

Soviets and Cubans to Give Their

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Washington Post Foreign Service

MOSCOW, Jan. 8—After more than a quarter of a century of official silence, the Soviet Union and Cuba are preparing to tell their behind-the-scenes versions of how the world approached nuclear war during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

Senior Soviet and Cuban officials have agreed to speak about their roles in the crisis during a conference here starting Jan. 26 that also will be attended by key aides to the late president John F. Kennedy. The green light for holding the conference has come from President Mikhail Gorbachev, who is scheduled to receive the main participants at its close on Jan. 29.

"This will be the first time that Soviet, American and Cuban officials have got together to discuss the crisis," said Jim Blight, director of the nuclear crisis project at Harvard University's Center for Science and International Affairs.

The Soviet decision to cooperate with the Harvard project reflects the Kremlin's new foreign policy line under Gorbachev. As Soviet rhetoric shifts from confrontation with the West to cooperation, the Cuban missile crisis is being held up as a case study in how the superpowers managed to avoid a nuclear apocalypse by demonstrating a willingness to compromise.

Until now, scholars have relied on the records and recollections of U.S. administration officials in reconstructing the most dangerous postwar confrontation between the superpowers. The Soviet and Cuban contribution has largely been confined to statements published at the time and occasional nuggets of information from secondary sources.

An indication of the revelations still to come was provided recently by the former Soviet ambassador to Cuba, Alexander Alexeev, who published his reminiscences in a Soviet magazine, *Planetary Echo*. The article marked the first detailed account of the crisis by a ranking Soviet participant.

Alexeev, who will participate in

Versions of '62

Missile Crisis

the conference, asserted that some of the 42 medium-range Soviet missiles in Cuba were fully operational by the time the United States announced its blockade of the island. Western officials and scholars have been arguing for years over whether the Soviet missiles had already been equipped with nuclear warheads by the time the crisis broke.

The former ambassador also said that a local Soviet commander was responsible for shooting down an American U2 plane over Cuba on Oct. 27, 1962, triggering the most tense phase in the two-week crisis. It is now clear that neither president Kennedy nor Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev ever learned the truth about this vital episode.

"The records show that, after the plane was shot down, Kennedy and the ExCom [National Security Council Executive Committee] believed that the action had been

ordered by Khrushchev. They interpreted it as a sign that Khrushchev was ready to go to war over the missiles. They went to bed not knowing that Khrushchev was even more horrified than Kennedy about what had happened," said Blight, who visited Moscow last month to organize the conference.

Khrushchev's memoirs indicate he was convinced the Cubans had shot down the U2. Soviet officials have told the Harvard team that a high-level military cover-up kept the former Kremlin chief in the dark.

"The more you get into this, the more you realize that neither side knew what the other side was really thinking. This leads us to believe that we may have been luckier than we think," said Blight.

In addition to Alexeev, Soviet participants in the conference are expected to include former foreign minister Andrei Gromyko, former ambassador to Washington Ana-

toliy Dobrynin and a KGB agent known as "Mr. X," who opened a back channel through John Scali of ABC News. The six-man Cuban delegation will be headed by Vice President Carlos Rafael Rodriguez.

Sen. Edward M. Kennedy will head the American delegation, which will also include John Kennedy Jr., former defense secretary Robert S. McNamara, former national security adviser McGeorge Bundy, former White House special counsel Ted Sorensen, former White House press secretary Pierre Salinger and general William Y. Smith, former chief aide to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Although the high-level Soviet participation at the conference fits in with the new Kremlin line as proclaimed by Gorbachev, the Harvard historians are convinced that personal factors also play a role.

"For many of these people, this was the most momentous time of their life. They are elderly people and they don't want to carry their secrets to the grave," said Blight.

Harvard hosted a seminar on the Cuban missile crisis last year that was attended by three Soviet academics in addition to former Kennedy administration officials. Unlike the Soviet officials who will be attending this month's conference, none of the Soviet participants in last year's meeting had first-hand knowledge of key events.

In his article in *Planetary Echo*, Alexeev gave a dramatic description of a Kremlin meeting in May 1962 at which Khrushchev announced his decision to deploy missiles in Cuba. According to the former ambassador, the key motivation was the wish to protect the Cuban revolution from a U.S. military intervention.

Khrushchev insisted that the

installation of the missiles be carried out in great secrecy in order to present Washington with a *fait accompli*. But the U.S. administration got word of the Soviet preparations, which began in July 1962, and confirmed the presence of Soviet missile sites in Cuba through aerial reconnaissance.

Alexeev said that by the time Kennedy went on radio and television, on Oct. 22, all 42 Soviet missiles, warheads and the military personnel required to man them were already "in place."

"Some rockets had been brought to military readiness. Some of our ships were still en route but they contained only auxiliary supplies and equipment for our military contingent, which it was possible to do without," wrote Alexeev.

The former ambassador said Castro reacted angrily when Khrushchev decided to dismantle the missiles without consulting or informing him. He quoted Khrushchev as later telling Castro that consultations had been impossible because "peace hung by a thread."

"Khrushchev said that all the members of the Communist Party's Presidium spent the entire night of Oct. 28 in the Kremlin, drafting their latest letter to the American president. According to him [Khrushchev], Soviet radio began broadcasting the text of the letter at a time when its end had not even been completed," Alexeev said.

The ambassador said that when he heard that Radio Moscow had announced the withdrawal of the missiles without informing Castro, "I felt myself the most unhappy person on earth, as I imagined what Fidel's reaction to this would be." The Cuban leader refused to talk to him for several weeks.

The Moscow conference will open with a video recording of Kennedy's televised speech on Oct. 22 in which he called on the Kremlin to remove the missiles from Cuba. Some Soviet officials maintain that the crisis could have been defused with much less tension had Kennedy decided to employ quiet diplomacy rather than public pressure.



In 1962 U.N. Security Council session, diplomats gather to view aerial photos of missile bases in Cuba displayed by U.S. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson, right.

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