

The Cuban Missile Crisis

Background:

From 14 October to 28 October 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis took place. Cartoons were published, such as the one on the right, featuring Khrushchev and Kennedy arm wrestling whilst sitting on nuclear warheads with their fingers aimed at the fire buttons. Newspaper placards with lines like WAR INEVITABLE were hanging up all over the place. Everyone thought that the USA and the USSR would launch into a nuclear war at any second.

Why did Khrushchev place nuclear missiles in Cuba?

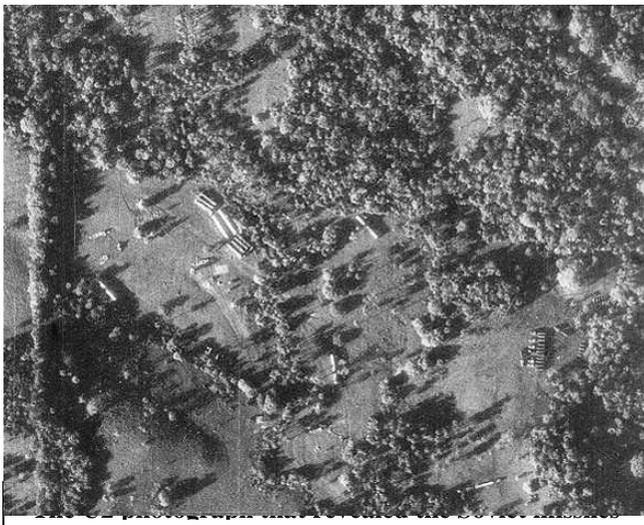
During the 1950s, the USA regarded the Caribbean as its territory. As Cuba was in the Caribbean, it also belonged to the USA. In 1959, the leader of Cuba, Fulgencio Batista, was overthrown by Fidel Castro, a Communist revolutionary. Batista was unpopular and corrupt, but he was not Communist, so the USA had supported his reign.



The missiles that Khrushchev placed in Cuba

The USA was very angry and immediately made moves to bring Castro down. They gave money and equipment to Cubans who wanted to take Castro down. These Cubans landed at the Bay of Pigs in the South of Cuba. Unfortunately, the planned take-down was a disaster. The men were slaughtered and the USA was made to look very stupid.

Nikita Khrushchev, the leader of the USSR, was very happy that there was a Communist country in the USA's back yard. He supported Cuba with weapons, food and advisors. Khrushchev realised that if the USA invaded Cuba and took down Castro, all his work would go to waste, so he installed nuclear missiles in Cuba to scare the Americans off.



During September 1962, Khrushchev sent 40 nuclear missiles to Cuba, along with missile launchers, experts to construct them and troops, jet fighter planes and anti-aircraft missiles to protect the nuclear warheads.

Two weeks of tension

14 October: The USA discovers that there are Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba.

16-20 October: President Kennedy forms EXCOMM to advise him. Some of his advisors

wanted to order a strategic airstrike to take out the missiles. Others wanted to invade Cuba. Still others wanted to either put diplomatic pressure on the USSR or do a deal with them in secret.

21 October: The USA announces that they are going to blockade Cuba to prevent any more missiles from being delivered. The US army starts preparing to invade Cuba to get rid of any missiles that remain. The army covers their real plan by saying that they are merely conducting a training exercise under the code-name ORTSAC.



President Kennedy and EXCOMM

22 October: President John F. Kennedy goes on national television to inform the nation about what is happening in Cuba. The army moves up to DEFCON 3 (DEFCON 1 means all-out war). Meanwhile, Soviet leader Khrushchev tells his advisors to expect an American invasion and fight back when it happens.

23 October: Khrushchev condemns the USA for blockading his ships from reaching Cuba. Castro orders his troops to ready themselves for an invasion by the USA. American People panic and race to the shops to stock up on goods in case of a nuclear war.

24 October: The Secretary General of the UN called on both the USA and the USSR to reach a compromise. Khrushchev orders his ships to stop heading for Cuba, but not to turn back. The US armed forces went up to DEFCON 2, against the President's orders.

25 October: An American warship stops a Soviet vessel (this is technically an act of war), but because she was only carrying oil, they allowed her passed.

26 October: Over 120 000 American troops get together near the Florida coast. President Kennedy receives a letter from Khrushchev saying that if the USA promises not to invade Cuba, he will remove his missiles.

27 October: A US U2 spy plane is shot down by Cuban anti-aircraft missiles. Khrushchev sent another letter to Kennedy, offering to remove the missiles from Cuba if the USA does not invade Cuba *and* removes her missiles from Turkey. President Kennedy agrees to this, but makes sure that the removal of the missiles from Turkey will be secret.

28 October: Khrushchev announces that he will remove his missiles from Cuba to protect world peace.

The results of the Crisis

The USA promised to leave Cuba alone and around six months later, her missiles were removed from Turkey. President Kennedy could claim victory in that his policy of

containment had worked and saved the world from nuclear war. Still, as a precaution, a hot line (a direct phone link) was set up between President Kennedy and Khrushchev.

In 1963, both countries signed the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, one small step towards ensuring that the threat of nuclear destruction would be reduced.

Questions:

1. Why did the USA support Fulgencio Batista and why did they not support Fidel Castro?
 2. Was the Bay of Pigs a success or a failure? Why or why not?
 3. Why do you think Khrushchev was pleased that there was a Communist country in the USA's "backyard"?
 4. Why do you think President Kennedy chose to blockade Cuba instead of (a) order an airstrike, (b) invade Cuba, (c) put diplomatic pressure on Cuba or (d) do a deal with the Soviets?
 5. Look closely at the code-name ORTSAC. If the letters are shuffled, what does it spell?
 6. Who ordered the USA and the USSR to reach a compromise and what effect did this order have?
 7. Why do you think the USA did not declare war on the Cuba after the U2 spy-plane was shot down?
 8. Why do you think Khrushchev sent a second letter to President Kennedy instead of just allowing the USA to agree to the terms of the first?
 9. What are some possible reasons why President Kennedy ordered the removal of the missiles from Turkey to be a secret?
 10. Could the USA claim that its policy of containment had worked successfully and that it had saved the world from nuclear war? Using the events and aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis, write a paragraph backing up your view.
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