(U)Cryptologic Almanac 50th Anniversary Series

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

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

~~(S//SI)~~ In the first three sections of this series, we looked at the activities of American and communist SIGINT organizations during the Cuban missile crisis from June through November 1962. The SIGINT organizations for both sides provided a good deal of information on the [redacted] But SIGINT from both sides failed to provide notice of the critical moves during the crisis. American SIGINT (and all other intelligence resources) never did discover the ballistic missiles in Cuba. It was not until 14 October that a U-2 photoreconnaissance flight found them. Meanwhile, Soviet SIGINT did not register the discovery of the Soviet missiles by the Americans. Moscow remained in the dark as the Kennedy administration prepared its riposte.

(U) The aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis saw a number of changes to Cold War paradigms. For one thing, a "hot line," usually portrayed in the movies as a telephone, but actually a secure teleprinter system operating between Washington and Moscow, was installed. (One of the devices, a Norwegian teleprinter using a one-time tape, can be seen at the National Cryptologic Museum.) This link offered a quick and reliable method of communication during future crises. No longer would both sides have to rely on back-door sources such as during the crisis when newsmen and GRU and KGB agents in Washington relayed information between Kennedy and Khrushchev. For the U.S., the crisis appeared to be a clear victory. However, the American public largely remained unaware of the horse trade of missile sites and the no-invasion guarantee that ended the crisis. Also, a Soviet military unit, which had been retained as a defense force as part of the agreement, would be a source of embarrassment the Carter administration in the late 1970s.

(U) For the Soviets, changes came slowly. Chagrined at the loss of face, and upset at his gambling foreign policy, members of the Politburo, led by Leonid Brezhnev, overthrew Khrushchev in late 1964. In a response to the apparent weakness by Soviet military forces to project their presence overseas during the crisis, a massive buildup was begun. By the mid-1970s, the Soviets achieved a parity with the United States in nuclear forces and an overwhelming superiority in local conventional forces in Europe.

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(U) However, both sides had stumbled into the crisis because of the closed thinking in Washington and Moscow. The Kennedy administration seemed incapable of realizing that its provocative military and paramilitary measures directed at Cuba concerned Khrushchev enough for him to intervene. Khrushchev believed that the United States threatened Soviet security in Berlin, Cuba, and the USSR itself. The missiles were his counter. However, Khrushchev miscalculated in believing that Kennedy, being pragmatic, would concede the Soviets their missiles in Cuba, once they were installed. He could not imagine Washington's belligerent reaction to the secret installation of the missiles. More so, his deliberate lying about the buildup in Cuba, both in his public announcements and in the private reassurances on 18 October by the Soviet Foreign Minister, Andrei Gromyko, infuriated the president and his advisers. ("…Gromyko, who, in this very room [Oval Office] not ten minutes ago, told more bareface [sic] lies than I have ever heard in so short a time…" as President Kennedy described the meeting.)

~~(S//SI)~~ A couple of statements about the overall contribution of SIGINT during the missile crisis can be made:

~~(S//SI)~~ American SIGINT did not detect the dispatch, arrival, or construction of the IRBM and MRBM missile sites in Cuba. This part of the Anadyr' plan remained undiscovered by any U.S. intelligence source until the 14 October U-2 flight. There were some fragments of SIGINT - [redacted] Close-in intercept by the Oxford failed to detect any communications from the missile sites, nor were the [redacted]

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~~(S//SI)~~ SIGINT's two contributions to the crisis were the detection of the change in direction by the Soviet merchant ships bound for Cuba after the quarantine was declared, and the reporting of the status of Soviet armed forces worldwide. The transcripts of the meetings of the EXCOMM suggest that the intelligence from the direction finding fixes and the ship position reports was funneled through naval intelligence, not NSA, and then to John McCone at the White House. Also, the initial report of changes in course by the Soviet ships was layered in naval jargon and initially was unintelligible to the president and his advisers - a lesson for intelligence reporters everywhere. SIGINT, and this was primarily NSA's efforts, maintained a good grasp of the status of Soviet forces [redacted]

(S//SI) (U) From the transcripts, even redacted for classified information, it is obvious that intelligence from all sources was given a prominent role in the EXCOMM deliberations.

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Detailed items from SIGINT reports, such as the ability of D/F to locate Soviet ships, the [redacted] Russian pilot chatter, emissions from Soviet combat radar sites, and the location of the Oxford were matters discussed at length by the president and his advisers in the various conference rooms used by the EXCOMM. Yet, ironically, the NSA is not mentioned once in 650 pages of sanitized transcripts from the EXCOMM proceedings.

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(U) Bibliographical notes: Over the last few years, a number of previously classified documents and memoirs relating to the Cuban Missile Crisis have been made public. Scholars from several countries have taken advantage of these new sources and have written fuller versions of the event. Older historical views have had to change because of these revelations. Some speculative pieces on certain events, notably the responsibility for the shootdown of the U-2 and the nature of the command and control of the Soviet tactical nuclear weapons in Cuba (the FROG or Luna missile, and the coastal defense cruise missile (SS-N-2), were premature. The Soviets were responsible for the shoot- down. While an allowance for General Pliyev to use tactical nuclear weapons for defense was considered by Defense Minister Malinovsky and Khrushchev, permission to use these weapons ultimately was refused by Moscow.

(U) A standard and still useful history of the crisis from a purely American standpoint is Dino Brugioni's Eyeball to Eyeball. Brugioni was the director of the photo interpretation center, and his book was the first to provide an insight from the intelligence perspective. A very good history from both perspectives is the work by Tim Naftali and Aleksandr Foursenko, One Hell of a Gamble. It has the enormous advantage of source material from a number of Russian archives. Robert Kennedy's Thirteen Days remains one of the best eyewitness accounts of the crisis.

(U) Documents, once classified, have slowly come out, though not always in unexpurgated form. The Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) has done much good work in getting documents released by the former Soviet Union. The tapes of the EXCOMM have been transcribed and put into a single volume, The Kennedy Tapes, edited by Ernest May and Philip Zelikov. Unfortunately, much detailed intelligence information, in this case SIGINT, brought up during the committee's deliberations has been deleted. In 1992, the CIA issued a volume of redacted documents about the crisis, CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962. This volume contains many of the memorandum and intelligence estimates that were critical during the crisis. Sadly, the NSA release of its documents on the crisis is quite disappointing and adds nothing to the historical discourse.

(U) Surprisingly, the two films done on the crisis are quite accurate and, from a dramatic standpoint, are worth seeing. The more recent Thirteen Days is extremely dramatic and offers a good look at the technical side of the intelligence gathering and naval action. A made-for-TV movie (1973), The Missiles of October, offers, among other things, an insight into the Soviet thinking, showing how the Kremlin leadership, especially

Khrushchev, found itself caught in its own trap when JFK announced the discovery of the missiles and the blockade. The Soviets, too, had to grapple with uncertainty, doubt, and fear.

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