

November 2, 1962

Ciphered Telegram from Ambassador to Cuba Alekseev to the Central Committee for the Communist Party of the Soviet Union

Citation:

"Ciphered Telegram from Ambassador to Cuba Alekseev to the Central Committee for the Communist Party of the Soviet Union", November 2, 1962, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Archive of the President of the Russian Federation, special declassification, April 2002. Translated by Svetlana Savranskaya of the National Security Archive.
<https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/115064>

Summary:

The telegram bears on the circumstances surrounding Fidel Castro's controversial 27 October letter to Khrushchev. Alekseev describes Castro's demeanor as being irritated and paranoid at the time of writing the letter. He provides background on Castro's actions and attitudes at the peak of the crisis, and especially his nocturnal visit to the Soviet embassy and preparation of his letter to Khrushchev on the night of 26-27 October. He advises Moscow on how to handle the Cuban leader, and offers analysis into the emotions and overall mood of Castro and his associates at that moment in the crisis.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Leon Levy Foundation

Original Language:

Russian

Contents:

Translation - English

Telegram

50390 50396 50397
50474 50424

Special # 1717-1722
Top priority

Special

To our [telegram] # 1710

When Fidel Castro was writing his letter, he was clearly irritated and experienced the influence of the revolutionary in form, but backward in substance, the mood of a certain part of his circle [of officials] and the electrified masses of people, to whom up to the last moment the Cuban leadership has not explained the essence of the decisions made by us, and thus objectively encouraged the emerging confusion and even anti-Soviet feelings.

The silence in the press about the responses in the world to the decision of the Soviet government, stimulation of militant anti-American feelings and in particular the wide mobilization of the public opinion in support of the five points of Fidel Castro's [28 October 1962] statement gave the people the grounds to think about the existence of serious differences between the governments of Cuba and the USSR.

As should have been expected, the Chinese have not missed a chance to exploit the temporarily unfavorable for us situation.

The government and the press of the People's Republic of China made pseudo-revolutionary statements, which started appearing in the Cuban newspapers, which flattered the excited Cubans.

Officials of the Chinese Embassy "went to the masses" and began calling them for resistance to the aggressor with their own forces.

In the attempt to influence the sentimental feelings of the Cubans, many of those [Chinese] came to the blood donation centers so that they could give blood and thus "cement the Chinese-Cuban friendship with blood." However, these cheap methods of propaganda did not have much success, although they strengthened the confusion of the Cubans even more.

One has to state the fact that this confusion affected not only common people, but also a number of the Cuban leaders. According to our information, members of the national leadership Guillermo Garcia [Frias], A. Santamaria [Haydée Santamaría Cuadrado], and partially [Raúl] Curbelo [Morales] and R. Valdez [Ramiro Valdés Menéndez] voiced criticism of our decisions at the last session of the ORI [Integrated Revolutionary Organizations] leadership.

[Cuban President Osvaldo] Dorticos also expressed his dissatisfaction with our methods of resolving this issue.

J.[oaquín] Ordoqui and C. R. Rodriguez spoke in defense of the decision. [Ernesto "Che"] Guevara and [Emilio] Aragones did not speak, and R. Castro was not present at the session.

Fidel Castro apparently has not drawn any conclusions, and just let everybody, who wanted to speak out do so, while he himself did not take any definite position.

Apparently, they achieved an agreement to consider the decisions made by us the business of the Soviet government.

They also agreed not to interfere in our subsequent decisions about the remaining troops and military equipment and not to present any requests regarding leaving them behind [in Cuba].

It was recommended that Fidel Castro should not subject our decision to analysis in his speech, and speak only in defense of the five points of his statement, negotiations with [Acting United Nations Secretary-General] U. Thant and that he should put an end to the anti-Soviet feelings, which emerged among the people, by placing an emphasis on the indestructible and permanent nature of friendship with the USSR.

If Fidel Castro himself was convinced that the Cuban revolution had gained a lot and became stronger as a result of the Soviet Union making such a courageous decision, then one could be sure that the entire population would have supported him and that would have removed all the confusion and stopped accusations against us. However, up until recently Castro was a prisoner of his delusion, and only after his meetings with U Thant and after having received the last letter from comrade Khrushchev, he seems to be assuming the correct realistic positions.

Castro's misunderstandings were caused by the following circumstances:

He is convinced that after the first concession to the imperialism others might follow (this is how he interpreted the decision of the Soviet government).

Castro has no doubt that the imperialists will press new accusations against him and will be searching for an opportunity for provocations.

In some of his remarks in his inner circle, he expressed the idea that the Cuban question had shifted from the international sphere to the local sphere, and that they should be prepared for a local war, in other words, with their own forces. He believes that in the period of the highest peak of the revolutionary transformations one should not be cooling down the Cuban people and imposing on them the illusions of reconciliation with imperialism. However, I see the main problem of Castro's confusions not so much in his still insufficient ideological preparedness and the absence of party experience, but in his special very complex and excessively sensitive and easy to offend character. The smallest incorrect expression, which has a double meaning or efforts of putting pressure on him, is perceived very painfully. This is what happened with the response to the letter from comrade Khrushchev that was sent to you. He "picked" on every detail and composed his response in a very emotional state. Here is the history of Fidel Castro's letter from 27 October:

On 27 October, at 2 a.m. Dorticos called me at my apartment and informed me that Castro is coming over for an important meeting. Castro stayed at my place until 7 a.m. trying to explain the critical nature of the moment, dictating and re-dictating dozens of times the letter that was later sent to you. Castro took turns dictating and making some notes before he finally decided on the full text. In the beginning, I could not understand for a long time what did Castro want to say with his quite intricate phrases, and in order to find out his opinion I directly asked him: "Do you want to say that we should deliver a first nuclear strike against the enemy." "No, said Castro, I do not want to say it directly, but under certain conditions, without waiting to experience the treachery of the imperialists and their first strike, we should be ahead of them

and erase them from the face of the earth in the case of their aggression against Cuba." F. Castro was convinced that the attack was inevitable, saying that there were only 5 percent out of 100 that it would not happen. While reading the letter from comrade N. S. Khrushchev, he made two comments about which I already wrote to you (see #1701).

Castro was especially disappointed by the following phrase in the letter: "In the telegram from 27 October, you suggested that we should be the first to deliver a nuclear strike against the enemy's territory."

Castro thought that you decided in Moscow that he is calling for a strike not after the invasion of Cuba but now, during the crisis. He suspected that we incorrectly translated his idea, and asked [me] to give him a translation of the telegram that we sent and his drafts, which we of course did, and he could see that we passed his thoughts on correctly.

From the letter that had been sent to you, Castro's confusion is obvious. The second item that offended him, and probably the main one, is that he does not believe that the telegram, which he had sent to us could be considered evidence that we had consulted him before making the decision.

He also expressed to me some friendly objections regarding sending "worrisome telegrams about the situation" (in reality I did not write such telegrams, but I did not tell Castro about it) and regarding my information that among some Cuban comrades the opinion exists that the Cuban people would have wanted a different [Soviet] statement, in any case not about the removal of the missiles." "You know better than me then not just certain comrades, but the entire people wanted that," he said.

By the way, the Russian text of the letter contains an unfortunate mistake, which we had to correct in the interest of our cause.

The text said: "Dear comrade Castro, when you sent us telegrams one more worrisome than the other, and finally the last telegram from 27 October . . ."

We translated and passed the following text to Castro: "When we received telegrams one more worrisome than the other and finally your telegram from 27 October . . ."

In reality, Castro had not written anything to Moscow with the exception of the telegram from 27 October. Had we not corrected that mistake, one should have no doubts about the directness of Castro's reply that would have followed.

In the most recent days, I think, Castro has understood that Cuba was really able to avoid the war and destruction and that the prospects of peace and independence emerged now, and he began to reconsider his mistaken positions and regained his spirit.

Due to his character, he has not rejected the old opinion yet, but the crisis I think is over now, and in the future he would repeatedly express his gratitude to us for the wisdom of the decision that we took.

Knowing Castro's sensitive nature, I believe that we should not hurry or push him, and especially we should not start any polemics with him yet.

The last letter from comrade Khrushchev and the future conversations of comrade [Anastas] Mikoyan with Castro will work its course.

When he understands his mistakes, he will move even closer to us and will strengthen his party spirit even more, especially if we do not remind him of [his mistakes].

Taking all this into account, I would consider it possible not to respond to his letter, which was caused by a momentary irritation, or to send him a response, in which to express approximately the following ideas:

We were glad that you expressed your thoughts frankly as it is appropriate for a Marxist-Leninist.

Only on these conditions true friendship is possible. We will not argue who of us is correct, history will judge that.

We fully share your assessment of imperialism and this is why we are doing everything in order to complicate its aggressive actions, not only directly, but also through the diplomatic channels.

You could always rely on us in your just struggle. It is possible that we do not cry against imperialism as loudly as some, but with our actions we deliver much more sensitive blows against it. (This should be said in such a way that Castro would not perceive the last thought as directed against him, but understand that it was directed against the Chinese.)

It would be desirable to emphasize the courage of the Cuban people and the personal courage of Castro and his concern about the future of his people and the cause of socialism.

It would be better not to enter into an argument with him on other small issues, and maybe we should even admit that the complex nature of the circumstances did not allow us to conduct consultations, because we always do it under normal conditions.

I am convinced that a response along such lines would be received by Castro with great satisfaction and that he will repeatedly regret having written that letter.

I start from the assumption that we would need one or two years of especially careful work with Castro until he acquires all the qualities of the Marxist Leninist party spirit. However, currently he is the main force in Cuba and the living program for the people, and therefore we should fight for him, educate him, and sometimes forgive him some of his mistakes.

The potential danger, I believe, is hidden not in Castro's ideological confusions but in the qualities of his character.

If I am mistaken, I am asking you to correct me.

2 November 1962 Alekseev

50389

Reference: # 1710 (entry # 50273) from 1 November 1962

Comrade Alekseev transmitted translation of F. Castro's letter to Khrushchev in response to his letter of October 30 of this year.

#1701 (entry # 49971) from 31 October 1962. Comrade Alekseev reported about his meeting with Fidel Castro and delivery him a letter from N. S. Khrushchev.