

Cuban Missile Crisis

The **Cuban Missile Crisis** was a confrontation during the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States regarding the Soviet deployment of nuclear missiles in Cuba. The crisis started on October 16, 1962, when U.S. reconnaissance was shown to U.S. President John F. Kennedy revealing Soviet nuclear missile installations on the island, and ended thirteen days later on October 28, 1962, when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev announced that the installations would be dismantled. The Cuban Missile Crisis is regarded as the moment when the Cold War came closest to escalating into a nuclear war. Russians refer to the event as the "**Caribbean Crisis**," while Cubans refer to it as the "**October Crisis**."

U.S. Nuclear Advantage

Various estimates indicate that the U.S. had a decided advantage over the Soviet Union in the period leading up to the Cuban Missile Crisis. In Chapter 6 of *The Demilitarized Society: Disarmament and Conversion*, Seymour Melman describes how "the attempt to emplace medium and intermediate-range missiles in Cuba made solid sense for the Soviets. For their leaders it was a necessary response to desperate military situations into which the Soviets had been cornered by a series of remarkable American successes with military materiel and military intelligence." For example, by the close of 1962 the United States had a dramatic advantage in nuclear weapons with "more than 300 land-based intercontinental missiles and a fleet of Polaris missile submarines." The Soviet Union for its part had only four to six land-based ICBMs, according to a White House estimate in 1962, and "about 100 short-range V-1 type missiles that could be launched from surface submarines" (Melman, 1988: 118-119).

...also points to a dramatic U.S. military advantage. He writes: "Few in Washington seriously believed that a few dozen ballistic missiles in Cuba could change the essential fact of the strategic balance of power: the Soviet Union was hopelessly outgunned...By the fall of 1962, America's arsenal contained 3,000 nuclear warheads and nearly 300 in espionage. Before his arrest on the first day of the Cuban missile crisis, Colonel Oleg Penkovsky had served as intelligence agent for the Americans and British. He was also a colonel in Soviet Intelligence. Melman notes that "the proceedings of his trial in April 1963 revealed that he had delivered 5,000 frames of film of Soviet military-technical information, apart from many hours of talk with western agents during several trips to western Europe". Melman argues that top officers in the Soviet Union concluded "that the US then possessed decisive advantage in arms and intelligence, and that the USSR no longer wielded a credible nuclear deterrent" (Melman, 1988: 119)

U.S. Missile Sites in Turkey

In 1961, the U.S. started deploying 15 Jupiter IRBM (intermediate-range ballistic missiles) nuclear missiles near Izmir, Turkey, which directly threatened cities in the western sections of the Soviet Union. These missiles were regarded by President Kennedy as being of questionable strategic value; a nuclear submarine was capable of providing the same cover with both stealth and superior firepower.

Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev had publicly expressed his anger at the Turkish deployment, and regarded the missiles as a personal affront. The deployment of missiles in Cuba — the first time Soviet missiles were moved outside the USSR — is commonly seen as Khrushchev's direct response to the Turkish missiles.

Soviet Medium-Range Ballistic Missiles on Cuban soil, with a range of 2,000 km (1,200 statute miles), could threaten Washington, DC and around half of the U.S.'s SAC bases (of nuclear-armed bombers), with a flight time of under twenty minutes. In addition, the U.S.'s radar warning systems oriented toward the USSR would have provided little warning of a launch from Cuba

Missile Deployment

Khrushchev devised the deployment plan in May of 1962, and by late July over sixty Soviet ships were en route to Cuba, some of them already carrying military material. John McCone, director of the CIA, warned President Kennedy that some of the ships were probably carrying missiles; however, John and Robert Kennedy, Dean Rusk, and Robert McNamara concluded that the Soviets would not try such a thing. Kennedy's administration had received repeated claims from Soviet diplomats that there were no missiles in Cuba, nor any plans to place any, and that the Soviets were not interested in starting an international drama that might impact the US elections in November. This meant that there would be no more war.

The U-2 flights

A U-2 flight in late August photographed a new series of SAM (surface-to-air missile) sites being constructed, but on September 4, 1962 Kennedy told Congress that there were no *offensive* missiles in Cuba. On the night of September 8, the first consignment of SS-4 MRBMs was unloaded in Havana, and a second shipload arrived on September 16. The Soviets were building nine sites — six for SS-4s and three for SS-5s with a range of 4,000 km (2,400 statute miles). The planned arsenal was forty launchers, an increase in Soviet first strike capacity of 70%. This matter was readily noticed by Cubans in Cuba and perhaps as many as a thousand reports of such reached Miami, and were evaluated and then considered spurious by US intelligence

A number of unconnected problems meant that the missiles were not discovered by the US until a U-2 flight of October 14 clearly showed the construction of an SS-4 site near San Cristobal. The photographs were shown to Kennedy on October 16. By October 19 the U-2 flights (then almost continuous) showed four sites were operational. Initially, the U.S. government kept the information secret, telling only the fourteen key officials of the executive committee.

The United Kingdom was not informed until the evening of October 21. President Kennedy, in a televised address on October 22, announced the discovery of the installations and proclaimed that any nuclear missile attack from Cuba would be regarded as an attack by the Soviet Union and would be responded to accordingly. He also placed a naval "quarantine" (blockade) on Cuba to prevent further Soviet shipments of military weapons from arriving there. The word *quarantine* was used rather than *blockade* for reasons of international law (the blockade took place in international waters) and in keeping with the Quarantine Speech of 1937 by Franklin D. Roosevelt. Kennedy reasoned that a blockade would be an act of war (which was correct) and war had not been declared between the U.S. and Cuba. A U-2 flight was shot down by a SA-2 stationary air turret October 27, causing negotiation stress between the USSR and USA.

U.S. Response

With the news of the confirmed photographic evidence of Soviet missile bases in Cuba, President Kennedy convened a special group of senior advisers to meet secretly at the White House. This group later became known as the Ex-Comm, or Executive Committee of the National Security Council. From the morning of October 16 this group met frequently to devise a response to the threat. An immediate bombing strike was dismissed early on, as was a potentially time-consuming appeal to the United Nations. They were eventually able to put out the possibility of diplomacy, narrowing the choice down to a naval blockade and an ultimatum, or full-scale invasion. A blockade was finally chosen, although there were a number of hawks (notably Paul Nitze, and Generals Curtis LeMay and Maxwell Taylor) who kept pushing for tougher action. An invasion was planned, and troops were assembled in Florida. However US intelligence was flawed: they believed Soviet and Cuban troop numbers on Cuba to be around 10,000 and 100,000, when they were in fact around 43,000 and 270,000 respectively. Also, they were unaware that 12 kiloton-range nuclear warheads had already been delivered to the island and mounted on FROG-3 "Luna" short-range artillery rockets, which could be launched on the authority of the Soviet commander on the island, General Pliyev, in the event of an invasion. Though they posed no threat to the continental US, an invasion would probably have precipitated a nuclear strike against the invading force, with catastrophic results.

There were a number of issues with the naval blockade. There was legality - as Fidel Castro noted, there was nothing illegal about the missile installations; they were certainly a threat to the U.S., but similar missiles aimed at the U.S.S.R. were in place in Europe (sixty Thor IRBMs in four squadrons near Nottingham, in the United Kingdom; thirty Jupiter IRBMs in two squadrons near Gioia del Colle, Italy; and fifteen Jupiter IRBMs in one squadron near İzmir, Turkey). There was concern of the Soviet's reaction to the blockade; it might turn into escalating retaliation.

Kennedy spoke to the American public, and to the Soviet government, in a televised address on October 22. He confirmed the presence of the missiles in Cuba and announced the naval blockade as a quarantine zone of 500 nautical miles (926 km) around the Cuban coast. He warned that the military was "prepared for any eventualities", and condemned the Soviet Union for "secrecy and deception". The U.S. was surprised at the solid support from its European allies, particularly from the notoriously difficult President Charles de Gaulle of France. Nevertheless, Britain's prime minister Macmillan, as well as much of the international community, did not understand why a diplomatic solution was not considered.

The case was conclusively proved on October 25 at an emergency session of the UN Security Council. U.S. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson attempted to force an answer from Soviet Ambassador Valerian Zorin as to the existence of the weapons, famously demanding, "Don't wait for the translation!" Upon Zorin's refusal, Stevenson produced photographs taken by U.S. surveillance aircraft showing the missile installations in Cuba.

Khrushchev sent letters to Kennedy on October 23 and 24 claiming the deterrent nature of the missiles in Cuba and the peaceful intentions of the Soviet Union; however, the Soviets had delivered two different deals to the United States government. On October 26, they offered to withdraw the missiles in return for a U.S. guarantee not to invade Cuba or support any invasion. The second deal was broadcast on public radio on October 27, calling for the withdrawal of U.S. missiles from Turkey in addition to the demands of the 26th.

The crisis peaked on October 27, when a U-2 (piloted by Rudolph Anderson) was shot down over Cuba and another U-2 flight over Russia was almost intercepted when it strayed over Siberia, after Curtis LeMay (U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff) had neglected to enforce Presidential orders to suspend all overflights. At the same time, Soviet merchant ships were nearing the quarantine zone. Kennedy responded by publicly accepting the first deal and sending Robert Kennedy to the Soviet embassy to accept the second in private that the fifteen Jupiter missiles near İzmir, Turkey would be removed six months later. The Soviet ships turned back and on October 28, Khrushchev announced that he had ordered the removal of the Soviet missiles in Cuba. The decision prompted then Secretary of State Dean Rusk to comment, "*We are eyeball to eyeball, and the other fellow just blinked.*"

Satisfied that the Soviets had removed the missiles, President Kennedy ordered an end to the quarantine of Cuba on November 20.

Aftermath

The compromise satisfied no one, though it was a particularly sharp embarrassment for Khrushchev and the Soviet Union because the withdrawal of American missiles from Turkey was not made public. They were seen as retreating from circumstances that they had started — though if played well, it could have looked like just the opposite: the USSR gallantly saving the world from nuclear holocaust by not insisting on restoring the nuclear equilibrium. Khrushchev's fall from power two years later can be partially linked to Politburo embarrassment at both Khrushchev's eventual concessions to the US and his ineptitude in precipitating the crisis in the first place.

U.S. military commanders were not happy with the result either. General LeMay told the President that it was "the greatest defeat in our history" and that the US should invade immediately. This was considered by John F. Kennedy but cooler heads would prevail and used his patience to his advantage and ran a successful quarantine on Cuba.

For Cuba, it was a betrayal by the Soviets whom they had trusted, given that the decisions on putting an end to the crisis had been made exclusively by Kennedy and Khrushchev.

In early 1992 it was confirmed that key Soviet forces in Cuba had, by the time the crisis broke, received tactical nuclear warheads for their artillery rockets, and IL-28 bombers, though General Anatoly Gribkov, part of the Soviet staff responsible for the operation, stated that the local Soviet commander, General Issa Pliyev, had pre-delegated authority to use them if the U.S. had mounted a full-scale invasion of Cuba. Gribkov misspoke: the Kremlin's authorization remained unsigned and undelivered. (Other accounts show that Pliyev was given permission to use tactical nuclear warheads but only in the most extreme case of an American invasion during which contact with Moscow is lost. However when American forces seemed to be readying for an attack, (after the U2 photos, but before Kennedy's television address), Khrushchev rescinded his earlier permission for Pliyev to use the tactical nuclear weapons, even under the most extreme conditions. Whether because of the clear American nuclear dominance, or simply out of benevolence, Khrushchev wanted to avoid nuclear war at all costs.)

The Cuban Missile Crisis may have led to the creation of the *Hot Line*, a direct communications link between Moscow and Washington D.C. The purpose of this undersea line was to have a way the leaders of the two Cold War countries could communicate directly to better solve a crisis like the one in October 1962.