

The Cuban Missile Crisis

The Cuban Missile Crisis was a 13-day confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union over Soviet ballistic missiles deployed in Cuba that took place between October 16 and October 28 in 1962. Information about the Cuban Missile Crisis was broadcast on television worldwide, and it was the one event in history that brought the Cold War closest to escalating into a full-scale nuclear war.

Following from the enmity between the United States and the Soviet Union since the end of World War II in 1945, the United States was concerned about the rise of Communism, and a Latin American country allying openly with the USSR, short for Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, was unacceptable. In addition, the United States had recently suffered a public embarrassment, because of the failed invasion at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961 under President John F. Kennedy. The invasion had been attempted by a group known as Brigade 2506 that consisted of 1400 paramilitaries, who had been trained and funded by the United States government's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Launched from Guatemala on 17 April 1961, the Brigade 2506 had intended to land at the Bay of Pigs and to overthrow Cuba's increasingly communist government but it was defeated within three days by the Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces, who were under the direct command of Cuba's Prime Minister Fidel Castro.

After the events at the Bay of Pigs, the former American President Eisenhower told Kennedy that now the Soviets were "embolden to do something that they would otherwise not do." Indeed, the failed invasion created the impression with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev and his advisers that Kennedy was indecisive and, as one Soviet adviser wrote about Kennedy: "too young, intellectual, not prepared well for decision making in crisis situations ... too intelligent and too weak." Albeit briefly distracted by the Berlin Crisis, which took place between June and November 1961 and accumulated in the erection of the Berlin Wall, the United States continued to carry out covert investigations in Cuba, the largest of which was known as "Operation Mongoose". The latter was a secret program that aimed to remove communists from power in Cuba and to overthrow the Communist regime, including its leader Fidel Castro, in a revolt that was planned for October 1962.

In January 1962, General Edward Lansdale described the plans to overthrow the Cuban government in a top-secret report to President Kennedy and officials involved with Operation Mongoose. CIA agents were to be infiltrated into Cuba to carry out acts of sabotage and organise anti-communist propaganda, including radio broadcasts. In February 1962, the United States launched an embargo against Cuba. Lansdale presented a 26-page, top-secret timetable for implementing the overthrow of the Cuban government, mandating that guerrilla operations begin in August, September and in the first two weeks of October 1962.

Previously, when Kennedy ran for president in 1960, one of his key election issues was an alleged "missile gap", whereby the Soviet Union was suspected to hold and build more missiles than the United States. Although the Soviets held only four intercontinental ballistic missiles in 1961, CIA reports suggested that they had more than 100 at their disposal. By comparison, the United States held eight George Washington- and Ethan Allen-class ballistic missile submarines, each with the capability to launch 16 Polaris missiles, with a range of 1,500 nautical miles (2,800 km). Notwithstanding these facts,

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Khrushchev increased the perception of a "missile gap" when he loudly boasted to the world that the USSR was building missiles "like sausages". In reality, the Soviet Union only had medium-range ballistic missiles in quantity, about 700 of them, which were very unreliable and inaccurate. The United States had a considerable advantage in total number of nuclear warheads -- 27,000 against 3,600 overall -- at the time, and they also had all the technologies needed to deliver missiles accurately to targets.

Khrushchev faced a strategic situation where the United States was perceived to have a "splendid first strike" capability but the vast majority of the Soviet missiles did not have the reach and accuracy to hit the United States back. One way to address this issue was moving the Soviet missiles closer to U.S. territory. A second reason for deploying Soviet missiles to Cuba was that Khrushchev wanted to bring West Berlin -- the American/British/French-controlled democratic enclave within Communist East Germany -- into the Soviet orbit. The Soviets considered the western control over parts of Berlin a grave threat to East Germany. Khrushchev believed that if the United States allowed the missile deployments in Cuba without much protest, he could muscle the West out of Berlin using said missiles as a deterrent to western counter-measures in Berlin. In other words, Khrushchev figured that if the United States tried to bargain with the Soviets after becoming aware of the missiles, he could trade the Cuban missiles for West Berlin. Since Berlin was strategically more important than Cuba, the trade would be a win for Khrushchev. A third reason for Khrushchev to order the deployment of missiles to Cuba was that the United States had installed inter-mediate-range ballistic missiles in Turkey in April 1962. Soviet intelligence services had produced convincing evidence that the missiles in Turkey were aimed at Soviet territory.

In May 1962, Khrushchev began to counter the United States' growing lead in developing and deploying strategic missiles by placing Soviet intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Cuba, even though the Soviet Ambassador in Havana, Alexandr Ivanovich Alexeyev, argued that Castro would not accept the deployment of these missiles. To convince Castro, a group of Soviet military and missile construction specialists travelled with an agricultural delegation to Havana, and they arranged an informal meeting with Castro. Castro had a strong expectation that the United States would invade Cuba again, and he approved the idea of installing nuclear missiles in Cuba. Although Castro was concerned that the missile deployment would make him look like a Soviet puppet, he was persuaded that missiles in Cuba would be an irritant to the United States and help the interests of the entire socialist camp. Also, the deployment would include short-range tactical weapons with a reach of 40 km, which were therefore usable against naval vessels and which would provide a "nuclear umbrella" for attacks upon the island.

From the very beginning of the missile deployment to Cuba, the Soviets' operation entailed elaborate denial and deception, known in the USSR as "maskirovka". All of the planning and preparation for transporting and deploying the missiles were carried out in the utmost secrecy, with only a very few told the exact nature of the mission. Even the troops allocated to the mission were given misdirection, and they were told that they were headed for a cold region and thus, outfitted with ski boots, fleece-lined parkas, and other winter equipment. The Soviet code name was Operation Anadyr, which also referred to a river flowing into the Bering Sea, the name of the capital of Chukotsky District, and a bomber base in the far eastern region. All these tactics were meant to conceal the program and protect it from discovery by journalists and secret service agents.

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Specialists in missile construction arrived in Cuba in July 1962 under the guise of "machine operators," "irrigation specialists" and "agricultural specialists". Marshal Sergei Biryuzov, chief of the Soviet Rocket Forces, led a survey team that visited Cuba. He told Khrushchev that the missiles would be concealed and camouflaged by the palm trees.

The Soviet leadership believed, based on their perception of Kennedy's lack of confidence during the Bay of Pigs Invasion, that he would avoid confrontation and accept the missiles as an accomplished fact. Being confident that Kennedy was to acquiesce the situation, the Soviet government publicly warned in September 1962 that any attack by the United States on Cuba or on Soviet ships carrying supplies to the island would mean war. At the same time, the Soviets continued the "maskirovka" program to conceal their actions in Cuba, and they declared that the USSR was supplying only defensive weapons to Cuba. In October 1962, the Soviet embassy official Georgy Bolshakov brought President Kennedy a personal message from Khrushchev reassuring him that "under no circumstances would surface-to-surface missiles be sent to Cuba."

As early as August 1962, the United States suspected that the Soviets were building missile facilities in Cuba. During that month, the CIA gathered information about sightings by ground observers of Russian-built fighters and light bombers; also surface-to-air missile sites were detected at eight different locations. These activities made the CIA director John A. McCone suspicious, and he informed President Kennedy that the Soviets were preparing to introduce ballistic missiles into Cuba. With important Congressional elections scheduled for November 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis became enmeshed in the day-to-day business of American politics at the time. The Republican opposition accused the Kennedy Administration of covering up a major threat to the United States. The White House denied the Republican charges that there were dangerous Soviet missiles deployed 90 miles from Florida.

In September 1962, the first consignment of missiles arrived in Cuba. They were intermediate-range ballistic missiles, capable of carrying a thermonuclear warhead with an effective range of up to 2,800 miles. While the missiles were still being assembled, an American spy-plane produced clear photographic evidence of the ballistic missile facilities in Cuba. On 16 October 1962, President Kennedy was shown the photographs and in the evening of that day, he convened the first of several secret meetings of the nine members of the National Security Council and five other key advisors. For the next five days, the group met almost non-stop, always in secrecy, at the White House to deliberate and discuss all possible reactions to and scenarios about the Cuban missile deployment. On 22 October 1962, President Kennedy delivered a nationwide address televised on all major networks, where he announced the discovery of the missiles and his government's response. He said:

"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 by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union. [...] To halt this offensive buildup, a strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba is being initiated. All ships of any kind bound for Cuba, from whatever nation or port, will, if found to contain cargoes of offensive weapons, be turned back. This quarantine will be extended, if needed, to other types of cargo and carriers. We are not

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at this time, however, denying the necessities of life as the Soviets attempted to do in their Berlin blockade of 1948."

What followed was five days of tense negotiations between the Soviet Union and the United States. Kennedy and Khrushchev communicated mainly through their political advisors but they never met or had any other form of direct contact or interaction. Several small military incidents during that period further increased the tension between East and West, with the rest of the world watching on as new details about the Crisis were televised every hour.

The end of the Crisis was achieved on 28 October 1962, after final secret negotiations. Publicly, the Soviets agreed to dismantle their offensive weapons in Cuba and return them to the Soviet Union, subject to United Nations verification, in exchange for a U.S. public declaration and agreement never to invade Cuba without direct provocation. Secretly, the United States also agreed to dismantle all its missiles deployed in Turkey and Italy, whose existence was not publicly known at the time.

When all offensive missiles and light bombers had been withdrawn from Cuba, the blockade was formally ended on 20 November 1962. The negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union during the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis pointed out the necessity of a quick, clear, and direct communication line between Washington and Moscow. As a result, the Moscow–Washington hotline was established in 1963 that links the Pentagon with the Kremlin. Although in popular culture known as the "red telephone", the hotline was never a telephone line, and no red phones were used. The first implementation used Teletype equipment, which was shifted to fax machines in 1986. Since 2008, the Moscow–Washington hotline is a secure computer link over which messages are exchanged by email.