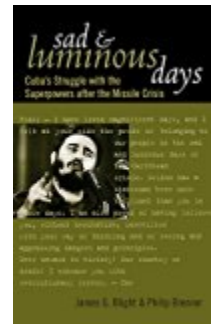


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“Empathy” for Cuba’s Missile Crisis

Every few months, it seems, new evidence or revelations about the Cuban Missile Crisis come to light to underscore the seriousness of that moment in human history. Most recently, the fortieth-anniversary conference in Havana in October 2002 brought Cuban leader Fidel Castro together with scholars as well as surviving Kennedy and Khrushchev advisers to add still more insight into how close the world came to annihilation. There, the assembled learned, for instance, that two officers of a Soviet submarine, out of touch with Moscow and besieged by U.S. depth charges, had actually begun the process of launching a nuclear attack before the cooler head of a third Soviet officer halted the launching. One man vetoed two others and thus stopped a thermonuclear war; it really did come that close.[1]

What is coming to light, however, are not only the eerie “what ifs.” A more complex aspect of the crisis that is becoming increasingly evident is that the “role of Cuba deserves a certain amount of emphasis,” as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who advised Kennedy during the crisis, recently explained.[2] Castro himself has been making that case since a similar 1992 conference, not only by releasing new evidence but also by personally taking part in the discussions.

Why Castro has been so willing to oversee this rewriting of history is largely explained in James Blight and Philip Brenner’s short but uniquely valuable book, *Sad and Luminous Days: Cuba’s Struggle with the Superpowers after the Missile Crisis*. Their description of Castro’s bitterness, at what he perceived to be Nikita Khrushchev’s betrayal, has come out now with the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Apparently, Castro no longer needs to conceal the fact that Cuban and Soviet leaders grew estranged after the feeling of defeat that resulted from the agreement to dismantle Cuba’s missiles in 1962 settled on Moscow and Havana.

Cuba has long been, as Blight and Brenner write, the “big ‘loser’ in October 1962” (p. xv). In scholarship since 1962, Cuba has largely figured as a marginal third party. It is portrayed as a neutral exotic backdrop in the U.S.-Soviet confrontation; or, in U.S. eyes, as a reckless host for the missiles; or still, in Soviet eyes, as an annoying junior partner. Recently, historians such as Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali in *One Hell of a Gamble*, influenced by new documents from the former Soviet Union, have begun the process of internationalizing the perspectives on the crisis, moving beyond the limited U.S. view offered by the declassification of its documents.[4]

Sad and Luminous Days is a timely effort to further internationalize the history of the Missile Crisis by adding to what we know of the Cuban perspective. Blight and Brenner have been working towards this moment for over a decade. They have already written widely about the crisis and have interviewed several Cubans who participated in it.

They have also been at the forefront, along with the National Security Archive, of bringing to light new documents from all three participating countries. Blight and Brenner’s coup, and the centerpiece of this book, is their success in convincing Cuba to release Castro’s previously secret speech (lasting close to a dozen hours) given in January 1968 to the Cuban Communist Party’s Central Committee. Abandoned by the Soviet Union in the 1990s, Cubans, eager to redeem their active role in

the crisis, not only released the original Spanish version of the speech but provided a competent English translation, reproduced faithfully and fully by Blight and Brenner as chapter 2. The authors describe the speech as “the longest and most detailed account of the crisis the Cuban leader ha[s] ever offered” and maybe “the best reflection of his perceptions at the time of the 1962 crisis” (p. xvii). The immediate purpose of the meeting that occasioned the speech was to accuse Anibal Escalante and other pro-Soviet Cubans of treason against the Revolution. The bulk of the speech, however, has Castro recalling the tearing asunder of Cuban-Soviet relations during the Missile Crisis.

In the speech, Castro detailed how Cuba had originally accepted the missiles only reluctantly, fearing it would become even more of a U.S. target for aggression. Castro then appeared to see no reason to sneak the missiles in, as if Cuba had not the sovereign right to harbor any weapons it wanted. He also cleared up the rumor, based on his October 26, 1962 letter to Khrushchev, that he had called for a Soviet preemptive nuclear attack. Castro quoted from his own letter to the Soviet leader, which merely called for nuclear retaliation in case of a U.S. attack, conventional or nuclear.

Most galling to Castro, however, was clearly the settlement of the crisis on 28 October, when the Soviets agreed to pull their missiles out of Cuba and to have the removal inspected internationally. In exchange the United States promised not to invade Cuba and secretly added that it would remove missiles of its own from Turkey. Castro was furious that he was not consulted—or even informed—about the removal of the missiles. He hated the idea of American eyes peering over Cuban sites and did not believe Khrushchev’s explanation that there had been no time for such a consultation. Adding to Castro’s humiliation, in November 1962, Khrushchev bowed to U.S. pressure, again without consulting Castro, to remove IL-28 bombers from Cuba while U-2 overflights continued. When Moscow then pulled out not only its missiles and planes but the great bulk of its forces, Castro felt unprotected and betrayed.

There may not be any new strategically-sensitive information in the speech, but the emotions expressed matter greatly to Blight and Brenner. The modest theoretical claim of the authors is that they can best analyze Cuba’s dealings with both superpowers through what they call “realistic empathy, which interprets a conflict by putting oneself in the shoes of each side” (pp. xxvi-xxvii). The importance of the 1968 speech, therefore, is not so much

in any evidentiary “smoking guns” but in demonstrating how the Missile Crisis was a psychological trauma for Cubans.

This trauma was dual, as the title of the book indicates. The expression “sad and luminous days” comes from Ernesto Ché Guevara’s 1965 “Farewell Letter” to Castro. In that letter, Guevara expressed two seemingly contradictory emotions: the sadness of being out of control and on the brink, but also the luminousness that came from finally confronting the United States with its own mortality. As one Cuban official explained, in October 1962 Cubans filled nightclubs and danced for either, or perhaps both, of these reasons, i.e., nihilism and joy (p. 24). This duality certainly existed at many levels. For instance, at the policy level Cubans first feared the arrival of the missiles would provoke a U.S. invasion, but at the end of the crisis, they feared their dismantling would have the same effect. It was also felt in the trenches. Castro explained to First Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan that “Cuban soldiers were crying in the trenches because they weren’t allowed to shoot at the [U.S.] planes” but also that “Cubans do not want war” (p. 79).

The intent to achieve “empathy” is admirable, and best realized in chapter 1, which compares the same event with different names in three capitals: Washington’s “Missile Crisis,” Moscow’s “Caribbean Crisis,” and Havana’s “October Crisis.” U.S. policymakers, typically viewing the event through the lens of only “thirteen days,” focused on the tense White House deliberations between the time of the U.S. discovery of ground-to-ground missiles and the late-October *quid pro quo* between the superpowers. In this view, Cuba “was essentially irrelevant” (p. 3). The Soviets, in contrast, took a larger view, in two ways. First, Soviets considered that the crucial clash took place on the high seas during the U.S. blockade, rather than in Cuba itself (the episode of the depth charges would seem to confirm that the Caribbean Sea was indeed the most dangerous staging ground). Second, the Soviet “Caribbean Crisis” lasted thirteen months, not days, and it encompassed the larger threats to invade the island, begun in 1961 and repudiated only after October 1962. Like the U.S. officials, the Soviets also focused on the confrontation between the superpowers and left Cuban agency largely out of it.

The Cuban perspective fills out not only the remainder of chapter 1 but of the book itself. Cubans took a month to qualify the crisis, the authors argue, because the island had been living through several attacks from exiles in the past years, not to mention economic warfare

from the U.S. government, and expected further attacks after October 1962. The “October Crisis,” therefore, was merely the most important clash in a long series of traumas for Cubans.

The crisis had consequences on Cuba’s relations with the Soviet Union and the rest of the world at least until 1968. Largely against the will of Moscow, for instance, Cuba supported insurgencies in Latin America and Africa in order to aggravate U.S. fears of widespread revolutionary threat and, thus, take pressure off Cuba. The authors argue that Castro acted “both for reasons of state security and reasons of moral principle,” emphasizing the need to assert Cuban independence from Soviet foreign policy after 1962 (p. 98). By 1967, wanting to turn the screw on a Fidel Castro who was increasingly galvanizing Latin American revolutionaries, through the martyrdom of the now-dead Guevara, the Soviets refused to raise fuel deliveries to Cuba, which partly explains the timing of the bitter speech. Castro’s political realism, however, reasserted itself seven months after the speech, when he gave public approval to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, an otherwise divisive event among the world’s socialist parties.

Perhaps the most fascinating and novel conclusion of the book is that the Cuban-Soviet relationship started to look very similar to the old Cuban-U.S. relationship. What comes out most clearly from the 1968 speech is that Castro and other Cuban leaders harbored perhaps as much resentment against the Soviet Union as they did against the United States. Cuban leaders felt that the Kremlin was paternalistic and unilateral towards Cubans, who considered themselves equal to other socialist peoples and perhaps even more heroic since they had refused to accede to U.S. demands during the October Crisis. The Soviets, in turn, failed to appreciate Cuban nationalism, claiming that the island should know its place in the geopolitical scheme of things, express gratitude, and (in Khrushchev’s words) “not ... be carried away by sentiment” (p. 11). The irony hung heavy in Cuba when, in 1962, the Soviet Union had begun to act like the imperialist nation from which Cuba had just wrenched its independence. For a Cuban leadership hoping to regain some dignity in Latin America and on the world stage, full independence from both superpowers, it seemed, had never been an option.

For all its venerable intentions, however, applying the concept of “empathy” has its limits. To be sure, the authors do keep the focus on Cuba’s point of view as a small nation facing two superpowers (particularly in a

long epilogue covering U.S.-Cuban relations since 1962 that adds little and seems out of place). But in the end, empathy—realistic or otherwise—appears to mean little more than openness to multiple cultural perspectives, a goal that many scholars of international relations have achieved without needing to belabor the point or force a term on the process. Moreover, historians may find Blight and Brenner’s treatment of Cuban nationalism somewhat short on background. Although the authors admirably place the October Crisis within the immediate context of economic embargo and sabotage as well as assassination and invasion attempts by Cuban exiles and the CIA, they say little—beyond a few lines on Cuban patriot José Martí—about the historical experiences that created Cuba’s attitudes toward nationality, isolation, security, machismo, and anti-Americanism. The reader is left puzzled by Castro’s assertion that “the image of an invasion was more palpably frightening than the abstraction of being a nuclear target” (p. 21). Other questions also arise. What were the bureaucratic politics inside the Cuban government in October 1962? Did anyone disagree with Castro’s prideful approach? Given the comments about dancing to annihilation in clubs, is there room for a social history of Cubans during the crisis? In other words, while Blight and Brenner aim to redress the long neglect of non-strategic aspects of the Cuban Missile Crisis by delving into the 1968 speech, they do not fully explore what the speech itself suggests.

Overall, however, this book succeeds through a careful, sensitive approach to unveiling a Castro speech that stands out among his thousands. Blight and Brenner not only use surrounding events to explain the speech but use the speech itself—along with surprising and often insightful interviews—to argue that Cuba’s particularly bitter aftertaste from “October” influenced its behavior in the rest of the Cold War and influences it today still. The Castro speech is not a groundbreaking addition to scholarship on the Missile Crisis, but it is a wedge that can help understand why its “loser” still hangs on to power.

Notes:

- [1]. Mario Lloyd, “Soviets Close to Using A-Bomb in 1962 Crisis, Forum is Told,” *Boston Globe*, 13 October 2002, p. A20. Materials from the 2002 conference are at [3](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/cuba/protect/unhbox/voidb@x\bgroup\def,{mis}\let\futurelet\@let@token\let\protect\relax\protect\edefn{it}\protect\xdef\OT1/cmr/m/n/5{\EU1/LinuxLibertine0(0)/m/n/10}\OT1/cmr/m/n/5\size@update\enc@updateemis\egroupcri/</p>
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[2]. Schlesinger, "Fresh Air" radio transcript, October 16, 2002.

[3]. Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997). See also Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1997); and,

Lawrence Chang and Peter Kornbluh, *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: A National Security Archives Documents Reader* (New York: The New Press, 1999).

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