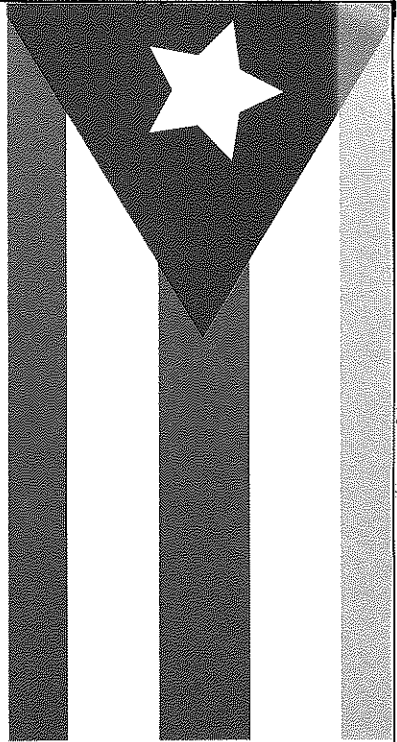


# Reappraising the Cuban Missile Crisis



Is our view of the crisis a pack of Kennedy-camp myths?

Mark Rathbone

## Key concept

### Significance

#### Before you read this

You should make sure you are familiar with the basic chronology of the crisis. This article is about challenging common perceptions, so try to sum up in a single sentence what you think was going on in 1962 and why. (That is quite a good revision exercise, by the way!)

John F. Kennedy's reputation as one of the great US presidents depends in no small measure on his handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962. Standing up both to the aggressive provocation of the USSR and to pressure from the US **Chiefs of Staff** within **ExComm** to invade Cuba or bomb the missile sites, he secured the dismantling of the sites without provoking a catastrophic war. And, afterwards, he resisted the temptation to antagonise the Soviets by presenting it as a US victory. When, on 28 October, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev declared his willingness to dismantle the missiles and return them to the USSR, Kennedy publicly praised the Soviet leader, calling the decision 'an important and constructive contribution to peace'.

The role of President Kennedy in these events has often been presented in heroic terms. No doubt it helped that several of the earliest studies of the crisis were written by Kennedy White House insiders, who naturally praised the role of the president. This article examines some of the myths lying behind the crisis and tries to reach a more balanced conclusion about its causes.

### Myth 1: The Missile Crisis was provoked by Soviet aggression

The traditional Western view of the crisis puts the blame squarely on Khrushchev, who attempted to install offensive weapons close to the USA — endangering almost every major US city — and withdrew them because of Kennedy's resolute determination. But this US-centred interpretation ignores the fact that the missile crisis did not begin in October 1962, nor was it confined to Cuba.

The USA and Turkey signed an agreement on 28 October 1959 for the deployment of **Jupiter** nuclear missiles in Turkey, predating any high-level contacts between the USSR and **Fidel Castro's** Cuban government. Soviet first deputy prime minister Anastas Mikoyan initially visited Cuba in February 1960 and the first Soviet arms shipments arrived in Cuba in September 1960. It was another 20 months before a Soviet delegation arrived in Havana, on 29 May 1962, to discuss with Castro and his brother Raul (the Cuban minister of defence) their concern over a potential US invasion of Cuba and to suggest fortifying Cuban defences by deploying nuclear missiles there.

The Soviets had shown remarkable patience in waiting over 2 years before responding in kind to the US move to deploy nuclear missiles in Turkey. It was only when the Jupiter missiles became operational in April 1962 that Khrushchev decided to deploy similar weapons in Cuba. It is important to any understanding of the missile crisis to realise that the Jupiter missiles in Turkey were just as threatening to the USSR as the Cuban missiles were to the USA. Cuba may have been only 140 km from the coast of Florida, but Turkey bordered on the

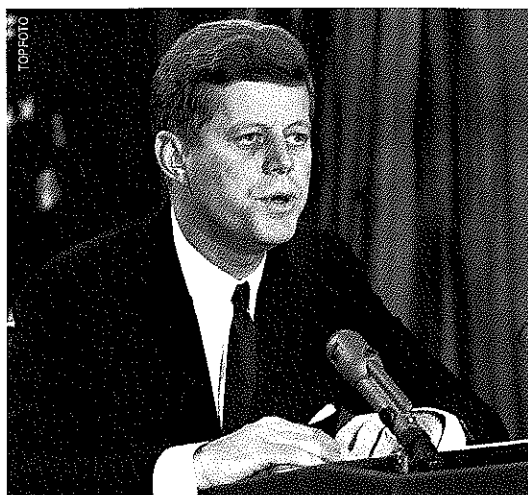
**Chiefs of Staff:** heads of the US Army, Navy and Air Force.

**ExComm:** Executive Committee of the National Security Council, created by President Kennedy on 16 October 1962. It was the key US decision-making body during the crisis. It included members of Kennedy's government, senior US diplomats, the director of the CIA, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and various special advisers.

**Jupiter missiles:** US nuclear missiles whose deployment in Turkey was agreed in 1959 and which became operational in April 1962.

**Fidel Castro:** Cuban president, prime minister and commander-in-chief of armed forces after the 1959 coup that overthrew the Batista government. In 1962, Castro accepted the Soviet offer to deploy nuclear missiles in Cuba.

**President Kennedy announcing on television the US enforcement of a blockade of Cuba, 23 October 1962.**



### Key US personnel involved

#### President John F. Kennedy

Approved the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961 and Operation Mongoose in November. Kennedy established ExComm in October 1962 to decide on US actions in the missile crisis. Kennedy was anxious to avoid another débâcle like the Bay of Pigs but he was also aware of the danger of a nuclear war.

#### Robert F. 'Bobby' Kennedy

Attorney general and President Kennedy's brother, his most intimate and influential adviser. He met secretly with Soviet ambassador Dobrynin in an attempt to end the crisis.

#### Robert McNamara

Secretary of defense. McNamara opposed an air attack on Cuba and pressed for a blockade. He supported assuring the Soviets informally of the later removal of Jupiter missiles from Turkey.

#### Dean Rusk

Secretary of state. Rusk initially advocated air strikes on Cuba but later suggested that Robert Kennedy offer Ambassador Dobrynin assurances that the Jupiter missiles in Turkey would be withdrawn.

#### Adlai Stevenson

US ambassador to the United Nations. Stevenson consistently argued for a diplomatic solution to the crisis.

#### John McCone

CIA director. He advocated a hard-line stance towards the USSR throughout the crisis.

#### General Maxwell Taylor

Chairman, US Joint Chiefs of Staff. Taylor consistently argued for a full invasion of Cuba.

#### General Curtis LeMay

Chief of strategic air command. LeMay urged for air strikes against Cuba followed by an invasion, even after the crisis had ended.

USSR. If the Americans could get away with deploying their missiles in Turkey, why should they object to the Soviets doing the same in Cuba?

In their 1997 study of the missile crisis — *One Hell of a Gamble* — the Russian historian Aleksandr Fursenko and the US historian Timothy Naftali put it like this, 'In Soviet eyes the Jupiters legitimated the missiles in Cuba. In the court of world opinion, there was no difference between US missiles stationed in Turkey and pointed at Moscow and Soviet missiles pointed at Washington, D.C., from Cuba.'

There was a difference, however, between the US attitude to Castro and the USSR's attitude to Turkey. The USA made repeated and vigorous attempts to undermine and overthrow Castro's government. On 16 August 1960 (before any Soviet arms had arrived in Cuba), the CIA attempted to assassinate Castro by poisoning his favourite cigars. There were at least seven further US attempts to kill the Cuban leader between 1960 and 1965, according to a US Senate investigation 10 years later, not all of them as hare-brained as the first!

On 17 April 1961, 1,400 Cuban exiles, trained, armed and assisted by the USA, attempted to invade Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. The operation was a disaster: 114 were killed and almost 1,200 captured. The US threat to Castro did not end after this fiasco, though it did become subtler. On 30 November 1961, President Kennedy authorised Operation Mongoose, a covert CIA operation '...to help Cuba overthrow the Communist regime'. The continuing US threat to Castro's government was used by the Soviets to justify the deployment of missiles in Cuba, but there was no comparable Soviet action against the Turkish government.

### Myth 2: The Soviets were deceitful and dishonest throughout

Khrushchev is often condemned for his duplicity in the build-up to the missile crisis, repeatedly denying that the USSR was constructing bases on Cuba. Eighteen months before the crisis, on 19 April 1961, US attorney-general Robert Kennedy anticipated the danger, warning the president that, 'If we don't want Russia to set up missile bases in Cuba, we had better decide now what we are willing to do to stop it.'

Coincidentally, on the same day, Khrushchev assured Kennedy that, 'The Soviet Union does not seek any advantages or privileges in Cuba. We do not have any bases in Cuba, and we do not intend to establish any.' On 29 May 1962, Khrushchev made the first move towards building such bases. On 18 October 1962, President Kennedy asked Anatoly Dobrynin, Soviet ambassador to the USA, directly whether his country was building missile bases in Cuba. Dobrynin offered his assurances that only 'defensive' Soviet military equipment was

### Key Soviet personnel involved

#### Nikita Khrushchev

Leader of the USSR from 1953. Khrushchev had proposed the idea of secretly stationing medium-range nuclear missiles in Cuba.

#### Andrei Gromyko

Soviet foreign minister. Gromyko opposed the deployment of missiles in Cuba and assured Kennedy on 18 October that they were 'defensive'.

#### Aleksandr Fomin

KGB Station Chief in Washington. Fomin used journalist John Scali as a back channel to relay Khrushchev's offer to the US government to remove the missiles in return for a US promise not to invade Cuba.

#### Anatoly Dobrynin

Soviet ambassador to the USA. Dobrynin had secret talks with Robert Kennedy, in which Kennedy suggested the removal of the US Jupiter missiles in Turkey.

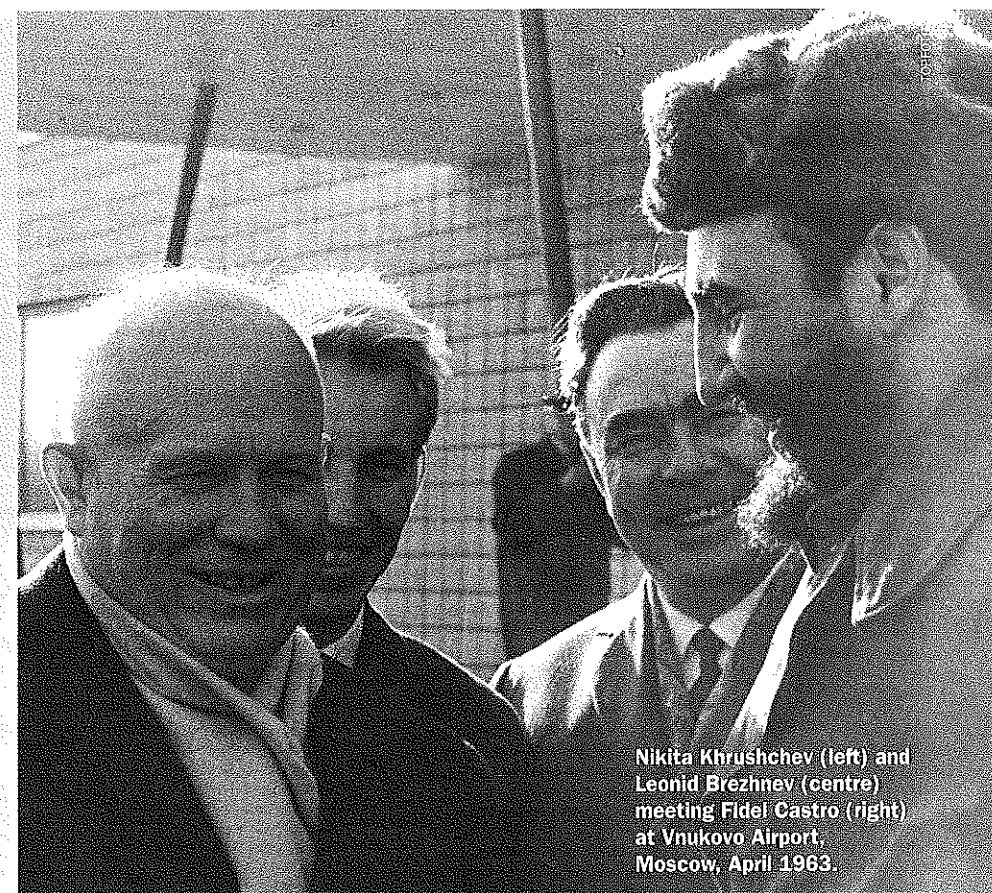
#### Valerian Zorin

Soviet ambassador to the UN. He maintained there were no Soviet missile sites in Cuba until Adlai Stevenson produced U2 photographs proving that there were.

being provided to Cuba. He was lying, and Kennedy, who had seen U2 spy plane photographs of missile bases under construction in Cuba, knew it. In his book, *Thirteen Days*, Robert Kennedy characterised the Soviet position over Cuba as 'one gigantic fabric of lies'.

Khrushchev himself continued to maintain, in a letter he wrote to Kennedy on 23 October, that, 'the armaments which are in Cuba...are intended solely for defensive purposes.' The letter was written the day after the president had made the Cuban situation public in a televised address to the US people. This pretence was exposed to the whole world in the famous confrontation in the United Nations Security Council 2 days later, when US ambassador Adlai Stevenson produced massive enlargements of the U2 photographs of Soviet missile sites in Cuba, to the embarrassment of Soviet ambassador Valerian Zorin.

The Soviets, then, were undoubtedly guilty of deception and dishonesty. Yet there was nothing exceptional about this. Lies and duplicity were the common currency of international diplomacy, then as now, and the Americans were just as guilty of deception as the Soviets. In the **U2 incident** in May 1960, for example, President Eisenhower continued to deny that the USA was undertaking photographic reconnaissance flights over Soviet territory until the USSR produced not only the wreckage of the U2 aircraft they had shot down, but also Gary Powers, its pilot.



Nikita Khrushchev (left) and Leonid Brezhnev (centre) meeting Fidel Castro (right) at Vnukovo Airport, Moscow, April 1963.

The Kennedy administration was no more honest than its predecessor, as the degree of deception involved in its Cuba policy demonstrates. The attempt to disguise the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba by US-trained, US-armed, US-transported Cuban exiles on 17 April 1961 as a spontaneous uprising caused by internal discontent with Castro's government was as disingenuous as its execution was incompetent. Even after the failure of the Bay of Pigs, the US government continued to lie about its intentions in Cuba. For example, Kennedy told Aleksei Adzhubei, Khrushchev's son-in-law, early in 1962, 'We are not planning an invasion of Cuba...' Yet just a few weeks earlier, the president had authorised Operation Mongoose. A review of

**U2:** high-altitude US photographic surveillance aircraft. Photographs taken by a U2 in October 1962 provided the first solid evidence for the construction of Soviet missile sites in Cuba.

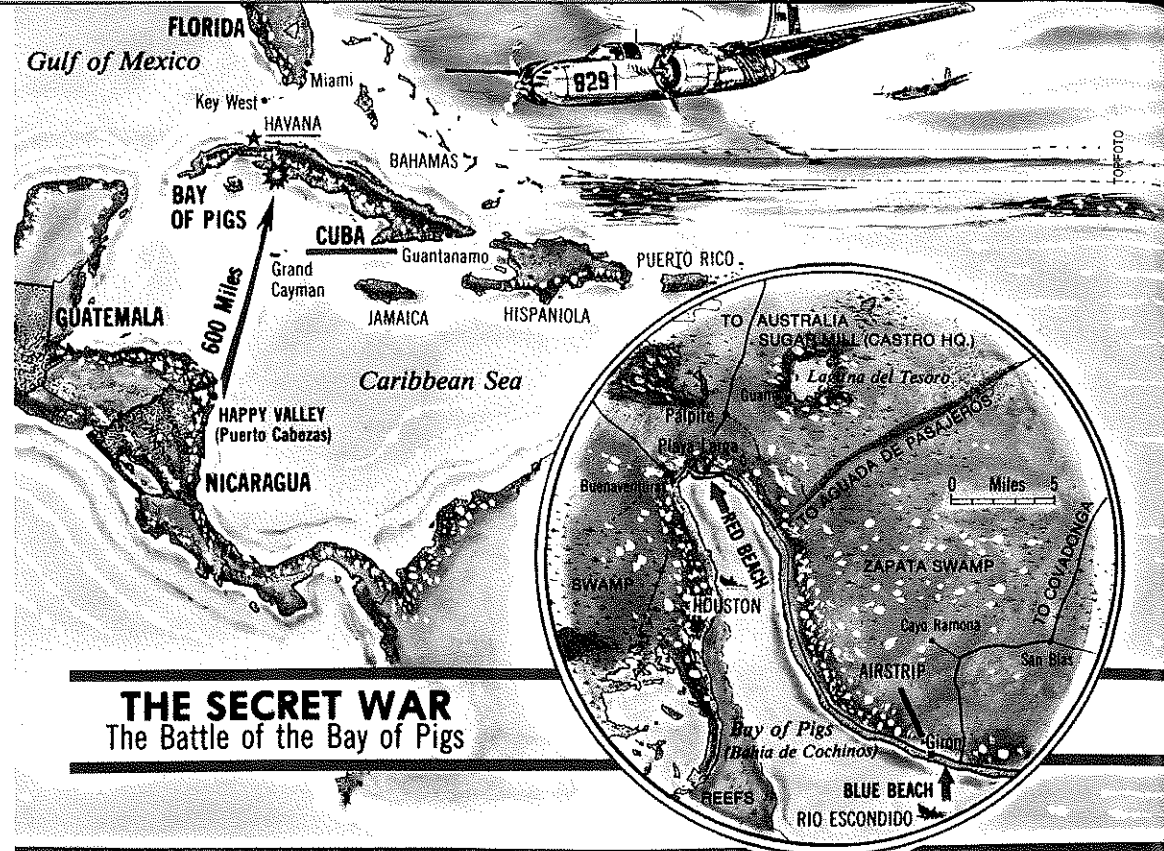
**U2 incident:** in May 1960, a U2 aircraft was shot down in Soviet airspace. This incident had a serious impact on a US/USSR summit meeting in Paris.

### key points

- John F. Kennedy's role in the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 is often presented in heroic terms. It holds that, by standing up both to Soviet aggression and to pressure from the US chiefs of staff for a military response, Kennedy secured a peaceful resolution of the crisis.
- This version of events has been promoted by numerous US accounts of the crisis, most typically by *Thirteen Days*, written by the president's brother, Robert Kennedy.
- However, this interpretation is heavily US-centred and historians should also consider events from the Soviet viewpoint.
- The roots of the crisis go back at least to 1959 and include a long trail of aggressive US moves, such as the deployment of Jupiter missiles in Turkey, the attempted invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs, and Operation Mongoose, a covert attempt to undermine Castro.



# The Bay of Pigs invasion, April 1961.



progress with this operation by Brigadier-General Edward Lansdale on 25 July 1962 spelt out four options, one of which was to 'overthrow the Castro-Communist regime by US military force'.

## Myth 3: Castro was a puppet of the USSR

In the 1950s, Fidel Castro waged a guerrilla war against the pro-US Cuban dictator **General Batista**, which culminated in Batista's defeat and Castro's triumphant entry into Havana on 1 January 1959. At this stage Castro had no high-level contacts with the Soviet Union. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were not established until 7 May 1960, 16 months after Castro came to power.

It was US policy which drove Castro increasingly into the hands of the USSR. For many years, the USA had bought the bulk of Cuban sugar production. On 8 July 1960, the US government suspended the sugar quota, which cut off around 80% of Cuban exports to the USA. The USSR quickly agreed to buy all the sugar previously destined for the USA. Furthermore, the US suspension of the sugar quota prompted Castro to respond by nationalising US investments in Cuba.

## Questions

- According to Robert Kennedy, President Kennedy had been intending to remove the Jupiter missiles from Turkey long before the Cuban crisis blew up. How does this affect your assessment of Kennedy's conduct during the crisis?
- Does the evidence support the accusation that Kennedy lied when he said the USA was not planning an invasion of Cuba? You might not like it when politicians lie, but to what extent did the dishonesty on both sides actually matter?
- Has Rathbone proved his case in this article that Castro was not a Soviet puppet?

US policy had deprived America of any influence in Cuba and forced Castro into economic dependence on the USSR.

Later US actions — notably the Bay of Pigs invasion and Operation Mongoose — reinforced this and caused economic dependence to lead to military protection. Castro and other Cuban officials believed, not without some justification, that a new US invasion was imminent and the Soviet offer of nuclear missiles in May 1962 was accepted quickly.

Yet even then, Castro retained his independence and was determined not to become a Soviet puppet. Towards the end of the crisis, infuriated by Khrushchev's unilateral decision to dismantle the missile sites and remove the missiles from Cuba, as well as by US demands (and Soviet pressure) for

Cuban agreement to on-site inspection and the removal of IL-28 bombers, Castro flew into a rage, cursing Khrushchev as 'son of a bitch, bastard, asshole'. Relations between Cuba and the USSR were strained for several years.

If Castro had been merely a Soviet puppet, he would not have survived the collapse of the USSR in 1991. As it is, Castro celebrated the fortieth anniversary of his seizure of power in 1999 and, despite looking increasingly frail in recent years, was still president of Cuba in 2006. Castro was left-wing certainly, but he was predominantly a nationalist who wanted independence for his country, not a Soviet stooge, as the US government seemed to suppose. It was a mistake which the USA also made with Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, with even more disastrous consequences.

## Conclusion

The heroic portrayal of John F. Kennedy's role in the missile crisis in *Thirteen Days* is an attractive and enduring one. It contains some elements of truth, in that Kennedy does deserve credit for resisting pressure from the chiefs of staff for an attack on Cuba, and for being willing to withdraw the Jupiter missiles from Turkey, tacitly acknowledging their equivalent status to the Soviet missiles in Cuba. But it is also one-sided and confines the crisis too narrowly, both geographically and chronologically, in that it allocates blame entirely on the USSR and ignores the long trail of aggressive US moves — the deployment of Jupiters in

Turkey, the Bay of Pigs, the covert operation to undermine Castro — which was the predominant cause of the crisis.

**Mark Rathbone** is Head of History at Canford School, Wimborne, Dorset. He is the author of numerous articles on British and US history and modern British politics.

## Further study

- Freedman, L. (2000) *Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos and Vietnam*, OUP. An up-to-date analysis of Kennedy's foreign policy.
- Fursenko, A. and Naftali, T. (1997) *One Hell of a Gamble*, John Murray. An authoritative and readable study of the crisis, written jointly by a Russian and an American historian.
- Isaacs, J. and Downing, T. (1998) *Cold War*, Bantam. An illustrated account of the Cold War, written to accompany the excellent television series with the same title.
- Kennedy, R. F. (1969) *Thirteen Days*, Pan. A short account of the missile crisis from one of the principal members of ExComm.
- Phillips, S. (2001) *The Cold War*, Heinemann. An excellent AS/A2 textbook on the Cold War.
- Schlesinger, A. M. (1965) *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*, Andre Deutsch. Detailed and reverent insider's account of the Kennedy presidency.
- Talbott, S. (ed.) (1971) *Khrushchev Remembers*, Little Brown. A compilation of memoirs written by Khrushchev.
- Walker, M. (1993) *The Cold War*, Fourth Estate. One of the first studies of the Cold War to be written after it ended.

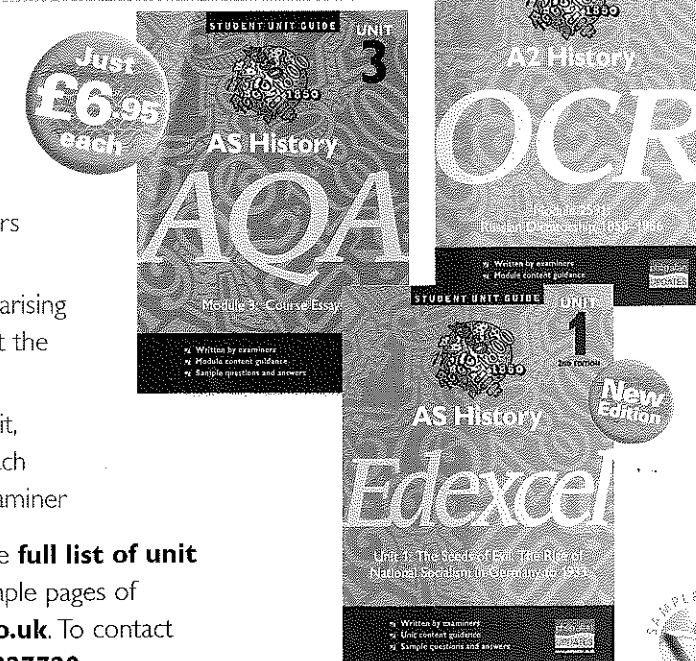
## AS/A2 Student Unit Guides

Student Unit Guides will help focus your revision, build your confidence and strengthen your exam technique.

Each guide:

- outlines the aims of the AS or A2 qualification and offers strategies to improve revision
- provides an examiner's overview of the module, summarising the key content and identifying opportunities to exhibit the skills required by the unit
- presents graded answers to questions typical of the unit, with comments on the strengths and weaknesses of each response, giving you an insight into the mind of the examiner

See the form in the centre pages of this magazine for the **full list of unit guides** and for details of how to order. You can see sample pages of selected guides and order online at **www.philipallan.co.uk**. To contact our Customer Services Department, telephone **01235 827720**.



There is a vast amount of material relating to the crisis available on the internet. The following are just three of the more interesting websites: [www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/10/](http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/10/). Website related to the CNN/BBC television series *Cold War*.

[www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/cuba\\_mis\\_cri/](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/cuba_mis_cri/). Website of the US National Security Archive. Contains a wealth of material, including declassified documents, audio clips and photographs.

[www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/diplomacy/forrel/cuba/cubamenu.htm](http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/diplomacy/forrel/cuba/cubamenu.htm). Huge collection of documents, compiled by Yale University Law School.