Anatomiia Karibskogo krizisa (review)

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Sergo Mikoian, *Anatomiia Karibskogo krizisa* [Anatomy of the Caribbean (Cuban Missile) Crisis]. 1071 pp., illus. Moscow: Akademiia, 2006. ISBN: 5874442421.

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Sergo Mikoian has produced what is probably the thickest book ever written on the Cuban Missile Crisis. It is an impressive study; its breadth of scope and depth of analysis mark it as an outstanding piece of scholarship. Although Mikoian makes use of research materials and books on the crisis published on the U.S. side, his main focus primarily and justifiably covers the Soviet angle of the confrontation.[1] Or I should rather say "a Soviet angle," or one of the possible Soviet angles, because in the end the book is really about the author's father, Anastas Mikoian, and his role in the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Anastas Mikoian was a ranking Presidium member and a close associate of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. He was perhaps the only Soviet leader, besides Khrushchev himself, who had any input in the making of foreign policy after Khrushchev had purged his political rivals from power. Mikoian's experience and diplomatic skills made him indispensable to Khrushchev as a troubleshooter in places where Soviet policies went badly wrong, as in Hungary in 1956 or, indeed, in Cuba in 1962. So, even discounting the author's personal connection to Mikoian, it is understandable that he is at the center of the story, though perhaps with some injustice to other important actors. For example, this wonderfully illustrated book features about 80 photographs of Mikoian on different occasions, compared to only about 70 of Castro, 60 of Che Guevara, 17 of Kennedy, and a mere 12 of Khrushchev.

With priorities thus placed, it is convenient to break up the narrative into four main sections: Mikoian's 1960 trip to Cuba, his view on Khrushchev's decisions to send missiles to Cuba, his recollections of the crisis, and his mission to Cuba and the United States to put out the flames in November 1962. The author makes excellent use of unknown documents from his

[1] The book usefully adds to sparse literature on the Soviet side; for other interesting studies, see Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *"One Hell of a Gamble": Khrushchev, Castro, Kennedy, and the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1958–1964* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997); and Anatoli I. Gribkov, William Y. Smith, and Alfred Friendly, *Operation ANADYR: U.S. and Soviet Generals Recount the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Chicago: edition q, 1994).

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personal archive and Mikoian's recorded recollections. He also followed his father to Cuba in 1960 and 1962 and adds his personal experiences to liven up the narrative.

The author's detailed description of his father's meetings with the Cuban leadership in February 1960 raises a number of interesting questions about the origin and the nature of the Soviet–Cuban alliance. He cites, for example, an (alas, unreferenced) memorandum of a conversation involving Mikoian, Fidel Castro, and Che Guevara, where Castro predicted that Cuba would take the socialist road in ten years. Che offered a more optimistic prognosis—two or three years (67). The author argues that Castro was in no rush to implant socialism in Cuba; he wanted time to see how socialism worked in the USSR and in Eastern Europe, and it was only U.S. economic sanctions and hostile policies that forced him to seek a stronger alliance with the USSR. The author also reflects on Mikoian's personal enthusiasm about Castro and his revolution, which reminded him of the years of his youth (71).

This enthusiasm helps explain, from the author's viewpoint, why the Soviet Union sent missiles to Cuba. He takes sides unequivocally in the old historiographical debate—Khrushchev was not thinking of the strategic balance between the United States and the USSR, even less about using Cuba for extracting advantages in Berlin. His decision to send missiles to Cuba was motivated solely by one rationale—to save the Cuban revolution from a U.S. invasion. In this context, Mikoian cites his father's recollections about how Khrushchev made his decision:

> We [Mikoian and Khrushchev] both agreed that this [invasion] would inevitably be repeated, but with a different force, with an eye to a quick and full victory of the Americans. "And a thought came to me," [Khrushchev] said, "what if we send our missiles there, install them quickly and secretly, [and] then announce them to the Americans, first through diplomatic channels, and then publicly. This will immediately show them their place. They will find themselves in the condition of the same balance, as in the relationship with our country. Any attack on Cuba will mean a strike directly against their territory. And this will mean that they will have to abandon any plans of attacking Cuba." (129–30)

Khrushchev raised the question of Cuba's vulnerability at a Presidium meeting and asked Defense Minister Rodion Malinovskii how long it would take for the Soviet forces to occupy an island off its coast in similar conditions. Malinovskii predicted that the operation would take three to four days, at worst a week. "You see?" Khrushchev gloated, "in this case we will have nothing left to do" (142). Mikoian reportedly raised objections,

citing likely opposition by Washington to this scheme, but Khrushchev had his way. In the end, the author claims, Mikoian acquiesced to Khrushchev's adventurism.

Mikoian's recollections offer striking and revealing details of Kremlin decision-making under Khrushchev. The first secretary dominated policy discussions; these discussions, in fact, came down to him voicing his opinion—no one else's mattered. Pluralism of views was out of the question. Mikoian's own dissenting voice drowned in the flattering and congratulatory chorus of the other Presidium members. This account is entirely believable. The only question is to what extent Mikoian's claims that he was the only voice of reason in the Presidium and that he alone opposed Khrushchev's ill-advised initiative correspond to reality. In the absence of full Presidium transcripts (Fursenko's recent publication does not clear up this issue), it is difficult to say.[2] In any case, Mikoian's own recollections of his role in the fateful decision have to be taken with a dose of healthy historical skepticism. Yet the author predictably portrays Mikoian as a lone wise man in an ocean of bureaucratic stupidity.

Speaking of which, Mikoian, Jr., does an excellent job with his insider analysis of the Kremlin's mode of thought. He writes, for instance, about the "Soviet mania for secrecy and the habit of doing everything covertly and the pathological and never-ending propensity, irrespective of the political regime, toward lies on the part of the Kremlin rulers" (164). This unseemly propensity in part helps explain why Khrushchev, instead of announcing that he would move Soviet missiles to Cuba, tried to sneak behind the United States' back in a covert operation. In the end, Khrushchev's deceit eroded Soviet standing in the eyes of international public opinion and hardened U.S. resolve to oppose his adventurism.

Another problem with Khrushchev's attempt to surprise the United States with nuclear missiles in Cuba was that he simply had no contingency plans. Kennedy "had planned several moves ahead. Khrushchev never planned even one move ahead—from May to November 1962" (248). As an example of this shortsightedness on Khrushchev's part, the author cites his ridiculous assurances to Che Guevara in August 1962 that if the Americans took a tough line on Cuba because of the missiles, the Soviets would dispatch the Baltic fleet and order their artillery "to strike a blow" (167). Khrushchev was simply too confident in his own harebrained schemes to permit any second thought.

Thus the author offers credible yet simple explanations for Soviet foreign policy behavior. The imagined picture of farsighted policymakers in the Kremlin carefully weighing their strategic priorities and devising impossible

[2] Aleksandr Fursenko, *Prezidium TsK KPSS 1954–1964: Chernovye protokol'nye zapisi zasedanii, stenogrammy, postanovleniia* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2003).

schemes to outsmart and outmaneuver their opponents in Washington fades before a mundane reality of stupidity, lack of planning, petty bureaucratic squabbles, and the utter incompetence of the Soviet leadership. Let's not forget to "subtract" Mikoian. But with or without Mikoian, the author's argument is extremely well made, and he makes a point to register his disagreement, for example, with John Lewis Gaddis, who is "far from understanding the psychology and the frame of thought of the Soviet leadership" (135) and with Raymond Garthoff, whose "problem is that he judges from a position of unblemished logic" (147).

Mikoian, Jr., gives low marks to Khrushchev for his crisis diplomacy. From bluffing and bravado in the first days of the crisis Khrushchev jumped in the opposite direction, and soon his concessions showered on Washington, almost preempting Kennedy's imagination in making new demands (314). At the same time he badly offended Castro when he failed to consult with him about withdrawing missiles from Cuba, volunteered to allow inspections on Cuban territory in the absence of Castro's agreement, and in other cases. The author laments Khrushchev's lack of tact, arrogance, and chauvinism. He ordered Castro about as he would order a "secretary of a regional party committee to plant corn" (244). As the author notes with insight, this shortcoming was evident in the actions of "any boss in the Kremlin" and not just Khrushchev (245).

Evidently, Anastas Mikoian had a better feel for making friends and influencing people, or else Khrushchev would not have dispatched him to Cuba to patch up problems with Castro in November 1962. The book includes a lengthy chapter on Mikoian's talks with the Cuban leadership. Some of these memcons (memoranda of conversations) have been published in English translation in the *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*.[3] Other documents appear in Mikoian's volume for the first time.

For example, the appendix to the book contains exchanges between Mikoian and Khrushchev while the former was in Havana. Khrushchev's passionate and confusing letters to Mikoian blame Castro for ingratitude—he should know better than to accuse Moscow of betraying Cuba's interests! In his letter of 11 November, Khrushchev complains about Castro's unwillingness to "make joint decisions and take coordinated steps" (918)—this is after he completely ignored Castro in his negotiations with Washington. On 16 November, Mikoian received another letter from Khrushchev; this time the first secretary repeated himself time and again to the effect that if Castro continued to make life difficult for Moscow, the Soviets would pack up and leave Cuba altogether:

[3] *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, no. 5 (Spring 1995): 93–109, 159; no. 8–9 (Winter 1996–97): 320–48. Available in PDF at www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=topics.publications.

> If the Cuban comrades do not want to cooperate with us on this question and do not want to take joint measures, which would help resolve this crisis and avoid being dragged into war, then, apparently, one must conclude that our presence there is not useful to our friends.… But then we must let them know of the possibility that we will be forced to decline all responsibility for the consequences to which their actions may lead. (934)

Fortunately, Mikoian did not blurt out Khrushchev's instructions in his talks with the Cubans; his diplomatic skills helped repair the crumbling Soviet–Cuban alliance, as the author eagerly points out.

One chapter examines more closely the fate of the Soviet–Cuban alliance. Was it an alliance of an imperialist power and a client regime? Not according to this book. "This view," the author says, "insults people who sacrificed much to support Cuba" (451). Of course, there is no denial of the sacrifice, or of the extent of the Soviet economic aid to Cuba, which in the end cost the USSR an arm and a leg. But I am not confident that these factors alone suffice to refute the persistent claims in Western literature to the effect that Cuba switched one imperialist patron for another. In fact, the evidence that Mikoian presents in his book—for example, the inevitable chauvinism and great-power arrogance in Khrushchev's (and, admittedly, his successors') treatment of Cuba—require a careful reading of proletarian internationalism so as not to overlook great-power politics under the veil of class solidarity.

Overall, the book is a must for any specialist on the Cuban Missile Crisis or Cold War history in general. It is no doubt repetitive at times and veers off course toward the end (in the completely unnecessary chapters on the life and times of Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and—who would have thought?—Ernest Hemingway). But Mikoian's excellent research, his profound expertise and command of the subject, and his lively and engaging style deserve the highest praise and make for pleasant and informative reading.

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