

## **Attention! Moscow Calling: BBC Monitoring and the Cuban Missile Crisis**

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The Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 was the most dangerous moment of the Cold War and a standout episode in the history of the BBC Monitoring Service, which played an absolutely vital role. This was because key developments in the crisis, including its final resolution, turned on messages from the Soviet President Khrushchev to the American President John F Kennedy (JFK), which were broadcast directly and publicly over Radio Moscow.

These were translated immediately by the monitors at Caversham and transmitted by teleprinter not just to the British government departments in London but to the White House and US government agencies in Washington. This was done via the American Foreign Broadcast Information Unit (FBIS) – the Americans had maintained a presence at Caversham since the Second World War.

Khrushchev used the radio primarily for speed. In 1962, there was still no telephone hotline between the governments in Washington and Moscow and diplomatic channels which depended on ciphered telegrams were extremely slow and cumbersome. During the final weekend of the crisis speed of communication was absolutely vital. The time difference between Moscow and Washington (which was between seven and eight hours) was another factor that hindered communications and contributed to the tension and exhaustion of the protagonists.<sup>1</sup> Khrushchev also used the radio for diplomatic effect: by making public statements on the radio he attempted to out-manoeuvre both JFK and Fidel Castro.

In 1962 Radio Moscow broadcast both domestically and abroad in a wide range of different languages, and during the Cold War it was a vital source of information about all aspects of the Soviet Union, from changes in the direction of government foreign policy to the domestic details of daily life. The BBC had no radio correspondent in Moscow until 1963 so the Monitoring Service at Caversham was crucial in keeping the British public informed of developments.

During the Cuban Missile Crisis Radio Moscow increased its output dramatically and put BBC Monitoring under considerable strain. Its output in Spanish for Cuba went up tenfold

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<sup>1</sup> All the monitoring transcripts give times of broadcasts as GMT but it is important to note that summer time ended in both the UK and the US overnight on 27/28 October.

from seven to seventy hours a week. It also made a number of unscheduled broadcasts not only in English but also in French, Spanish and German.

The public phase of the Cuban Missile Crisis began with Kennedy's television broadcast at 7pm Washington time on Monday 22 October. It was midnight in Britain but the BBC light programme stayed on air to broadcast it live. Kennedy told the American people that within the past week there had been unmistakable evidence that a series of offensive missile sites for medium range ballistic missiles was now in preparation on Cuba ('that imprisoned island'). Henceforth it would be American policy to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the western hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States requiring a full retaliatory response on the Soviet Union.

JFK addressed 'the captive people of Cuba' and described the Cuban leaders as 'puppets and agents of an international conspiracy which has turned Cuba...into the first Latin American country to become a target for nuclear war.' He announced that there would be a 'strict quarantine' on any military equipment to Cuba which would be enforced by the US and called for immediate meetings of the UN Security Council and the Organisation of American States.<sup>2</sup>

From the moment of this broadcast the American and British public and people in all countries with an open media were consumed with anxiety. The BBC followed every development in the crisis to the best of its ability. In the Soviet Union, in contrast, the public mood was very different and there was nothing like the level of alarm and agitation felt in America, Britain and other European countries.

Sir Frank Roberts, the British Ambassador to Moscow, reported that the Moscow public were much less excited and apprehensive than they had been during the Berlin crisis a year earlier. There was no run on the shops and no visible signs of nervousness or tension among the people on the streets. While there was some 'quiet apprehension' among the domestic staff at the embassy, other acquaintances reflected the unalarmed picture presented by Soviet leaders.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John F. Kennedy, 'Radio and television address to the American people on the Soviet arms build-up in Cuba', 22 Oct.1962, online audio clip, accessed 5 July 2016, [www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/sUvMCh-sB0mOLfrBcaHaSg.aspx](http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/sUvMCh-sB0mOLfrBcaHaSg.aspx).

<sup>3</sup> Sir Frank Roberts, Telegram no 60, Moscow to Foreign Office, 1 November 1962

Although the 'Caribbean crisis' as it was called dominated the news bulletins it was placed firmly in the context of Khrushchev's wise and determined efforts to avoid a thermo-nuclear war and limit the dangerous actions of aggressive American imperialism. The Soviet Union was presented as taking the lead in international diplomacy at the United Nations. The Soviet government completely controlled the news outlets so they could withhold information, or simply impose a short delay on its release. This produced an atmosphere entirely different from that in the west and the news was managed in such a way that the crisis was not fully evident to the Soviet public until the danger had passed. For example, Kennedy's broadcast and the announcement of a naval blockade around Cuba was not reported until 13.00 GMT (4pm in Moscow) on Tuesday 23 October.

This broadcast condemned the blockade of Cuba as an unheard of violation of international law and accused the US of 'recklessly playing with fire'.<sup>4</sup> But the statement insisted that any Soviet arms deliveries to Cuba were purely for defensive purposes and did not refer to the charge that the Soviet Union was setting up nuclear missile sites in Cuba. (In fact the Soviet government did not publicly admit that there were missiles in Cuba until Khrushchev's broadcast on the following Saturday.) It affirmed Soviet support for the United Nations Charter and called on all governments and peoples to protest against the aggressive actions of the United States. The Soviet Government would do everything in its power to thwart the aggressive designs of the imperialist circles of the United States 'and to safeguard and consolidate peace on earth'.<sup>5</sup>

On Wednesday 24 October it was announced over Radio Moscow that all military leave in the Soviet Union had been stopped. This must have indicated that there was some problem but was followed later the same evening by an announcement that Khrushchev had proposed an international summit meeting which was designed to have a calming effect. There were also numerous references to Khrushchev and other leaders attending theatrical and musical performances, including fortuitously one given by a Cuban orchestra, which were clearly intended to produce an impression of business as usual.

One theme which emerges strongly from the Radio Moscow news reports is the emphasis placed on widespread protests throughout the world against American imperialist aggression. There were detailed descriptions of protests in western countries

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<sup>4</sup> USSR (Home) Moscow (First): in Russian, 23.10 on 23 Oct 1962, BBCM SU. B.68, October 1962.

<sup>5</sup> USSR (Home) Moscow (First): in Russian, 23.10 on 23 Oct 1962, BBCM SU. B.68, October 1962.

and demonstrations in London were given particular prominence. On Thursday 25 October at 19.00 GMT there was a report from London on the trial of pro-Cuban demonstrators who had been arrested outside the US embassy. 'The British patriots, who felt it was their duty to protest against the monstrous provocation of the American warmongers, faced the court. Two demonstrators were sentenced to three months, others were fined heavily.'<sup>6</sup>

Cuba was a long way from the Soviet Union and in case any Russians were wondering exactly why their forces should be engaged in the Caribbean the theme of solidarity between Soviet and Cuban workers was stressed constantly and linked to industrial productivity. 'We are with you Cuba! These words can be heard in all corners of the Soviet land...'.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, a shipyard worker was described as having just returned from Cuba 'where he spent two years among the industrious, intelligent and heroic Cuban people. Approving the Soviet government statement on Cuba, Sormovo steel smelters have decided to produce 100 tons of steel above their previous pledges by October Day as their contribution to strengthening their country's might.'<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to the tone of anxiety and alarm in Britain and the US over twists and turns in the story, the news bulletins on Radio Moscow reported the crisis through a prism of heroic Soviet achievements which aimed to convey a sense of life continuing as usual. Cuba was portrayed as a revolutionary beacon which required solidarity from the equally, if not more, indomitable Soviet people. For example, as the crisis reached its height on Saturday 27 October the lead item noted again from the previous day the 470<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the discovery of Cuba, not usually a landmark on the Soviet horizon.<sup>9</sup>

'Cuba, the abundant island which has now drawn to itself the attention of the whole of mankind. The heroic people of the island of freedom is building a new life. But its neighbour, American imperialism, does not like it. It would like not only to blockade the island, but even perhaps completely to suppress it. This is not within its power. And the peoples of the whole world will not allow the imperialists to light in the Caribbean Sea the flame of the conflagration of war...

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<sup>6</sup> USSR (Home) Moscow: in Russian, 19:00 on 25 Oct. 1962, Part II, BBCM SU.B.68, October 1962.

<sup>7</sup> USSR (Home), Moscow (First): in Russian, 19:00 on 25 Oct. 1962, Part I, BBCM SU.B.68, October 1962.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> USSR (Home), Moscow (First): in Russian, 03:00 on 27 Oct 1962, BBCM SU.B.68, October 1962.

The Soviet people, the loyal and reliable friends of Cubans, are continuing to toil quietly for the good of their country to strengthen its might and for the sake of peace throughout the world.<sup>10</sup>

But the next three items concerned the achievements of electrification and the fulfilment of industrial quotas and plans. The next mentions of Cuba were much further down the running order and then the focus was on protests in Paris outside the American embassy, a Tanganyika paper that had condemned US action and news that there had been demonstrations against US actions in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

Just how vital the role of radio was during the crisis is underlined by the extremely slow and cumbersome nature of official diplomatic communications. This was evident on Friday 26 October when Khrushchev sent Kennedy a message in an attempt to reach a deal. This was a long, verbose and emotional letter in which Khrushchev talked of the horrific dangers of nuclear war and said that if it were to break out neither of them would have the power to stop it. He insisted that the Soviet missiles were only for the defence of Cuba but he made the crucial offer that if the US would withdraw its ships and promise not to attack Cuba then 'the need for the presence of our military specialists in Cuba would disappear'.<sup>11</sup>

This was delivered to the American embassy in Moscow at 4.42pm (so 9.42am in Washington). The embassy staff then had to translate the letter and put it into cipher, then send it to the State Department in Washington where it was decoded and typed up. All this took a great deal of time. To speed things up the American embassy divided the letter into four sections which arrived out of order in Washington so that the final part was not ready until after 9pm Washington time on Friday evening, almost 12 hours after it had been first delivered to the US Embassy in Moscow.

Khrushchev's Friday message to Kennedy led the US administration to believe that he was offering to withdraw the missiles from Cuba. But then on Saturday 27 October, known as 'Black Saturday', there was a further move by Khrushchev which dashed that hope.

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<sup>10</sup> USSR (Home) Moscow (Fourth): in Russian, 21.05 on 26 Oct 1962, BBCM SU. B.68, October 1962.

<sup>11</sup> Translated message from Khrushchev to Kennedy, Moscow: 26 Oct 1962, U.S. State Department: Khrushchev-Kennedy Exchanges (Volume 6), Khrushchev Reference Archive, accessed 5 July 2016, [www.marxists.org/archive/khrushchev/1962/10/26.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/khrushchev/1962/10/26.htm).

This was the broadcast on Radio Moscow of an open letter from Khrushchev to Kennedy which ratcheted up the danger. The broadcast had been preceded by an earlier announcement at 1.05pm local time: 'Attention, Moscow calling. Comrades, an important government statement is to be broadcast on the radio at 17.00.'<sup>12</sup> So there was no doubt that the monitors at Caversham would be ready and the US government alerted by FBIS.

At 14.00 GMT the Soviet radio and television networks were aligned and the announcer on Radio Moscow proclaimed that they were transmitting a message from the Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers to the President of the USA, copied to the acting Secretary General of the United Nations, U Thant. It was a very long statement and the monitors translating and editing process is visible on the transcript. The key paragraph came towards the end of part 5.

*was checked*

V. TOMBERG USSR MOSCOW FIRST 1400 27.10.1962. Part 5. - 1 -

I therefore make this proposal. We agree to remove from Cuba those means which you regard as offensive means; we agree to carry this out and to declare in the UNO this pledge. Your representatives will make a declaration to the effect that the USA, on her part, considering the uneasiness and anxiety of the Soviet State, will remove their <sup>analogous</sup> ~~similar~~ means from Turkey.

Let us reach agreement as to the span of time <sup>needed</sup> ~~MMMM~~ for you and for us to bring this about. And after that <sup>ensuring the confidence of</sup> ~~confidential~~ persons of the Security Council of the UNO might check on the spot the fulfilment of the pledges taken up. Of course, the <sup>authorisation of</sup> Governments of Cuba and of Turkey are necessary for the entry of those countries of ~~MMMMMMMMMM~~ <sup>plenipotentiaries</sup> these agents and for inspection of the fulfilment of the pledge taken up by ~~MMMM~~ either side.

~~As it seems,~~ <sup>obviously</sup> ~~It would~~ be better if these <sup>plenipotentiaries</sup> agents would have the trust and of the Security Council, and your trust and mine, of the USA and the Soviet Union, as well as of Turkey and Cuba.

<sup>12</sup> USSR (Home), Moscow (First): in Russian, 13:05 on 27 Oct 1962, BCM SU.B.68, October 1962.

'We agree to remove from Cuba those means which you regard as offensive means; we agree to carry this out and declare in the UN this pledge. Your representatives will make a declaration to the effect that the USA on her part, considering the uneasiness and anxiety of the Soviet State, will remove their analogous ('similar' crossed out) means from Turkey.'<sup>13</sup>

Khrushchev had made the startling offer that he would withdraw the Soviet missiles from Cuba, but only if the US would withdraw its Jupiter missiles from Turkey in return. The Soviet Union would also promise to respect the frontiers and sovereignty of Turkey if the US would pledge the same and promise not to invade Cuba. This broadcast was made at 10am Washington time and the President and his advisers were meeting in ExComm, the special committee managing the crisis, as the message came through from FBIS at 10.18am. So the contrast between this immediacy and the length of time it had taken the Friday telegram to arrive is stark.

This was the first time that Khrushchev had publicly admitted that there were Soviet missiles in Cuba. He still protested that they were for defensive purposes, but in acknowledging that the US saw them as offensive he appeared to be moving towards trying to achieve a deal. But this announcement caused consternation in Washington (and in London) because it publicly linked any withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba with an equivalent withdrawal of the Jupiter missiles in Turkey.

We now know that the obsolete Jupiter missiles, described by Robert McNamara, US Secretary of Defense, as a 'pile of junk', were in fact already the subject of secret negotiations between Washington and Moscow, but that was not known at the time when the American public stance was that there had to be an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the Soviet missiles.<sup>14</sup> This new position of Khrushchev's seemed eminently reasonable and there was consternation that it would go down well with international public opinion and put the US on the back foot.

The news of Khrushchev's offer on Radio Moscow at 14.05 GMT (3pm BST) was broadcast almost immediately around the world. In Britain it was broadcast by the BBC in a television news flash at 3.35pm, only half an hour after it had begun and only minutes

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<sup>13</sup> USSR (Home) Moscow (First): in Russian, 14:00 on 27 Oct 1962, BBCM SU.B.68, October 1962.

<sup>14</sup> "War and Peace in the Nuclear Age; Europe Goes Nuclear; Interview with Robert McNamara, 1986 [1]," 20 Feb 1986, WGBH Media Library & Archives, accessed 5 July 2016, [http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V\\_DF35A31CD90545FE83A077DE010DD044](http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_DF35A31CD90545FE83A077DE010DD044).

after the White House received it. <sup>15</sup>The flash from Monitoring would have gone through simultaneously to the US administration, government departments in London and the BBC newsroom at Broadcasting House.

By the time the Presidium of the Soviet Union met at 10am on the morning of Sunday 28 October at Khrushchev's country dacha outside Moscow their anxiety was acute. Kennedy had replied publicly to Khrushchev and stated that he would not invade Cuba and that he would end the naval blockade if the Soviet missiles were withdrawn. But Kennedy had ignored the difference in substance between the Friday diplomatic telegram and the Saturday radio broadcast and made no mention of the offer of a deal on the Turkish missiles. Although Kennedy's reply was released to the press to avoid the long delay in diplomatic communications, it was not reported on Radio Moscow until the next afternoon. <sup>16</sup>

Several additional dangerous events had taken place overnight. An American U2 reconnaissance plane had been shot down over Cuba and the pilot killed. Castro had sent messages to Moscow that he expected an imminent invasion and Khrushchev was extremely worried that he might launch a pre-emptive attack on the US. Moscow believed that the Pentagon wanted air strikes against Cuba to begin on Monday. Reports had also come through from Soviet intelligence sources in the US that Kennedy was to go on television to make an important announcement at 9am Washington time on Sunday. It was expected to say that the US was about to bomb the missile bases and attack Cuba.

Khrushchev had already prepared the Presidium for a tactical retreat and depicted the American promise not to invade Cuba as a great triumph for Soviet diplomacy. But these latest developments were extremely alarming and to save time Khrushchev decided that his response to Kennedy had to be transmitted publicly by radio rather than by coded cable. So Khrushchev called for a typist and began dictating. His style was particularly blunt, rambling and disjointed and had to be worked on by Soviet officials to bring it into the acceptable language and bureaucratic style of international diplomacy. The Communist Party Secretary Leonid Ilyichev with responsibility for mass ideology then had to get the message to the headquarters of Radio Moscow, which was a forty-five minute drive away. According to one account the car raced along at breakneck speed and was recognised as a Kremlin limousine and waved through by the traffic policeman. <sup>17</sup>

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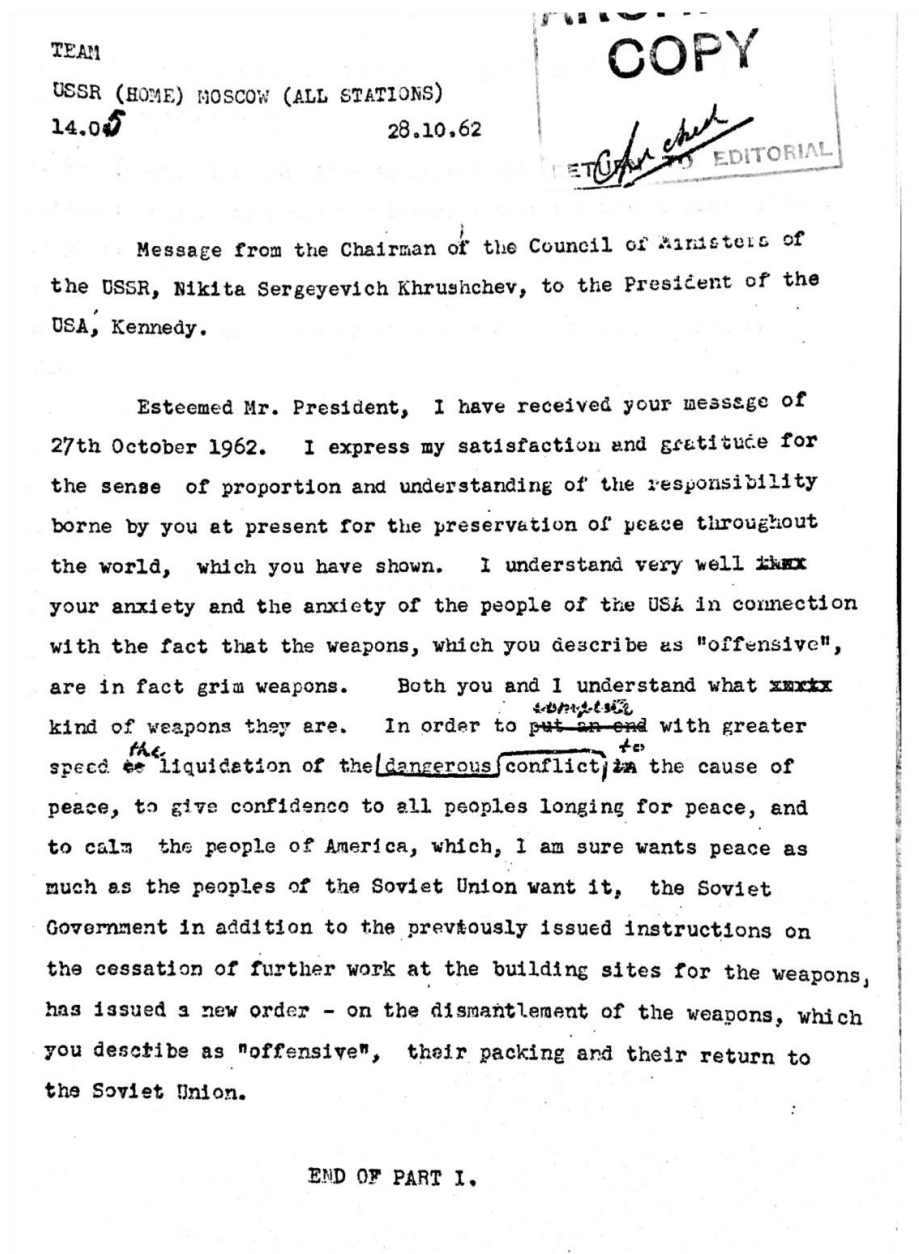
<sup>15</sup> BBC Written Archives Centre (BBC WAC) Television News Script, 27 October 1962.

<sup>16</sup> USSR (Home) Moscow (First): in Russian, 14:30 on 29 Oct 1962, BBCM SU.B.69, October 1962.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War* (London: Hutchinson, 2008), p 332



At 13.35 GMT Radio Moscow had already announced that there would be an Important Government Statement at 14.00. This was made twice: 'Comrades, radio listeners, an important announcement will be made'.<sup>18</sup> At 14.00 there was no broadcast until all stations were linked, then at 14.05 came the announcement: the heart of the message was on the first page.



<sup>18</sup> USSR (Home) Moscow (First): in Russian, 13:35 on 28 Oct 1962, BBCM SU.B.69, October 1962.

'... the Soviet Government in addition to the previously issued instructions on the cessation of further work at the building sites for the weapons, has issued a new order – on the dismantlement of the weapons, which you describe as 'offensive', their packing and their return to the Soviet Union.' The final phrase of the broadcast was widely paraphrased when it became known as 'crate and return'.<sup>19</sup>

In Washington it was just 9.08am, when the news started to come through on the FBIS teleprinter.<sup>20</sup> McGeorge Bundy, the President's security adviser, instantly rang Kennedy who was getting ready to go to church.

The news was made public in Britain and elsewhere almost immediately. At 2.29pm a BBC radio news flash on the Home service reported that 'Mr Khrushchev has ordered the dismantling of the rocket bases in Cuba and the return of the equipment to Russia...details of Mr Khrushchev's reply are still coming in and we don't yet know whether he's made any reservations.' A further news flash thirty minutes later confirmed that Khrushchev was not making any conditions.<sup>21</sup>

This was greeted with huge relief in Washington, and in London where Harold Macmillan and some of his ministers met at Admiralty House. There is some evidence (although it is not definitive) that he had planned to call a Cabinet meeting for the Sunday afternoon where a move to the Precautionary Stage, the military and official preparations for nuclear war, would be on the agenda. Then as Macmillan's diary described it: 'As we were finishing luncheon together, the news came (by radio) that the Russians had given in!' <sup>22</sup>

Neither Macmillan's diary nor that of his press secretary Harold Evans, are specific about exactly how and at what time they heard the news. When Macmillan says the news came by radio it does not mean that ministers and officials were clustered round the wireless. The news would have come through Monitoring and there is a clue in Evans diary, who recorded that, as all the ministers and official departed, Macmillan 'had flopped down in a chair by the tape machine.'<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> USSR (Home) Moscow (All Stations): in Russian, 14:05 on 28 Oct 1962, BBCM SU.B.69, October 1962.

<sup>20</sup> Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, p 334

<sup>21</sup> BBC WAC Television News Script, 28 October 1962

<sup>22</sup> Peter Catterall, ed., *The Macmillan Diaries: Prime Minister and After, 1957-1966*, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan 2011), p 514

<sup>23</sup> Harold Evans, *Downing Street Diary: The Macmillan Years, 1957-1963* (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1981), p. 224

## Conclusion

The Cuban Missile Crisis placed a huge strain on the BBC Monitoring Service and vastly increased its workload, but it rose to the occasion magnificently and played a crucial role in resolving the crisis. Monitoring was also vital in keeping the British public informed of developments in the Soviet Union. As previously noted, the BBC had no correspondent in Moscow at this time, so the BBC newsrooms and other programmes in London relied on Caversham for information on important developments.

While the archive does not give us much on the thought processes behind the translating or editing process, or any details of exactly how the American FBIS unit operated at Caversham, the transcripts do nonetheless offer a few interesting clues on these topics.

One is the Radio Moscow report of Kennedy's reply to Khrushchev on Sunday 28 October, which has the note 'checked against Reuter and found identical'.<sup>24</sup> It shows that the Monitors must have checked that Radio Moscow was actually broadcasting an accurate account, that it must have been part of their job to do that.

COLEMAN  
USSR (HOME) MOSCOW I & IV  
15.00 28.10.62

CONFIDENTIAL

1. Text of Khrushchev's message to Kennedy on dismantling of Cuban missile bases and return of weapons to the Soviet Union.  
(Repeat of Moscow I/14.05/28.10.62)

2. Washington: Text of Kennedy's message to Khrushchev of 27th October. (Checked against Reuter and found identical).

Also on the evening of Sunday 28 October a report on an exchange of messages between U Thant and Castro is marked 'amplification for FBIS' and we know from the

<sup>24</sup> USSR (Home) Moscow (First and Fourth): in Russian, 15:00 on 28 Oct 1962, BBCM SU.B.69, October 1962.

recollections of former monitors that the US frequently asked for additional translation work to be done on areas of particular interest to them.<sup>25</sup>

USSR (HOME) MOSCOW FIRST PROGRAMME  
2200 28.10.62

AMPLIFICATION FOR FRIS

item 1 U Thant - Castro exchange messages.

We already know a good deal about the substance of the most significant Radio Moscow broadcasts because the BBC published the Monitoring Report and the Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB). The SWB which covered the Cuban Missile Crisis in great detail and printed the Soviet government statements in full has been analysed closely by Gary Rawnsley.

But what the full archive of BBC Monitoring gives us is much more detail and context. The detailed running order of the news bulletins means that we know what the Russian people were told, and crucially not told, as well as exactly when they were told it. The verbatim record of these broadcasts, with their archaic language and quotidian details of daily life, enables us to build up a much richer and more comprehensive picture of the Soviet interpretation of the crisis. It transports us, as nothing else can do, directly into the mindset of the Soviet Union at the most dangerous moment of the Cold War.

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<sup>25</sup> USSR (Home) Moscow (First): in Russian, 22:00 on 28 Oct 1962, BBCM SU.B.69, October 1962.