

The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis: Background

The Problem

On October 16, 1962, a U-2 spy plane over Cuba discovered that the Soviet Union was building missile-launching sites on the island. U.S. **President John F. Kennedy** was informed that the Soviet Union was building launching sites in Cuba for nuclear missiles with a range of 1000 miles. Cuba is approximately 90 miles from the United States. The missiles could carry warheads 60 times *more* powerful than the atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima in WWII.

The Response

On October 22, Kennedy announced to the world that the United States was setting up a naval blockade around the island of Cuba to prevent anymore shipments of missiles from the Soviet Union to reach Cuba. He also demanded that the Soviets pull out all of their offensive weapons from Cuba.

The Crisis

During the next five days, tensions ran quite high, especially when a Soviet Union boat came to the point of crossing the blockade line. Soviet Premier (man in charge) **Nikita Khrushchev** responded to Kennedy's demands on October 26 with an angry letter in which he proposed that the Soviet Union would withdraw the missiles if the U.S. promised not to invade Cuba. The next day he sent a second letter to Kennedy and demanded that the U.S. also withdraw its nuclear missiles from Turkey, which bordered the Soviet Union. October 27th was a day that was very tense and anxiety filled. That morning a U.S. surveillance plane was shot down by a Soviet air missile. The U.S. responded with an ultimatum: Get the missiles out in 48 hours or the U.S. will attack Cuba.

Tensions Rise

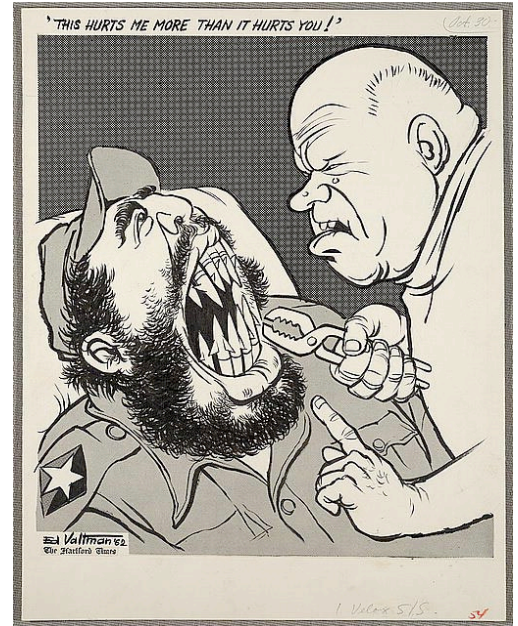


Khrushchev also feared events were spiraling out of control. In addition to nuclear missiles, the Soviets had “tactical” nuclear missiles in Cuba, which would be used to stop an invasion by the U.S. The U.S. was ready to invade with 180,000 troops stationed on October 29th. If the U.S. invaded and was hit with tactical nuclear weapons, Kennedy was sure to retaliate with a nuclear strike. It was clear that the Soviet Union and the United States were headed toward **nuclear war**.

The Deal

The U.S. offered the Soviets a secret deal. They would withdraw its missiles from Turkey, but would not make this public. The announcement made to the U.S. people would be that Khrushchev decided to remove the Cuban missiles to avoid a U.S. invasion. From October 24 to November 20, 1962, historians say, the world came closer to the brink of nuclear war than at any other time in history.

Don Munton and David A. Welch, *The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Concise History* (Oxford University Press, 2007)
Philip Brenner, “Turning History on its Head.”



1962 Cuban Missile Crisis – Reflection Questions

- 1. Write a brief summary of the article you just read. What happened at the Cuban Missile Crisis?**
- 2. Who is John F. Kennedy?**
- 3. Who is Nikita Khrushchev?**
- 4. What did the Soviet Union do that upset the United States in 1962? Why would this upset the US?**
- 5. How did Kennedy respond to the USSR putting nuclear weapons in Cuba?**
- 6. How did Khrushchev respond to Kennedy's response? What did he propose?**
- 7. What did the US come really close to doing?**
- 8. What was the result of the crisis?**
- 9. What did the world come really close to during this time? Which of our key terms describes this?**
- 10. Based on your reading, create a definition for Cuban Missile Crisis in your own words.**
(Possible sentence starter: The Cuban Missile Crisis was a time when...)