

# 10 THE CUBAN MISSILES CRISIS (1962)



## Key Issue

- How close did the world come to a Third World War?

By 1960, the two superpowers had enough nuclear missiles to wipe out each other and everyone else as well. However, they were still nervous. What would happen if their missiles were destroyed before they could use them? Or suppose they were destroyed in mid-flight? Both the USA and USSR became worried that nuclear missiles alone did not offer a final solution.

So each side developed its own nuclear deterrents. These would deter the enemy from using its missiles. This would be achieved by making sure that your own side could still strike back even after being attacked by nuclear weapons – resulting in both sides being wiped out. This theory was known as **MAD** (Mutually Assured Destruction).

## BACKGROUND

The island of Cuba lies about 90 miles off the United States coast. From 1952 to 1959, it was ruled by a dictator called General Batista. The USA supported him for most of that time. American companies controlled much of Cuban business. As long as Cuba was at peace, American business profited. So the USA supplied Batista with arms.

However, Batista's rule became more and more brutal and, in 1957, the USA cut off arms supplies. It wanted a more effective government so it encouraged a resistance movement, led by Fidel Castro. In 1959, he overthrew Batista's government and became Cuban President. By then, he had become communist.

The friendly relations between Castro and the USA did not last for long. Castro began a series of reforms, which included nationalising some Cuban industries. Many of these were American.

Also, Castro blamed the USA for the island's poverty and sought aid from the USSR. When the USA refused to buy Cuba's sugar, the USSR agreed to take the sugar in return for oil and machinery.

## THE BAY OF PIGS (1961)

President Eisenhower promised to help Cuban refugees who wanted to get rid of Castro. In January 1961, John F Kennedy took over as US President, the youngest in the country's history. He was told of a CIA plan to invade Cuba and overthrow Castro. He allowed the plan to go ahead and the result was a disaster.

On 17 April, about 1500 of Castro's opponents landed at Cochinos Bay ('the Bay of Pigs') on the southern coast of Cuba. They were equipped with arms provided by the USA. These rebels had told the CIA that the Cubans would join them and overthrow Castro; they did not.

The group was badly trained and poorly armed and equipped. Even their maps were out-of-date. In any case, they were outnumbered by almost 300 to one. Within three days, the invaders were either dead or in prison. Kennedy was furious with the CIA for recommending the invasion (see Source A).

The results of this invasion were the opposite to what the CIA intended. First, the Cuban army had defeated the invaders so easily that Castro became more popular. Secondly, Castro now saw the USA as a very serious threat indeed. He asked Khrushchev for help to defend Cuba.



This invader (the one with his hands up) was captured two days after the Bay of Pigs invasion.

## MISSILE SITES

Throughout 1962, American intelligence kept watch over Cuba. In the summer, CIA agents reported that Soviet ships were seen heading for the island. Down at the docks, Cubans were thrown out of their homes while Soviet sentries guarded ships which were being unloaded.

In September, the USSR admitted supplying arms to Castro but said they were for Cuban defence only. This seemed to make sense: if the USSR wished to attack the USA with nuclear weapons, it did not need to go to Cuba to do it. It could have launched them from bases within the USSR.

On 16 October 1962, Kennedy received evidence which suggested that Khrushchev had lied. An American U-2 spy plane had flown over Cuba and taken photographs. These pictures showed that rocket-launching sites were being built on the island. From these sites the Cubans would be able to fire atomic missiles at almost any major American city.

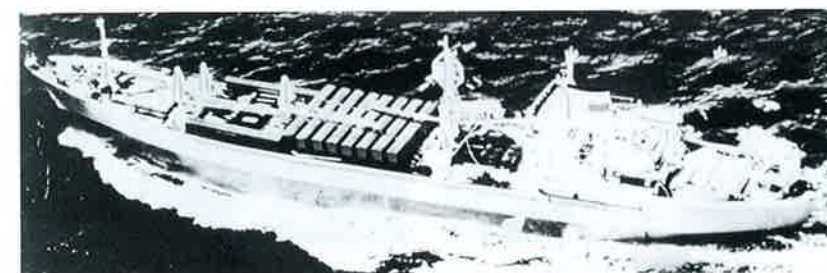
## WHAT SHOULD KENNEDY DO?

Kennedy faced a difficult decision. The Cold War was at its height and the USSR seemed to be winning it. In 1960, the USA had been publicly humiliated when a U-2 spy plane had been shot down over the Soviet Union. In August 1961, the communists had built the Berlin Wall (see pages 16–17).

The USA had been embarrassed again in 1961 when the world learned of the Bay of Pigs fiasco. Was Khrushchev testing Kennedy's nerve, to see whether the young president would stand up to him (see Source B)? Whether he was or not, Kennedy had to decide what to do about the Cuban missiles.

These five options were considered by Kennedy's advisers:

- 1 Do nothing.
- 2 Offer to remove US missile bases in Turkey in exchange for the removal of Cuban missiles.
- 3 Blockade Cuba, e.g. by putting ships around it.
- 4 Launch an air attack on the missile sites.
- 5 Invade and occupy the entire island of Cuba.



This American photo showed Soviet missiles heading for Cuba (1962).

## A SOURCE

This was what Kennedy told a friend after the Bay of Pigs failure (from *Kennedy*, R Gadney, 1983).

*How could I have been so far off base? All my life I've known better than to depend on the experts. How could I have been so stupid to let them go ahead?*

## B SOURCE

In June 1961, Kennedy and Khrushchev held a summit conference in Vienna. Khrushchev was hostile, as Kennedy told a reporter.

*I've got two problems. First, to figure out why he [acted] in such a hostile way. Second, to figure out what we can do about it. I think he [was hostile] because of the Bay of Pigs. I think he thought that anyone who was so young and inexperienced as to get into a mess like that could be taken. And anyone who got into it, and didn't see it through, had no guts. So I've got a terrible problem. If he thinks I'm inexperienced and have no guts, until we remove those ideas we won't get anywhere with him.*

## Question

Describe the key features of the Bay of Pigs conflict in 1961. [6 marks]



## KENNEDY'S DECISION

Kennedy consulted with his advisers and decided to use the US navy to blockade Cuba. This would stop Soviet ships from landing any more missiles or other weapons. However, there was no guarantee that the USSR would tolerate this. They might take action themselves, such as seizing West Berlin.

So, in western America, 156 ICBMs were primed, ready to be fired at once. Meanwhile, the US air force was put on stand-by and nuclear bombs were loaded into the bomb bays (on the planes).

The outside world knew nothing of this. The first news of the crisis was given by President Kennedy himself when he appeared on television on 22 October 1962. He announced the blockade and asked Khrushchev to stop supplying missiles to Cuba. And he went further to say that the United States would:

'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 upon the Soviet Union.'



Map showing how Soviet ICBMs based on Cuba could have wiped out much of the United States.

## THE SOVIET DECISION

Kennedy's meaning was obvious. If a Cuban missile was launched, the USA would attack the USSR. The world held its breath. On 23 October, the Soviet Press Officer at the UN told an American: 'This could well be our last conversation. New York will be blown up tomorrow by Soviet nuclear weapons. The Kremlin won't stand for this!'

In fact, he was wrong. The following day, 12 Soviet ships heading for Cuba either stopped or changed course. 'We're eyeball to eyeball,' said the US Secretary of State, 'and I think the other fellow just blinked.'

On Cuba itself, work continued on the missile sites. In the United States, Kennedy mobilised troops, ready for a possible invasion of Cuba. But the Russians were looking for a way out of the crisis. The two leaders talked by telephone and Khrushchev sent Kennedy two letters (see Sources A and B).

## HOW DID IT END?

Many people believed that a nuclear war might start at any minute. On one occasion, the US navy boarded a USSR merchant ship – but the USSR did not retaliate. On another occasion, a Soviet missile shot down a U-2 plane over Cuba, killing the pilot: this time, the USA took no action.

The crisis ended on 28 October. The public was told that the USSR agreed to remove its missiles from Cuba and not install any more. In return, Kennedy ended the American blockade and also promised not to invade the island.



Around the world, there were demonstrations against American policy on Cuba. This one was in London.

In fact, President Kennedy had struck a secret deal with the USSR. Neither the public nor the US government was told about it. Kennedy had promised to remove some missiles from Europe if Khrushchev removed Soviet ones from Cuba. In November 1962, the Soviet missiles were dismantled. In April 1963, American Jupiter missiles were quietly withdrawn from Britain, Italy and Turkey.

## RESULTS OF THE CRISIS

The two superpowers had come dangerously close to a war. Neither Kennedy nor Khrushchev wanted to run the risk of a similar clash in the future. So a direct telephone line was set up in 1963 between Moscow and Washington. The two leaders could use this 'hotline' to talk directly to each other at just a few minutes' notice.

In that same year, a Test Ban Treaty was signed by the USA, USSR and Britain. They agreed to stop all nuclear tests in the atmosphere. However, it was not signed by either France or China. The French already had an atomic bomb; China exploded its first in 1964. The USSR's leaders did not share Khrushchev's view of the Soviet 'success' (see Source D). In 1964 he was quietly removed from power by the Communist Party.

### A SOURCE

This is from Khrushchev's first letter, received on 26 October 1962.

*This is my proposal. No more weapons to Cuba and those within Cuba withdrawn or destroyed, and you respond by ending your blockade and also agree not to invade Cuba. Do not interfere with Russian ships.*

### B SOURCE

This is from Khrushchev's second letter which arrived on 27 October.

*Your rockets are situated in Britain, situated in Italy and are aimed at us. Your rockets are situated in Turkey. You are worried by Cuba. You say that it worries you because it is a distance of 90 miles from America, but Turkey is next to us. Our sentries walk up and down and look at each other.*

*I therefore make this proposal: we agree to remove [the missiles] from Cuba; we agree to carry this out and make a pledge to the United Nations. Your representatives will [declare] that the United States will remove its [missiles] from Turkey.*

### C SOURCE

This British cartoon showed how serious the situation had been (November 1962). It shows Khrushchev (left) and Kennedy.



### D SOURCE

Nikita Khrushchev gave his view of the crisis in his autobiography, *Khrushchev Remembers* (1971).

*We had to find a way of stopping US interference in the Caribbean. The answer was missiles. I had the idea of installing missiles with nuclear warheads in Cuba without letting the United States find out they were there until it was too late to do anything about them. We had no desire to start a war.*

*We sent the Americans a note saying that we agreed to remove our missiles and bombers on the condition that the President [promised] that there would be no invasion of Cuba by the forces of the United States or anybody else.*

*Finally Kennedy gave in and agreed to [give] us such an assurance. It was a great victory for us, a spectacular success without having to fire a single shot!*

## Questions

- Study Source C. Explain the message of this cartoon. Support your answer by referring to details of the cartoon and your knowledge. [6 marks]
- Explain why there was a crisis over Cuba in 1962. [9 marks]
- How did the United States react to Castro's revolution in Cuba? [4 marks]
- Why was the Bay of Pigs invasion a failure? [6 marks]
- Explain how the following together contributed to the Cuban Missiles Crisis:
  - The Bay of Pigs
  - The US blockade of Cuba
  - US missiles in Turkey. [10 marks]