

Cambridge
IGCSE®

Modern World History

Option B: The 20th century

Case study 2: The Cuban Missile Crisis

SOURCE 12

We considered it part of the United States practically, just a wonderful little country over there that was of no danger to anybody, as a matter of fact it was a rather important economic asset to the United States.

American TV reporter Walter Cronkite

SOURCE 13

I believe there is no country in the world ... whose economic colonisation, humiliation and exploitation were worse than in Cuba, partly as a consequence of US policy during the Batista regime. I believe that, without being aware of it, we conceived and created the Castro movement, starting from scratch.

President Kennedy speaking in 1963.

Source Analysis

- How far do Sources 12 and 13 agree about Cuba's relationship with the USA before the revolution?
- Apart from the caption in Russian, how else can you tell that the cartoon in Source 14 is a Soviet cartoon?
- The aim of the cartoonist in Source 14 was simply to tell people that the USA was forbidding Cuba to make friends with the USSR, nothing more.' Do you agree with this statement?

Revision Tip

From these two pages you should make sure you remember:

- one reason why the USA disliked Castro's government
- how the USA initially tried to contain Communism on Cuba.

The Cuban Revolution?

Cuba is a large island just 160 km from Florida in the southern USA. It had long been an American ally. Americans owned most of the businesses on the island and they had a huge naval base there (see Source 18 on page 104). The Americans also provided the Cuban ruler, General Batista, with economic and military support. Batista was a dictator. His rule was corrupt and unpopular. The Americans supported Batista primarily because he was just as opposed to Communism as they were.

Enter Fidel Castro

There was plenty of opposition to Batista in Cuba itself. In 1959, after a three-year campaign, Fidel Castro overthrew Batista. Castro was charming, clever and also ruthless. He quickly killed, arrested or exiled many political opponents. Castro was also a clever propagandist. He was very charismatic, and he had a vision for a better Cuba which won over the majority of Cubans.

The USA responds

The USA was taken by surprise at first and decided to recognise Castro as the new leader of Cuba. However, within a short period of time relations between the two countries grew worse. There were two important reasons:

- There were thousands of Cuban exiles in the USA who had fled from Castro's rule. They formed powerful pressure groups demanding action against Castro.
- Castro took over some American-owned businesses in Cuba, particularly the agricultural businesses. He took their land and distributed it to his supporters among Cuba's peasant farmer population.

SOURCE 14



A 1960 Soviet cartoon. The notice held by the US Secretary of State says to Castro in Cuba: 'I forbid you to make friends with the Soviet Union.'

SOURCE 15

By October 1962 the historic friendship between Cuba and the USA was gone. Behind this change was the story of the betrayal of the Cuban people. It began with Fidel Castro triumphantly entering Havana in 1959. Castro promised democracy and freedom and for a time it appeared to most Cubans that they were liberated. But it soon became apparent that Castro had sold out to Premier Khrushchev of the Communists.

Commentary from an American TV programme made in 1962.

SOURCE 16

I think he [Khrushchev] did it [was so aggressive in the meeting] because of the Bay of Pigs. He thought that anyone who was so young and inexperienced as to get into that mess could be beaten; and anyone who got into it and didn't see it through had no guts. So he just beat the hell out of me.

If he thinks I'm inexperienced and have no guts, until we remove those ideas we won't get anywhere with him.

Kennedy speaking after a meeting with Khrushchev in 1961

As early as June 1960, US President Eisenhower authorised the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to investigate ways of overthrowing Castro. The CIA provided support and funds to Cuban exiles. They also investigated ways to disrupt the Cuban economy, such as damaging sugar plantations. American companies working in Cuba refused to co-operate with any Cuban businesses which used oil or other materials which had been imported from the USSR. The American media also broadcast a relentless stream of criticism of Castro and his regime (see Source 15 for example).

Castro responded to US hostility with a mixed approach. He assured Americans living in Cuba that they were safe and he allowed the USA to keep its naval base. He said he simply wanted to run Cuba without interference. However, by the summer of 1960 he had allied Cuba with the Soviet Union. Soviet leader Khrushchev signed a trade agreement giving Cuba \$100 million in economic aid. Castro also began receiving arms from the Soviet Union and American spies knew this.

To invade or not to invade, that is the question!

In January 1961 the USA's new President, John F Kennedy, broke off diplomatic relations with Cuba. Castro thought that the USA was preparing to invade his country. The Americans did not invade directly, but Kennedy was no longer prepared to tolerate a Soviet satellite in the USA's 'sphere of influence'. The plans to overthrow Castro which were begun under Eisenhower began to take shape.

The Bay of Pigs

Rather than a direct invasion, President Kennedy supplied arms, equipment and transport for 1,400 anti-Castro exiles to invade Cuba and overthrow him. In April 1961 the exiles landed at the Bay of Pigs. They were met by 20,000 Cuban troops, armed with tanks and modern weapons. The invasion failed disastrously. Castro captured or killed them all within days.

The impact of the invasion

The half-hearted invasion suggested to Cuba and the Soviet Union that, despite its opposition to Communism in Cuba, the USA was unwilling to get directly involved in Cuba. The Soviet leader Khrushchev was scornful of Kennedy's pathetic attempt to oust Communism from Cuba.

Historians too argue that the Bay of Pigs fiasco further strengthened Castro's position in Cuba. It suggested to the USSR that Kennedy was weak. It also made Castro and Khrushchev very suspicious of US policy.

Factfile

Bay of Pigs invasion

- ▶ Cuban exiles were funded and trained by CIA and supported by US air power.
- ▶ Plan originally devised by President Eisenhower's government but Kennedy approved it when he became President. Training began in April 1960.
- ▶ Cuban security services knew that the invasion was coming.
- ▶ Invasion took place on 17 April 1961. It was a complete failure. US intelligence which stated that Cuban people would rebel against Castro proved to be wrong.

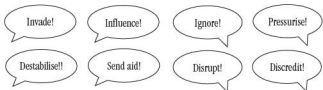
Kennedy ordered extensive investigations into the disaster. Key failings included:

- ▶ lack of secrecy so that USA could not deny its involvement;
- ▶ poor links between various US departments;
- ▶ failure to organise resistance inside Cuba;
- ▶ insufficient Spanish-speaking staff.

Focus Task

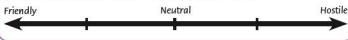
How did the USA respond to the Cuban revolution?

- 1 The President has asked his advisers how he should deal with Cuba. Here are some suggestions they might have made:



Record examples you can find of the USA doing any of these things. If you find examples of American actions that are not covered by these words record them too.

- 2 Place these actions on a 'containment continuum' like this:



SOURCE 17

[Estimates were that the] missiles had an atomic warhead [power] of about half the current missile capacity of the entire Soviet Union. The photographs indicated that missiles were directed at certain American cities. The estimate was that within a few minutes of their being fired 80 million Americans would be dead.

President Kennedy's brother, Robert Kennedy, describing events on Thursday 18 October in the book he wrote about the crisis, *13 Days*.

Khrushchev arms Castro

After the Bay of Pigs fiasco, Soviet arms flooded into Cuba. In May 1962 the Soviet Union announced publicly for the first time that it was supplying Cuba with arms. By July 1962 Cuba had the best-equipped army in Latin America. By September it had thousands of Soviet missiles, plus patrol boats, tanks, radar vans, missile erectors, jet bombers, jet fighters and 5,000 Soviet technicians to help to maintain the weapons.

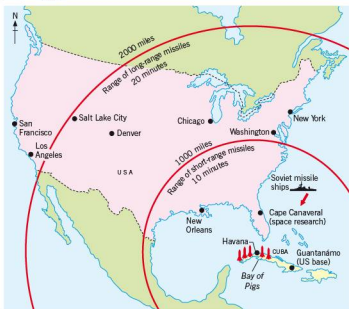
The Americans watched all this with great alarm. They seemed ready to tolerate conventional arms being supplied to Cuba, but the big question was whether the Soviet Union would dare to put **nuclear** missiles on Cuba. In September Kennedy's own Intelligence Department said that it did not believe the USSR would send nuclear weapons to Cuba. The USSR had not taken this step with any of its satellite states before and the US Intelligence Department believed that the USSR would consider it too risky to do it in Cuba. On 11 September, Kennedy warned the USSR that he would prevent 'by whatever means might be necessary' Cuba's becoming an offensive military base – by which, everyone knew, he meant a base for nuclear missiles. The same day the USSR assured the USA that it had no need to put nuclear missiles on Cuba and no intention of doing so.

The October crisis

On Sunday, 14 October 1962, an American spy plane flew over Cuba. It took amazingly detailed photographs of missile sites in Cuba. To the military experts two things were obvious – that these were nuclear missile sites, and that they were being built by the USSR.

More photo reconnaissance followed over the next two days. This confirmed that some sites were nearly finished but others were still being built. Some were already supplied with missiles, others were awaiting them. The experts said that the most developed of the sites could be ready to launch missiles in just seven days. American spy planes also reported that twenty Soviet ships were currently on the way to Cuba carrying missiles.

SOURCE 18



Map showing the location of Cuba and the range of the Cuban missiles.

Think!

How should President Kennedy deal with the Cuban crisis?

On Tuesday 16 October, President Kennedy was informed of the discovery. He formed a special team of advisers called Ex Comm.

They came up with several choices.

Work in groups. You are advisers to the President. You have to reduce Ex Comm's five options to just two for the President to choose between.

When you have made your decision explain why you have rejected the three you have.

Option 1 Do nothing?

For: The Americans still had a vastly greater nuclear power than the Soviet Union. The USA could still destroy the Soviet Union, so – the argument went – the USSR would never use these missiles. The biggest danger to world peace would be to overreact to this discovery.

Against: The USSR had lied about Cuban missiles. Kennedy had already issued his solemn warning to the USSR. To do nothing would be another sign of weakness.



Option 4 Diplomatic pressures?

To get the United Nations or other body to intervene and negotiate.

For: It would avoid conflict.

Against: If the USA was forced to back down, it would be a sign of weakness.



Option 2 Surgical air attack?

An immediate selected air attack to destroy the nuclear bases themselves.

For: It would destroy the missiles before they were ready to use.

Against: 1 Destruction of all sites could not be guaranteed. Even one left undamaged could launch a counter-attack against the USA.
2 The attack would inevitably kill Soviet soldiers. The Soviet Union might retaliate at once.
3 To attack without advance warning was seen as immoral.



Option 3 Invasion?

All-out invasion of Cuba by air and sea.

For: An invasion would not only get rid of the missiles but Castro as well. The American forces were already trained and available to do it.

Against: It would almost certainly guarantee an equivalent Soviet response, either to protect Cuba, or within the Soviet sphere of influence – for example, a take-over of Berlin.



Option 5 Blockade?

A ban on the Soviet Union bringing in any further military supplies to Cuba, enforced by the US navy who would stop and search Soviet ships. And a call for the Soviet Union to withdraw what was already there.

For: It would show that the USA was serious, but it would not be a direct act of war. It would put the burden on Khrushchev to decide what to do next. The USA had a strong navy and could still take the other options if this one did not work.

Against: It would not solve the main problem – the missiles were already on Cuba. They could be used within one week. The Soviet Union might retaliate by blockading Berlin as it had done in 1948.



- Tue 16 October**
Sat 20 October
Mon 22 October

Source Analysis ▶

- 1 What words and phrases in Source 19 reveal how serious Kennedy believed the situation was in October 1962?
- 2 Kennedy was renowned as a skilled communicator. How did he convince his audience that he was in the right?

What happened next?

President Kennedy was informed of the missile build-up. Ex Comm formed.

Kennedy decided on a blockade of Cuba.

Kennedy announced the blockade and called on the Soviet Union to withdraw its missiles. He addressed the American people:

SOURCE 19

Good Evening, My Fellow Citizens:

This government, as promised, has maintained the closest surveillance of the Soviet military build-up on the island of Cuba. Within the past week, unmistakable evidence has established the fact that a series of offensive missile sites is now in preparation on that imprisoned island. The purpose of these bases can be none other than to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western Hemisphere. ...

Acting, therefore, in the defence of our own security and of the entire Western Hemisphere, and under the authority entrusted to me by the Constitution as endorsed by the resolution of the Congress, I have directed that the following initial steps be taken immediately:

First: To halt this offensive build-up, a strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba ... Second: I have directed the continued and increased close surveillance of Cuba and its military build-up. ... I have directed the Armed Forces to prepare for any eventualities ... Third: It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union.

Extract from President Kennedy's TV broadcast to the American people on
 22 October 1962.

- Tue 23 October**
Wed 24 October

Kennedy received a letter from Khrushchev saying that Soviet ships would not observe the blockade. Khrushchev did not admit the presence of nuclear missiles on Cuba.

The blockade began. The first missile-carrying ships, accompanied by a Soviet submarine, approached the 500-mile (800-km) blockade zone. Then suddenly, at 10.32 a.m., the twenty Soviet ships which were closest to the zone stopped or turned around.

Source Analysis ▶

- 1 Source 20 is a British cartoon. Pretend you did not know this. Explain why it is unlikely to be an American or Soviet cartoon.
- 2 What is its attitude to the two sides in the crisis?

SOURCE 20



A cartoon by Vicky (Victor Weisz) from the *London Evening Standard*, 24 October 1962.

Thu 25 October

Despite the Soviet ships turning around, intensive aerial photography revealed that work on the missile bases in Cuba was proceeding rapidly.

Fri 26 October

Kennedy received a long personal letter from Khrushchev. The letter claimed that the missiles on Cuba were purely defensive, but went on: 'If assurances were given that the USA would not participate in an attack on Cuba and the blockade was lifted, then the question of the removal or the destruction of the missile sites would be an entirely different question.' This was the first time Khrushchev had admitted the presence of the missiles.

Sat 27 October a.m.

Khrushchev sent a second letter – revising his proposals – saying that the condition for removing the missiles from Cuba was that the USA withdraw its missiles from Turkey.

An American U-2 plane was shot down over Cuba. The pilot was killed. The President was advised to launch an immediate reprisal attack on Cuba.

Sat 27 October p.m.

Kennedy decided to delay an attack. He also decided to ignore the second Khrushchev letter, but accepted the terms suggested by Khrushchev on 26 October. He said that if the Soviet Union did not withdraw, an attack would follow.

SOURCE 21

It was a beautiful autumn evening, the height of the crisis, and I went up to the open air to smell it, because I thought it was the last Saturday I would ever see.

Robert McNamara talking about the evening of 27 October 1962. McNamara was one of Kennedy's closest advisers during the Cuban Crisis.

Sun 28 October

Khrushchev replied to Kennedy: 'In order to eliminate as rapidly as possible the conflict which endangers the cause of peace ... the Soviet Government has given a new order to dismantle the arms which you described as offensive and to crate and return them to the Soviet Union.'

SOURCE 22

Source Analysis ►

Does Source 22 give the impression that either Khrushchev or Kennedy has the upper hand? Explain whether you think the events of the Crisis on these pages support that view.



A cartoon from the British newspaper, the *Daily Mail*.

Think!

Kennedy described Wednesday 24 October and Saturday 27 October as the darkest days of the crisis. Use the information on this page to explain why.

Why did the Soviet Union place nuclear missiles on Cuba?

It was an incredibly risky strategy. The USSR had supplied many of its allies with conventional weapons but this was the first time that any Soviet leader had placed nuclear weapons outside Soviet territory. Why did Khrushchev take such an unusual step? The USSR must have known that it would cause a crisis. What's more, the USSR made no attempt at all to camouflage the sites, and even allowed the missiles to travel on open deck. This has caused much debate as to what Khrushchev was really doing. Historians have suggested various possible explanations.



To bargain with the USA

If Khrushchev had missiles on Cuba, he could agree to remove them in return for some American concessions.



To close the missile gap

Khrushchev was so concerned about the missile gap between the USSR and the USA that he would seize any opportunity he could to close it. With missiles on Cuba it was less likely that the USA would ever launch a 'first strike' against the USSR.



To test the USA

In the strained atmosphere of Cold War politics the missiles were designed to see how strong the Americans really were – whether they would back off or face up.



To defend Cuba

Cuba was the only Communist state in the Western hemisphere, and it had willingly become Communist rather than having become Communist as a result of invasion by the USSR. In addition, Cuba was in 'Uncle Sam's backyard'. As Castro himself put it: 'The imperialist cannot forgive that we have made a socialist revolution under the nose of the United States.' Just by existing, Castro's Cuba was excellent propaganda for the USSR.



To trap the USA

Khrushchev wanted the Americans to find them and be drawn into a nuclear war. He did not even try to hide them.



To strengthen his own position in the USSR

The superiority of the USA in nuclear missiles undermined Khrushchev's credibility inside the USSR. His critics pointed out that he was the one who had urged the USSR to rely on nuclear missiles. Now, could he show that the USSR really was a nuclear power?

Think!

- Which of the explanations above do Sources 23 and 24 support?
- Talking in private Khrushchev called the missiles 'a hedgehog in Uncle Sam's pants'. Which of the explanations does this statement support?
- Which explanation do you think Khrushchev's actions on 26 and 27 October support (see page 107)?
- Choose the explanation(s) that you think best fit what you have found out about the crisis. Explain your choice.

SOURCE 23

From the territory of the Soviet Union, the medium-range missiles couldn't possibly reach the territory of the USA, but deployed on Cuba they would become strategic nuclear weapons. That meant in practical terms we had a chance to narrow the differences between our forces.

General Anatoly Gribkov, commander, Soviet forces, Cuba.

SOURCE 24

In addition to protecting Cuba, our missiles would have equalized what the West likes to call the 'balance of power'. The Americans had surrounded our country with military bases and threatened us with nuclear weapons, and now they would learn just what it feels like to have enemy missiles pointing at you ...

Khrushchev writing in his memoirs in 1971.

The outcomes ...

For Kennedy and the USA

- Kennedy came out of the crisis with a greatly improved reputation in his own country and throughout the West. He had stood up to Khrushchev and had made him back down.
- Kennedy had also successfully stood up to the hardliners in his own government. Critics of containment had wanted the USA to invade Cuba – to turn back Communism. However, the Cuban Missile Crisis highlighted the weakness of their case. Such intervention was not worth the high risk.
- On the other hand, he did secretly agree to remove the missiles from Turkey. This was slightly awkward for him as technically the decision to remove them was a decision for NATO. His NATO allies were unhappy that Kennedy had traded them during the Cuban Missile Crisis but clearly this was much better than a nuclear war.
- Kennedy also had to accept that Castro's Cuba would remain a Communist state in America's backyard. The USA still has trade and other economic restrictions in place against Cuba today.

For Khrushchev and the USSR

- In public Khrushchev was able to highlight his role as a responsible peacemaker, willing to make the first move towards compromise.
- There was no question that keeping Cuba safe from American action was a major achievement for the Soviets. Cuba was a valuable ally and proved a useful base to support Communists in South America.
- Khrushchev did also get the USA to withdraw its nuclear missiles from Turkey. However, Khrushchev had to agree that this withdrawal was to be kept secret so he was unable to use it for propaganda purposes.
- The crisis also exposed the USA to criticism amongst some of its allies. Newspaper articles in Britain, for example, felt that the USA was unreasonable to have missiles in Turkey and then object to Soviet missiles in Cuba.
- On the other hand, there was no denying the fact that Khrushchev had been forced to back down and remove the missiles. The Soviet military was particularly upset at the terms of the withdrawal. They were forced to put the missiles on the decks of their ships so the Americans could count them. They felt this was a humiliation.
- Khrushchev's actions in Cuba made no impact on the underlying problem of the Missile Gap. The USSR went on to develop its stockpile of ICBMs at a huge financial cost, but it never caught up with the USA.
- In 1964 Khrushchev himself was forced from power by his enemies inside the USSR. Many commentators believe that the Cuban Missile Crisis contributed to this.

For the Cold War

- Historians agree that the Cuban Missile Crisis helped to thaw Cold War relations between the USA and the USSR.
- Both leaders had seen how their game of brinkmanship had nearly ended in nuclear war. Now they were more prepared to take steps to reduce the risk of nuclear war.
- A permanent 'hot line' phone link direct from the White House to the Kremlin was set up.
- The following year, in 1963, they signed a Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. It did not stop the development of weapons, but it limited tests and was an important step forward.
- Although it was clear the USSR could not match US nuclear technology or numbers of weapons, it was also clear that this was not necessary. The Soviet nuclear arsenal was enough of a threat to make the USA respect the USSR. It is noticeable that for the rest of the Cold War the Superpowers avoided direct confrontation and fought through their allies where possible.

For Castro's Cuba

- Castro was very upset by the deal which Khrushchev made with America but he had little choice. He needed the support of the USSR.
- Cuba stayed Communist and highly armed. The nuclear missiles were removed but Cuba remained an important base for Communist supporters in South America. Cuban forces also intervened to help the Communist side in a civil war in Angola (in South-West Africa) in the 1970s.
- Castro also kept control of the American companies and other economic resources he nationalised during his revolution. This remains a source of dispute between Cuba and the USA today but Castro has never backed down.

Think!

- 1 Use the information on this page to fill out a table of positive and negative outcomes for the USA and the USSR.
- 2 Who do you think gained the most from the Cuban Missile Crisis?

Focus Task

Was the Cuban Missile Crisis a success for containment?

Look back at your table from page 99. Complete a second row for the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Revision Tip

Make sure you can remember from this case study:

- ◆ one reason that this might be seen as a success for containment
- ◆ one reason it might be seen as a failure.