

THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS: COULD IT HAVE LED TO NUCLEAR WAR?



Throughout this chapter, consider the following essay questions:

- How effectively did both Kennedy and Khrushchev handle the Cuban Missile Crisis?
- What impact did this crisis have on the Cold War?
- Has the danger of this crisis been overstated?

The Cuban Missile Crisis was perhaps the most dramatic Cold War confrontation between the USSR and the USA. During the 13 days of the crisis, the United States and the Soviet Union came close to a direct military showdown for the first and only time during the Cold War. Both leaders were under intense **domestic** pressure to prove themselves, and their individual personalities and perceptions were critical in the development and resolution of the crisis.

The timeline below shows how the USA and the USSR reacted to the sequence of events that followed the 1959 takeover of the government of Cuba by Fidel Castro and his fellow revolutionaries.

| Policies of Cuba | Date | Actions of USA | Actions of USSR |
|--|---------------|---|--|
| Castro seizes power Batista's supporters executed Castro visits USA to discuss package of U.S. aid for his industrialization programme USA will only give money if Cuba follows guidelines of International Monetary Fund (IMF) Request for loan from Organization of American States (OAS) also turned down Agrarian Reform Law (which appropriates land and bans land ownership by foreigners) introduced | 1959 | | |
| | Jan 1 | | |
| | Jan 7 | USA recognizes Cuban government | |
| | April | | |
| | May | Convinced that Cuba is Communist: hostility increases | |
| First shipment of arms from USSR arrives in Cuba Castro seizes Texaco and Esso oil refineries after they refuse to accept Russian oil Castro expropriates U.S. industrial property and nationalizes banks | 1960 | | First Deputy Minister of USSR visits Cuba. Five-year Treaty signed: USSR to buy 5 million tons of sugar and to give \$100 million credit to buy industrial machinery and material. Secretly agrees to send arms. |
| | Feb | | |
| | March | Eisenhower orders CIA to train exiles for a future attack on Cuba | |
| | June | | |
| | July | Eisenhower reduces Cuban sugar quota by 700,000 tons | Soviets agree to buy the surplus sugar |
| | August | USA presents a document to OAS charging Cuba with introducing Communism into Western sphere. Not supported by OAS | |

| Policies of Cuba | Date | Actions of USA | Actions of USSR |
|--|-----------------|--|---|
| Cuba expropriates 166 more U.S. companies in reply to embargo | Oct 7 | Kennedy in election speech calls Cuba 'a Communist menace' | New sugar quota signed |
| | Oct 19 | USA proclaims embargo on Cuba except for foodstuffs and medicine | |
| | Nov | USA suspends sugar quota for 1961 | |
| | Dec | | |
| <p>Castro orders U.S. embassy to cut its staff to 11</p> <p>Castro announces that his regime is a socialist regime</p> <p>Cubans victorious over counter-revolutionaries</p> <p>Castro declares himself to be a Marxist-Leninist</p> | 1961 | <p>Eisenhower breaks off diplomatic relations</p> <p>Air strike against Cuba</p> <p>Bay of Pigs landing</p> <p>Operation Mongoose put into operation</p> <p>Castro's speech greeted with enthusiasm; believe that Castro has now revealed what they knew all along</p> | No comment on Castro's speech |
| | Jan 2 | | |
| | April 14 | | |
| | April 15 | | |
| | April 17 | | |
| | April 19 | | |
| | Nov 30 | | |
| Dec 2 | | | |
| <p>Economic situation now in crisis; signs trade agreement with China</p> <p>Sugar production is 2 million tons lower than in 1961</p> <p>Castro refuses to allow UN inspectors into Cuba</p> | 1962 | <p>U.S. trade embargo – except for certain foodstuffs and medicine</p> <p>Cuba expelled from OAS</p> <p>U.S. U-2 planes photograph missile sites under construction</p> <p>ExComm set up</p> <p>President Kennedy publicly announces the establishment of Cuban quarantine</p> <p>Robert Kennedy and Anatoly Dobrynin meet</p> <p>Democrats maintain control in mid-term elections</p> | <p>New trade agreement with Cuba</p> <p>Soviet warships turn back</p> <p>Khrushchev sends first telegram</p> <p>U-2 plane shot down</p> <p>Khrushchev sends second telegram</p> <p>Khrushchev agrees to withdraw missiles</p> |
| | Feb | | |
| | May | | |
| | June | | |
| | Oct 14 | | |
| | Oct 16 | | |
| | Oct 22 | | |
| | Oct 24 | | |
| | Oct 26 | | |
| | Oct 27 | | |
| | Oct 28 | | |
| Nov | | | |

Background to the Cuban Missile Crisis

Why was the United States opposed to Castro's revolution?

The origins of the Cuban Missile Crisis can be traced back to the overthrow of the pro-USA Cuban government of General Fulgencio Batista by Fidel Castro in 1959. Cuba lies only 145 kilometres (90 miles) from the coast of Florida. For this reason, the USA considered the island of Cuba to be within its sphere of influence, and it was determined that any government in Cuba should reflect and protect U.S. interests, which were considerable. In the economic arena, the U.S. companies controlled most of the financial, railway, electricity, telegraph and sugar industries. The Platt Agreement signed between Cuba and the United States in 1902 had given the USA the right to establish a naval base at Guantanamo Bay (the base which still exists today). It also stipulated that the U.S. would 'exercise the right to intervene for the preservation of Cuban independence' and for 'the maintenance of a government adequate for the protection of life, property and individual liberty.' It was clear that the U.S. administration intended to decide what constituted Cuban independence and when a government was or was not 'adequate'.

This map shows the geographical position of Cuba in relation to the United States.



Castro takes power

On 7 January 1959, realizing that Batista had lost the support of most Cubans, the United States reluctantly recognized the new government of Fidel Castro, which had taken power after fighting a guerrilla war campaign for seven years. The United States still hoped to control events in Cuba through its economic interests and the presence of a large pro-U.S. middle class. Initially Castro insisted that he was not a Communist, asserting, 'This is not Communism or Marxism, but representative democracy and social justice in a

well-planned economy'. In April 1959, he visited the United States in the hope of getting economic assistance for the far-reaching reforms he believed Cuba needed.

However, Castro's revolutionary reforms involved **nationalization** of U.S. economic interests, and most pro-U.S. Cubans chose to move to the United States rather than to stay and resist. The U.S. government tried to moderate Castro's reforms by refusing him economic assistance unless he followed guidelines set out by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The Organization of American States (OAS) refused to give Castro financial aid for economic development, and so Castro turned to the Soviet Union, which offered economic aid in February 1960 (see timeline on page 90). This direct involvement of the Soviet Union with a Caribbean state was an immediate challenge to the USA, coming as it did to a country right on its doorstep.

Who was Fidel Castro?

Fidel Castro was born into a wealthy land-owning family. He attended a Jesuit school and then graduated as a lawyer from Havana University. He took on the legal cases of poor people, and he became very aware of the inequalities in Cuban society. Like all Cubans, he particularly resented the domination of Americans in every aspect of Cuban life. In 1947, Castro joined the Cuban People's Party, which campaigned against poverty and injustice. However, although the Cuban People's Party was expected to win the 1952 election (Castro was a candidate), it was not given the opportunity due to a military **coup** led by General Fulgencio Batista which took over Cuba's government. Castro then decided that revolution was the only option for gaining power in Cuba and led an attack on the Moncada Army Barracks. This ended in disaster, but Castro was fortunate to survive, and he used his trial to make a speech about the problems of Cuba. This later was written up as a book entitled *History Will Absolve Me*. The international recognition and personal popularity that followed his courtroom speech meant that he was released from prison. Castro then planned an attack with other rebels (known as July 26 Movement after the date of the attack on the Moncada Barracks) against the Cuban military **junta**. They based themselves in the Sierra Maestra Mountains where they fought a guerrilla war against Batista's regime. This eventually was successful, and Fidel Castro marched into the Cuban capital, Havana, on 9 January 1959 as the country's new leader.



STUDENT STUDY SECTION

Review and discussion questions

Study the timeline on pages 90–1, then answer the following questions:

- 1 What actions taken by Castro would have convinced the United States that he was a Communist?
- 2 What actions taken by Castro indicate that in fact he may not have been a Communist in 1959?
- 3 What evidence is there to support the view that the United States helped push Castro into a relationship with the Soviet Union?

Research activity

In order to understand the nature of Castro's revolution, research the following aspects of his struggle:

- What military tactics did Castro use?
- How did his army behave towards the local population?
- What political and economic policies did the Cuban military regime follow with the local population?
- How do Castro's guerrilla tactics compare with those of other guerrilla armies, such as the Vietminh?
- What other groups in Cuban society contributed to the final success of Castro?

How did the United States deal with the 'threat' of Castro?

The United States decided to deal with this threatening situation in two ways:

- economically, by proclaiming an embargo on all exports to Cuba except for foodstuffs and medicine
- militarily, by organizing an invasion force of Cuban exiles to overthrow Castro.

The first plan, as can be seen from the timeline, failed in that it drove Castro to sign more economic agreements with the Soviet Union. The second plan, the invasion, ended in a humiliation for the U.S. government.

Why was the Bay of Pigs invasion a failure?

In March 1960, President Eisenhower approved a CIA plan to overthrow Castro's government. Part of this plan involved training Cuban refugees for an invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. President Kennedy inherited the plan and gave it his approval. However, the invasion was a failure, ending in the capture of 1214 of the original 1400 invaders. These prisoners were later released in return for \$53 million worth of food and machines paid for by voluntary groups in the United States.

This was a severe humiliation for Kennedy and his administration. He was blamed by all parties for the failure of this venture and was condemned internationally for allowing it to have taken place. However, it is now clear that the reasons for the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion was more the fault of the CIA. It underestimated the strength of popular support for Castro within Cuba. It had counted on a popular uprising against Castro, which never materialized, and indeed the whole episode strengthened popular support for his regime. In addition, the actual invasion plans were severely flawed with the soldier-exiles suffering from shortage of ammunition and lack of air cover. Castro's air force was much more effective than had been originally supposed. Despite the CIA's assurances to the contrary, the exiles could not survive without the cover from the U.S. Air Force and this was something that President Kennedy could not sanction if he was to publicly distance himself from the plot.

This photograph shows the growing friendship between Castro and Khrushchev.



What were the results of the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion?

For Kennedy, the failure of the invasion was humiliating and meant a loss of prestige within the United States and in the rest of the world. It also set back Kennedy's attempts to identify the USA with **anti-colonialism**. Castro's support within Cuba increased and his position was strengthened: 'What is hidden behind the Yankees' hatred of the Cuban Revolution ... a small country of only seven million people, economically underdeveloped, without financial or military means to threaten the security or economy of any other country? What explains it is fear. Not fear of the Cuban revolution, but fear of the Latin American Revolution.'

The Soviet Union and Khrushchev were also given ammunition to use in criticizing the United States. Other Latin American governments and peoples were outraged and the episode revived fears of U.S. imperialism in the area.

The failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion also strengthened Cuba's ties with the USSR. After the failed attack, Castro declared himself to be a Marxist-Leninist and concluded a defensive alliance with the Soviet Union. Thus, the USA was unable to prevent the flow of Soviet advisers and weapons into Cuba.

The USA continued its efforts to reverse the Cuban revolution through covert action (Operation Mongoose), which involved the sabotage of economic targets, such as sugar plantations and petroleum installations, assassination plots against Castro and other Cuban leaders, and the diplomatic isolation of Cuba. For example, Cuba was expelled from the Organization of American States (OAS) in 1962. The USA also put military pressure on Cuba by carrying out training exercises near Puerto Rico.

The Cuban Missile Crisis

Why did Khrushchev put missiles in Cuba?

In 1962, Khrushchev made the decision to put intermediate range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) into Cuba. This was a highly provocative act and was bound to cause a reaction from the USA. So, why did Khrushchev make this move?

Khrushchev wrote in his memoirs that the reason was to protect Cuba and also because 'it was high time America learned what it feels like to have her own land and her own people threatened'. The United States had missiles in Turkey, which bordered on the Soviet Union, and putting missiles a similar distance away from the United States was seen as a way of redressing the balance.

Equally important, Khrushchev aimed to seize a propaganda advantage after the humiliation of the Berlin Wall (see Chapter Eight) and to acquire a bargaining chip against the stationing of U.S. nuclear missiles in Europe.

By swiftly and secretly installing missiles in Cuba, an island only ninety miles away from the United States, the Russians would have stolen a march on the Americans. It was a gamble with extremely high stakes, but if it had paid off, the Soviets would have immensely improved their prestige in the eyes of the world, not least in Latin America, and by doing so would also have increased their bargaining power in Cold War offensives, for example Berlin.

From Robert Beggs, Flashpoints: The Cuban Missile Crisis (Longman, 1977) p.91

John Lewis Gaddis, however, believes that Khrushchev put the missiles into Cuba mainly because he feared another invasion of Cuba. Khrushchev may have seen the Bay of Pigs

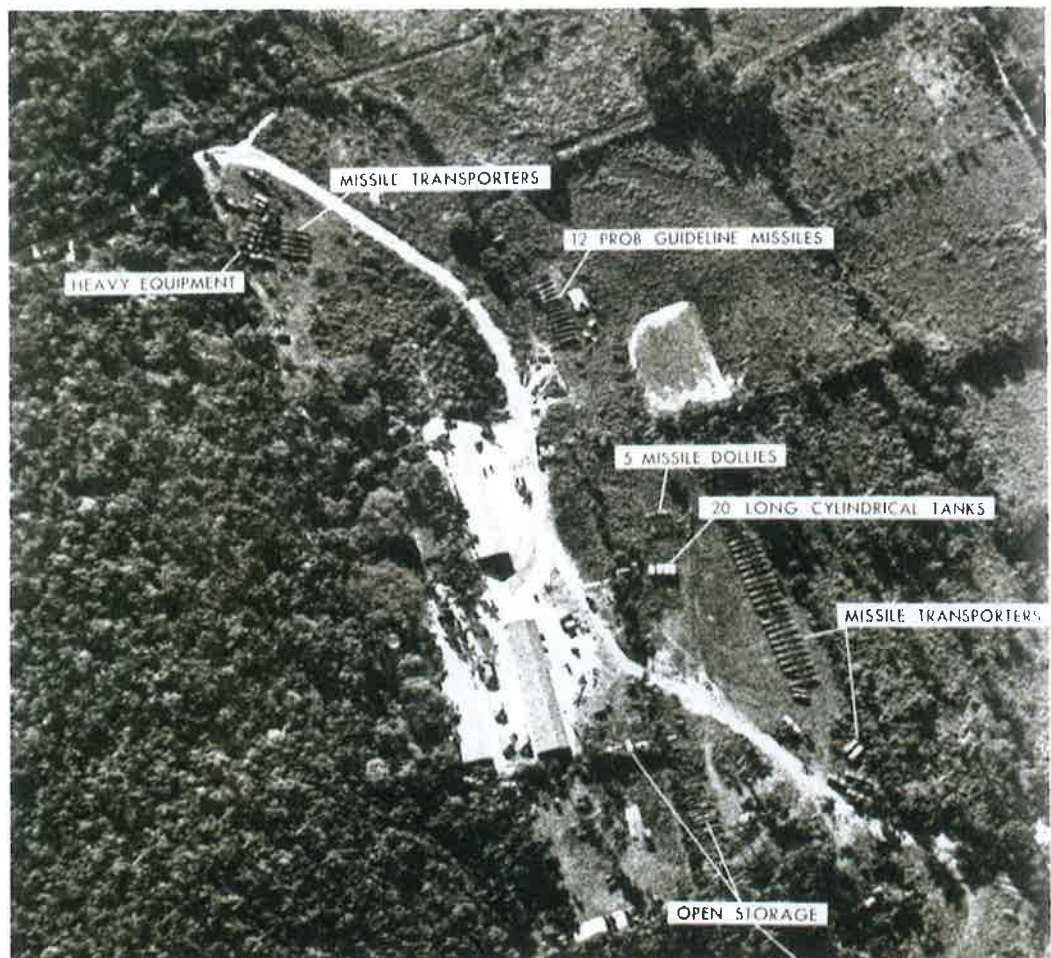
i **The CIA and Castro**
The CIA carried out numerous assassination attempts against Castro. Stories about plots against Castro include exploding cigars, poison in milkshakes, training an ex-girlfriend to shoot him, and, as confirmed in recently published CIA documents, hiring the Mafia to kill Castro. However, Fidel Castro has gone on to survive ten U.S. presidents.

invasion not as a sign of Kennedy's weakness, but rather of his determination to crush the Cuban revolution. Should the U.S. government succeed in this aim, it would be a defeat for Communism worldwide. The fact that the United States had missiles in Turkey, so near to the heart of the Soviet Union, provided a justification for installing missiles in Cuba to protect the island. This viewpoint is supported by the Soviet historians Zubok and Pleshakov, who believe that Khrushchev was primarily concerned with preserving revolutionary Cuba and, thereby, Soviet **hegemony** and the spread of Communism (Zubok and Pleshakov, 'Khrushchev and Kennedy: The Taming of the Cold War', in *The Cold War*, eds. Larrs and Annlane, Blackwell, 2001).

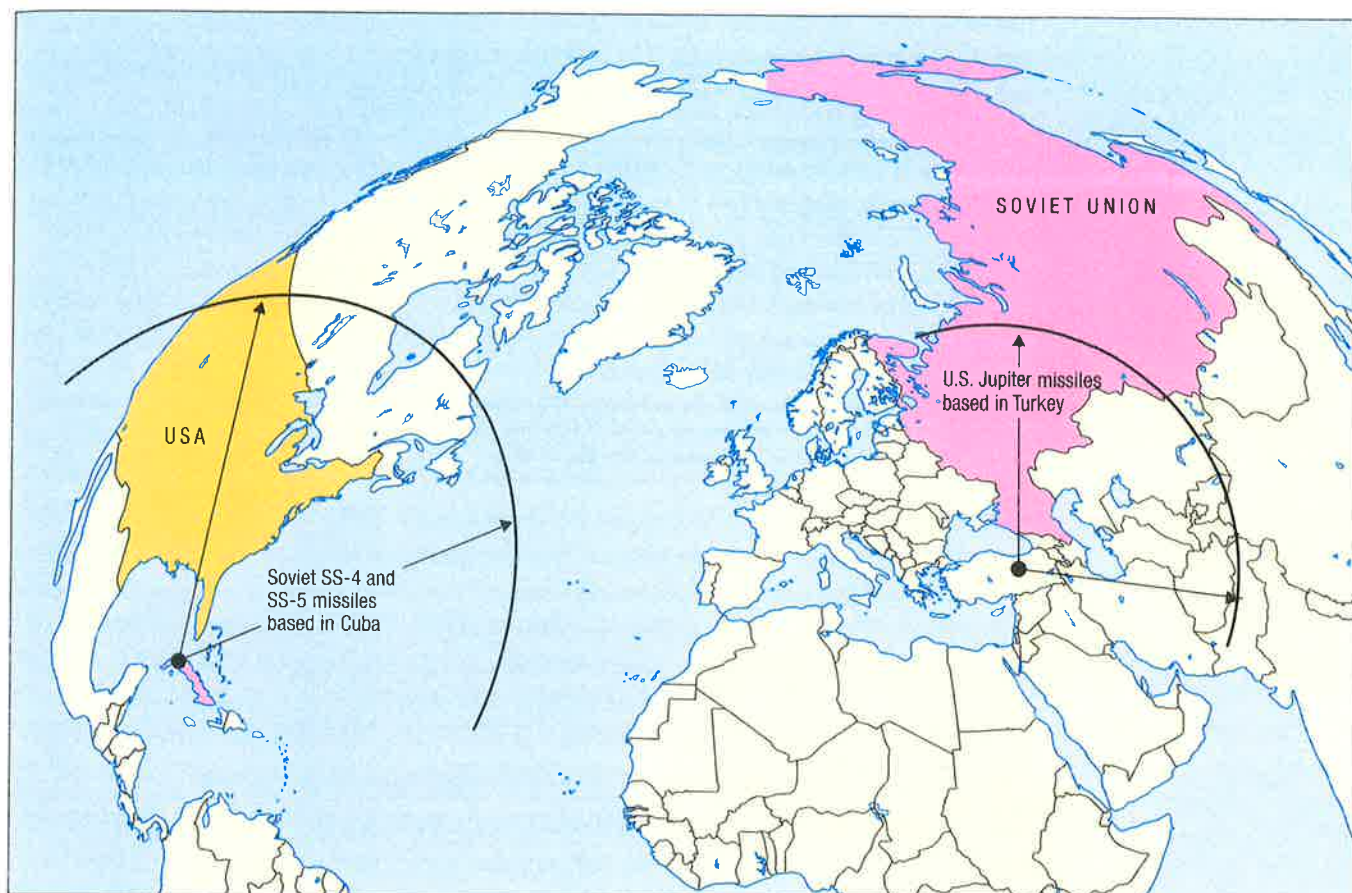
Why was the presence of missiles so intolerable to the United States?

On 14 October 1962, Kennedy was presented with photos from a U-2 spy plane that showed evidence that launch pads were being constructed by the Soviets for 64 IRBMs.

Aerial photograph of missile sites in Cuba, issued by the United States Embassy in London on 23 October 1962.



It is important to note that in fact the positioning of the missiles in Cuba did not really affect the worldwide nuclear balance. However, it did increase the Soviet **first strike** capability, and it meant that warning time for missiles fired at the United States would be far less than for missiles fired from within the Soviet Union (see map). More important, perhaps, is the fact that to the U.S. public it certainly seemed that the balance of power had changed. 'Offensive missiles in Cuba have a very different psychological and political effect in this hemisphere than missiles in the USSR pointed at us,' President Kennedy pointed out at a meeting with his advisers.



▲ This map shows the position and range of missiles based in Cuba compared to those based in Turkey.

Therefore, President Kennedy faced a crisis. The prestige of the USA and also of Kennedy himself was again at stake. Cuba was not just 90 miles away from the USA, but it was also the place where the disastrous and – for Kennedy – humiliating Bay of Pigs episode had taken place. Another factor for Kennedy was the impending Congressional elections, which were to take place in early November. For the Democratic Party to face elections with missiles installed in Cuba would be a disaster for the Kennedy administration. So the president had to take action, but how could he resolve the crisis without precipitating a dangerous and world-threatening head-on collision with the USSR?

How was the crisis resolved?

President Kennedy summoned a crisis management team, the Executive Committee (ExComm) to deal with the threat of missiles in Cuba. This began what has become known as ‘The Thirteen Days’. Kennedy rejected calls from the military for an immediate air strike followed by an invasion of Cuba (General Curtis LeMay actually called for the total elimination of Cuba) and ordered instead a naval blockade of the island. The president made the American position public by going on television to announce the establishment of the ‘**quarantine**’ around Cuba to prevent the delivery of any nuclear warheads to the island. Khrushchev ignored the quarantine, and Soviet ships containing missiles headed for Cuba. However, on 24 October, six Soviet ships turned back towards the Soviet Union. At this point Dean Rusk, the U.S. Secretary of State, commented, ‘We’re eyeball to eyeball and I think the other fellow just blinked’. Nevertheless, the crisis continued as the missile sites still remained on Cuba.

On 26 October, Khrushchev sent a telegram to Kennedy saying that the Soviet Union would remove the missiles in return for a U.S. pledge not to invade Cuba. At this point, he was convinced that the United States was on the verge of attacking Cuba:

... We and you ought not to pull on the ends of the rope in which you have tied the knot of war, because the more the two of us pull, the tighter the knot will be tied. And then it will be necessary to cut that knot, and what that will mean is not for me to explain to you, because you yourself understand perfectly of what terrible forces our countries dispose. ... I have participated in two wars and know that war ends when it is rolled through cities and villages everywhere sowing death and destruction. For such is the logic of war; if people do not display wisdom they will clash like blind moles.

In a letter from Khrushchev to Kennedy dated 26 October 1962, quoted by the Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in the television documentary, The Fog of War.

However, before Kennedy could respond to this telegram, Khrushchev sent a second, more demanding letter to the U.S. government insisting on the inclusion of the removal of Turkish missiles in any deal over Cuba. The crisis escalated after a U.S. U-2 plane was shot down over Cuba. This had been done by military leaders in Cuba without authorization by the Soviet Union and seemed a sign that events could easily spiral out of control. The shooting down increased pressure on Kennedy to take military action against Cuba. The consequences of this would have been extremely serious as, unknown to the Americans at the time, nuclear short-range missiles were already on Cuba and ready for use by the Cubans.

Kennedy continued to see military action as a last resort and, on the advice of Llewellyn (Tommy) Thompson, who had been U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, he decided to accept Khrushchev's first offer and ignore the second. At the same time, however, Kennedy's brother and then Attorney General, Robert Kennedy, met with Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet ambassador in Washington, D.C., to agree that the United States would remove missiles from Turkey.

On 28 October, Khrushchev cabled President Kennedy and agreed to remove all missiles from Cuba in return for U.S. assurance that it would not invade Cuba. There was no reference to U.S. removal of missiles from Turkey – this part of the deal remained secret.

How effective was Kennedy's handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis?

The Orthodox view

The traditional interpretation of President Kennedy's role in the missile crisis has stressed that this was Kennedy's finest hour, that he successfully used nuclear brinkmanship to preserve world peace. The writings of Robert Kennedy, Theodore C. Sorensen and Richard E. Neustadt all put forward the following arguments in support of this view:

- Kennedy was right to respond to this crisis in a firm and forceful way, as the missiles represented a Soviet threat to alter the balance of power either in actuality or in appearance.
- The idea of imposing a quarantine (blockade) exerted maximum pressure on the Soviet Union while incurring the minimum risk of war.
- Kennedy himself always remained calm and in control of the situation. He resisted pressure for action from the military, he was statesmanlike and did not attempt to humiliate Khrushchev.
- The results of the crisis helped to preserve the balance of power and world peace.



The Revisionist view

The Revisionist interpretation of Kennedy's role in the missile crisis stresses that Kennedy unnecessarily raised the Cuban episode to the level of crisis and confrontation and thus subjected the world to the danger of nuclear war. Roger Hagman, David Horowitz and I.F. Stone put forward the following arguments in support of this view:

- The missiles did not affect the nuclear balance and the USA was under no greater threat. This was rather a political problem that could have been resolved by political means.
- The imposition of the blockade and the fact that Kennedy made the crisis public turned it into an unnecessarily dangerous situation.
- Kennedy was only interested in personal and national prestige. The forthcoming November elections meant that the President wanted the situation solved quickly, so he could not wait for lengthy negotiations.
- The aftermath of the crisis was not victory but arrogance, which led the United States to increase its activity in Vietnam.

What if the Russians had refused to back down and remove their missiles from Cuba? What if they had called our bluff and war had begun, and escalated? How would the historians of mankind, if a fragment survived, have regarded the events of October? ... Since this is the kind of bluff that can easily be played once too often, and that his successors may feel urged to imitate, it would be well to think it over carefully before canonizing Kennedy as an apostle of peace.

From an article by I.F. Stone on John F. Kennedy written after Kennedy's assassination.

New interpretations

Recent evidence seems to support the view that Kennedy did indeed act in a statesmanlike way, was prepared to compromise and was not motivated by self-interest. The tape recordings of ExComm meetings at the time show Kennedy repeatedly pushing for compromise and point to the fact that he was keenly aware of the dangers of nuclear war. He deceived ExComm by having the secret agreement to remove missiles from Turkey, and it was revealed in 1987 that he had another option up his sleeve: if all else failed, the United Nations Secretary General was to suggest a Turkey–Cuba trade-off that Kennedy would then accept.

What conclusions can be reached about Khrushchev's actions?

Khrushchev was able to claim a victory over the missile crisis. He argued that Kennedy had now promised not to invade Cuba, so the continued existence of a socialist Cuba in the Soviet sphere of influence was guaranteed. This is clearly significant, especially if you take Gaddis's view that this was the main reason that Khrushchev put missiles on Cuba in the first place. Khrushchev must also be given credit for being prepared to back down in the face of nuclear war, especially when many saw his handling of the crisis as a humiliation for the Soviet Union. However, the Soviet military were particularly angry. They were already unhappy about Khrushchev's military cuts, and they now had to accept a hasty withdrawal from Cuba, as well as the ultimate humiliation of having U.S. officials count the missiles as they were removed.

Castro was also furious with Khrushchev's handling of the affair. He was not consulted about the final deal concerning the missiles or over his agreement with Kennedy to withdraw the Soviet IL-28 bombers and Soviet troops which had been sent to help the Cuban army. He was also left with the U.S. base at Guantanamo Bay, while U.S. missiles were removed from Turkey in 1963.

Khrushchev had to work hard in the ensuing months to rebuild his relations with Castro and the Cuban regime and prevent a Sino-Cuban alliance developing (see Chapter Eleven). Russian historians Zubok and Pleshakov wrote that during this crisis Khrushchev, 'acted in the chillingly "realist" manner of Stalin: walking over the egos and bodies of those who had helped in the implementation of his grandiose designs, but then just happened to be in the way of retreat.' (Zubok and Pleshakov, 'Khrushchev and Kennedy: The Taming of the Cold War', in *The Cold War*, eds. Larrs and Annlane, Blackwell, 2001, p.130)

What was Castro's role in the crisis?

It is clear now that Castro played a greater role in the development of this crisis than has previously been realized. Particularly significant is the period of time around 24–26 October. Castro was determined to make the most of the situation, and he claims that he would not have hesitated to use the nuclear weapons which were already in Cuba should the United States have attempted a land invasion. This is despite the fact that it would have led to the destruction of the island. The shooting down of the U-2 plane indicates the difficulties that Khrushchev and Kennedy had in keeping control of the situation on the ground as it developed.

What were the results of the crisis ...

... for the USA?

Kennedy's personal prestige increased. It shocked the United States into realizing the fragility of its own security, and increased the U.S. focus on building up military strength.

... for the USSR?

Despite his claims of victory, the crisis was a humiliation for Khrushchev and contributed to his fall from power in 1964. The USSR did not itself suffer from this humiliation and continued as a superpower for the next three decades.

... for Cuba?

Castro remained in power with the threat of a U.S. invasion removed. However, Cuba became determined not to become a pawn in the East-West struggle, and pursued a foreign policy independent of Moscow (see Chapter Fifteen). Havana became a centre of revolutionary activity, educating and training activists and spreading revolution in Africa and Central America, although the Castro regime did continue to rely on the USSR for economic aid and arms.

... for China?

China saw the resolution of the crisis and the USSR's unwillingness to challenge the United States as final proof that the USSR had ceased to be a revolutionary state. Its relationship with the USSR continued to deteriorate from this point, and China opted to continue developing nuclear weapons independently (see Chapter Eleven).

... for the wider international situation?

The Orthodox view is that the world was made a more secure place because:

- A hotline was established between the USSR and USA to make immediate telephone communication easier.



- Both sides realized the danger of nuclear war. Two important treaties were signed following the crisis: the Test-ban Treaty of August 1964, which forbade nuclear tests in the atmosphere, space or underwater (not signed by France and China) and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1968, which prevented signatories from transferring weapons or knowledge of how to make them to non-nuclear powers.

Recent interpretations point out that the arms treaties did not in fact prevent the arms race, which intensified after the Cuban Missile Crisis even if it was conducted within an increasingly precise set of rules. Nevertheless, the world was more secure after the missile crisis in that there was more stability: neither side would now issue challenges to the other side's **sphere of influence**.

STUDENT STUDY SECTION

Research questions

- 1 One of the results of the Cuban Missile Crisis is that Cuba decided to be more independent of the USSR. It became involved in revolutionary activity in Latin America and also in Africa. Research Cuba's actions, and its success or failure in spreading revolution, in one of these areas, for example, Angola.
- 2 Che Guevara became an icon of socialist revolutionaries. Research Che's role in the Cuban revolution and then his actions in spreading revolution after 1965 outside of Cuba.

Essay question

Consider the following essay title and then look at the essay frame that follows: 'The danger of the Cuban missile crisis has been seriously exaggerated.' To what extent do you agree?

Essay frame

Introduction: Remember to clarify any key words in the title and to show you understand what the question is asking. Here you need to explain what the 'danger' of the missile crisis was and to set out briefly the areas of debate that you will be discussing in your essay.

Part 1 of essay: You will have to set out both sides of the argument. In the first paragraph discuss ways in which there was a real danger. Points you could consider are:

- actions of Kennedy and Khrushchev
- pressures on Kennedy and Khrushchev
- aims of Castro
- perceptions of people who were there at the time
- difficulty that Kennedy and Khrushchev had controlling events on the ground, for example, the shooting down of the American U-2.

Consider when and how you will bring in the view of historians. The Orthodox historians believed the danger to be very real and that Kennedy saved the crisis by his astute management of the crisis. Consider also the view of the Revisionist historians, who argue that Kennedy actually increased the danger by his reckless actions.

Part 2 of essay: You now need to look at the other side, that is, the view that the danger was exaggerated. What evidence can you find for this? Would Kennedy or Khrushchev really have been prepared to push the nuclear button given the consequences, particularly Khrushchev, who knew that the Americans had nuclear superiority over the USSR at this time?

Part 3 of essay: What is the most recent view? Recent analysis would argue that the danger was even more real than supposed at the time. Look back in the chapter to find evidence for this.

Conclusion: This is up to you! Remember to come back to the question and answer it directly.

Examiner's hint:

After writing your essay, go back and highlight the first sentence for each paragraph. Can you tell from reading the first sentence what the point of the paragraph is going to be? This is vital if the examiner is to follow clearly the direction of your argument.

Document analysis**Document A**

President Kennedy dedicated himself to making it clear to Khrushchev by word and deed ... that the United States had limited objectives and that we had no intention of accomplishing those objectives by adversely affecting the national security of the Soviet Union or by humiliating her ...

During our crisis he kept stressing the fact that we would indeed have war if we placed the Soviet Union in a position she believed would adversely affect national security or such public humiliation that she lost the respect of her own people and countries around the globe. The missiles in Cuba, we felt, vitally concerned our national security, but not that of the Soviet Union.

This fact was ultimately recognized by Khrushchev, and this recognition, I believe brought about this change in what, up to that time, had been a very adamant position. The President believed from the start that the Soviet Chairman was a rational, intelligent man, who if given sufficient time and shown our determination, would alter his position. But there was always the chance of error, or mistake, miscalculation, or misunderstanding, and President Kennedy was committed to do everything possible to lessen that chance on our side.

From Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days. A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Norton, 1973) p.96

Document B

The fate of Cuba and the maintenance of Soviet prestige in that part of the world preoccupied me ... We had to establish a tangible and effective deterrent to American interference in the Caribbean. But what exactly? The logical answer was missiles. We knew that American missiles were aimed against us in Turkey and Italy, to say nothing of West Germany ...

I had the idea of installing missiles with nuclear warheads in Cuba without letting the United States find out if they were there until it was too late to do anything about them ...

I want to make one thing absolutely clear: when we put our ballistic missiles in Cuba, we had no desire to start a war. On the contrary, our principal aim was to deter America from starting a war ...

The climax came after five or six days when our Ambassador to Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin, reported that the President's brother, Robert Kennedy, had come to see him on an unofficial visit. Dobrynin's report went something like this:

'Robert Kennedy looked exhausted ... He said that he had not been home for six days and nights, "The President is in a grave situation", Robert Kennedy said, "and he does not know how to get out of it. We are under very severe stress ... from our military to use force against Cuba ... We want to ask you, Mr Dobrynin, to pass President Kennedy's message to Chairman Khrushchev through unofficial channels. President Kennedy implores Chairman Khrushchev to accept his offer and to take into consideration the peculiarities of the American system ... If the situation continues much longer, the President is not sure that the military will not overthrow him and seize power. The American army could get out of control!'

I hadn't overlooked this possibility. I knew that Kennedy was a young President and that the security of the United States was indeed threatened ...

We sent the Americans a note saying that we agreed to remove our missiles and bombers on the condition that the President give us his assurance 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 make a statement giving us such an assurance ...

It had been, to say the least, an interesting and challenging situation. The two most powerful nations in the world had been squared off against each other, each with its finger on the button ... It was a great victory for us, though ... The Caribbean crisis was a triumph of Soviet foreign policy and a personal triumph in my own career ... We achieved, I would say, a spectacular success without having to fire a single shot!

From Nikita Khrushchev's memoirs, *Khrushchev Remembers*, (Andrew Nurnberg Associates, 1977)

Questions

Now answer the following questions using the above documents:

- 1 What impression does Robert Kennedy give of President Kennedy's handling of the crisis?
- 2 What does Khrushchev say about: (a) the reasons why he put missiles on Cuba (b) the reasons why he agreed to remove the missiles and (c) the outcome of the crisis?
- 3 Are there any areas over which the two sources disagree?
- 4 What are the value and limitations for historians of using these sources (both being memoirs by key players) in analysing the Cuban Missile Crisis?



ToK Time

Discuss the following questions in small groups and feedback to the class:

- Our understanding of events in history often 'changes over time'. At the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, it was perceived by many that the world was on the brink of a nuclear holocaust. How important is it for historians to find out whether this situation was overstated (exaggerated)?
- Does a re-evaluation of historical events give us a better understanding of significant events and crises today?
- Will what we believe is the 'truth' about an event today have a different interpretation in 10 or 20 years' time?
- To what extent does historical truth change over time, and how might this affect the way we view primary and secondary sources?

Examiner's hint:

Here are some points to consider when evaluating memoirs as historical evidence:

- Why do people write memoirs? What do you think the purpose of Kennedy or Khrushchev might have been in doing this?
- Did the person writing the memoir have first-hand knowledge of the event/ events being described?
- How long after the event/ events being described were the memoirs written?