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Khrushchev, Kennedy and Cuba

Gregory Slyszy documents the political situation and events leading up to the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962

AQA A2 Aspects of international relations, 1945–2004

Edexcel A2 A world divided: superpower relations, 1944–90

'Manifest Destiny' A political doctrine, set out in the nineteenth century, that stipulated the right of the USA to expand westwards towards the Pacific Ocean.

Argument

No victor, no loser

The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, which brought the world to the brink of a potential nuclear war, was both caused and resolved by the two sides in this Cold War conflict.

The Cuban Missile Crisis is one of the defining episodes of the Cold War. Unsurprisingly, opinion about its causes, its unfolding and its aftermath has been divided, consistent with general interpretative approaches to the Cold War itself. Orthodox historians, such as Arthur Schlesinger, blame the recklessness of the Soviet Union for threatening the peace of the entire world. Revisionists, conversely, such as Ronald Steel and Barton J. Bernstein, cite a combination of US economic and domestic issues that frightened the Soviets into action in Cuba. Post-revisionist historians, however, like John Lewis Gaddis,

reject the partisanship of both views, and point to many different motives and causes, as well as to mutual blunders.

Context: the 'Monroe Doctrine'

As with most episodes of the Cold War period, the Cuban Missile Crisis had deep roots and it is important to view it in proper context. When in 1823 the US president, James Monroe, declared that the USA would no longer tolerate European colonial interference in the Americas, he set in motion a policy that would eventually form the basis of US strategy in the region. Growing naval and economic power enabled the USA to establish huge influence in the region. In 1904 President Theodore Roosevelt, in the spirit of 'Manifest Destiny', added to Monroe's declaration with his so-called corollary (supplement). This committed the USA to intervene as a 'police power' in any South American country in the event of 'chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilised society'.

Concern over lapses in civilisation was certainly not the reason why the USA was so 'protective' of its neighbours. On the eve of the First World War it had amassed huge economic interests across the region, from fruit to petroleum, sugar to agricultural land

— its dominance symbolised by the opening of the Panama Canal in August 1914.

US policy in Cuba

US interests in Cuba must be seen in the context of the Monroe Doctrine. The USA's defeat of Spain in the American–Spanish War of 1898 forced Spain to give up sovereignty over Cuba. Although Cuba was formally granted independence, it came under the USA's neo-colonial control in all but name — the USA having already annexed other former Spanish possessions of Puerto Rico, the Philippines and Guam. The myth of US pre-Second World War isolationism is thus put into perspective.

Over the next half a century or so, US–Cuban relations strengthened, as did US economic interests in Cuba, which by 1958 amounted to 90% of all foreign direct investment there, worth billions of dollars. The USA continued to interfere in Cuban affairs when it deemed it necessary to protect its interests, turning a blind eye to human rights abuses and inordinate levels of corruption. Cuba's uneven economic development, which favoured the top levels of society, provoked much unrest, particularly during the dissolute regime of Fulgencio Batista. In 1958 he was overthrown by a group of populist revolutionaries led by the charismatic young lawyer, Fidel Castro.

The Russian/Soviet game

Russia's links with Spanish colonies were sporadic, the remoteness of the area and its distance from Russia making closer relations extremely difficult. The Russian Revolution of 1917 altered matters little, Russian/Soviet interests being restricted to the

Questions

- Why is it important to view the Cuban Missile Crisis in a broad context?
- Why can it be argued that long-term US foreign policy drove Castro into the hands of the enemy?
- Can it be argued that Khrushchev provoked the Cuban Missile Crisis and Kennedy ended it?
- Why did each side claim victory?
- Why is there such diverse historical opinion as to the causes of the crisis?
- What did Zbigniew Brzezinski mean by claiming that the outcome of the crisis was a 'tactical victory for the USA and a strategic victory for the Soviet Union'?

activities of the Comintern. The Soviet Union was too preoccupied with its own security to expand its geopolitical interests much beyond its immediate borders.

With the Soviet Union's build-up of huge military forces during the Cold War that could project its power globally, however, matters were to change. The developing world from Asia to Africa was a particular target as former colonial Western powers were departing, leaving political vacuums in their wake. National and ideological interests were never far beneath the surface of the Soviet Union's propaganda that proclaimed liberation from capitalist oppression as its motive. The brutality of 'liberation', however, as it had been in Eastern Europe after the Second World War, was all too common. Cold War superpower competition provided ample opportunity for conflict where political stability was at a premium.

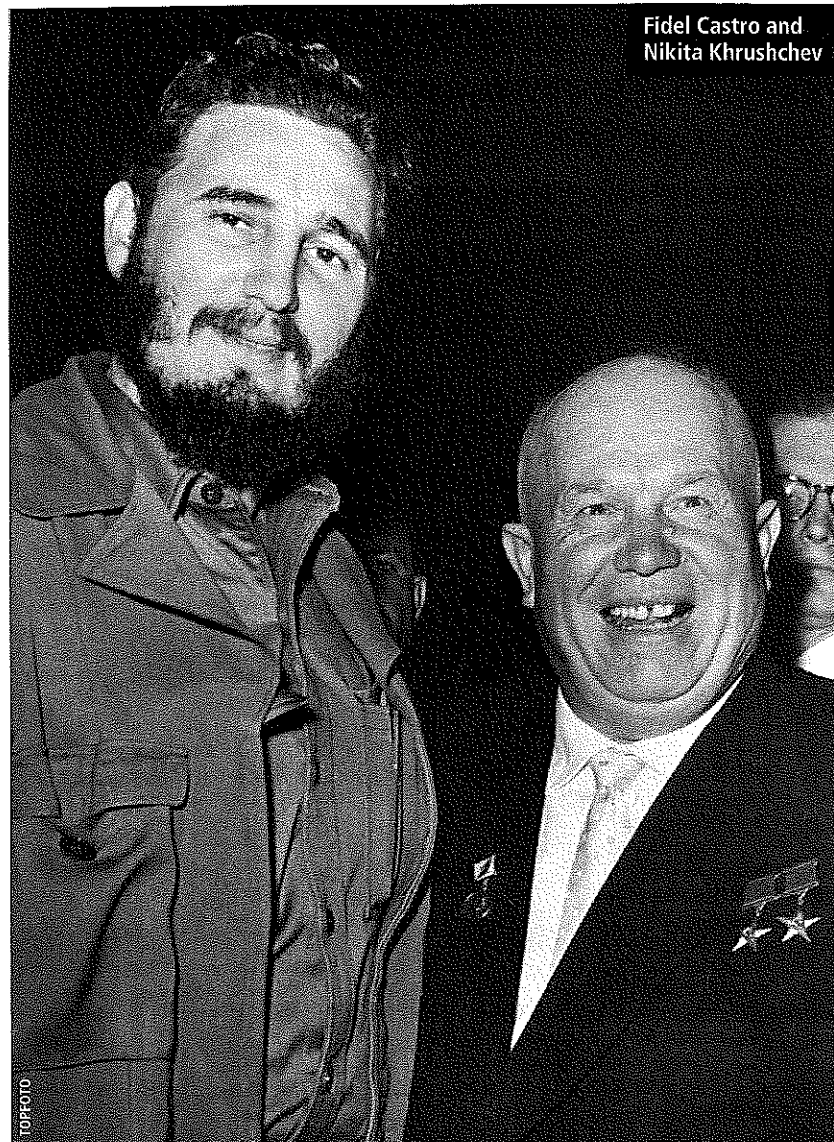
Fulgencio Batista During his corrupt regime of 1952–59, he was keener to attract lucrative US contracts than engage in a comprehensive programme of reform.

Comintern Also known as Communist International, formed in Moscow in 1919 to coordinate revolutionary activity around the world. It was dissolved in 1943. By 1930, 13 states in Latin America had Communist parties within the Comintern structure.

Members of the Cuban militia celebrating after defeating the CIA-backed invasion by anti-Castro exiles at the Bay of Pigs, April 1961



TOP PHOTO



Fidel Castro and Nikita Khrushchev

Chronology



- 2 December 1823** 'Monroe Doctrine' declared by President James Monroe.
- 6 December 1904** 'Roosevelt Corollary' declared by President Theodore Roosevelt during his 'State of the Union' address.
- 8 January 1959** Fidel Castro comes to power after the fall of the Batista regime.
- 14 April 1961** Bay of Pigs invasion operations begin.
- 1961** USA deploys 15 Jupiter intermediate-range ballistic missiles at Izmir, Turkey, aimed at the cities of western USSR, including Moscow.
- 30 November 1961** Kennedy initiates Operation Mongoose.
- April 1962** Khrushchev agrees to supply Cuba with missiles.
- September 1962** USA finalises a pre-invasion of Cuba bombing plan.
- 8 September 1962** Soviet intermediate-range missile equipment begins to arrive in Cuba.
- 14 October 1962** U2 reconnaissance plane discovers missile sites.
- 22 October 1962** President Kennedy addresses the US nation to reveal existence of missile sites.
- 23 October 1962** Kennedy announces 'quarantine' around Cuba.
- 24 October 1962** Soviet ships turn away from the 'quarantine'.
- 26 October 1962** Khrushchev's first letter to Kennedy.
- 27 October 1962** U2 spy plane shot down over Cuba. Khrushchev's second letter to Kennedy.
- 28 October 1962** Deal between the USSR and USA agreed.
- 30 November 1962** 'Quarantine' around Cuba ends.

US policy drives Cuba towards the Soviet Union

By the end of the Second World War the dominance of the USA over Cuba, as well as over the other 'independent' states of Latin America, was total. The Cuban situation after Castro's takeover was similar in many ways to that of Guatemala, where in 1954 a CIA plot ousted the elected leftist leader Jacobo Arbenz Guzman. This was because of his Soviet links and his nationalisation of land owned by the American United Fruit Company.

The trade embargo that the USA imposed on Cuba in retaliation for Castro's nationalisation of land belonging to US sugar companies forced him to seek economic assistance from the Soviet Union. This, in turn, was seen by the Soviet Union as a unique opportunity to break the USA's Latin American monopoly. Once again the CIA was called upon to remove a threat and on 17 April 1961, 1,500 US-trained Cuban exile troops landed at the so-called Bay of Pigs on Cuba's coast to overthrow the Castro

regime. Though it was a fiasco, US plans to remove Castro, which the subsequent Operation Mongoose continued, provoked Castro to turn to Moscow for security guarantees. He also declared for the first time his commitment to communism to combat 'Yankee imperialism'. US foreign policy mismanagement had driven Cuba into the hands of the enemy.

The Soviet Union takes the opportunity

Initially the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, was cautious about engaging the USA in its own backyard. Despite his characteristic bluster about the Soviet Union's nuclear capability, he was aware of the USA's military superiority, which President Kennedy had just announced would be increased. As such he decided in the autumn of 1961 to 'launch a hedgehog into Uncle Sam's pants', in reference to the recently deployed US missiles in Turkey.

If the Soviets could place on Cuba short- and medium-range missiles, of which they had plenty, they could not only deter a US invasion of the island but also redress the balance in terms of

President Kennedy signing the proclamation on the Cuba blockade, 24 October 1962



intercontinental missiles, of which the USA had plenty and the Soviets had few, as well as regain the initiative in Berlin. There was the additional bonus in Khrushchev's mind, of creating an ideological springboard from where to spread Marxist revolution in Latin America, as improbable as this was.

The discovery of the missile sites by a US U2 spy plane on 14 October 1962 would bring the world to the brink of nuclear war. However unreasonable the USA's regional policy was, Khrushchev's action was an irresponsible gamble as the USA could never tolerate hostile nuclear missiles 90 miles from its shore. Never a thoughtful decision-maker, Khrushchev believed he could outwit the new young US president, J. F. Kennedy, whom he had harangued the previous year in Vienna where the two leaders met for the first time.

Both sides opt for diplomacy and compromise

During the 2 weeks of the crisis, diplomacy prevailed over military options. Key to its success was Soviet respect for the naval and air 'quarantine' (blockade) that the USA imposed around Cuba on 24 October to prevent further build-up of Soviet arms. Notwithstanding the downing of a U2 spy plane over Cuba on 27 October, Khrushchev offered Kennedy a compromise in a letter on 26 October. In the letter he noted that, 'We and you ought not now to pull on the ends of the rope in which you have tied the knot of war, because the more the two

of us pull, the tighter that knot will be tied...let us take measures to untie that knot'.

Kennedy agreed, ignoring a second, more aggressive letter demanding withdrawal of US missiles from Turkey. In return for the withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba, the USA guaranteed not to invade the island and also pledged to withdraw its missiles from Turkey, though this would be done some time later so as not to imply any military concession.

Conclusion

If the immediate cause of the Cuban Missile Crisis was largely down to Khrushchev, then the USA stands accused of its long-term cause. As Khrushchev's biographer William Taubman notes, Khrushchev did prevent a flashpoint that Kennedy's 'macho diplomacy' (in historian David Reynolds' words) could have created. This was in part designed to appease US pro-war opinion in the middle of a congressional election campaign.

Weblinks



The BBC has a reproduction of the contemporary news release of 28 October 1962 announcing the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis at: www.tinyurl.com/29jbhz

George Washington University's website gives a view of the crisis 40 years on at www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/cuba_mis_cri/ but you have to pick through it to get what you want.

Berlin Although the Berlin Wall, built in August 1961, resolved immediate tensions, Khrushchev was ultimately holding out for a lasting solution that favoured the Soviet Union.

missile sites In September 1962 the Soviet Union began to construct missile sites in Cuba, from which nuclear warheads would have ultimately been able to hit 90% of US territory.

naval and air 'quarantine' (blockade) The term 'blockade' was avoided because in international law it signified an act of war, though Khrushchev did refer to it as a blockade, to highlight what he insisted was US aggression against Cuba.

Further reading

Gaddis, J. L. (1998) *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, Clarendon Press. A narrative of the first half of the Cold War up to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Includes many new perspectives.

Isaacs, J. and Downing, T. (1988) *Cold War*, Transworld Publishers. The book of the ground-breaking television series, this is an accessible narrative accompanied by many fascinating photographs.

Kennedy, R. F. (2000) *Thirteen Days: a Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*, W. W. Norton & Co. An equally intriguing account of the crisis by President Kennedy's brother Robert — his key adviser.

Keylor, W. R. (2005) *The Twentieth-Century World and Beyond: an International History Since 1900*,

Oxford University Press. An excellent overview of international relations.

Khrushchev, N. (trans. Strobe Talbot) (1971) *Khrushchev Remembers*, Sphere Books. Khrushchev's autobiography, which gives great insight into his rule from his perspective.

Nathan, J. (ed.) (1992) *The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited*, St Martin's Press. A highly recommended collection of essays from a number of scholars who shed new light on the crisis.

Schlesinger, A. (2002) *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*, Mariner Books. First published in 1965, this is a fascinating account of the Kennedy administration from an insider.

As such, perhaps accusations of a humiliating climb-down are inappropriate, especially as we now know that Kennedy was as willing to compromise as Khrushchev, not heeding US public opinion, which was pushing for war. Moreover, as the future Republican president, Richard Nixon, scornfully declared, echoing Khrushchev's own take on the outcome, a socialist Cuba still existed and communism had a foothold in the western hemisphere. There would be no repeat of Guatemala here. For Khrushchev, at least, this was a victory for his diplomacy and 'without a single shot having been fired'.

In reality there was no outright victor or loser. The outcome of the crisis, as historian Zbigniew Brzezinski notes, was a 'tactical victory for the USA and a strategic victory for the Soviet Union'. In the end, as journalist Elie Abel argued, 'it was sanity... that won', frightening the superpowers into a period of détente.

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