

TOP SECRET//COMINT//X

(U)Cryptologic Almanac 50th Anniversary Series

(U)A Reconsideration of the Role of SIGINT during the Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962 (Part 3 of 4)

(b)(1)
(b)(3)-50 USC 403
(b)(3)-P.L. 86-36
(b)(3)-18 USC 798

~~(S//SI)~~ In the first two parts of this series, we considered the role of American SIGINT during the Soviet arms buildup in Cuba during the summer and early fall of 1962.

Although the conventional buildup was easily discovered, the transfer and installation of intermediate and medium-range ballistic missiles had not been discovered until a U-2 reconnaissance flight of 14 October. The Kennedy administration responded by declaring a maritime quarantine around Cuba on 22 October. U.S. naval forces were to stop and search all incoming vessels. Those with nonmilitary cargoes would continue on. The next day, the Soviets recalled ships carrying military supplies. SIGINT detected the reversal of the Soviet ships. SIGINT also maintained a close watch on the status of [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The Soviets, although on alert, never forward deployed their military.

[REDACTED] U.S. SIGINT intercepted the activity of the communist direction finding networks scattered throughout the USSR [REDACTED] Cuba. From this intercept, NSA determined that the communists were monitoring U.S. (and NATO) readiness levels and force deployments, much like their U.S. counterparts were watching the communist forces.

~~(S//SI)~~ In the last decade since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw pact, independent scholars have gained access to a number of former Soviet archives. Part of what they have made public concerns the activities of Cuban and Soviet SIGINT activities in Cuba and the United States, the latter probably a covert monitoring site in a Soviet installation in Washington, DC. The material reveals that the communist cryptologists, especially the Soviets, had a fairly good analytic insight into U.S. communications. Their traffic analytic and cryptanalytic efforts provided substantial information to Moscow regarding U.S. force posture. But, like the Americans, they were limited in what information they could provide about American intentions.

~~(S//SI)~~ What support did Soviet and Cuban SIGINT provide during the crisis?

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~~(S//SI)~~ How the communist SIGINT organizations operated during the crisis still is not known in great detail.

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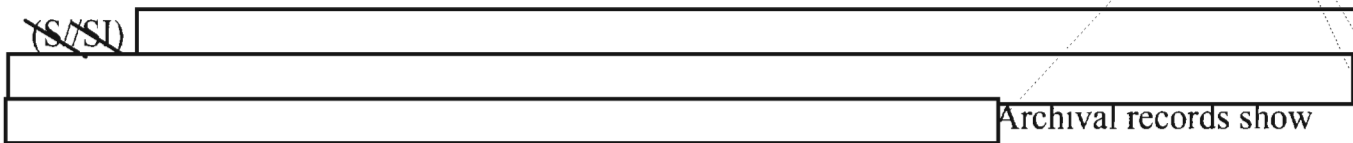


(U) Interestingly, it was during the initial buildup that the Cuban COMINT elements and the GRU made their first big discovery. Records from the GRU archives indicate that the Cubans had been intercepting a number of radio messages by agents within Cuba. It is not clear if these were the CIA-run networks or the rather haphazard operations of anti-Castro groups. Most likely the messages of both were being collected. The Cubans and Soviets were able to decrypt them. What they found was disturbing from the Soviet perspective: The agents were reporting the movements of Soviet military personnel throughout Cuba, and the construction of military barracks and sites for missile launchers. Though some of the messages incorrectly reported the locations of the missile bases, and others reported the presence of missiles before any of the SS-4s had been shipped, the very fact that such reports might reach Washington could compromise the Anadyr' operation.

(U) During the period between the 14 October discovery of the missile sites and JFK's 22 October speech revealing the missile sites, archival records indicate that Soviet SIGINT monitored a disturbing increase in the level of military preparations by the United States. Among other things, the GRU had observed a large increase in military aircraft stationed in Puerto Rico. It also noted an alarming rise in the number of SAC aircraft put on alert. The U.S. Navy had reinforced sharply the number of ships in the Caribbean that were part of an announced exercise ORTSAC (Castro spelled backwards). The GRU mission in Washington, probably operating a listening post from of the embassy, had overheard orders for senior military officers to be on call if needed at the Pentagon.

(U) Ironically, these disquieting indicators of an increased U.S. military posture went largely ignored in Moscow. The considered opinion within the ruling Presidium was exemplified by Foreign Secretary Andrei Gromyko's opinion that a "military adventure against Cuba is almost beyond belief." Still, as Khrushchev and the others awaited the President's speech on 22 October, the intelligence gathered by the GRU monitors suggested that Anadyr' had been blown.

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Archival records show that on 23 October GRU listening posts in Cuba discovered that the U.S. Navy was extremely interested in an unnamed freighter that might be carrying nuclear warheads. There was such a ship, the Alexandrovsk, and it was carrying over 60 nuclear warheads for the SS-4 and Luna missiles. On that day, it was inside the quarantine line as defined by President Kennedy. It was scheduled to dock at Mariel, but a recent flurry of aerial reconnaissance flights over that port caused the Soviets to send the ship to another harbor. So much attention was fixed on this ship that the Soviet ambassador in Cuba cabled

Premier Khrushchev when it had arrived safely. (There is no evidence that U.S. authorities in the defense or intelligence agencies ever fixed on the Alexandrovsk as a nuclear weapon transport. Merchant ship status reports issued by NSA and field sites never singled out the Alexandrovsk for any special interest or significance. The EXCOMM transcripts show that the Kennedy administration believed that the Poltava was the ship carrying nuclear warheads, and this may have been the vessel that the GRU overheard the U.S. Navy discussing.)

(U) For the remainder of the crisis, the GRU kept Moscow closely apprised of the levels of alert and preparations by the U.S. military. On 24 October, the GRU in Washington apparently intercepted enough radio and phone traffic to determine that some forces, probably SAC, had gone to DEFCON 2, the next level of alert before hostilities are declared. (Other U.S. forces had remained at DEFCON 3.) This meant that all of that command's missiles and bombers were ready to go; the bombers, in fact, were already airborne and stayed aloft by refueling. However, this information probably did not reach Moscow until 26 October.

(U) On the morning of 26 October, Khrushchev received more ominous news from Washington and Havana. The U.S. was preparing for a strike at Cuba. Indeed, the plan for a massive air strike, known as Operation Scabbards, was in place and ready to go within twelve hours of the president's order. The GRU reported that it had obtained information that U.S. military hospitals had received orders to expect a number of casualties to arrive. So certain were the Soviets that an air strike against Cuba was imminent that Moscow gave Pliyev permission fire on American aircraft if he believed an attack was under way. These expectations played a major role in the shutdown of the U-2 that afternoon.

(U) In the end, the GRU appears to have performed fairly well in keeping Moscow attuned to American military preparations. However, the entire Soviet intelligence structure failed when it came to alerting Khrushchev that the U-2 flights of 14, 15, and 17 October probably detected the missile sites that were being constructed. However, the secrecy of the Anadyr' plan - the Soviet ambassador to Washington was kept in the dark - and the refusal to develop a plan if the Americans discovered the Soviet ruse, left Moscow at a severe disadvantage after 22 October.

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