

**Which of the two
superpowers, US and USSR,
caused the Cuban Missile
Crisis in 1962?**

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Section A: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 reflects the policy of Cold War brinkmanship. According to several authors/historians, the world has never been closer to a nuclear conflict between the two superpowers, the US and the USSR. This investigation will therefore focus on the question “Which of the two superpowers, US and USSR, caused the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962?”. Two sources that have been important to this investigation are *A thousand days* by Arthur M Schlesinger Jr and *One Hell of a Gamble* by Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali.

A thousand days by Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr is an in-depth biography & autobiography that includes personal memoirs, published in 1965 just a few years after the Cuban Missile Crisis. *A Thousand Days* was written with the purpose to provide insight into the US presidency of John F. Kennedy to obtain a deeper understanding and recollection of the momentous event. This primary source is valuable to historians as Schlesinger was Kennedy's special assistant meaning he was a part of his inner circle and could obtain first-hand accounts of Kennedy's presidency not available to other counterparts. He was also a specialist in American history as he wrote other pieces of work such as *The Politics of Upheaval*, which indicates his knowledge of the topic at hand. Additionally, the piece was published three years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, meaning there is a lower likelihood that any important information had been forgotten. However, the book's limitations lie in the fact that it may have been written to justify Kennedy's actions due to political pressures. In addition, the readers of the book are not provided with any counterarguments from the USSR government/leadership viewpoint making it a one-sided interpretation. Therefore, one can suggest that it is a biased source, however, nonetheless important to the discussion and exploration of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Another valuable source is a book titled *One Hell of a Gamble*, a secondary source written by Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftal, published in 1997. The book provides a “play by play” scenario of the crisis by utilising US and USSR perspectives simultaneously, partly basing it on Soviet archives. The purpose of this book is to enlighten readers of the events that took place leading up to the Cuban Missile Crisis taking the Soviet perspective into consideration to examine the scenario in a less biased format. Fursenko was one of Russia's leading historians specialising in American

diplomatic history and Naftali, an American-Canadian historian, has previously focused on the Cold War and is able to provide the American view. It is ideal that two authors with different backgrounds and perspectives came together in an attempt to create a more objective and balanced analysis of the outbreak of the crisis. Furthermore, since the book was published more than 30 years after the event, the discussion benefits from hindsight and is able to consult different viewpoints and multiple sources to determine the main arguments in the book. On the other hand, since this book is based on unprecedented research containing classified information, there is no way to validate whether it represents full disclosure, and therefore it is important to keep this in mind when analysing and discussing this source.

Section B: Investigation

Background

The Cuban Revolution in 1959 was an armed uprising led by Fidel Castro in order to overthrow Fulgencio Batista, a corrupt elected president in Cuba.¹ Prior to the revolution, the US-Cuba relations were strong due to Batista's anti-communist stance, however, the newly instated leader, Castro, transformed Cuba into a communist state². The new revolutionary government started nationalising US-owned properties and increased trade deals with the USSR³. This generated antagonism towards Cuba from the US. Resultingly, in 1960 US president Dwight D. Eisenhower responded by implementing a near-full trade embargo, which was followed by severing diplomatic ties in January 1961, the same month that John F. Kennedy's US Presidency began. Furthermore, the CIA launched an invasion of Cuba in April 1961, the Bay of Pigs attack which failed, leading to US humiliation⁴. Additionally, the Berlin Crisis in June escalated in which the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, encouraged East Germany to build the Berlin Wall, however, Kennedy did not take

¹ The Editors of Encyclopaedia, "Cuban Revolution," Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., July 19, 2021), <https://www.britannica.com/event/Cuban-Revolution#ref339520>

² History.com Editors, "Fidel Castro," History.com (A&E Television Networks, November 9, 2009), <https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/fidel-castro>

³ Robert S. Walters. "Soviet Economic Aid to Cuba: 1959-1964." *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 42, no. 1 (1966): 74–86. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2612437>.

⁴ "Timeline: U.S.-Cuba Relations," Council on Foreign Relations (Council on Foreign Relations), accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-cuba-relations>

military action⁵. On both of these occasions, Kennedy's political inexperience was visible, hence, the Soviet premier viewed this as a vulnerability. The following year, the partial embargo in Cuba became a full embargo, leading to the USSR offering trade delegations and military support to Cuba to lighten the impact⁶. In July 1962, the concerns for a US attack on Cuba escalated, leading to the implementation of secret USSR strategic nuclear missiles⁷. This nuclear buildup was discovered by a US U-2 spy plane on the 14th of October, followed by the 13-day span of the Cuban Missile Crisis in which Kennedy and Krushchev engaged in a political and military standoff⁸.

Historians fail to agree on which superpower caused the outbreak of the Cuban Missile Crisis, hence in this essay, the two split views will be discussed. The first view supports the US's actions and blames the USSR for the outbreak due to their aggressive tactics and secretive implementation of the missiles. The second view acknowledges the USSR's point of view and highlights the blame that the US holds due to their said hypocrisy and overreactions to the situation.

USSR caused the Missile Crisis

It has been argued that the USSR caused the Cuban Missile Crisis by being too aggressive. Operation Anadyr, explained by *Soviet Deception in the Cuban Missile Crisis* written by CIA member James Hansen, was a secret USSR operation in which missiles were delivered and deployed to Cuba by using techniques such as altering cargo records to disguise the operation⁹. The concealment of the missiles counteracted the idea that they were placed in Cuba for defensive purposes. Historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and his book *A thousand days* supports and justifies this view through his personal accounts with Kennedy. Schlesinger argues that the missiles were placed in Cuba for offensive

⁵ The Editors of Encyclopaedia, "Berlin Crisis of 1961," Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., May 12, 2020), <https://www.britannica.com/event/Berlin-crisis-of-1961>

⁶ "Timeline: U.S.-Cuba Relations," Council on Foreign Relations (Council on Foreign Relations), accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-cuba-relations>

⁷ "The Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962," U.S. Department of State (U.S. Department of State), accessed February 20, 2022, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/cuban-missile-crisis>

⁸ Ibid

⁹ James H. Hansen, "Soviet Deception in the Cuban Missile Crisis," CIA GOV, 2002, <https://www.cia.gov/static/205b8c27be0286b9a0d19fbf90d2382a/Soviet-Deception-Cuban-Missile.pdf>

purposes as he states “one can only speculate as to what these Soviet reasons were”¹⁰ when discussing the reasoning behind placing missiles in Cuba. In Kennedy’s speech where he announces the quarantine against Cuba on October 22nd, 1962, he says that the “action also contradicts the repeated assurances of Soviet spokesmen,... that the arms buildup in Cuba would retain its original defensive character, and that the Soviet Union had no need or desire to station strategic missiles on the territory of any other nation.”¹¹ Thus, Kennedy adamantly believed that the missiles were offensive due to the covert deployments, as well as the violation of their own words, hence justifying his response of a quarantine. This view can further be supported by more than 100,000 troops being sent to Florida to initiate military preparation in the eventuality of an attack¹².

Hence, even though some writings do not explicitly blame the USSR for the Cuban Missile Crisis, they make it clear how Kennedy handled the situation flawlessly with the implementation of the naval blockade. A famous example of this was through Schlesinger’s words, “It was this combination of toughness and restraint, of will, nerve and wisdom, so brilliantly controlled, so matchlessly calibrated, that dazzled the world.”¹³ From these pieces of evidence, we can draw the conclusion that the US were in charge of protecting the world from nuclear war caused by the USSR.

USA caused the Missile Crisis

The US caused the Cuban Missile Crisis by exaggerating the situation and implying that the missiles were for offensive uses. One well-known historian who discusses this view is John Lewis Gaddis in his book, *The Cold War: A New History*. The US government’s growing fear of Cuba led to multiple attacks such as destroying sugar mills and allegedly attempting to assassinate Castro a total

¹⁰ Arthur M. Schlesinger, “Again Cuba,” in *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1965), p 796.

¹¹Vincent Ferraro, “President John F. Kennedy’s Speech Announcing the Quarantine Against Cuba, October 22, 1962,” (Hewlett International Studies Grant), accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/kencuba.htm>

¹² Arthur M. Schlesinger, “Again Cuba,” in *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1965), p 803.

¹³ Arthur M. Schlesinger, “Again Cuba,” in *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1965), p 841.

of 638 times¹⁴. These aggressive acts, code-named Operation Mongoose¹⁵, caused Castro to seek diplomatic assistance from the UN where he presented his worries of an approaching US attack. One of the outcomes of this was that a US ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, assured that “The United States had no aggressive purpose against Cuba”¹⁶. This was followed by the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961. Hence, Cuba was not able to trust the US anymore as they went against their own word. This can further be supported by John Lewis Gaddis as he says, “the attempted invasion reflected counter-revolutionary resolve in Washington, and it would surely be repeated, the next time with much greater force”¹⁷ which explains the viewpoint that Khrushchev was genuinely concerned for the safety of Cuba which is why his actions of placing the missiles in Cuba were justified.

Furthermore, Kennedy provoked the USSR in 1961 by implementing missiles in Italy and Turkey with the capability to hit Moscow, and therefore Gaddis believes that “The United States could hardly object,”¹⁸. Gaddis argues that the US was in the wrong for believing that the Cuban missiles were offensive as the USSR had replicated the US actions to “level the playing field”¹⁹. Additionally, historian Thomas G. Paterson strongly believed that Kennedy over exaggerated the situation for personal glory as he states, “The president’s desire to score a victory, to recapture previous losses, and to flex his muscle accentuated the crisis and obstructed diplomacy.”²⁰ which acknowledges the glorification of Kennedy by officials and his inability to acknowledge any other perspective than his own. Thus, Paterson believed that the ultimate cause of the outbreak of the Cuban Missile Crisis was due to Kennedy and the US’ action.

¹⁴ Esteban Morales Dominguez and Gary Prevost, *United States-Cuban Relations a Critical History* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), p. 55.

¹⁵ Rabe, Stephen G. “The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited.” *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 3, no. 3 (1991): 62. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30001786>

¹⁶ Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Domination* (New York: Henry Holt and Co, 2003), p 81.

¹⁷ John Lewis Gaddis, “Chapter 2 - Deathboats and Lifeboats,” in *The Cold War* (London: Penguin, 2011), p 161.

¹⁸ John Lewis Gaddis, “Chapter 2 - Deathboats and Lifeboats,” in *The Cold War* (London: Penguin, 2011), p 162.

¹⁹ History.com Editors, “Cuban Missile Crisis,” History.com (A&E Television Networks, January 4, 2010), <https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/cuban-missile-crisis>

²⁰ Thomas G. Paterson, “Bearing the Burden: A Critical Look at JFK's Foreign Policy,” *VQR Online* (The Virginia Quarterly Review, 1978), <http://www.vqronline.org/essay/bearing-burden-critical-look-jfk%E2%80%99s-foreign-policy>

Overall, this perspective draws attention to the fear that the US had of the rise of the Soviet Union forcing Castro and Khrushchev to respond to Kennedy's provocations. The US knew their great advantage over the USSR in the arms race as the US had 424 ICBMs (intercontinental ballistic missile) by 1963, whereas the USSR had about 20 in 1962²¹. Yet Kennedy believed the missiles were offensive. This seems greatly unrealistic due to the fact that Kennedy should have known that this would have been a suicide mission for both Cuba and the USSR, therefore, people who viewed both sides of the crisis are able to understand the wider implication of why the missiles actually existed in Cuba. Thus, we can come to the conclusion that Kennedy was influenced by the emotional aspect by overreacting, instead of viewing the crisis logically as he would have seen that the missiles were indeed not there for offensive purposes.

Conclusion

To conclude, assigning unilateral blame to one superpower is very difficult as both contributed to causing it, and some of their actions were even justified. There is evidence to suggest that Kennedy chose to take the missiles seriously as it otherwise would have made him seem even weaker to Krushchev following the Bay of Pigs and the Berlin Crisis. However, there is also strong evidence to support that Kennedy was wrong for fearing the missiles as the USSR was just retaliating to his actions. In retrospect, it is a lot easier for historians to come to the conclusion that the missiles were only defensive given all the evidence. Since Kennedy and Eisenhower both persistently provoked Cuba years before the crisis, they established a fragile foundation. Therefore, we can conclude that the US caused the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962.

Section C: Reflection

Throughout this investigation, the different justifications of actions of both the Soviet and US have enlightened me to the challenges that historians face. Since both superpowers are able to justify

²¹ Rabe, Stephen G. "The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited." *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 3, no. 3 (1991): 61. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30001786>.

their actions, my first challenge was needing to add weight to each of their actions in order to conclude which had the greatest significance. Furthermore, to reflect an accurate representation of events, historians try to be as objective as possible by considering multiple perspectives. In this investigation it was hard to balance the use of primary and secondary sources, since the primary sources give a first-hand perspective but are also limited by personal attachments to the event, exemplified by Schlesinger and his work *A thousand days*. Although this source provided valuable insight, Schlesinger's perspective of the event may have been compromised since he had a political background. This could have caused bias as there may have been justification of Kennedy's actions just to persuade the public that the USSR was to blame, leading to the manipulation of history.

A technique that I tried to use when picking my facts and perspectives was to make sure that there were multiple sources with similar information. This method was useful when understanding the US perspective, but became increasingly more limited for the USSR perspective. This was due to the classified materials, making it hard to overlap evidence. Finally, as highlighted by my analysis, almost all sources that I used were diligently written in a way to not blatantly blame the other superpower, but instead, hint at their personal views which is commonly done by Schlesinger. This resulted in me having to draw my own conclusions from the narrative given, which historians are challenged with as they need to interpret evidence, leading to a variety of interpretations just from one source. Hence, it is a lot more accurate to definitively express one's opinion on the event since it minimises the margin of error which is what I tried to replicate in my conclusion.

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