

History: The Cold War
Lesson 21 of 30

Worksheet:

How was the Cuban Missile Crisis resolved and with what significance?



What was happening in Cuba by the end of 1961?

By the end of 1961, the **USSR and Cuba were closer allies than ever before.** The **USA had been humiliated by the Bay of Pigs incident** and it was clear that **Communism was becoming a strong and popular force in Cuba.** The Bay of Pigs invasion also served as a perfect excuse for **Khrushchev** to **place more military advisers and combat units on the island of Cuba** – if the USA had planned one attack, then the USSR saw it as their responsibility to protect Cuba from any attacks in the future. Having failed to force the West out of West Berlin, **Khrushchev** also saw this as a perfect opportunity to get the upper hand over the USA. **Khrushchev** was also **concerned by US missile bases in Italy and Turkey** and thought that **placing similar missile bases on Cuba would help to restore the balance of power** and would also strengthen the spread of communism throughout South America.



Consequently, throughout 1962, **Khrushchev** continued to send military supplies to Cuba. In **September 1962, the Soviets also began to install ballistic missiles on the island.** Again, **Khrushchev** used the Bay of Pigs incident as an example of why this was necessary – Cuba needed defending and these weapons would only be used if Cuba was attacked. This contrasted with the missiles that the USA had put in Turkey which were in clear firing range of the USSR. However, **Khrushchev's** argument was challenged on **14th October 1962 when a U-2 spy plane took photographs of Cuba which showed that Soviet intermediate range missile bases were being constructed.** **Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles** were missiles that could be **launched and reach targets that were up to 3500km away.** In other words, these missiles, when planted in Cuba, **could hit almost all US cities.** When **Kennedy** saw these images, it was **clear he needed to respond.** Not only was the risk of Soviet attack very real, but he was aware that the American people would lose all confidence in him as President if he did not stand up to Cuba and get the missiles removed.



How did Kennedy respond to the discovery of missile bases in Cuba?

Kennedy's options

On **16th October 1962**, **Kennedy** called together an **Executive Committee of 12 advisors**, including his brother **Robert Kennedy** who was the US **Attorney General**. This committee became known as **ExComm** for short and was the **main decision-making body during the October Crisis of 1962**. It was clear that **Kennedy** had several options for how he could respond to the missiles in Cuba. Most drastically, he could **bomb Cuba and the USSR using nuclear missiles**. However, this would **risk mutually assured destruction**. Alternatively, **Kennedy could invade Cuba**, although as the Bay of Pigs incident had shown, that had not turned out too well before. He could also **use an air-strike to deliberately target the missile bases in Cuba**, but surely this would provoke the USSR to do the same to the US missile bases in Turkey? The USA could also **blockade** Cuba, to prevent the USSR from being able to transport its missiles to the island. Or, the USA **could sit back and trust that the USSR would not use the weapons** – and do nothing. Which option should **Kennedy** choose?



Kennedy's actions

On **22nd October 1962**, **ExComm** decided that the best solution would be to place a naval **blockade** around Cuba to **prevent any Soviet ships from delivering weapons**, and particularly missiles, to the island. The **blockade** was to stretch **3,300km around Cuba** and the Americans anticipated and planned for Soviet resistance. They **prepared a fleet of submarines that were armed with nuclear missiles** and also made **156 ICBMs ready for attack**. Many Air Force bombers took flight to patrol the air around Cuba and hundreds of thousands of American soldiers were told to prepare for combat. On **22nd October, Kennedy addressed the American people on television**. He told them that while he was not prepared to risk nuclear war by attacking Cuba or the USA, it was **important that the USA stood up in some way to the USSR**. The **blockade** was to be this compromise and, it was hoped, **would show the USSR that the storing of missiles in Cuba would not be tolerated**.



Khrushchev's response

On **24th October 1962**, the **eighteen Soviet ships that were approaching Cuba** reached the **blockade** – and **turned around to avoid confrontation**. But the crisis was far from over. On **25th October**, **Kennedy** raised the **country's military readiness to one of its highest levels** – the country was now ready for nuclear war and prepared to launch an attack on the USSR or Cuba if necessary. Having succeeded in preventing more Soviet missiles from arriving in Cuba, **Kennedy** now **demanded that all missiles already in Cuba be removed**. If **Khrushchev failed to do this**, **Kennedy threatened to invade Cuba**.

How did **Khrushchev** respond to such a threat? **On 26th October**, **Khrushchev** sent **Kennedy** a **telegram offering to remove the missiles from Cuba if Kennedy removed the blockade and promised not to invade Cuba**. It looked as though the crisis might be resolved peacefully. However, many of **Khrushchev's** advisors in the USSR felt that this was **far too soft a response**, leading to **Khrushchev** sending a **much tougher telegram** to **Kennedy** on **27th October**. In this **telegram**, **Khrushchev promised to remove the missiles if the USA removed its missiles from Turkey**. On the same day, a **U-2 spy plane was also shot down over Cuba by a Soviet missile**. The crisis deepened and **tensions became more intense**.



Kennedy's response to the telegrams

In many ways, **Khrushchev's** failure to include his tougher demands in his first **telegram** was a big mistake. On the advice of his brother, **Kennedy** decided to **ignore the second telegram** and **publicly accepted the terms of the first**. He also reiterated his first threat – that if the USSR did not respond positively to Kennedy, US forces would invade Cuba. Reluctantly, **Khrushchev accepted the offer** and **agreed to remove the missiles from Cuba**. The world breathed a sigh of relief. Despite coming very close to provoking nuclear confrontation, the Crisis had been resolved relatively peacefully. We now know that **Khrushchev** agreed to this because the **USA had in fact also agreed to Khrushchev's second telegram, but in secret**. Keen to avoid tensions escalating again because of missiles, **Robert Kennedy** had **met with the Soviet ambassador to the USSR in Washington on 27th October**, and had **agreed to remove US missiles from Turkey**, although this would not happen until well after Soviet missiles were removed from Cuba. Consequently, the **Cuban Missile Crisis was resolved peacefully** – but, at the same time, it had also revealed the **terrifying heights to which the superpowers were prepared to travel to protect their countries** and spheres of influence. The proximity and real risk of nuclear war that existed between the USA and the USSR was not something that anyone would forget in a hurry.



What were the consequences of the Cuban Missile Crisis?

Kennedy was strengthened

In a significant turn of events since the humiliation of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, **Kennedy's reputation was strengthened** as a result of the Cuban Missile Crisis. **Kennedy** had shown himself to be a **strong leader**, who had **stood up to Khrushchev** and **successfully had the Soviet missile sites removed from Cuba**. It helped **Kennedy** that the **USA's secret agreement to remove their own missiles from Turkey had not been made public**. In fact, it would remain a secret from the public for more than 25 years! This meant that **Kennedy** was simply seen as a strong leader, who had acted confidently under pressure to achieve a peaceful resolution to a terrifying conflict. As a result, his **popularity in the USA increased**.



Khrushchev was weakened

On the other hand, **Khrushchev** did not come out of the crisis looking as good. While he **claimed that he had won the crisis**, as he had guaranteed Cuba's security and kept it communist, the **Soviet military felt that they had been forced to make an embarrassing withdrawal**. **Mao Zedong**, the communist leader of China, also **criticised Khrushchev for placing the missiles in Cuba and then backing down**. It did not help **Khrushchev** that his victory regarding the removal of US missiles from Turkey had to remain a secret. Consequently, **Khrushchev became very unpopular in the USSR** and this contributed to **his removal as leader of the USSR in 1964**.



Reduced tensions

Although the Cuban Missile Crisis had seen **tensions increase to perhaps their greatest height** in the Cold War, the event's overall impact was actually to **reduce tensions**. The two superpowers had always followed a policy of **brinkmanship** before, which means that they kept pushing disagreements to the point where a risk of war was incredibly likely. However, the risks to world peace which this policy created had been highlighted all too clearly by the Cuban Missile Crisis, and now **both superpowers committed to maintaining peaceful relations**.

The first, most practical, step that was introduced to support this was the **introduction of a telephone hotline between the White House in Washington DC and the Kremlin in Moscow**. This was **installed in June 1963**. It would prevent the leaders of the USA and the USSR from having to communicate by **telegram** in times of crisis and was **intended to help them reach immediate responses to any future crises**.



Reduced tensions

Three other steps were also taken to prevent future misunderstandings from leading to war. In **August 1963**, the **Limited Test Ban Treaty** was signed. In this treaty, the USA and the USSR **agreed to ban the testing of nuclear weapons in the atmosphere or underwater**. This was followed by the **Outer Space Treaty in 1967**, where the British joined with the Americans and Soviets to **agree to use outer space only for peaceful purposes and therefore not test or put nuclear weapons in orbit of the earth**. Finally, in **1968**, the **Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty** was signed **to stop the spread of nuclear weapons**. Countries agreed **not to share their nuclear technology with other countries** and to **stop developing new nuclear weapons**. It also encouraged the superpowers to put limits on the amount of military power that they had built up and in **1969**, the **Strategic Arms Limitation Talks** began, with the aim of trying to ensure that both the **USA and USSR began to limit the size of their arsenals**. It was clear that the events of the Cuban Missile Crisis had scared the superpowers and their nations. Therefore, what started off as perhaps one of the biggest crises of the Cold War **ended in improved relations between the superpowers** and created hope that perhaps a peaceful resolution to what had now been two decades of increasing tension could be found.



Glossary

Arsenal – A collection of military equipment and weapons

Attorney General – the chief law officer and legal adviser of a state or nation

Blockade – the shutting off of traffic into or out of a place

Brinkmanship – pushing disagreements to the point where there is risk of war



Glossary

Hotline – a direct communication system set up for use in times of emergency or crisis

Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles – destructive weapons that could reach targets up to 3500km away

Telegram – a message sent in code by electronic means over wires



Comprehension Questions

1. What did an American U-2 spy plane photograph in Cuba on 14th October 1962?
2. What did Kennedy decide to do in response to this discovery and how did the USSR react?
3. What did Khrushchev demand in his two telegrams to Kennedy on 26th and 27th October 1962?
4. How did Kennedy respond to Khrushchev's telegrams and what was the result?
5. Challenge question: How did the Cuban Missile Crisis affect the relationship between the superpowers?

