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This photograph, from the U.S. National Archives, depicts a Soviet "SAM" (surface-to-air missile) site near Havana (Cuba) as it existed during August of 1962. We see the characteristic star-shaped deployment pattern in the image. The picture was taken during an August 29, 1962 U-2 flight over Cuba. This SAM-site buildup was part of the Soviet Union's "Operation Anadyr."

What were the Soviets trying to accomplish with Operation Anadyr?

Many people think Khrushchev was trying to establish a Soviet base in the Western hemisphere. If that were true, nuclear missiles pointed at the United States would be *offensive* weapons. But contemporary documents from Russian archives (released after the fall of the Soviet Union) paint a different conceptual picture.

Because he planned to use the island for a counter-strike, in the event of an American invasion, Khrushchev and his associates would insist (with a straight face) the missiles were *defensive*. As Mikoyan explained to Castro days after the crisis was resolved:

The only thing we need to do is to launch a counter strike, but that will serve to destroy them without having to send in our troops.

Soviet "advisers" were on the island by early spring of 1962. In May, Sharif Rashidov first asked Castro what he thought about the idea of Soviet missiles on Cuban soil.

From a recently released, previously secret document, we learn Castro's reaction. He was concerned Cuba would be in the middle of an American/Soviet confrontation. On the other hand, he was willing to place his country at risk for the good of the socialist world.

Castro had earlier tried, but failed, to join the Warsaw Pact. Allowing missiles in Cuba would give him and Cuba *de facto* status in that alliance:

We saw it as a means of strengthening the socialist community ...and if we were proposing that the entire socialist community be prepared to go to war to defend any socialist country, then we had absolutely no right to raise any questions about something that could represent a potential danger.
(Quoted in *Sad and Luminous Days: Cuba's Struggle with the Superpowers*, by James G. Blight and Philip Brenne, at [page 36.](#))

With Castro's consent, Operation Anadyr began.

Nearly 42,000 Soviet troops were sent to Cuba. Lethal SS-4 (referred to as "Sandal") and deadly SS-5 (referred to as "Skean") missiles were placed on Soviet cargo ships. IL-28s, capable of carrying nuclear bombs, were disassembled so they would not be recognized on board ship.

And ... completely unknown to U.S. intelligence until Russian archived documents were discovered by scholars decades after the crisis ... at least 100 "small" (or "tactical") nuclear weapons (to be used in the event of an American invasion) were hidden on the island. Most of those "small" weapons were as deadly as the Hiroshima atomic bomb.

One of Khrushchev's essential orders was not carried out:

Khrushchev ordered that the missiles be laid down during the day and that they be raised only during the night. Evidently, this order was never carried out.

As a result, the Soviet plan to install missiles in Cuba was about as "secret" as the American plan ("Operation Mongoose") to overthrow Castro.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

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See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

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Media Stream



Fidel Castro

Image online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

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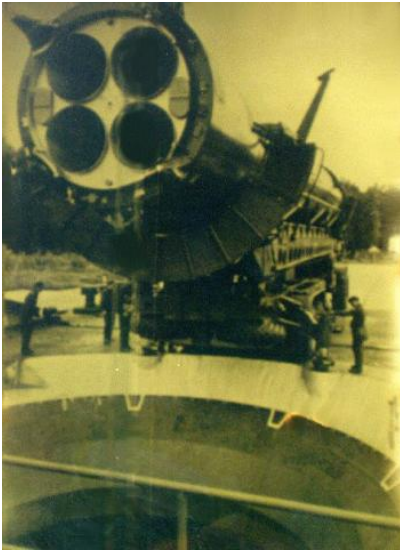
R-12 / SS-4 Soviet Missile

Image online, courtesy "The National Security Archive" at George Washington University.

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R-14 / SS-5 Soviet Missile

Image online, courtesy Federation of American Scientists.

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SS-5 Missile on Display

Image of the R-14 / SS-5 on display, online courtesy Federation of American Scientists.

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IL-28 Fighter-Bomber Aircraft

Image online, courtesy Federation of American Scientists.

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