

Book Review

Missiles in Cuba: Kennedy, Khrushchev, Castro, and the 1962 Crisis

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A good historian avoids bias, and that is precisely what Mark J. White's intention was when he set out to research and write about the Cuban Missile Crisis. Published in 1997, White had at his disposal documentation that other historians such as Barton J. Bernstein and William J. Medland did not, mainly materials on Operation Mongoose from the National Security Archive, tapes of the ExComm meeting from October 18-22, 1962, from the JFK Library, and publications from the Cold War International History Project of the Woodrow Wilson Center between Soviet officials in Washington, D.C., Havana, and their counterparts in Moscow. At the time, these source documents had only recently become available and were not included in historical and analytical accounts of the Cold War.¹

What sets White apart from most historians is his inclusion of Cuba and the background of the hostilities between 1959 and 1962. The Cuban Missile Crisis represents the peak of Cold War tensions, but much of the existing historiography focuses on *what happened* rather than *how it happened*. Fidel Castro will always be a significant figure in Communism in the Caribbean and Cuba itself. Still, the history of Cuba is interwoven with the destinies of Castro and the U.S.-backed Fulgencio Batista. The issue at hand was that a Communist regime led by Fidel Castro overthrew the U.S.-backed Batista government. The United States, born out of a revolution itself, faced a dilemma: either support a communist revolution in its backyard or oppose it and risk international consequences.²

White does an excellent job setting the stage and providing a backstory for future hostilities between the U.S., Cuba, and the Soviet Union. Still, he didn't elaborate on NATO

¹ Mark J. White, *Missiles in Cuba: Kennedy, Khrushchev, Castro, and the 1962 Crisis* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Inc., 1997), ix.

² White, 3-4.

countries, how they felt about Jupiter missiles in Turkey, and Cuba's alliance with the USSR. Barton J. Bernstein's article *The Cuban Missile Crisis: Trading the Jupiters in Turkey?* did, however. Bernstein pointed out, in particular, how the Cuban Missile Crisis affected East and West Germany and created wedges between the U.S., West Germany, Great Britain, and France. Konrad Adenauer, chancellor of West Germany, feared any concessions JFK would make to the Soviet Union throughout the 1960s would ultimately lead to Western abandonment.³ British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan shared Adenauer's concerns and feared that Moscow's missiles in Cuba served two purposes: (1) to force the U.S. to consider trading Cuba for Berlin and (2) to weaken Western alliances.⁴

Charles de Gaulle was already weary of NATO membership, as the U.S. had blocked France's struggle to develop an independent foreign policy. If the JFK Administration had publicly traded the Jupiter missiles in Turkey, then de Gaulle would have been convinced that the U.S. would abandon its allies whenever convenient to its interests.⁵ White doesn't mention these relationships and their repercussions, as his focus was strictly on the relationship between the U.S., USSR, and Cuba. He also didn't expand upon specific Cold War revisionist theories, mainly that the Soviets had three ulterior motives for providing missiles to Cuba: (1) to counter the Jupiter missiles in Turkey, (2) to protect Cuban Communism, and (3) to bolster the Soviet sphere of influence in the Caribbean and Latin America.⁶

³ Barton J. Bernstein, "The Cuban Missile Crisis: Trading the Jupiters in Turkey?" *Political Science Quarterly* 95, no. 1 (Spring 1980): 113, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2149587>.

⁴ Bernstein, 114.

⁵ Bernstein, 114.

⁶ William J. Medland, "The Cuban Missile Crisis: Evolving Historical Perspectives," *The History Teacher* 23, no. 4 (August 1990): 435-436, <https://doi.org/10.2307/494397>.

Another question that remained unanswered in White's work was whether each side considered the Cuban Missile Crisis a military or political problem.⁷ Perhaps it was both. While White overlooked certain aspects of the Cuban Missile Crisis and downplayed many of the more significant international issues at play, by focusing on the three substantial players and direct issues, White could condense his research and writing without veering off on multiple tangents. By centering on people's keen awareness of the potential for nuclear war, White captured the climate of the 1960s as it related to the Caribbean world, Latin Americans, Europeans, and Americans. The big picture, as White pointed out, was that for thirteen days, "American, Cuban, and Soviet citizens, in particular, lived...with the prospect of nuclear annihilation."⁸

⁷ Medland, 436.

⁸ Mark J. White, *Missiles in Cuba: Kennedy, Khrushchev, Castro, and the 1962 Crisis* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Inc., 1997), 112.

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