

FOCUS

A year after the Berlin Crisis came a new crisis in superpower relations. This was over Cuba. Many historians think it was probably the most dangerous moment of the Cold War. You will evaluate the importance of these events.

2.2 The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962

Cuba: America's 'backyard'

Cuba is an island in the Caribbean Sea. In the 1950s, the USA regarded the Caribbean (and Central America) as its territory – almost like its 'backyard'. Americans dominated Cuba. They went there for holidays, owned big businesses and controlled Cuba's most important export, sugar. The US army had a large military base at Guantanamo Bay.

Cuba was ruled by a military dictator, Fulgencio Batista. He had seized power in a military **coup** in 1952. Batista was cruel, his rule was corrupt and he was massively unpopular. But he was ruthless, and he was supported by financial and military aid from the USA. The US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) helped him to track down his opponents. The CIA estimated that Batista killed around 20,000 political opponents during his rule.

FIGURE 1



The position of Cuba in the Caribbean.

Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution

In 1959, it all went badly wrong for the USA. Batista was overthrown in a revolution led by the communist Fidel Castro. Castro killed or imprisoned many of Batista's followers. Thousands more fled into exile in the USA where they remained bitterly hostile to Castro and put pressure on the US Government to overthrow him.

The American reaction

The Americans were horrified by events in Cuba. Even so, President Eisenhower reluctantly gave official recognition to the new Cuban regime. He was hoping that the USA might be able to co-operate with Castro.

After that, however, relations went downhill very quickly. Castro took control of the major businesses in Cuba. The most important was farming – particularly sugar. Several large American corporations had their land taken away and the land was given to ordinary Cubans. The Americans retaliated by banning sugar imports in 1960. This could potentially bankrupt Cuba's economy as most of their sugar was sold to the USA. Other American businesses **boycotted** trade with Cuba. The USA began a propaganda campaign against the Cuban leader and his regime.

SOURCE 1

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.

RETRIEVAL PRACTICE

- 1 How did the USA dominate Cuba?
- 2 How was this relationship one-sided in America's favour?
- 3 What happened in 1959?
- 4 How did it affect Cuba?
- 5 What was the effect of the arrival of Cuban exiles in the USA?

Khrushchev supports Castro

Castro feared the US would invade Cuba, so he turned to the USSR for help. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev was happy to help:

This is a good way to exploit the USA's embarrassment over losing Cuba and for supporting a corrupt ruler like Batista.

We now have a communist state in the USA's 'backyard'. We must protect it and ensure it survives.



The USA has nuclear missiles in Turkey. Turkey is close to the USSR, just as Cuba is close to the USA. Perhaps I can strike a deal with the USA to get those missiles out of Turkey or maybe some kind of deal over Berlin.

RETRIEVAL PRACTICE

- 1 How did the USA respond to the Cuban Revolution at first?
- 2 How and why did this change?
- 3 Why did Castro appeal to the USSR for help?
- 4 Why was Khrushchev keen to help Castro?
- 5 What help did Khrushchev provide?
- 6 How did the USA respond to the alliance between Cuba and the Soviets?

In Autumn 1960, Khrushchev and Castro agreed a \$100 million package of economic aid, which included buying much of Cuba's sugar production. Khrushchev also started sending military equipment and technical advisers to Cuba.

The USA responded by breaking off diplomatic relations on the grounds that they refused to accept that Castro's regime was the legal government of Cuba. Behind the scenes, President Eisenhower ordered the CIA (America's spying and espionage organisation) to investigate ways to overthrow Castro.

FOCUS TASK

What was the importance of the Cuban Revolution in superpower relations?

Here are some facts about the Cuban Revolution. They are all true! But are they all important in the context of superpower relations? To answer this question, you have to judge:

- Do they tell you something important about the behaviour or beliefs of the superpowers (USSR or USA)?
- Do they tell you something important about the relationship between the superpowers?
- Did this help change superpower relationships in any important way?

Make your own copy of this table and fill out as many rows as you can.

| Facts about the Cuban Revolution | Important, Not important or Not sure? | Reason ... |
|--|---------------------------------------|------------|
| Batista was fiercely anti-communist | | |
| Americans regarded Cuba as their own territory | | |
| It replaced an unpopular ruler, Batista, with a more popular ruler, Castro | | |
| It led to the arrival of Cuban exiles in the US who were very anti-Castro | | |
| It gave Khrushchev the opportunity to embarrass the USA | | |
| The USA stopped buying Cuba's sugar | | |
| It led to friendship between the USSR and Cuba | | |
| The USA had nuclear missiles in Turkey | | |

SOURCE 2



A Cuban Government photograph showing prisoners who surrendered at the Bay of Pigs.

RETRIEVAL PRACTICE

- 7 What was Kennedy's attitude towards Cuba?
- 8 What actions did Kennedy take against Cuba?
- 9 What went wrong at the Bay of Pigs?
- 10 Why was the Bay of Pigs a military disaster for Kennedy?
- 11 Why was it a political disaster?
- 12 How did Kennedy react to the Bay of Pigs?
- 13 How did Castro react to Kennedy's aggression?
- 14 What did Khrushchev do to support Castro?
- 15 How did the Americans react?

FOCUS TASK

What was the importance of the Bay of Pigs invasion in superpower relations?

For each fact below, explain why you think it is either important or not important.

- The Bay of Pigs is on the south coast of Cuba.
- The invasion showed what Kennedy thought about Cuba.
- The 2000 invaders were outnumbered by 15,000 Cubans.
- It was a military disaster for the USA.
- Kennedy felt humiliated.
- It changed Kennedy's policies and attitude towards Cuba.
- It led to an even closer alliance between the USSR and Cuba.
- It led Khrushchev to send arms to Cuba.

The Bay of Pigs invasion

In January 1961, the USA got a new president, John F. Kennedy. He bitterly disliked Castro's Cuba. He increased military spending and ordered the CIA and the US military to consider all possible ways to remove Castro. In April 1961, Kennedy authorised a CIA-backed plan to help 1400 Cuban exiles – opponents of Castro – to land at the Bay of Pigs on the south coast of Cuba and overthrow Castro.

The invasion was a disaster. The Cuban exiles were inexperienced and poorly trained. The US did not support them effectively and Castro got advance warning of the invasion.

What was the significance of the Bay of Pigs?

- It was a military disaster. Around 1200 prisoners were taken. They were eventually ransomed by the US in return for \$53 million worth of medical supplies.
- It was also a political disaster. The USA was clearly interfering in the affairs of another country. This was exactly what they had accused the Soviets of doing in Eastern Europe.
- At the same time, it was evidence that the people of Cuba accepted Castro's rule despite what American propaganda claimed. The Bay of Pigs invasion therefore strengthened Castro's hold on Cuba, making him more secure than before.

Consequences of the Bay of Pigs disaster

Despite the disaster, Kennedy did not ease the pressure on Cuba. In fact, it made him more aggressive.

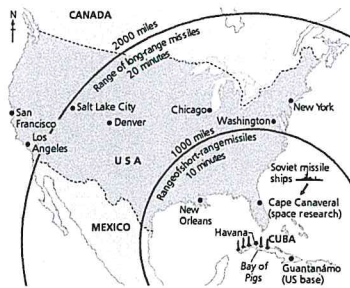
- He authorised massive increases in military spending and US forces began training for a possible full-scale invasion.
- In November 1961, Kennedy launched Operation Mongoose, the largest ever CIA operation to destabilise and undermine Castro's government by stirring up opposition to Castro.
- Kennedy also authorised attempts by the CIA to assassinate Castro.

The USSR arms Cuba

Kennedy's aggressive policies alarmed Castro, so he turned to Khrushchev for support and protection. In September 1961, Khrushchev agreed to supplying Cuba with arms. This was kept secret at first, but was publicly announced in May 1962. By September 1962, Cuba had thousands of Soviet missiles, plus patrol boats, tanks, radar equipment, aircraft and 5000 Soviet technicians to help maintain the weapons.

The Americans watched all this with concern. They were especially worried that the USSR might put nuclear missiles on Cuba. On 11 September, Kennedy warned the USSR that he would take serious action if this happened. Khrushchev assured Kennedy that he had no intention of doing so.

FIGURE 2



The range of Soviet missiles in Cuba in 1962, based on US intelligence photos.

The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962

Kennedy suspected Khrushchev was lying. He knew Khrushchev wanted to protect Cuba and he also knew Khrushchev had critics back in the USSR and wanted to be seen to be tough.

Kennedy's suspicions were confirmed on 14 October, when an American U2 spy plane took a series of photographs of Cuba that showed nuclear missile sites being prepared. It was the beginning of a two-week crisis that took the world to the brink of nuclear war. The story of the crisis is summarised below.

FIGURE 3



14 October

U2 spy plane took pictures of missile sites in Cuba.



16-20 October

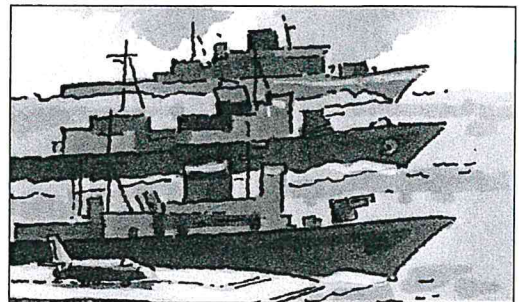
President Kennedy formed an Executive Committee (ExComm) to advise him. For the next three days, ExComm argued about what to do.

Hawks (including Kennedy at this point) wanted tough action:

- air attack to destroy the missile launch sites
- an invasion of Cuba.

Doves wanted less drastic measures:

- diplomatic pressure
- secret contact with the USSR to see if they could do a deal.



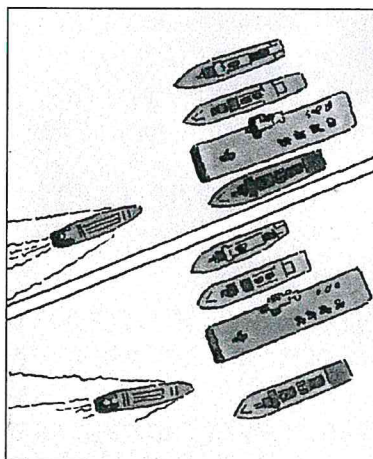
21 October

- ExComm agreed a plan – to 'quarantine' (i.e. cut off) Cuba. This meant the US Navy stopping all ships coming to Cuba to check for weapons. No more military equipment would be allowed in.
- Technically, this 'blockade' was an act of war. Kennedy admitted to his brother, Robert, that it was 'one hell of a gamble'. Even so, it showed that Kennedy was becoming less of a Hawk and more of a Dove (or less influenced by the Hawks).



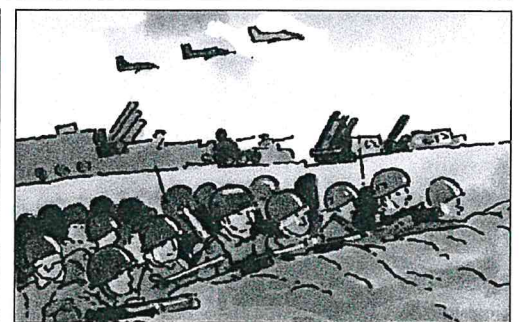
24 October

- Secretary General of the UN, U Thant, called on both sides to compromise.
- Khrushchev ordered Soviet ships to stop heading for Cuba (i.e. stop where they are but not to turn back).
- US armed forces went to DEFCON 2. This was the only time in the entire Cold War they went this close to war.



25 October

US warships stopped the first Soviet ship. It was only carrying oil so they let it through.



26 October

- Over 120,000 US troops assembled near the Florida coast. A US invasion of Cuba looked likely.
- Kennedy told ExComm that he favoured some sort of deal to end the crisis. The ExComm Hawks disagreed and still wanted an invasion.
- Kennedy received a letter from Khrushchev. The letter offered to remove the missiles if the USA promised not to invade Cuba. Most of ExComm wanted to accept the offer.

FOCUS TASK

Write your own narrative of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Your target is 200 words. Here are some suggested points to include and develop.

| Event/development | What happened ... | Important enough to be included in my narrative because ... |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|---|
| Kennedy sees the U2 photographs | | |
| ExComm debates | | |
| Quarantine | | |
| Khrushchev's response | | |
| Deal | | |



22 October

- US forces were put on DEFCON 3 alert (two steps away from war; DEFCON 1 would mean all-out war).
- President Kennedy went on national TV to tell the American public what was happening.
- Khrushchev became convinced that the USA intended to invade Cuba. He told his advisers, 'They can attack us and we shall respond. This may end in a big war.'



The 13 days of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

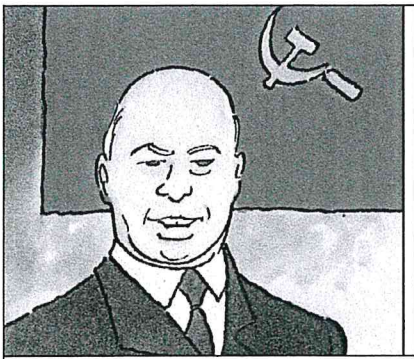
23 October

- Khrushchev condemned the US blockade, calling it piracy. Secretly, he was relieved that the US had not invaded Cuba but he knew it was still a strong possibility.
- A fleet of Soviet ships approached Cuba carrying more missiles.



27 October

- Probably the most tense day of the crisis. Cuban forces shot down a US spy plane.
- Khrushchev sent another letter to Kennedy. It repeated the offer of 26 October. However, it *also* insisted that US missiles be removed from Turkey.
- Kennedy did not agree immediately. However, he admitted that 'Khrushchev has us in a pretty good spot here, because most people will regard this as a reasonable proposal'.
- Kennedy accepted Khrushchev's offer. However, he insisted that the bit about removing missiles from Turkey had to be kept secret.






28 October

Khrushchev announced that the USSR would remove its missiles from Cuba in order to protect world peace.

The consequences of the Cuban crisis

Consequences for the key players

| Khrushchev | Castro | Kennedy |
|---|--|---|
|  |  |  |
| <p>Khrushchev managed to keep Cuba communist and win a promise from the USA that Cuba would not be invaded. This was very important to the USSR. Khrushchev also managed to cause tensions between the USA and its allies, particularly Britain. He also got the US missiles removed from Turkey, although this was kept secret.</p> <p>On the other hand, Khrushchev had been forced to back down about the missiles and the missile gap between the USA and USSR never narrowed. Other communist leaders in the USSR and China criticised him for being weak and in 1964 he was forced to step down as Soviet leader.</p> | <p>Castro was very upset by the deal Khrushchev made with the USA, but he had little choice.</p> <p>On the other hand, Cuba stayed communist and highly armed. The nuclear missiles were removed, but Cuba remained an important base for communist supporters in South America.</p> <p>Castro also kept control of the American companies and other economic resources he nationalised during his revolution.</p> | <p>Kennedy came out of the crisis well. He made Khrushchev back down and he also stood up to the 'Hawks' in his own government.</p> <p>On the other hand, he had not managed to remove Castro and he removed US missiles from Turkey (although this part of the deal between him and Khrushchev was kept secret).</p> <p>Kennedy was also shocked by the seriousness of the crisis and became less hostile to the USSR afterwards. Professor Mark White claims that before the crisis, Kennedy's understanding of nuclear war was a theory. But the crisis made him confront what nuclear war really meant in practice for the USA and the world. From then on he became much less aggressive and tried to find diplomatic solutions to reduce Cold War tensions.</p> |

Consequences for the Cold War

In one sense, the crisis made the world a safer place. Both leaders had seen how their brinkmanship had nearly ended in nuclear war. They were now more prepared to take steps to reduce the risk of nuclear war.

- A permanent 'hot line' phone link was set up direct from the White House to the Kremlin.
- In 1963, they signed a Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. It did not stop the development of weapons, but it limited tests, so was an important step forward.
- In 1968, the USA and USSR, along with other nuclear powers, agreed the Outer Space Treaty. They agreed not to place nuclear weapons in space. This may seem strange, but remember that the following year, the USA put a man on the moon.
- In 1968, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty bound the superpowers and other states that had nuclear weapons to limit the spread and increase of these weapons.

FOCUS TASK

What were the consequences of the Cuban Missile Crisis?

Read through pages 46–47 and find at least two consequences of the Cuban Missile Crisis. For each one:

- 1 Describe it in a single phrase or sentence (e.g. Missiles were removed from Cuba).
- 2 Write some notes to explain
 - who was affected by this and in what ways
 - how great was the impact
 - how it made superpower relations better or worse.

REVISION

You don't need to do these tasks now, use them when you are revising for a test, or a mock exam, or the real thing.

Task 1

Go back over this chapter. Cover up the text so that you can only see the Retrieval Practice tasks. See if you can answer them without looking at the text.

Task 2

Ask your teacher to provide you with copies of all the visual sources and figures in this chapter. Turn these slides into a presentation and see if you can tell the story of superpower relations in this period using only these sources.

Task 3

Which event of the period 1959–68 had the most important consequences?

- 1 Look back at page 16 to where we explain about types of consequences and their impacts – just to remind yourself.
- 2 Now choose the event(s) that you think had the most serious consequences. You could use a table like this to compare them.

| Events | Type of consequence(s): political, economic, ideological, international, domestic, etc. | Actual impact(s) on people, countries, international relations, etc. |
|--------|---|---|
| | | |