscow as to the negotiated solution of the crisis. On the one hand, Khrushchev tried to justify his actions, whereas on the other hand Fidel Castro defended his moral positions and principles with regards to the defense of Cuba.

This book presents the reader with a detailed account of the background and prelude to the crisis, as well as its development and ultimate end, from a Cuban historical perspective. Numerous works have examined the crisis, mainly from the viewpoint of the United States and its allies. We believe that the impact of such a monumental crisis on a small country like Cuba has not been sufficiently studied and analyzed.

Although the Missile Crisis ended more than 55 years ago, the archaeological and anthropological aspects of this dangerous event have still not been sufficiently investigated and discussed. As a consequence of the dominant narrative of the crisis with regards to its development and internal dynamics—in the same way as we partly will do in this book, although from a Cuban perspective—other aspects and dimensions of the crisis have been neglected and/or suppressed. This applies to the material remains that can still be found on the former missile bases and to the memories and narratives maintained by people living in their

surroundings in the Cuban countryside. Today, the material remains of the former Soviet strategic nuclear missile installations can still be found at nine sites in the western and central parts of Cuba. Six of these bases were designated for MRBM missiles of the R-12 type and three for IRBM missiles of the R-14 type.⁶ At the same time, numerous memories and narratives have been maintained by individuals living in the countryside and in the villages surrounding these former nuclear missile bases. These memories and narratives constitute unique testimonies of how this global crisis was perceived by the people who were suddenly and unexpectedly located at the epicenter of the crisis.

We became convinced that these under-researched material and immaterial remains can add valuable and important dimensions to the overall narrative of the crisis; therefore, we started the project the “World Crisis from Below” in 2005. The project is a cooperative endeavor between Swedish archaeologists and Cuban archaeologists, anthropologists and historians. Since the project’s launch, researchers have visited and investigated all of the six former missile bases where Soviet MRBMs were placed in October 1962.⁷ From the beginning the project was focused on the “repressed” and “neglected” dimensions of the crisis; that is, the material remains at the former missile bases and the memories and narratives maintained by people in the local communities surrounding them. The goal was to add to the overall and general history of the crisis with information gathered from material and immaterial remains in a manner where the dominating narrative of the crisis could be complemented, enriched, explained and also questioned by insights “from below.” We sought to provide insights that contribute more with regard to the human dimension and the dominant narrative to provide new dimensions and knowledge about the crisis.

This book presents the reader with the archaeological and anthropological findings based on the work carried out by the researchers involved in this project. The material remains from the former missile bases, as well as the present reuse of this material for various practical purposes in the countryside and the newfound interest from regional museums and other Cuban institutions to use the bases as cultural heritage resources, will be presented. The book also offers the reader a number of testimonies from people who experienced the crisis firsthand in the Cuban countryside. Adding additional Cuban historical perspective, the book also offers the important—but seldom presented—testimony given by Fidel Castro during the Havana Tripartite Conference held in January 1992, where the former Cuban leader makes a personal reflection on the causes, development and end of the crisis.

It is our hope that the book will be useful for scholars and those who are interested in this important historical event, in general, and of Cuba, in particular.

Notes

1. This denotation, common in the U.S. political and historical literature, has a political rather than a semantic meaning, because it assumes that the cause that unleashed the crisis was the deployment of the Soviet MRBMs in the Cuban territory, rather than the U.S. government's hostile and aggressive policy against Cuba since the very beginning of the Revolution in 1959.
2. On April 19, 1961, the U.S. suffered a humiliating defeat when trying to disembark a mercenary army of Cuban exiles at Playa Girón [The Bay of Pigs] with the aim to overthrow the Cuban revolutionary government. The mercenaries, who had been prepared, armed and trained by the Americans for a year, were defeated by Cuban forces within 72 hours.
3. SS-4 and SS-5, in accordance with the U.S. nomenclature.
4. The Cuban stance concerning the search for a peaceful solution is clearly expressed in the message of Fidel Castro to U Thant on October 27.
5. The Cuban defense plan, among other measures, involved the protection of the Soviet-deployed missile sites by anti-aircraft batteries.
6. In comparison with the MRBM bases, the IRBM bases were never operational due to the fact that the R-14 missiles never reached Cuba as a consequence of the naval blockade of Cuba that the United States imposed on October 23.
7. The project has been carried out as a low-budget collaborative project between Swedish and Cuban scholars from the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Gothenburg and the Institutes of History and Anthropology in Havana.

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Havana, September 1, 2018
Håkan Karlsson
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Part I

The 1962 Missile Crisis

Historical Reflections



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1 The Threat of a Direct U.S. Invasion of Cuba

The origin of the Missile Crisis was not the deployment of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba in October 1962, rather the principal reason can be found in the hostile and aggressive U.S. policy against Cuba since the very beginning of the Revolution in 1959.

After the U.S. defeat at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961, the Cuban government became aware of Washington's policy objectives toward Cuba and how these were aimed at eliminating the socialist system. The conviction that the White House was seriously considering the military option of using its own armed forces in a direct invasion of the island prevailed. This view was corroborated in later months by the stepping up of internal subversive actions organized and directed by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. The CIA appropriated financial and technical resources for the organization of terrorist and sabotage actions against the new Cuban government and the orchestration of assassination plots against the main leaders of the Revolution. It also engaged in intense ideological and psychological warfare, the provision of material support to pockets of armed resistance acting in different rural areas of the country and the support of other counterrevolutionary activities.

In the conclusions of the investigations ordered by President John F. Kennedy to General Maxwell Taylor in order to clarify the causes of the failure at Playa Girón, the latter recommended:

In the light of the foregoing considerations, we are of the opinion that the preparation and execution of paramilitary operations such as Zapata are a form of Cold War action in which the country must be prepared to engage. . . . Such operations should be planned and executed by a governmental mechanism capable of bringing into play, in addition to military and covert techniques, all other political, economic, ideological and intelligence forces, which can contribute to its success. No such mechanism presently exists but should be created to plan, coordinate and further a national Cold War strategy capable of including paramilitary operations.¹