

Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Cuba: New Evidence

By Svetlana Savaranskaya

The most studied crisis of the twentieth century—the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962—never fails to provide researchers with new puzzles. As Raymond L. Garthoff pointed out in *CWIHP Bulletin 11*, “Each new tranche of revelations about the Cuban Missile Crisis helps to answer some old questions about it, but also raises new ones.”¹ One of the most interesting questions still remaining concerns Soviet intentions regarding the weapons not explicitly covered in the exchange of letters between US President John F. Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev, and the evolving nature of the Soviet-Cuban military agreement.

The new documents from the Russian archives that became available at the Havana Conference² (“The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: 40th Anniversary Conference”) in October 2002 shed new light on Khrushchev’s decision to deploy and then to remove tactical nuclear weapons from Cuba. They also invite further discussion on the following questions: what were the Soviet intentions regarding the tactical nuclear weapons in Cuba? What was the nature of the debate in the Soviet Union on the removal of these weapons from Cuba? Were there differing positions between the military and the political leadership on this issue? When, and why, was the final decision to withdraw those weapons made? When did the last tactical nuclear warhead leave Cuba?

We know that Khrushchev’s initial decision to deploy a nuclear-armed group of Soviet forces in Cuba included sending both strategic and tactical nuclear weapons (80 cruise missiles with nuclear warheads, as specified in the original plan for “Operation Anadyr” of 24 May 1962). In early September, Khrushchev augmented the plan by adding 6 nuclear bombs for the IL-28 bomber and 12 short-range tactical nuclear missiles for the dual-use Luna complex. (Later in September he also revised the plans for naval deployment, drastically reducing the naval capability specified in the plan.)

Until January 1992, US officials had been unaware of the presence of tactical nuclear weapons in Cuba in 1962.³ This type of weaponry had not been explicitly covered in the exchange of letters between Khrushchev and Kennedy. Khrushchev had promised Kennedy that the “the so-called offensive weapons would be removed,” which referred to the short- and medium-range ballistic missiles SS-4 (R-12, with a range of 1,050 miles) and SS-5 (R-14, with a range of approx. 2,000 miles) capable of reaching US territory. Even if the Americans had known about the presence of tactical nuclear weapons in Cuba, it would have been hard for them to make an argument that tactical nuclear weapons were offensive since their short range allowed them to be used only as battlefield weapons against an invading force.

Exploiting the ambiguity of Khrushchev’s phrase, the US demanded the withdrawal of the IL-28 bombers declaring them an offensive weapon. After Moscow decided to withdraw the bombers, Soviet Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan,

sent by Khrushchev to Havana, discussed the US demand with the Cubans. Mikoyan presented the issue in such a way that the Soviet government appeared to be consulting with the Cubans on the withdrawal of the IL-28s.

No such pretense was taken, however, on the issue of tactical nuclear weapons; there were no consultations with the Cuban leadership. Much to their surprise the Cubans were told that the tactical nuclear weapons were to be returned to the Soviet Union, even though they were not covered by the Kennedy-Khrushchev exchange. A more definitive answer to the question of why the Soviets decided to withdraw tactical nuclear weapons from Cuba may become feasible only after full access to the minutes of the CPSU Presidium sessions in the fall of 1962 (the so-called “Malin Notes”), which remain classified in the Presidential Archive of the Russian Federation in Moscow.⁴ Unfortunately, the selections of the Malin notes declassified so far do not contain any references to the discussion of whether to remove tactical nuclear weapons, which one would suspect, must have taken place at the Politburo some time in November 1962.

Nevertheless, the newly declassified documents from the Presidential Archive (“Special Declassification,” April 2002) and from the personal archive of Mikoyan’s son, Sergo Mikoyan, show that Khrushchev was ambivalent about the tactical nuclear weapons and their safety throughout the crisis, and that eventually he concluded that they were just too dangerous to be left in the hands of the Cuban ally. There are also some indications of differences between the Soviet military (who might have wanted to keep the weapons on the island) and Khrushchev.

The earliest sign of the Soviets ambiguity on the issue of tactical nuclear weapons emerged in September in discussions concerning the predelegation of authority to use the tactical nuclear weapons in the event of an US invasion of Cuba. The question was whether local commanders should have the authority to use tactical nuclear weapons if they were under attack, and if it was impossible to contact Moscow. Concerning the predelegation of authority to use the weapons in the event of an invasion of Cuba during which it was impossible that contact with Moscow. As General Anatoly Gribkov, the top Soviet military official in Cuba in 1962, explained in his 1996 book *Operation Anadyr*,⁵ a directive predelegating the authority to use tactical nuclear weapons had been prepared by the General Staff but, it was never signed by Defense Minister Rodion Malinovsky, likely reflecting Khrushchev’s unwillingness to predelegate the authority to launch to the local commanders.

Even though the directive was never signed, Malinovsky apparently remained apprehensive as to whether General Issa Pliev, commander of the Soviet Group of Forces in Cuba, understood the procedures for using tactical nuclear weap-

ons in a critical situation. On 27 October he sent an urgent telegram to Pliiev “categorically confirming that you are prohibited to use [tactical] nuclear weapons.” The cable might have been prompted by the shooting down of an American U-2 plane that day, despite the fact that Soviet commanders did not have the authority to do so.

According to the newly declassified Presidium materials, in anticipation of President Kennedy’s address to the nation on 22 October 1962, the Soviet leadership discussed the possibility of using tactical nuclear weapons if the U.S. paratroopers landed on Cuba immediately after President Kennedy’s speech. Specifically, Malin notes Khrushchev saying “To give instructions to Pliiev—to bring the troops to combat readiness. To make every effort not to use atomic

of the military agreement with Moscow, which was supposed to be signed during Khrushchev’s visit to Cuba. Moscow was silent regarding the agreement. The discussions in the beginning of November in Moscow apparently came to no conclusion. The Malinovsky-to-Pliiev telegrams dated early November tentatively assumed that the tactical nuclear weapons would stay in Cuba.

On 8 November, Mikoyan sent a telegram to Moscow prompting Khrushchev to make a decision regarding the military agreement and suggesting his version of the solution—transferring the remaining weapons to the Cubans after the Soviet specialists trained them, and then gradually withdrawing most of the Soviet specialists so that the USSR could not be accused of having a military base in Cuba (Soviet official

[Among] the most interesting questions still remaining concerns Soviet intentions regarding the weapons not explicitly covered in the exchange of letters between US President John F. Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev.

[weapons] in the early stages. If there is a landing [of U.S. forces]—tactical atomic weapons, and strategic—[wait] until instructions (excluding the use of the means of Statsenko’s equipment).

After Khrushchev’s decision to remove the strategic weapons from Cuba, the available cable traffic between “Reed” (Malinovsky) and “Pavlov” (Pliiev) reveals that there was considerable ambiguity regarding the withdrawal of the tactical nuclear warheads. At the beginning of November, Malinovsky suggested that warheads for cruise missiles, Lunas and the Il-28 bombs should be left in Cuba because “so far their withdrawal was not discussed.”⁶

The Cubans, of course, were very interested in the fate of the remaining military equipment and fully expected that those weapons that were not a part of the Kennedy-Khrushchev exchange would remain in Cuba. This interest was expressed repeatedly in the Cuban leaders’ inquiries about the fate of the unsigned military agreement between the Soviet Union and Cuba in the conversations with Mikoyan.

On 6 November, Mikoyan sent a long letter to the CPSU Central Committee summarizing his first conversations with the Cuban leaders.⁷ In that letter he described an episode during which Fidel Castro alleged that the Soviet Union had promised the Americans in the Khrushchev letters to “withdraw all weapons and all military specialists from Cuba,” to which Mikoyan replied, reassuring Fidel: “And you know that not only in these letters but today as well, we hold to the position that you will keep all the weapons with the exception of the offensive weapons and associated service personnel, which were promised to be withdrawn in Khrushchev’s letter.”⁸

Not fully reassured by Mikoyan’s clarifications, the Cubans kept pressing the Soviet representatives about the fate

policy at the time was to have no military bases on foreign soil). The telegram does not even mention the tactical nuclear weapons, and it is unclear whether Mikoyan included them with the “remaining weapons.”

Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko responded to Mikoyan’s telegram approving his suggestion on the part of the Presidium. Between 6 November and 12 November, all available evidence indicates, tensions between the USSR and Cuba were declining, and Mikoyan’s conversations with the Cuban leaders were quite friendly and cordial. They visited state farms and educational centers and discussed various issues concerning Soviet-Cuban cooperation.

But on 12 November, the emerging fraternal bliss was shattered by the confrontation over the Soviet decision to withdraw the Il-28s. Although Mikoyan tried to be as sensitive as possible in framing the issue of withdrawal by seemingly asking for Cuban consent, the Cuban leader quickly realized the decision had already been made in Moscow.⁹

The Cuban reaction to the Soviet decision to withdraw the Il-28s was so openly negative—Castro even refused to meet with Mikoyan for several days—that it surprised and alarmed the Moscow leadership. In addition, on 15 November, Castro, while visiting his troops and without consultation with the Soviets, issued an order to shoot at any low-flying US reconnaissance aircraft. That move surprised the Kremlin, which at that moment was engaged in difficult negotiations with the United States over the conditions of withdrawal and inspections of weapons.

Khrushchev once again realized that he could not control his independent and emotional ally Fidel Castro, and that such an alliance, given the presence of tactical nuclear weapons on the island, could be downright dangerous. Castro’s order led to an unprecedented outburst of anger and irritation on the part of Khrushchev, who called the Cuban leader

“unreliable” and threatened to withdraw all of the Soviet forces from Cuba if Castro did not immediately correct his course.¹⁰

Khrushchev’s long telegram to Mikoyan on 16 November signified a turning point in the Soviet-Cuban story of crisis resolution. Although we will only know for sure when the Soviet Presidium minutes become available, one may hypothesize that the decision to remove tactical nuclear weapons from Cuba was made between 15 November and 21 November. On 20 November, Malinovsky ordered Pliev to load all tactical nuclear weapons on the ship “Atkarsk” and return them to the Soviet Union. Gribkov stated at the October 2002 conference in Havana that the last nuclear warhead left Cuba on 20 November.¹¹

On 21 November, Mikoyan sent a telegram to Moscow, in which he concluded that all tactical nuclear weapons should be removed from Cuba. This telegram read in stark contrast to his telegram of 8 November. On 22 November, the CPSU Presidium issued instructions to Mikoyan in connection with the Cuban Foreign Ministry’s message to the Cuban representative at the United Nations, Carlos Lechuga, that “we should keep the tactical nuclear weapons.” Mikoyan was instructed to make sure that the Cubans stop talking about any nuclear weapons and to inform them that “these weapons belong to us, and are to be kept in our hands only, we never transferred them to anyone, and we do not intend to transfer them to anyone. In addition, as we have told the Americans, all nuclear weapons have been removed from Cuba.”¹²

The issue reached its culmination during the meeting between Mikoyan and the Cuban leadership on the evening of 22 November, at which Mikoyan confronted the Cubans with the fact that all tactical nuclear weapons would be removed from Cuba even though they were not part of the agreement between the Soviet Union and the United States. This unexpected turn of events was clearly hard for Castro to accept, but eventually he stopped trying to pressure Mikoyan into finding some way to keep those weapons, or even any significant Soviet military presence on the island. According to the available documents, the issue of tactical nuclear weapons in Cuba was never raised again after 22 November.

Most likely, the decision to withdraw the tactical nuclear weapons resulted from “nuclear learning” on the part of the Soviet leadership. Although the Khrushchev initially intended to leave the tactical nuclear weapons along with the rest of the equipment not covered in the exchange of letters in Cuba, he soon began to appreciate the danger of an inadvertent nuclear conflict and some time in the second half of November 1962 Moscow apparently resolved to withdraw them. However, more evidence is still needed to be able to state conclusively when the final decision was made and what the main argument was for removing the tactical nuclear weapons.

The documents below became available as a result of international collaboration between the National Security Archive and the Russian scholars, military veterans of the Cuban missile crisis and archivists. For a more extensive look at the new Russian documentation on the Cuban Mis-

sile Crisis, consult the websites of the National Security Archive (<http://www.nsarchive.org>) and the Cold War International History Project (<http://cwihip.si.edu>) as well as the forthcoming book by Sergo A. Mikoyan.

Dr. Svetlana Savranskaya is director of Russian programs at the National Security Archive at The George Washington University.



DOCUMENT No. 1

Telegram TROSTNIK (REED—USSR Defense Minister Rodion Malinovsky) to PAVLOV (Commander of the Group of Soviet Forces in Cuba General Isa Pliev), 22 October 1962

[Source: Archive of the President of the Russian Federation, Special Declassification, April 2002. Translated by Svetlana Savranskaya.]

TOP SECRET

TROSTNIK...to Comrade PAVLOV

In connection with the possible landing of Americans participating in the maneuvers in the Caribbean Sea on Cuba, undertake urgent measures to increase combat readiness, and to repel the enemy by joint efforts of the Cuban army and all units of the Soviet troops, excluding the weapons of Statsenko’s and of all Beloborodov’s cargo.

Director

#4/389

22 October 1962

23.30



DOCUMENT No. 2

Telegram TROSTNIK (REED—USSR Defense Minister Rodion Malinovsky) to PAVLOV (Commander of the Group of Soviet Forces in Cuba General Isa Pliev), 23 October 1962

[Source: Archive of the President of the Russian Federation, Special Declassification, April 2002. Translated by Svetlana Savranskaya.]

TOP SECRET

TROSTNIK...to Comrade PAVLOV

From 00 Moscow time on 24 October establish two-way radio connection on two directions on radio station R-

The tactical nuclear weapons left Cuba on December 1. The presence of the tactical nuclear weapons in Cuba was significant. Had JFK followed the initial advice of his advisers to strike Soviet missile sites, the Soviets would likely have retaliated with a nuclear strike against the U.S. military base at Guantánamo Bay. The Soviet commanders on the island did not need permission or launch codes from Moscow to fire their weapons. And if the United States had invaded Cuba, U.S. troops would almost certainly have been wiped out by tactical nuclear weapons. A full-scale nuclear exchange between the This evidence of battlefield weapons of mass destruction got submerged in the flood of intelligence reaching the president. Those forgotten missiles of the Cuban Missile Crisis could have triggered World War III. Earlier, in response to a Soviet supplied military buildup in Cuba in mid-1962, Pentagon planners were refining two operational plans against Cuba: one a massive 500 sortie airstrike against missile and radar sites and MiG airfields; the other a 125,000-strong joint-force invasion. The latter apparently had no contingencies for facing tactical nuclear weapons, as Defense Secretary Robert McNamara revealed in his book *In Retrospect*, " . . . U.S. invasion forces would not have been equipped with tactical nuclear weapons."