

The ICRC and the 1962 Cuban missile crisis

by

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On 6 November 1962, the Swiss ambassador and former President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Paul Rüegger, embarked on a delicate mission to negotiate with the United Nations Secretary-General and the representatives of the two superpowers and Cuba in New York. His task was to specify and obtain prior acceptance of the conditions under which the ICRC was prepared to lend its good offices to the United Nations and the parties involved in the Cuban missile crisis, so as to help ease the tension that had arisen from the secret introduction of Soviet nuclear weapons in the Caribbean. This article deals with the unusual role the ICRC was ready to play in that crisis and sheds new light on how it came to be engaged in these highly political matters.

New American, Soviet and Cuban sources that have become known since 1990 reveal in great detail the events surrounding the planned ICRC intervention in the missile crisis. It is a story that has so far remained untold. Most of the new material is to be found in the microfiche collection of declassified documents on the Cuban missile crisis compiled and made available by the National

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Security Archive, a private research institution in Washington DC.¹ The collection also contains the relevant documents of the United Nations Archives in New York. Since the publication of this material, further sources of information about the ICRC's role in the crisis have come to light and been collected by the National Security Archive.² The material that emerged about the Cuban missile crisis from Russian archives was partly translated and published by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington.³ Their publications contain highly valuable information on the origins of the ICRC's involvement in the missile crisis. The personal papers of Paul Rüeegger are to be found in the *Archiv für Zeitgeschichte* at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich. These papers reveal the negotiations by the ICRC's special envoy to New York, as well as the discussions within the Committee, the governing body of the ICRC, in Geneva.⁴

This new material, and a series of retrospective conferences between 1987 and 1992 that brought together American, Soviet and Cuban participants in the crisis, have led to a broad re-evaluation of what happened in late October and early November 1962 in the

1 Chadwyck-Healey Inc. & The National Security Archive (ed.), *Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962*, Microfiche Collection, Chadwyck-Healey, Alexandria, 1990 (hereinafter *Cuban Missile Crisis*). The most important documents from that collection have been published in a documents reader: Laurence Chang and Peter Kornbluh (eds), *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: A National Security Archive Documents Reader*, New Press, New York, 1992.

2 See *Cuban Missile Crisis*, *ibid.*, 1992 Releases, Box, and *ibid.*, Extras, Box. This material was researched by the author of this article during a stay in the United States in 1996.

3 Woodrow Wilson International Center for International Scholars (ed.), *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issues 1-9, Spring 1992-Winter 1996/1997 (hereinafter *CWIHP Bulletin*).

4 Archiv für Zeitgeschichte, ETH Zürich, *Nachlass Paul Rüeegger*, Dossier No. 28.3.25.2 (hereinafter *NL Rüeegger*).

5 The oral history conferences resulted in a series of books and articles by James G. Blight and others: Bruce J. Allyn, James G. Blight, and David A. Welch, "Essence of revision: Moscow, Havana and the Cuban missile crisis", *International Security*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Winter 1989/90, pp. 136-172; James G. Blight and David A. Welch (eds), *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Noonday Press, New York, 1990; Bruce J. Allyn, James G. Blight, and David A. Welch (eds), *Back to the Brink: Proceedings of the Moscow Conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis, January 27-28, 1989*, CSIA Occasional Papers, No. 9, University Press of America, Boston, 1992; Bruce J. Allyn, James G. Blight, and David A. Welch (eds), *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis, and the Soviet Collapse*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1993.

Caribbean.⁵ Of the numerous publications on the Cuban crisis since the end of the Cold War, I shall mention only a few. Michael R. Beschloss' book *The Crisis Years* is probably the best account of the missile crisis based on this new body of information.⁶ Equally important is John Lewis Gaddis' latest work, in which he has reassessed the real moments of danger during it. In addition, both Fursenko/Naftali and Zubok/Pleshakov have dealt with the crisis from the point of view of the Russian archival sources.⁷

Little has been written about the ICRC's role in the Cuban missile crisis so far. The former UN Secretary-General, U Thant, deals with it at length in his memoirs but lacks precision with regard to some important facts.⁸ There have also been a few accounts of the mission by Paul Rüeeggler to New York. They are all written by former members of the ICRC or the Swiss Department of Foreign Affairs, who emphasize the importance of the part he played in easing tension in the Caribbean at the time.⁹ The ICRC itself summarized Rüeeggler's mission in two of its own publications.¹⁰ What these firsthand accounts do not provide is a historically analytical study of the events based on archival sources. That task has been attempted in this article.

⁶ Michael R. Beschloss, *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963*, Harper Collins, New York, 1991.

⁷ John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997; Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *'One Hell of a Gamble': Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964*, W.W. Norton & Co., New York, London, 1997; Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.), London, 1996.

⁸ U Thant, *View from the UN*, David & Charles, Newton Abbot, London, 1977; for the ICRC's role in the Cuban missile crisis, see pp. 177-194.

⁹ Melchior Borsinger, "Paul Ruegger — Envoyé extraordinaire de l'humanité", in Victor Umbricht (ed.), *À Paul Ruegger pour son 80^e anniversaire, 14 août 1977*, Schudel, Riehen/Basel, 1977, pp. 155-162; René-Jean Dupuy, "Paul Ruegger et le droit international", *ibid.*, pp. 27-42; Raymond Probst, *'Good Offices' in the Light of Swiss International Practice and Experience*, Martinus Nijhoff, Dordrecht, 1989.

¹⁰ "The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Cuban missile crisis", *International Review of the Red Cross*, December 1962, pp. 653-657; International Committee of the Red Cross, *Annual Report 1962*, pp. 31-35.

The Cuban missile crisis

On Tuesday morning, 16 October 1962, McGeorge Bundy, the National Security Adviser, informed the American President, John F. Kennedy, that photographic evidence had been obtained showing Soviet medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) in Cuba capable of carrying nuclear warheads. Two days earlier, two U-2 aircraft had flown over the Caribbean island and taken pictures that proved the existence of Soviet MRBMs in Cuba and the build-up of twenty-four SAM (surface-to-air missile) sites on the island.¹¹ After the discovery of the missiles, President Kennedy immediately called a meeting of a group of advisers that became known as the ExComm (Executive Committee of the National Security Council).

In the first ExComm meeting on 16 October, a consensus was soon reached that all means had to be used to remove the Soviet missiles from Cuba. The following discussions within the ExComm centred on the question of the requisite initial response and military preparations.¹² After five days of analysis and controversial debates, President Kennedy decided on 20 October to impose a naval blockade on the further delivery of all offensive military equipment to Cuba and to insist on the withdrawal of Soviet missiles already in Cuba. The American President was not prepared to run the risk of an air strike or a full-scale invasion to have the missiles removed, as had been originally discussed in the ExComm. The risk of a nuclear escalation seemed much too high and Kennedy therefore opted for a politically more cautious solution. On the evening of Monday 22 October, he announced his decision to the nation and the world. In his TV address he warned the Soviet government that the United States would regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the

¹¹ McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years*, Random House, New York, 1988, pp. 684 f. The story of the discovery of the missiles by the intelligence officers of the National Photographic Interpretation Center is described in detail by Dino A. Brugioni, *Eyeball to Eyeball: The Inside Story of the Cuban Missile Crisis*, edited by Robert

F. McCourt, Random House, New York, 1991, pp. 56-217.

¹² The minutes of the ExComm discussions during the Cuban missile crisis are to be found in Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow (eds), *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.), London, 1997.

western hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response against the Soviet Union.¹³

Operation ANADYR,¹⁴ as the secret deployment of the Soviet missiles in Cuba that led to the showdown with the United States in October 1962 was code-named, proved to be the most dangerous moment during the Cold War. The two superpowers were face to face in a dispute over nuclear weapons. Had either Kennedy or his Soviet counterpart Nikita Khrushchev reacted too sharply, the crisis would have escalated into the Third World War. The US naval quarantine of Cuba was accompanied by a series of military and diplomatic moves and countermoves which were not all authorized by the political leadership of the two main opponents.¹⁵ Remarkably enough, Khrushchev panicked and stepped back after a week of taut confrontation.

Why had Khrushchev sent missiles in the first place? It is widely agreed today that there were three main reasons for his decision. First, after a failed attempt by Cuban exiles supported by US intelligence to invade Cuba in the Bay of Pigs in April 1961, both the Cuban leader Fidel Castro and Nikita Khrushchev felt the need to preserve the Cuban revolution and deter a possible US invasion. Secondly, from the Soviet point of view the stationing of the missiles in Cuba was a means of closing the “missile gap” with the United States and, in one move, redressing the highly unfavourable strategic balance. Thirdly, though to a lesser degree, Khrushchev saw it as a tempting possibility for a *quid pro quo* to expose the United States to a direct threat comparable to that faced by the Soviet Union, owing to the deployment of US nuclear weapons on its periphery.¹⁶ For a long

¹³ John F. Kennedy, *Radio-TV Address of the President to the Nation, October 22, 1962*, in Chang/Kornbluh, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp. 150-154.

¹⁴ See Anatoli I. Gribkov and William Y. Smith, *Operation ANADYR: U.S. and Soviet Generals Recount the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Edition q, Chicago, 1994.

¹⁵ For an assessment of the moments dur-

ing the crisis at which there was a real danger of war see Gaddis, *op. cit.* (note 7), pp. 269-278.

¹⁶ In particular the US Jupiter missiles that were installed in Turkey that very same year. Philip Nash, *The Other Missiles of October: Eisenhower, Kennedy, and the Jupiters, 1957-1963*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, N.C., 1997.

time Khrushchev's official explanation for the missile deployment — the fear of an American invasion — has been considered by Western analysts and politicians as a *post hoc* justification for the outcome of the crisis.¹⁷ But the information now available from Soviet participants in the oral history conferences on the missile crisis has made it clear that these fears were just as much on Khrushchev's mind as the desire to recreate the strategic balance.¹⁸

Khrushchev noted in his memoirs that he developed the idea of deploying nuclear missiles in Cuba during a visit to Bulgaria in May 1962, while thinking about the US missiles in Turkey on the other side of the Black Sea.¹⁹ In actual fact, he seems to have planned and discussed the whole operation with two of his closest political advisers, Anastas I. Mikoyan and Andrei Gromyko, in the weeks before and after his visit to Bulgaria. Castro was sceptical at first but then gave his assent, whereupon Khrushchev decided to go ahead with the deployment in early June 1962.²⁰ In September and October the missiles were secretly shipped to Cuba and installed with the assistance of Soviet specialists. Khrushchev's plan was to announce his "deterrent" to Kennedy only after the November mid-term elections in the United States. The American President was then to be confronted with the *fait accompli* of nuclear missiles in Cuba. Only a few days ahead of 25-27 October, the time by which the missiles were to be operational, their existence in Cuba was discovered. The events that followed made for the most tense week in the whole of the Cold War.

¹⁷ For Khrushchev's explanation of his motives: Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, translated and edited by Strobe Talbott, Little, Brown, Boston, 1970, p. 493, and Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament*, translated and edited by Strobe Talbott, Little, Brown, Boston, 1974, p. 511.

¹⁸ Allyn/Blight/Welch, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 138-144; Zubok/Pleshakov, *op. cit.* (note 7), p. 259 f.

¹⁹ *Khrushchev Remembers, op. cit.* (note 17), p. 493; Gaddis, *op. cit.* (note 7), p. 264.

²⁰ Castro was at first afraid that the missile deployment would in fact turn Cuba into a Soviet military base, but then reluctantly agreed for the sake of re-establishing the strategic balance between East and West. Whereas Khrushchev's main concern was to safeguard the Cuban Revolution, Castro's reasoning therefore inverted Khrushchev's. Gaddis, *op. cit.* (note 7), p. 265 f.

The UN Secretary-General's initiative for a peaceful settlement

Khrushchev's initial reaction to Kennedy's announcement of the naval blockade on 22 October was to press on with the completion of the missile sites. The Soviet leader was determined to proceed with ANADYR. He ordered his vessels to challenge the quarantine line and to speed up work on the sites in Cuba.²¹ It looked as though an open confrontation at sea was inevitable. At that stage, Secretary-General U Thant made an appeal to the leaders of the superpowers on 24 October, calling for a moratorium on military actions for two to three weeks and urgent negotiations between the parties directly involved: "In this context, I shall gladly make myself available to all parties for whatever services I may be able to perform."²²

At first, both Khrushchev and Kennedy were annoyed by U Thant's appeal, but when tension mounted during the night of 24 to 25 October,²³ they welcomed the Secretary-General's initiative. Washington was now trying to change from a bargaining strategy to one of not losing control over events. This was due mainly to Kennedy's realization that the risk of an escalation to the nuclear level should be avoided under any circumstances. He therefore began to push strongly for a compromise.²⁴ In a telephone conversation with one of his main advisers, Under Secretary of State George Ball, he discussed the possibility of U Thant launching a second appeal.²⁵ On 25 October, the Secretary-General sent a second message urging the Soviet leader to stop his vessels for a limited time in order to discuss the terms of a possible agreement which could settle the problem peacefully. To make it look like an impartial third-party initiative, he

²¹ Fursenko/Naftali, *op. cit.* (note 7), p. 247.

²² U Thant, *op. cit.* (note 8), Appendix A, p. 460.

²³ Although Khrushchev had ordered the vessels carrying missiles and nuclear warheads to turn back before they reached the quarantine line, the other ships sailing under the Soviet flag were still heading for Cuba. Beschloss, *op. cit.* (note 6), pp. 497 f.

²⁴ Gaddis, *op. cit.* (note 7), p. 272.

²⁵ Memorandum of telephone conversation between President Kennedy and the Under Secretary of State (Ball), October 24, 1962, 23:45, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963: Cuba*, Vol. X, David S. Patterson (ed.), United States Government Printing Office, Washington D.C., 1997, pp. 193-195.

asked the White House to do everything possible to avoid a direct confrontation with Soviet ships, in order to minimize the risk of any unforeseen incident.²⁶ As late as 26 October Khrushchev, misled by erroneous intelligence reports that a US invasion of Cuba was imminent and worried that Kennedy was in fact ready to go over the brink, accepted U Thant's standstill-proposal.²⁷ The Kremlin leader, it was now clear, was seeking a way out of the crisis without losing face.

The ICRC's offer to lend its good offices

When the two superpowers accepted U Thant's standstill-proposal, time was gained for negotiations under the auspices of the Secretary-General and the military front line at sea was given a breather. At that point the ICRC made its first entry in the drama of the Cuban missile crisis. On 26 October the following telegram from the UN's European Office in Geneva reached U Thant's chef de cabinet, C.V. Narasimhan, in New York:

"Mr. Gallopin, Delegate General of the International Committee of the Red Cross, came to see me yesterday evening. He (...) had been asked by Mr. Boissier, the President of the International Red Cross, to convey to us informally the Committee's readiness and desire to help the Secretary-General in any way in its power, should the need arise. I thanked him and promised to convey this kind message."²⁸

The ICRC's offer to help the Secretary-General in his difficult search for a peaceful settlement of the crisis was by no means self-evident. The Cuban missile crisis was clearly outside the conventional and traditional field of operation of a humanitarian organization. Only the adoption in 1961 of the newly drafted Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross by the Council of Delegates

²⁶ U Thant, *op. cit.* (note 8), Appendix B, p. 461, and Appendix D, pp. 462 f.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Appendix E, p. 463. The decisive passage in Khrushchev's message reads as follows: "We therefore accept your proposal, and have ordered the masters of Soviet vessels bound for Cuba but not yet within the

area of the American warships' piratical activities to stay out of the interception area, as you recommend."

²⁸ Interoffice memorandum Hill to C.V. Narasimhan, 26 October 1962, *Cuban Missile Crisis, op. cit.* (note 1), Doc. 1392.

of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement made it possible for the ICRC to offer its services in a political crisis. The principle of humanity not only recognizes as a principle of action the duty to prevent and relieve human suffering in conflicts (*inter arma caritas*), but it also expresses the desire to spare humankind from the consequences of conflicts by promoting cooperation and lasting peace between all peoples (*per humanitatem ad pacem*).²⁹

The State Department in Washington received a long telegram from Khrushchev in the evening of 26 October. For the first time the Soviet leader signalled his readiness for a settlement of the crisis along the following lines: the Soviet bases would be removed under United Nations supervision if the United States pledged not to invade Cuba.³⁰ Khrushchev now seemed to be offering a peaceful solution.

In the meantime, Secretary-General U Thant met with the delegates of the United States, Cuba and the Soviet Union in New York to negotiate the terms of settlement. In the meeting of 26 October with the Soviet delegate to the United Nations, Valeri A. Zorin, U Thant announced that the US government was prepared to suspend the blockade for two to three weeks, with the proviso that measures would be taken to guarantee that ships arriving in Cuba were not supplying any weaponry during this period. Here U Thant mentioned the possibility of establishing a particular procedure for maritime traffic, or for particular ports of call in Cuba; in this connection, United Nations delegates from neutral countries, selected by agreement, or representatives of the *International Committee of the Red*

²⁹ Borsinger, *op. cit.* (note 9), p. 158. — In 1965, the 20th International Conference of the Red Cross formally proclaimed the Fundamental Principles. See *Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*, Handbook of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, 13th ed., Geneva, 1994, p. 620.

³⁰ Premier Khrushchev's telegram to President Kennedy, offering a settlement to the crisis, October 26, 1962, in Chang/Kornbluh, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp. 185-188. From

an American perspective, it looked as though Khrushchev's letter was confirming a proposed deal along the same lines that had leaked out through KGB channels earlier that day. New information, however, has made it clear that this informal *démarche* was never authorized by the Kremlin. Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, "Using KGB documents: The Scali-Feklisov channel in the Cuban missile crisis", *CWIHP Bulletin*, Issue 5, Spring 1995, pp. 58-62.

Cross might ascertain that vessels arriving in Cuba were not carrying arms.³¹ As the documents clearly indicate, it was the Secretary-General who came up with the proposal to consider the ICRC's help in this matter. The numerous speculations by Western journalists and politicians at the time that this was in fact a demand by Khrushchev to make the inspections look like a humanitarian operation are therefore false.³² Furthermore, the document cited above hints that it was the President of the ICRC, Léopold Boissier, himself who inspired the Secretary-General's idea to make use of the ICRC's good offices in the crisis.³³

Kennedy and Khrushchev reach an agreement

Although it was already agreed on 27 October that the terms of settlement were to be negotiated in New York, the crisis was far from over. While the ExComm was still contemplating a positive reply to Khrushchev's telegram of 26 October, Radio Moscow broadcast a new message from the Soviet Chairman. Soviet and Cuban information that an American attack on Cuba was imminent had turned out to be wrong. Khrushchev, obviously under the uncomfortable impression of appearing weak in the eyes of his subordinates, decided to make a U-turn. He now insisted that the United States remove its Jupiter missiles from Turkey in return for the removal of the Soviet missiles from Cuba.³⁴

Several times on 27 October the crisis very nearly flared out of control. In the morning, American intelligence reported that a Soviet tanker was challenging the blockade, and that the Soviet diplomats in New York and Washington were destroying all their sensitive documents in anticipation of a war.³⁵ Moreover, an American U-2 air-

³¹ Telegram Zorin to USSR Foreign Ministry, October 26, 1962, *CWIHP Bulletin*, Issues 8-9, Winter 1996/1997, pp. 289 f.

³² Nevertheless this version of how the ICRC came to be involved in the Cuban missile crisis can still be found in current literature. See e.g. Brugioni, *op. cit.* (note 11), p. 501.

³³ So far no evidence has been found by the author that there were any formal or infor-

mal contacts during the missile crisis between representatives of the UN and the ICRC before 25 October 1962.

³⁴ Premier Khrushchev's communiqué to President Kennedy, calling for a trade of Cuban missiles for Turkish missiles, October 27, 1962, Chang /Kornbluh, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp. 197-199.

³⁵ Beschloss, *op. cit.* (note 6), p. 524.

craft entered Soviet airspace as a result of a navigational error, and around noon another U-2 reconnaissance plane was shot down over Cuba by the Soviet air defence without authorization from the Kremlin. The pilot, Major Rudolph Anderson, Jr., was killed.³⁶

The strategic nuclear force of the United States was poised for action, and for the first time in history it was put on *DefCon2* (Defense Condition 2).³⁷ In addition, the United States was assembling troops necessary for an invasion of Cuba. Meanwhile the first Soviet missile sites were reported to be operational, and the Cuban military forces were fully mobilized. Negotiations at the United Nations in New York were adjourned, while the ExComm was still considering possible reactions to Khrushchev's latest message. At the same time the Soviet Chairman gathered the Presidium and Secretariat members in his dacha at Novo Ogarevo and stayed there all day and night discussing what to do if an American attack were unleashed.³⁸

By now Kennedy and Khrushchev both understood that a mere accidental incident could spark a nuclear war, and that therefore a quick end to the crisis had to be found. As a result of the ExComm meeting of 27 October, Kennedy decided to react only to the first of Khrushchev's messages of 26 October and simply to ignore the additional demands of the second message.³⁹ The reply sent to Khrushchev therefore called for the complete removal of the offensive weapons from Cuba under UN supervision, in exchange for a US guarantee of non-invasion in Cuba. In addition, the American President decided to send his brother, Attorney-General Robert F. Kennedy, to see the Soviet Ambassador to the United States, Anatoliy Dobrynin, with a private message for Chairman Khrushchev announcing that the missiles in Turkey would be removed once the crisis was resolved. If the

³⁶ Zubok/Pleshakov, *op. cit.* (note 7), p. 267.

³⁷ *DefCon2*, the second-highest alert posture, means full readiness for an enemy attack. The highest alert posture, *DefCon1*, is announced only when a full-scale war is already in progress. In times of peace the United States armed forces are usually on *DefCon5*.

³⁸ Andreas Wenger, *Living with Peril: Eisenhower, Kennedy and Nuclear Weapons*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham/Boulder/New York/Oxford, 1997, p. 276, and Zubok/Pleshakov, *op. cit.* (note 7), p. 267.

³⁹ Beschloss, *op. cit.* (note 6), pp. 526-528.

Soviets, however, made public any reference to this assurance, the proposal would become void. Should Khrushchev turn down this offer, a military attack on Cuba would be the consequence.⁴⁰

Khrushchev immediately accepted Kennedy's terms of a unilateral withdrawal of "all Soviet offensive arms" from Cuba. In his answer to President Kennedy the Soviet Chairman did not mention the missiles in Turkey again.⁴¹ This end to the crisis was publicly announced on the radio, and the Soviet military began to dismantle the missile sites and prepare them for shipping back to the Soviet Union without delay. During that last and decisive phase of the crisis the exchange between the two superpower leaders was conducted exclusively through direct messages between Moscow and Washington. These private exchanges were crucial in leading to the peaceful solution of the crisis.

The ICRC's involvement in the settlement of the crisis

Once Kennedy and Khrushchev had agreed bilaterally on 28 October, it was possible to resume negotiations in New York on the settlement of the crisis. The main task for Secretary-General U Thant and the delegates of the parties concerned was to sort out the conditions under which UN supervision of the dismantling of the missile sites would take place. Furthermore, they were to make sure that no new offensive weapons could be shipped to Cuba after the lifting of the blockade by the United States. In addition to his proposals of 26 October, U Thant named three ways in which the reintroduction of offensive weapons by the Soviets could be prevented: a) moni-

⁴⁰ Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1969, pp. 106-109, and Anatoly Fedorovich Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents (1962-1986)*, Times Books, Random House, New York, 1995, pp. 86-88. There has been a long-standing controversy between the two main protagonists as to whether the private offer to remove the US missiles in Turkey was an explicit part

of the deal between Kennedy and Khrushchev. See Jim Hershberg, "Anatomy of a controversy: Anatoly F. Dobrynin's meeting with Robert F. Kennedy, Saturday, 27 October 1962", *CWIHP Bulletin*, Issue 5, Spring 1995, pp. 75-80.

⁴¹ Premier Khrushchev's communiqué to President Kennedy, accepting an end to the missile crisis, October 28, 1962, Chang/Kornbluh, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp. 226-229.

toring of Soviet vessels by American ships; b) checks on the vessels by certain neutral countries; and c) by sharing these functions with the ICRC. In response to these three proposed procedures the new Soviet delegate, Vasili V. Kuznetsov, declared that his government would be prepared to allow the boarding of Soviet vessels bound for Cuba by representatives of the Red Cross. As for cargo checks in certain ports of call, this issue would be for the Cuban government to decide, since the Soviet government could not make any decision in that regard without Cuban consent.⁴² The American side agreed to such a procedure, provided that the personnel used by the ICRC were exclusively Swiss, but said that the US air reconnaissance over Cuba would continue until on-site inspections of the dismantling were assured.⁴³

Although U Thant expressed his doubts whether the ICRC would undertake the duty of inspecting the incoming Soviet vessels, he instructed the UN representative in Geneva, Pier Spinelli, to contact the ICRC. On that same afternoon of 29 October the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Léopold Boissier, agreed in principle. His organization would be ready to accept such an assignment, but only on condition that there was a formal request by all three parties to the conflict — including Cuba. Also, the approval of the Committee was still needed.⁴⁴ Thus the question was what stand the Cuban government and the ICRC would take.

On 30 October, Secretary-General U Thant flew to Cuba to negotiate with Castro.⁴⁵ The Cuban leader was furious about the outcome of the crisis because Khrushchev, in his haste to find a way

⁴² Record from the diary of V.V. Kuznetsov of the conversation with Acting U.N. Secretary-General U Thant, October 29, 1962, *CWIHP Bulletin*, Issues 8-9, Winter 1996/1997, pp. 295-299.

⁴³ McCloy phone call from New York, October 29, 1962, *Cuban Missile Crisis*, *op. cit.* (note 1), Doc. 1645.

⁴⁴ Spinelli to Narasimhan, October 30, 1962, *Cuban Missile Crisis*, *op. cit.* (note 1), Extras, Box Ro6Mo7S14To7, Cables – October 1962. See also U Thant, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 180.

⁴⁵ It is important to note that Castro's invitation to these talks dated from 27 October, a time when no agreement had as yet been reached between the superpowers. The Cuban leader therefore assumed he would be negotiating a solution to the crisis with U Thant, and not just the terms of the settlement based on the agreement reached between Kennedy and Khrushchev on 28 October. For Castro's invitation, see U Thant, *op. cit.* (note 8), Appendix G, p. 465.

out, had simply forgotten to contact or even inform Castro before accepting Kennedy's deal on 28 October.⁴⁶ Hence it was no surprise that U Thant's two days of talks with the Cuban leadership failed to produce any substantial understanding.⁴⁷ Castro categorically denied access to a UN supervisory mission that was to verify the dismantling of the missile bases in his country. He was equally opposed to any inspection in Cuban ports by ICRC personnel. If the Soviet Union permitted the ICRC to inspect its vessels on the high seas, then it was their business and he would not oppose that. Contrary to the mention made by U Thant in his memoirs,⁴⁸ the documents give no proof of him suggesting to Castro the possibility of ICRC involvement in verifying the *withdrawal* of Soviet missiles from Cuba.⁴⁹ In all U Thant's talks with Castro, the superpowers and the ICRC there was only the question of using the latter for *inspecting incoming* ships to Cuba. The responsibility for verification of the dismantlement always remained with the United Nations.

The Secretary-General had to return to New York on 31 October almost empty-handed. The only good news he brought with him was the information gathered from the Soviet general of the rocket forces in Cuba that the dismantling of the missiles and their installations was already in progress and would be completed by 2 November.⁵⁰ The other positive result of these talks was Castro's consent to send back to the United States, under the auspices of the Secretary-General, the dead body of Major Anderson, whose plane was downed over Cuba on 27 October.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Beschluss, *op. cit.* (note 6), p. 543.

⁴⁷ Summary of my meeting with President Dorticos, Premier Castro and Foreign Minister Roa in Havana, October 30, 1962, *Cuban Missile Crisis*, *op. cit.* (note 1) Doc. 1963, and Summary of my meeting with President Dorticos, Premier Castro of Cuba and Foreign Minister Roa, October 31, 1962, *ibid.*, Doc. 1747.

⁴⁸ U Thant, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 183.

⁴⁹ See Summaries of meetings, *op. cit.* (note 47), and Notes on my second meeting with Premier Fidel Castro of Cuba in Havana, October 31, 1962, *Cuban Missile Crisis*, *op. cit.* (note 1), Doc. 1745.

⁵⁰ U Thant, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 186.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

Rüegger's mission to New York

The members of the International Committee met on 31 October and 1 November to consider the ICRC's possible role in the inspection of Soviet vessels bound for Cuba. The debate was lively and some members immediately rejected the idea of accepting the UN Secretary-General's request for about 30 inspectors.⁵² In the end, however, the Committee decided to follow President Boissier's initial favourable response. They agreed that the former President of the ICRC and Swiss ambassador, Paul Rüegger, would be sent to New York for further clarification, as soon as a formal request for the ICRC's help was made by all the three parties to the conflict.⁵³

Word reached the United Nations Secretariat on 3 November that Rüegger, accompanied by ICRC senior staff member Melchior Borsinger, would be in New York by 6 November to contact and obtain information from the Secretary-General and the representatives of the countries concerned.⁵⁴ Rüegger was to state the conditions of acceptance by the ICRC of the planned assignment to it and once again explain the humanitarian organization's motives in lending its good offices. These were in particular the maintaining of international peace and the desire to spare mankind from suffering.⁵⁵ The ICRC's definite decision would depend upon the result of this mission.

Rüegger met with U Thant for the first time in the late afternoon of 6 November at the United Nations headquarters in New York. After the ICRC representative had repeated that the approval of all three parties concerned was needed for a Red Cross involvement, the Secretary-General said that the United States and the Soviet Union had already given their consent and that Fidel Castro had told

⁵² The number of 30 inspectors is to be found in an aide mémoire prepared by the ICRC on 30 October 1962, published in *NL Rüegger, op. cit.* (note 4), Dossier 28.3.25.2.

⁵³ Telegram Spinelli to Narasimhan, November 1, 1962, *Cuban Missile Crisis, op. cit.* (note 1), Extras, Box Ro6Mo7S14To7, Cables — November 1962. See also "The International Committee of the Red Cross and the

Cuban crisis", *International Review of the Red Cross*, December 1962, pp. 653 f.

⁵⁴ Telegram Spinelli to Narasimhan, November 3, 1962, *Cuban Missile Crisis, op. cit.* (note 1), Extras, Box Ro6Mo7S14To7, Cables — November 1962.

⁵⁵ Récit Boissier, 5 November 1962, *NL Rüegger, op. cit.* (note 4), Dossier 28.3.25.2.

him in Havana that ships could be inspected by the ICRC outside Cuban territorial waters. With regard to the method of inspection, Rüeegger suggested the following: all personnel for the inspections would be recruited by the ICRC, which would receive instructions for the performance of its task from the United Nations after consultation with the ICRC. The ICRC would therefore not assume direct responsibility for the inspections; its teams would work under the supervision of the United Nations. The teams would be stationed on neutral ships. If the inspectors were unable to carry out their task, they would report to the UN headquarters. U Thant agreed in general and suggested that Rüeegger meet with the representatives of the three parties the next day.⁵⁶

In his talks with the American delegates there was a wide consensus on the procedure, and the delegates even presented a list of Swedish ships which might be chartered for inspections by the ICRC.⁵⁷ During the following meeting with the Soviet side, however, there were clear indications that these inspections would never be carried out. The Soviet delegate stressed that the US blockade, which was meant to be replaced by ICRC inspections, was illegal in his opinion and should be liquidated once the Soviet rockets were out of Cuba. He therefore saw no necessity for continuing inspection by ICRC personnel after 10 November, the date at which the Soviet Union intended to finish withdrawing its rockets from Cuba. In reply Rüeegger stated that “a good week” was necessary to put the corps of inspectors into operation and requested a clear indication of when the operation was to begin and how long it was to last. Once again the Soviet negotiator stressed his point of view that the operation should come to an end with the final removal of the Soviet rockets. It became clear that if the Soviets insisted on this, the ICRC’s good offices would be obsolete by the time its inspectors were ready for action.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Rüeegger continued meeting with the Cuban side. The

⁵⁶ The Secretary-General’s meeting with Mr. Paul Rüeegger, representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross, at 5 p.m., November 6, 1962, *Cuban Missile Crisis*, *op. cit.* (note 1), Doc. 2004.

⁵⁷ Summary of meeting held on November 7, 1962, 10:00-11:00, *ibid.*, Doc. 2050.

⁵⁸ Summary of meeting held on November 7, 1962, 11:00-12:30, *ibid.*, Doc. 2051.

ICRC representative pointed out to the Cuban ambassador that the agreement of all three parties — including Cuba — was an essential preliminary condition for the ICRC to undertake inspections on the high seas. The Cuban delegate gave his consent and did not oppose inspections outside Cuban territory.⁵⁹ Following these meetings, Rüeegger reported the day's events in a long telegram to the ICRC in Geneva.⁶⁰

Meanwhile direct negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union on the settlement of the crisis were pursued. On 4 November the Soviet side signalled the possibility for the US Navy, instead of the United Nations, to verify the removal of the missiles if Castro continued to oppose on-site inspections in Cuba. The suggestion was as follows: the Soviets would give the US photographs of the rocket sites in dismantled form and, to make sure the missiles were all gone, the schedule of removal to the ports and the shipping schedule so that the US Navy could bring its ships alongside the Soviet vessels on the high seas and see and count the missiles.⁶¹ This plan took shape when the Soviet troubleshooter Anastas Mikoyan, who had been sent to Cuba when the crisis had abated, failed to get Castro to allow UN verification of the dismantling of the missile sites in Cuba.⁶² The Soviet Union and the United States now agreed that American ships would come up close to the Soviet vessels in order to see and photograph the missiles being shipped.⁶³ In addition, American helicopters could be sent if conditions at sea did not permit verification from ships brought alongside, and the photographing could be done from them.

⁵⁹ Summary of meeting held on November 7, 1962, 15:00, *ibid.*, Doc. 2052.

⁶⁰ Telegram Rüeegger to ICRC, 7 November 1962, *NL Rüeegger, op. cit.* (note 4), Dossier 28.3.25.2.

⁶¹ Telegram Stevenson to Secretary of State, November 4, 1962, *Cuban Missile Crisis, op. cit.* (note 1), 1992 Releases, Box 1.

⁶² Memorandum of the Third Castro-Mikoyan conversation, November 5, 1962, *CWIHP Bulletin*, Issue 5, Spring 1995, p. 104.

⁶³ For a short time, both sides considered the alternative of having the ICRC carry out

the inspection of the Soviet vessels leaving Cuba in the same way as had been proposed for the inspection of vessels bound for Cuba, but the matter had never been discussed with either the UN Secretary-General or the ICRC. Department of State, Codification of instructions on Cuban negotiations, November 5, 1962, NSA, *Cuban Missile Crisis, op. cit.* (note 1), 1992 Releases, Box 2. Telegram from V.V. Kuznetsov to USSR Foreign Ministry, November 6, 1962, *CWIHP Bulletin*, Issues 8-9, Winter 1996/1997, pp. 326 f.

The missiles would be shipped on deck and the covers or casings removed in order to make verification easy.⁶⁴ The first Soviet transport left Cuba on 6 November, and the US Navy carried out the first inspection on the high seas on the high seas on 7 November.⁶⁵

Thus a solution for verifying the removal of the Soviet missiles from Cuba was found without UN participation. As the Soviet side insisted that a replacement of the US blockade for incoming vessels by ICRC inspection on the high seas was justified only until the missiles were removed from Cuba, and as the United States simply continued monitoring the island by air reconnaissance with the Soviets' tacit consent, Rüeegger came to the conclusion that the planned ICRC inspections would never be implemented.⁶⁶ That there would certainly be no ICRC involvement in the settlement of the crisis became evident on 9 November:

"In view definite Sov[iet] statement to [ICRC delegation] yesterday that operation would be unnecessary after completion Sov[iet] withdrawal of offensive weapons from Cuba, and that withdrawal would be completed Nov[ember] 10, they saw little use in proceeding with operation."⁶⁷

Although the terms of reference for an ICRC assignment had been fully negotiated by that time,⁶⁸ Rüeegger terminated his mission and flew back to Switzerland on 10 November to report to the ICRC.⁶⁹ The Cuban missile crisis came to an end once and for all after the last Soviet IL-28 long-range bombers capable of delivering nuclear

⁶⁴ Telegram Kuznetsow to USSR Foreign Ministry, November 7, 1962, *CWIHP Bulletin*, Issues 8-9, Winter 1996/1997, pp. 329 f.

⁶⁵ For a detailed account of how the inspections were carried out, see Brugioni, *op. cit.* (note 11), pp. 520-523.

⁶⁶ Telegram Rüeegger to Boissier, 8 November, 1962, *NL Rüeegger, op. cit.* (note 4), Dossier 28.3.25.2.

⁶⁷ Telegram Stevenson to Secretary of State, November 9, 1962, *Cuban Missile Crisis, op. cit.* (note 1), Doc. 2178.

⁶⁸ These terms of references are to be found in a memorandum of the Legal

Counselor to the UN Secretary-General, Constantin A. Stavropoulos: Memorandum for the record, November 9, 1962, *NL Rüeegger, op. cit.* (note 4), Dossier 28.3.25.2

⁶⁹ Rapport de l'Ambassadeur Paul Rüeegger sur sa mission auprès du Secrétaire général des Nations Unies à New York du 6 au 11 novembre 1962 — établissement d'une procédure de vérification des cargaisons à destination de ce pays, 12 November 1962, *NL Rüeegger, op. cit.* (note 4), Dossier 28.3.25.2. See also the account by Melchior Borsinger who accompanied Rüeegger on his mission to New York, *op. cit.* (note 9), pp. 158-162.

weapons had been withdrawn from Cuba by 20 November. The US sea blockade was lifted and the dispute between the superpowers officially settled.

The aftermath of the ICRC's involvement in the crisis

Although the ICRC explained the role it might have assumed in the Cuban missile crisis, stressing that its mission was not to venture into the sphere of international politics but that it was duty-bound to make humanity prevail in circumstances of extreme gravity, its circular letter to that effect of 15 November 1962 to the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies triggered a broader discussion over the future orientation of the ICRC.⁷⁰ In the light of the events in Cuba and the possible role of the Red Cross, the President of the French Red Cross Society, Ambassador André François-Poncet, again raised an idea put forward earlier that year that the ICRC be entrusted in a fifth Geneva Convention with the monitoring of a nuclear test ban treaty yet to be negotiated. This proposal was published in a leading article in the French newspaper *Le Figaro* on 6 November.⁷¹ François-Poncet obviously belonged to those in favour of a wider field of activity for the ICRC in the atomic age — including political missions. As the documents indicate, and from what the present author has been told by the former Swiss ambassador and subsequent member of the Committee, Raymond Probst, it looks as if Léopold Boissier, the ICRC President at that time, was likewise seeking a more active role for his organization.

On the other hand, the Swiss government and the press were sceptical about the ICRC's determination to extend its field of activity. The unease about the possible involvement of the ICRC in the Cuban missile crisis was expressed by the then Swiss Foreign Minister, Friedrich Traugott Wahlen as early as 1 November 1962,

⁷⁰ This circular is reproduced in "The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Cuban missile crisis", *International Review of the Red Cross*, December 1962, pp. 655 f.

⁷¹ André François-Poncet, "Le grain a levé", *Le Figaro*, 6 November 1962, p. 1, 26.

when he was consulted by the American ambassador.⁷² The concern of the Swiss Department of Foreign Affairs about the ICRC getting involved in purely political matters is best reflected in an editorial by Willy Bretscher, a Liberal Democrat and Member of Parliament, in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* on 6 November 1962.⁷³ Bretscher wrote that there was no reason for the ICRC to take over a task assigned to the United Nations and which was outside the humanitarian field. There was a danger that, by taking part in an operation of a political nature, the ICRC would compromise its neutrality — an absolute prerequisite to its humanitarian duties. The Soviets, according to Bretscher, were just seeking a way out of the crisis without losing face; they would therefore try to assign the task of international inspection to the ICRC to make it look like a humanitarian operation. Therefore the ICRC should turn down the request for its good offices and the United Nations should entrust one or several neutral nations with the inspection.⁷⁴ — As we have seen, the ICRC eventually decided differently, but there were also voices within the Committee that questioned this position.

Almost a year after the events of October 1962 the Committee member and former Swiss Federal Councillor Max Petitpierre, referring specifically to the ICRC's role in the Cuban missile crisis, asked President Boissier to convene the Committee to discuss the future guidelines of the organization:

“On various occasions divergent tendencies have been expressed within the ICRC, some in favour of a more dynamic policy that would enable it to assert itself better in a rapidly changing world, the others calling for it to confine itself instead to its traditional activities.”⁷⁵

⁷² Telegram McKinney to Secretary of State, November 1, 1962, *Cuban Missile Crisis*, *op. cit.* (note 1), 1992 Releases, Box 1.

⁷³ Willy Bretscher, “Internationale Inspektion für Kuba: Soll das IKRK eingeschaltet werden?”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 6 November 1962, evening issue, p. 1.

⁷⁴ See also letter Bretscher to Schindler, 7 November 1962, *NL Rüegger*, Dossier

28.3.25.2

⁷⁵ “À différentes reprises au sein du CICR, diverses tendances se sont manifestées, les unes pour une politique plus dynamique qui permettrait au CICR de mieux s'affirmer dans un monde qui évolue rapidement, les autres dans le sens qu'il doit s'en tenir plutôt à ses activités traditionnelles.” Letter Petitpierre to Boissier, 31 October 1963, *ibid.*

It was in particular the experience of Rüeegger's mission to New York during the missile crisis that subsequently led to the elaboration of a new doctrine to guide the Committee's decision on any involvement of a similar kind. It was agreed that the ICRC would be ready in the future to lend its good offices only on condition:

- that peace was threatened by the danger of a nuclear war;
- that the United Nations declared itself unable to intervene;
- that the ICRC was called upon to lend its support to an efficient mission within the scope of the Red Cross principles,
- and that all parties concerned gave their approval to the intervention under the ICRC's conditions.⁷⁶

Although the plans for ICRC inspections in the Cuban missile crisis were never put into effect and the organization had little to do with the outcome of the events, Rüeegger's mission to New York therefore set a medium-term precedent that led to formulation of the rules of future ICRC engagement in the event of a nuclear crisis.

Conclusion

A lot of new material and information on the Cuban missile crisis has surfaced during the last ten years. It has, for the first time, made possible a detailed analysis of the hitherto untold story of the ICRC's involvement in the crisis. The documents show that the humanitarian organization was ready to play an extraordinary role by lending its good offices to the United Nations and the parties concerned for a highly political mission. Although the planned inspections of Soviet vessels by ICRC personnel ultimately never took place, the ICRC's involvement set a precedent for the future engagement of the humanitarian organization in similar circumstances.

It comes as a surprise that it was probably the President of the ICRC, Léopold Boissier himself, who gave the UN Secretary-General the idea of asking the ICRC for help in this unusual task outside the scope of its traditional humanitarian mission. Persistent rumours that its involvement in the crisis was due to a request by the

⁷⁶ Borsinger, *op. cit.* (note 9), p. 162.

Soviets are therefore undeniably false.⁷⁷ The reason that the ICRC inspections were never carried out is twofold. First, the Cuban leader Fidel Castro was opposed to any form of international inspections on Cuban territory in settling the crisis. This considerably complicated and delayed the establishment of any inspection procedure. Secondly, when the Soviet negotiator made it clear to the ICRC's envoy to New York, Paul Rüeegger, that the replacement of the American naval blockade by ICRC inspections was justified only until the last Soviet missiles were removed from Cuba, it was soon obvious that the good offices of the ICRC would be obsolete by the time its inspection team was ready for action.

To sum up, Rüeegger's mission to New York between 6 and 10 November 1962 did not have much influence on the outcome of the crisis itself. But in the long run the involvement of the ICRC in the Cuban missile crisis led to a broader discussion of its future role in the atomic age and to the formulation of a new internal policy setting the conditions under which it would be prepared to lend its good offices in a nuclear crisis.

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⁷⁷ Nevertheless that version of the story can still be found in current publications. See e.g. Brugioni, *op. cit.* (note 11), p. 501.

Résumé

Le CICR et la crise des missiles à Cuba (1962)

par THOMAS FISCHER

L'ouverture d'un grand nombre d'archives depuis la fin de la guerre froide et la publication d'informations inédites permettent aujourd'hui aux historiens de jeter un regard nouveau sur la crise qui a résulté de l'installation par l'Union soviétique de missiles nucléaires à Cuba en octobre 1962. Ainsi, il est pour la première fois possible d'analyser en détail le rôle exceptionnel joué par le CICR pendant la crise des missiles. Le CICR a en effet offert ses bons offices afin de donner aux États concernés et au secrétaire général des Nations Unies la possibilité de résoudre la crise sans recourir à la force. Il s'est notamment déclaré prêt à mettre à la disposition de l'ONU des délégués qui auraient pour tâche de s'assurer que les navires soviétiques se rendant à Cuba ne transportaient pas d'armes. Toutefois, sa proposition est devenue sans objet, la crise ayant été résolue à temps. L'auteur examine les implications de la position prise alors par le CICR pour l'avenir de l'institution et ses activités humanitaires.

