

The Cuban missile crisis

Castro's influence

Cuba's long period of political and economic reliance on the USA came to an abrupt end in 1959, with the fall of the Batista government and the rise of Fidel Castro. Castro immediately forged close ties with the Soviet Union and as a result, Cuba became an important zone of conflict in the Cold War between the two superpowers. The US imposed economic sanctions on the island, many of which continue to this day, and the CIA made several (rather inept) attempts to assassinate Castro.

In April 1961, more than a thousand Cubans in exile in the US attempted to invade Cuba. The so-called 'Bay of Pigs' incident was a total fiasco. Despite US air support and CIA training, the invaders were quickly overwhelmed by Castro's forces. Following the incident, Castro clamped down on potential dissidents within Cuba, thereby increasing his own hold on power. Over the next year, the US government grew increasingly alarmed at the amount of Soviet military hardware (tanks, boats and planes) in Cuba and there were continuous discussions about possible solutions.

The Cuban missile crisis was the closest the world has come to nuclear war. How did tensions reach such heights?

Escalation

In April 1962, US nuclear missiles were deployed in Turkey, a NATO member, and Soviet leader Khrushchev consulted with Castro about deploying nuclear missiles in Cuba. Castro agreed to the deployment and in July, ships carrying the missiles departed from the Black Sea. The US used spy planes to monitor military developments in Cuba, but it was not until mid-October 1962 that sufficient evidence was gathered to confirm US suspicions — sites capable of launching nuclear missiles were being built in Cuba.

The wider world did not find out about the very tense situation in Cuba until President Kennedy's address on October 22. For the next week, nuclear war was a very real possibility. Would the US launch a pre-emptive strike against Cuban missile sites, with an inevitable Soviet response? Would Soviet ships make it through to Cuba? Was a diplomatic solution possible?

In the end both Kennedy and Khrushchev were able to step back from war. Personal communications between the two men led to an acceptable agreement and the two superpowers backed away from a military conflict. The US pledged not to invade Cuba, removing the pretext for Soviet military support, and secretly promised to remove its nuclear missiles from Turkey that threatened the Soviet Union. The Soviets, in return, never delivered nuclear missiles to Cuba. Most historians agree that the Cuban missile crisis was the closest the world has come to a nuclear war. The following year the 'hotline', a direct link between Moscow and Washington, was established to improve communications in times of crisis.

14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28

October 14
A US spy plane photographs missile sites in Cuba

October 18
President Kennedy tells Soviet foreign minister Gromyko that Soviet missiles will not be tolerated in Cuba

October 22
In a televised national address, Kennedy orders a naval quarantine of Cuba and demands withdrawal of Soviet missiles from the island

October 24
Soviet ships carrying missiles to Cuba reach the US naval quarantine but do not cross it. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev tells Kennedy he risks nuclear war

October 26
Soviet leader Khrushchev writes to Kennedy, seeking a de-escalation

October 28
Khrushchev declares that Soviet missiles will be removed from Cuba

October 25
The USA makes preparations for a possible invasion of Cuba

October 27
The president's brother, Robert Kennedy, meets the Soviet ambassador and promises not to invade Cuba. He also secretly agrees to remove US missiles from Turkey

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