

BOOK REVIEW

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The 'Missile' Crisis As Seen From Cuba

BY TOMÁS DIEZ ACOSTA

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Over 40 years have passed since the tense hours in October 1962 when the world nearly saw the eruption of nuclear conflict between the United States and the USSR—and in a location never anticipated by cold war paradigm architect George Kennan in his famous “Mr. X” article of 1947. Tomás Diez Acosta, a soldier 16 years old at the time of that crisis, enjoyed a long career as a political education officer within the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Cuba and culminated his work as director of the Department of Military History within the Institute of Cuban History.

Diez Acosta’s book is worthwhile reading for Latin Americanist scholars in the United States. He opens with a well-documented section on the international antecedents to the Missile Crisis: the “dirty tricks” program that encouraged pro-Batista terrorists to detonate dams and bridges, pushed religious figures to denounce Fidel Castro, and sent diplomatic blitzes to intimidate Latin Americans supporting the revolution. This section resembles standard U.S. textbook accounts, except that it emphasizes the Kennedy administration’s inventory of diplomatic and clandestine actions attempting to discredit revolutionary Cuba in Latin America and destabilize the Castro government.

The situation then escalated when the USSR positioned several dozen nuclear missiles near Havana. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev deemed this action necessary in order “to prevent the

United States from overwhelming the Cuban Revolution.” Diez Acosta offers good information on the internal politics of the Kremlin with regard to the deployment of missiles in Cuba. It is useful to read this account of Kremlin bureaucracy in conjunction with Alexandr Fursenko’s recent revelations on the topic, *One Hell of a Gamble* (W.W. Norton, 1997). Diez Acosta’s interpretation of the actions of Soviet national security figures offer a fresh view of relationships between the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and the Soviet government. He also gives fresh insights on civil-military relations in the Soviet Union at the time. He is less cognizant, however, of the hornet’s nest of bureaucratic power plays that unfolded when photo interpretation expert Dino Brugioni risked his career to rush photo imagery of the missiles directly to President John F. Kennedy, recounted in Brugioni’s *Eyeball to Eyeball: The Inside Story of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Random House, 1992).

His greatest contribution, however, is his continual emphasis of the Cuban perspective. The view from Cuba was simple. They were surrounded by huge masses of U.S. offensive combat power: long columns of naval vessels were traversing the Panama Canal as reinforcements, massive numbers of offensive and surveillance aircraft roared constantly through the Caribbean skies, the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions were reputed to be enroute, and Marine Corps amphibious forces of divisional size were nearing Cuban shores. The CIA was mobilizing its “dirty tricks” capabilities at several points inside Cuba, although Diez Acosta opines that Cuban security handled this threat rather well. In all of this, Diez Acosta shows two Cuban forces at work: intense patriotism against the bullying northern enemy and sincere belief that the communist economic system was a revolutionary cause of great merit. Cubans were willing to die in battle for both reasons.

JFK showed the hypocrisy inherent in his Alliance for Progress (in Diez Acosta’s view) by conducting crisis negotiations with Khrushchev, even as he ordered up strategic strike forces by land,

sea, and air. Robert Kennedy negotiated frantically with Turkey to withdraw some recently authorized U.S. Jupiter missiles there, in exchange for which Khrushchev was finally disposed to remove Soviet weapons from Cuba. Yet tacitly, Khrushchev authorized a combat brigade, a training mission, and a powerful electronic oversight facility to remain.

Scholars of the Missile Crisis will respect Diez Acosta's extended discussion of this process, which Castro initially denounced bitterly as the sellout of Cuba by the USSR in favor of its own national security goals. He shows nuanced considerations concerning the U.S. naval blockade, the U.S. promise not to invade, intelligence overflights, and CIA-sponsored anti-Castro subversion. While he seems unaware of how this challenge to the U.S. military security finally gave Kennedy the impetus to centralize and streamline the U.S. national security process, he does show how the USSR underwent a revision of "soft" areas around the globe in the overall struggle for socialism.

Having opened wonderful doors for a look inside the once-hidden cold war wrangling over Cuba, Diez Acosta drops the historian's mantle of neutrality and becomes the loyal troop education officer for the Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces. Because he carries the reader beyond the "Nikita sold us out" wailing in Havana and the "let's nuke 'em anyway" rhetoric of U.S. Air Force General Curtis LeMay, he has a chance to write some new history. He has evidence to show how the aftermath of the crisis in Cuba produced a remarkably powerful revolutionary nation-state supported by strong, capable, and strategically deployable armed forces. Instead, much of his finale is taken up with a series of rousing homilies on the validity and historical importance of the revolution.

Nevertheless, this book is vital to a full understanding of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Pathfinder Press fills an important void in Latin American scholarship by offering this volume, which, like

their two volumes of Che Guevara's memoirs, is beautifully edited and illustrated. It is highly appropriate for any course in modern Caribbean politics, cold war history, Cuban history, or military history, and it gives the reader a full and sincere look at the often overlooked Cuban perspective of a world power triad near nuclear confrontation.