

Missiles Aimed at U.S. in '62

Castro Urged Launch Of Nuclear Strike, Conferees Are Told

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By Michael Dobbs
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MOSCOW, Jan. 28—Soviet officials, warned by Cuban leader Fidel Castro of the possibility of an imminent U.S. attack on Cuba, were better prepared to launch nuclear missiles against the United States in October 1962 than previously assumed, according to participants in a Soviet-U.S.-Cuban conference on the missile crisis here.

U.S. sources quoted a Soviet participant in the conference as saying that Castro sent a message to Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev at the height of the crisis urging him to fire nuclear missiles stationed on the island in anticipation of a U.S. attack, a move that almost certainly would have triggered massive U.S. retaliation against the Soviet Union.

Soviets taking part in the conference here said that Washington and New York were among the American cities targeted for attack by Cuban-based Soviet missiles and that at least half the 42 missiles deployed on the island were operational with nuclear warheads close at hand.

Cuban officials refused to confirm the report of Castro's message to Khrushchev, which was conveyed to American participants privately and did not form part of the official conference record. They acknowledged, however, that the Cuban leader sent a message to the Kremlin during the final weekend of the crisis warning that a U.S. air strike or invasion would probably take place within the next 72 hours.

The atmosphere of extreme tension in Havana was illustrated by former Soviet ambassador to Cuba Alexander Alexeev, who revealed that Castro spent the night of Oct.

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26, 1962, in an embassy air-raid bunker because he feared a U.S. attack. The Cuban leader was depicted as agitated but ready to die for the cause in which he believed.

Several American participants in the two-day conference said that they had previously underestimated the extent to which Cuban and Soviet officials believed that a U.S. invasion of the island was a real possibility.

"Much of the trouble arose from a failure of communication" between Washington and Moscow, said McGeorge Bundy, who was President Kennedy's national security adviser during the crisis. "You failed to understand in the Soviet Union that we were not going to invade the island of Cuba. That was partly our mistake, too, since we failed to understand your fears."

"There is plenty of blame to be shared by all three countries represented here today," concurred former White House aide Theodore Sorensen, who drafted many of Kennedy's speeches.

Other participants in the conference included former Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko, former ambassador to Washington Anatoliy Dobrynin and Sergei Khrushchev, whose father ordered the deployment of Soviet missiles in Cuba and their subsequent removal. The U.S. delegation included former defense secretary Robert S. McNamara, and the Cuban delegation was headed by Jorge Risquet, a close Castro aide and a member of the ruling Communist Party Politburo.

Details about the readiness of the Soviet missiles in Cuba were provided by Gen. Dmitri Volkogonov, a military historian who said he had reviewed archive material on the subject. U.S. officials have been debating for years whether the missiles were equipped with nuclear warheads, and many experts assumed that the U.S. naval blockade had prevented such weapons from reaching the island.

Volkogonov said that it would have taken four to five hours to make the missiles ready for launching and an additional 15 minutes to fire them. Sergei Khrushchev said that although the warheads were in Cuba they were not actually mounted on the missiles.

"My father would not have allowed them to be mounted," said Khrushchev, an engineer who now heads a computer research laboratory. "He felt that would have made it easier for a madman to start a war." After the conference, Khrush-

chev told journalists that his father was "extremely anxious" when he learned that an American U2 reconnaissance plane had been downed on Oct. 27 by a Soviet anti-aircraft unit on Cuba acting without instructions from Moscow.

"My father was convinced that nuclear war would not break out as long as he and the president had the situation under control," Khrushchev said. Earlier, he read into the conference record a telegram to his father from Castro on the night of Oct. 26 saying that he and his comrades were prepared to die "for the revolution" if the Americans attacked.

After the downing of the American U2, Kennedy threatened to destroy all the Soviet missile sites on Cuba unless the missiles were dismantled. But U.S. documents recently released under the Freedom of Information Act make clear

that the United States did not have the capacity to preempt a Soviet nuclear attack from Cuba.

At a meeting at the White House on Oct. 21, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had told the president that the U.S. could only be sure of destroying 90 percent of the known Soviet missiles on the island. Since some of the missile sites had not been discovered by reconnaissance planes, this would have left 10 to 15 missiles still intact.

Asked at today's session where the missiles were targeted, Sergei Khrushchev said that it was standard Soviet military doctrine at the time to target large cities rather than military bases. He later told American participants that he believed Washington and New York were among priority targets for attack.

The Soviet force of 42 medium-range missiles in Cuba represented two-thirds of the Kremlin's nuclear strike capability against the United States at the time of the crisis. Soviet officials said that only 20 or so intercontinental missiles were deployed in the Soviet Union in 1962, meaning that the United States at the time had a huge strategic superiority.

One of the Cuban participants in the conference, Comandante Emilio Aragonos, said that Cuban authorities estimated that as many as 800,000 people could have been killed in the event of a U.S. invasion of the island. He said that the 20,000 Soviet troops stationed in Cuba had also been ready to "fight and die" alongside their "Cuban

brothers.”

Another senior Cuban Communist official, Jose Arbesu, said in an interview that he was unaware of any appeal by Castro to Khrushchev to fire the missiles. But he acknowledged that the Cuban leader had sent a message on or about Oct. 26 warning of a probable U.S. air strike or invasion “in the next 24 to 72 hours.”

The conference appears to have convinced American participants that Soviet determination to defend Cuba against American assault played a much larger role in Khrushchev's thinking than previously acknowledged. Although Khrushchev cited the defense of Cuba as his primary motivation for installing missiles there, U.S. officials and academics have tended to emphasize other motivations.

The conference has also served to underline the danger of the crisis getting out of hand through events, like the shooting down of the U2, that neither Khrushchev nor Kennedy was able to control. Kennedy was convinced at the time that the downing of the plane was the result of a conscious decision by Khrushchev to escalate the crisis.

Although there have been numerous conferences on the missile crisis, this was the first time that high-ranking Soviet and Cuban participants had agreed to discuss the subject with former U.S. officials and academics. Risquet has offered to hold a follow-up meeting in Cuba.

In a joint statement at the conclusion of the gathering here, the U.S., Soviet and Cuban participants said that dealing with an emerging crisis was “immeasurably more difficult” than preventing a crisis. “Any mechanisms of deescalation of an armed confrontation are unreliable,” the statement said. “There is no guarantee that the outcome of another such crisis would turn out so favorably for humanity.”