

Cuba Given More Red Jets! Question Is: For War or Peace?

By ROBERT ALLEN and PAUL SCOTT

Russia is again baffling United States Intelligence authorities with some strange military moves in Communist-ruled Cuba.

In recent weeks, the Soviets have quietly doubled their jet fighters and fighter-bombers on the island while at the same time withdrawing around 3,000 combat troops.

The latest U-2 photographs, showing increased numbers of Russian planes on or near Cuban airfields, have forced U.S. intelligence experts to raise their estimates from 150 to "more than 300" Soviet planes in Cuba.

Troop Estimates Vary

In sharp contrast to this sinister build-up, U.S. aerial surveillance of Russian troop camps and departing ships has caused the intelligence experts to reduce their estimates of Soviet military personnel on the island from 11,000 in July to "approximately 8,000" by the end of October.

This new CIA estimate, which is being hotly challenged by Army and Navy intelligence, reports that 14,000 Russian troops have left Cuba since last year's missile crisis.

With the CIA again in undisputed command of all U.S. intelligence on Cuba, the DIA now takes the cautious position that it is impossible to estimate the number of Soviet troops still there. The reason: Lack of hard intelligence from inside Cuba.

To add to these conflicting estimates, reliable Cuban refugees are warning that most of the Russian troops have not left the island but have only taken off their uniform. The refugees' most recent estimate is 18,000.

The surprise appearance of more Soviet jet fighters and fighter-bombers in Cuba has touched off a new debate in the administration's intelligence community over whether the additional planes represent an offensive threat.

One group of experts, comprised mostly of intelligence officials from the CIA and the State Department, stresses that the new aerial build-up is "defensive," since most of the planes are single-engine MIG-21s, 19s and 17s.

These intelligence experts emphasize that the planes have an out-and-back range of 300 miles, which greatly limits their use as bombers against the U.S.

Another group, made up of intelligence experts from the three military services, claims that a build-up of this size presents an "offensive" threat.

These Pentagon veterans point out that more than 150 of the Soviet jets could be converted into 900-mile-range nuclear bombers in a matter of hours. This offensive capability could be attained by equipping the MIGs with additional fuel tanks and a new-type A-bomb rack.

Cuban refugees insist Russian technicians are building huge underground missile silos, although no big rockets have so far been sighted in the underground hideaways.