

Key Events – Activity 3

The Cuban Missile Crisis 1962

Aims

- To understand the causes and consequences of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962
- To evaluate the impact of the Crisis
- To explain the seriousness of the crisis in a piece of extended writing

Resources

coldwarKEA3.lgfl.net is your one-stop link to curriculum resources for this activity; you will find videos, photographs and links to the relevant main Cold War sections.

Introduction

The USA had been very hostile towards Cuba ever since a Communist revolution overthrew the US-backed dictator Batista to bring in the charismatic and fiery Fidel Castro as Cuban President. The US President John F Kennedy even backed an attempt to overthrow Castro by supporting Castro's enemies in an attempted invasion at the Bay of Pigs in 1961. By October 1962, the USA's gaze was even more tightly focused on Cuba. On the following pages, there is a timeline of the events which followed.

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Timeline

October 14th

U2 spy plane took pictures of missile sites in Cuba

October 16th – 20th

US President Kennedy formed an Executive Committee (ExComm) to advise him. For the next 3 days, ExComm argued about what to do. Some members (the 'hawks') wanted tough action, such as:

- A 'surgical' (very precise) air attack to destroy the missile launch sites
- An invasion of Cuba

Other ExComm members wanted less drastic measures:

- Diplomatic pressure
- Secret contact with the USSR to see if they could do a deal

October 21st

ExComm finally came up with a plan. The US Navy was to quarantine Cuba. This meant stopping all ships coming to Cuba. No more military equipment would be allowed in. It was risky. Stopping a Soviet ship was technically an act of war. Kennedy admitted to his brother Robert that it was 'one hell of a gamble'.

October 22nd

- US armed forces went to DEFCON 3 (Defence Condition 3). DEFCON 1 would be all-out war with the USSR
- President Kennedy went on national TV to tell the American public what was happening
- In Moscow, Khrushchev became more and more convinced that the USA would invade Cuba. He told his advisers, 'They can attack us and we shall respond. This may end in a big war.'

October 23rd

- Khrushchev condemned the US blockade, calling it piracy. Secretly, he was relieved that the US had not invaded Cuba
- Castro ordered Cuban forces to get ready for an American invasion
- A fleet of Soviet ships approached Cuba carrying more missiles
- Panic buying in US supermarkets, as people prepared for war

October 24th

- Secretary General of the United Nation, U Thant, called on both sides to compromise
- Khrushchev ordered Soviet ships to stop heading for Cuba (but not to turn back)
- US Armed Forces went to DEFCON2. This was the only time in the entire Cold War they went this close to war

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October 25th

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

October 26th

- Over 120,000 US troops assembled near Florida coast. US invasion of Cuba looked likely
- Kennedy told ExComm that he favoured some sort of deal to end the crisis. The ExComm Hawks 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

October 27th

- Probably the most tense day of the crisis. Cuban forces shot down a US spy plane
- Khrushchev sent another letter to Kennedy. It contained the same offer. 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 removal of missiles from Turkey had to be kept secret

October 28th

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

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Your task

A web search on the Cuban Missile Crisis will give you thousands of results, each with different points of view based on the author's perspective. In some cases, the perspective may be Soviet or American. In other cases, writers may focus on the technology or on particular politicians. Many writers have focused on how serious the crisis was. That will be your job in this task.



You may have come across the Doomsday Clock of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists: thebulletin.org/timeline. The job of the Doomsday Clock is to estimate how close the world is to destruction by nuclear weapons. The key figures on the BAS committee were not able to meet in October 1962 and therefore never set a time for the Cuban Crisis because it was over so quickly. Your task is to use all the resources provided to write a paragraph about the Cuban Crisis and explain how many minutes to midnight the clock would have been set.

The Cuban Missile Crisis 1962

___ minutes to midnight

In my opinion the clock would have been set at this time in October 1962.

The crisis originated because ...

It got worse because

The most dangerous point in my view was ...