

The Cuban Missile Crisis

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Grade Level: High

Duration of lesson: 1-2 Periods

Overview:

The Cuban Missile Crisis in October of 1962 brought the United States and the Soviet Union to the brink of nuclear war. Reconnaissance photos taken on October 15th showed missile bases being built by the Soviets in Cuba, 90 miles away from the coast of the United States. President Kennedy ordered a quarantine around Cuba and in the ensuing days both sides ramped up for a possible military engagement. U.S. military forces stood at the ready, while Soviet forces in Cuba had orders to use nuclear weapons if the U.S. invaded Cuba. The stage was set for a disastrous confrontation. Negotiations between Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev continued in hopes of a nonviolent resolution. After much deliberation, on October 28th, the Soviet Union agreed to remove all missiles in Cuba in exchange for the United States removing all missiles in Turkey. The outcome of the crisis forever altered the course of the Cold War as both sides saw just how close they had come to a nuclear conflict. The foreign policy between the two changed from confrontation to coexistence.

In this lesson students will examine several primary documents from the thirteen-day crisis and will analyze the differences in policy objectives were between the Cuban, Soviet and U.S. leaders. What were some of the other options available? By charting the event from start to finish students will get a clear understanding of what impact the Cuban Missile Crisis had on the Cold War.

Content Standards:

Postwar United States (1945 to early 1970s)

Standard 2: How the Cold War and conflicts in Korea and Vietnam influenced domestic and international politics

Historical Thinking Standards:

Standard 4: Historical Research Capabilities

- A. Formulate historical questions.
- C. Interrogate historical data.

Standard 5: Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision-Making

- A. Identify issues and problems in the past.
- B. Marshal evidence of antecedent circumstances and contemporary factors contributing to problems and alternative courses of action.
- E. Formulate a position or course of action on an issue.
- F. Evaluate the implementation of a decision.

· Students will analyze the primary and secondary sources focusing on the main idea and significance.

- Students will apply the analysis of the primary and secondary sources to create a map of what they believe occurred in the event being described in the documents.
- Students will determine to what extent the Cuban Missile Crisis changed the Cold War.

Thirteen days in October 1962 was one of the most intense periods in American and Soviet history. The United States and the Soviet Union came to the brink of nuclear war. The Cold War policy of containment was tested 90 miles from the Florida coast on the island of Cuba where the Soviets were installing nuclear missiles. The United States had for several decades had weapons that threatened major Soviet cities from Italy and Turkey. Soviet nuclear weapons had long suffered from inadequate delivery systems and long distances. Placing weapons in Cuba, just off the coast of the United States, would have helped Soviet leaders alleviate the seventeen to one American nuclear advantage over the USSR. During the crisis, American leaders failed to understand that 162 Soviet missiles had already been deployed in Cuba; that the USSR had the capability of annihilating Washington, D.C. and New York City for the first time without any advanced warning. Under-estimating Soviet nuclear power in Cuba, President John F. Kennedy and his Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara engaged in brinksmanship, challenging the Soviet military with a naval blockade and threatening to invade Cuba. After the crisis, both Soviet and American leaders realized, in full horror, how close they had come to nuclear apocalypse. As a result, the Cuban Missile Crisis was a turning point in the Cold War changing foreign policy from confrontation to coexistence.

The confrontation between the United States and Cuba began during Eisenhower's administration. During Eisenhower's administration, the dictator of Cuba was Batista who was friendly with the United States. In 1959, Batista was overthrown in a revolution by Fidel Castro.

As Castro gained power, the relationship between the United States and Cuba worsened.

Kennedy won the 1960 election and became president of the U.S. in 1961. Kennedy defeated Republican candidate Richard Nixon in part because Kennedy played up a so-called “missile gap”, claiming that Republicans under Eisenhower had let the Soviet Union get a missile advantage over the United States. This “missile gap” was wholly fictitious. The United States had far more missiles and nuclear bombs than the Soviet Union, but it established Kennedy’s credentials as a candidate who would not back down to a communist threat.¹ As Paterson notes, “Kennedy inherited the Cuban problem – and he made it worse.”² There were a number of methods the Kennedy Administration employed to try and eliminate Castro from Cuba: “diplomatic isolation in the hemisphere, ouster from the OAS (Organization of American States), economic embargo, CIA assistance to anti-Castro rebels in Cuba, exile raids and sabotage, assassination plots, Operation Mongoose, and anti-Cuban Alliance for Progress.”³ Paterson reasoned that “the principal source for that frightening crisis lay in Kennedy’s unvarnished hostility toward Cuba and in Castro’s understandable apprehension that the United States invasion was inevitable.”⁴ Kennedy’s policies and Castro’s perceptions were what inspired Khrushchev to install missiles in Cuba. According to Mark White, the Soviet leader gave a number of explanations: the “defend-Cuba theory”, “ally for Moscow”, a “socialist model for other Latin American countries”, “correct the imbalance between Soviet and American nuclear arsenal”, “presence of American Jupiter missiles in Italy and on the Soviet border in Turkey”, Vienna Summit and Khrushchev’s impression of John F. Kennedy as a weak leader, and “a

¹ See Richard Rhodes, *Arsenal of Folly: The Making of the Nuclear Arms Race* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

² Thomas G. Paterson, *Kennedy’s Quest For Victory American Foreign Policy, 1961-1963* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1989), 129.

³ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁴ Paterson, *Kennedy’s Quest For Victory American Foreign Policy, 1961-1963*, 140.

desire to improve his hand in the ongoing dispute over Berlin”.⁵ The result of the missile deployment was a “multifaceted military build up on the Caribbean island”.⁶ This was done in secret against the wishes of Castro and a few of Khrushchev’s advisers.⁷ The secrecy was a miscalculation that ultimately hurt Khrushchev because he offered no public explanation to the world for installing missiles in Cuba, and this caused suspicion. “It would have been much more difficult for Kennedy from a political and public relations perspective to have taken the sort of forceful action that he ultimately did during the missile crisis.”⁸

The Cuban Missile Crisis began on October 16, 1962 when the president and his advisers were notified of the U-2 reconnaissance photographs of missile sites being installed in Cuba. From October 16, 1962 to October 22, 1962, Kennedy formed the Executive Committee (ExCom) that met every day to decide how to handle the situation. The Executive Committee had to make a decision before the missiles became fully operational. During the decision-making process, the political and strategic implications needed to be considered. According to Ball, the “one question in dispute was whether the emplacement of the missiles would in any way change the power balance.”⁹ The United States was already under the threat of Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles. The strategic implication was only a matter of minutes, but also “shorter-range missiles in Cuba might greatly increase Soviet capability.”¹⁰

The leaders also considered the political implications . They considered that Soviet missiles alongside a communist Cuba would violate the American Monroe Doctrine, an assertion of American predominance in Latin and South America. They considered the Cuban missiles

⁵ Mark J. White, *Missiles in Cuba Kennedy, Khrushchev, Castro and the 1962 Crisis* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997), 34-40.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁷ White, *Missiles in Cuba Kennedy, Khrushchev, Castro and the 1962 Crisis*, 49.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁹ George W. Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern Memoirs* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982), 289.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 289.

“an unacceptable Soviet encroachment on the United States’ sphere of influence.”¹¹ As they deliberated, the Executive Committee divided into hawks and doves.¹² The decision came down to two options. The hawks wanted an air strike on the missile installations and to follow with an invasion if necessary. The doves wanted a naval blockade which would embargo military shipments to Cuba.¹³ Kennedy decided on the naval quarantine because it would give the Soviets a way to back down and save face. On October 22, 1962, Kennedy delivered a speech to the nation and world about the naval quarantine and the crisis in Cuba. From October 23, 1962 to October 28, 1962, letters of correspondence between Kennedy and Khrushchev were sent day by day as the crisis unfolded. On Wednesday, October 24, 1962, the U.S. Navy stopped a number of Soviet ships dead in the water. “This was the occasion for Rusk’s memorable aside to Bundy: “We’re eyeball to eyeball and I think the other fellow just blinked.”¹⁴ Some Soviet ships turned around. Other ships were allowed to pass that did not contain military supplies.¹⁵ Letters were still exchanged between the two leaders.

On Thursday, October 25, 1962, Adlai Stevenson showed photographs to the United Nations Security Council after an argument about the existence of the missile sites with Soviet UN Ambassador Zorin.¹⁶ On October 26, 1962, Khrushchev’s letter to Kennedy offered a possible settlement. On October 26, 1962, Castro sent a letter to Khrushchev convinced that the United States would invade Cuba and that he should respond with a nuclear strike against the United States.¹⁷ Khrushchev sent a message to Kennedy about the “double standard in American

¹¹ Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern Memoirs*, 289.

¹² *Ibid.*, 290.

¹³ Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern Memoirs*, 290-291.

¹⁴ Mark J. White, *Missiles in Cuba Kennedy, Khrushchev, Castro and the 1962 Crisis* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997), 120.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁶ White, *Missiles in Cuba Kennedy, Khrushchev, Castro and the 1962 Crisis*, 125.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 134.

objections to the presence of missiles in the Caribbean.”¹⁸ Khrushchev demanded that in recompense the American Jupiters be removed from Turkey. Kennedy’s response ignored the request and accepted the no-invasion pledge in return for the removal of the missiles from Cuba under United Nations’ inspection. The Jupiters were removed from Turkey, but at a later date and secretly. Dialogue continued through November that “failed to produce a formalized version of the settlement that had been sketched out on October 27-28.”¹⁹ The October 27-28 settlement was understood by the American public and the international community to entail a United States commitment not to attack Cuba, regardless of the nature of the November Kennedy-Khrushchev dialogue.”²⁰ On November 20, 1962, Kennedy lifted the blockade and on April 25, 1963 the Jupiter missiles were removed from Turkey.²¹ Even though the crisis subsided in November 1962, its effects were evident in the change in foreign policy.

According to Richard Lebow, “Cuba unquestionably had an effect on Soviet policy toward the United States. Soviet pronouncements after the crisis indicated a clear interest in reducing Cold War tensions.”²² The same was true of Kennedy and the United States. Kennedy’s speech at American University in 1963 called for a number of solutions to reach détente: dealing with conflict, accommodation, communication, arms, and peace.²³ Two solutions were dealt with immediately. A hot line between the Soviet premier and American president was established for crisis communication. In order to control arms, the Limited Test Ban Treaty limited testing to the underground only. Although the treaty limited where countries could test nuclear weapons, this did not limit the number of nuclear weapons. According to Garthoff, there were two lessons –

¹⁸White, *Missiles in Cuba Kennedy, Khrushchev, Castro and the 1962 Crisis*, 134-135.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

²⁰White, *Missiles in Cuba Kennedy, Khrushchev, Castro and the 1962 Crisis*, 149.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 148-149.

²² Richard Ned Lebow, “Domestic Politics and the Cuban Missile Crisis: The Traditional and Revisionist Interpretations Reevaluated,” *Diplomatic History* 14 (Fall 1990): 490.

²³ Raymond L. Garthoff, *A Journey Through The Cold War A Memoir of Containment and Coexistence* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2001), 165.

one learned and one not. The first lesson learned was that nuclear war was too risky to seriously risk. The second lesson not learned was it would not take many nuclear bombs to annihilate the enemy. So, despite arms-control agreements and a new spirit of diplomacy that emerged from the Cuban missile crisis, the two superpowers continued for the next 25 years to stock pile a massive number of weapons, weapons that were costly, menacing and unnecessary.²⁴ “The geopolitical rivalry continued for another quarter of a century, as did the arms race, and each side continued to seek strategic advantages when opportunities arose. Never again, however, would Soviet or American leaders go again to the brink of nuclear war.”²⁵

The Cuban Missile Crisis occurred during a period of confrontation between the U.S. against Cuba and the Soviet Union. The crisis evoked miscalculations and misperceptions frightened Soviet and American leaders into the realization that a change in policy was the only way to avert a nuclear war. Not only a change in policy, but also a change in the relationship of the three countries to a certain extent occurred. The evolution of the relationship between Kennedy and Khrushchev went from a reaction-response to one of coexistence with open communication. Cold War policy had changed. As Kennedy noted at a speech at American University, “We can seek a relaxation of tensions without relaxing our guard...we labor on – not toward a strategy of annihilation but toward a strategy of peace.”²⁶

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²⁴ Ibid., 183.

²⁵ Garthoff, *A Journey Through The Cold War A Memoir of Containment and Coexistence*, 187.

²⁶ White, *Missiles in Cuba Kennedy, Khrushchev, Castro and the 1962 Crisis*, 150.

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Vocabulary

ICBMs- any supersonic missile that has a range of at least 3500 nautical mi. (6500 km) and follows a ballistic trajectory after a powered, guided launching.

Teaching Procedures

Motivation:

- 1) Ask students to discuss and identify the tensions in Cuban and United States relations that contributed to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Try to structure the discussion to pay special attention to the Bay of Pigs Invasion of 1961.
- 2) Distribute reconnaissance photo of missile sites in Cuba from October 14, 1962 (RS #8). Have students examine the photo and discuss the capabilities of the Soviet Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs).
- 3) Hand out document showing Range of Soviet SS-4 Missiles (RS #9). After allowing students sufficient time to examine the missile range, pose the following lead questions.
 - A. What are the strategic and political implications of missiles 90 miles from our coast?
 - B. What objectives and options were available for the Kennedy administration?

Procedures:

- 1) Distribute primary source documents packets to each student containing RS#1-6. Tell students that while reading these documents they should keep in mind the following question:
 - A. What were the differences in policy objectives that divided the Cuban, Soviet, and United States leaders?
- 2) Give out the "Mapping an Event" sheets (RS #10-11) to each student. RS #10 is an instructional sheet and RS #11 is a blank sheet for student completion. Review the directions to the "Mapping an Event" sheets, answering any student posed questions.

- 3) Give students sufficient time to read through their document packets and complete RS#11.
- 4) Hand out the transcript of Kennedy's Commencement Speech at American University (RS #7). Play the speech for students and have them follow along with the transcript (audio is available online at the JFK Library). If audio is unavailable students can take turns reading the speech aloud.

Closure:

Lead a class discussion on the policy choices confronting the U.S. and Soviet leaders. Ask student to evaluate Kennedy's decision to establish a naval blockade.

Assessment:

Have students complete a BCR on the following lead question:

To what extent did the Cold War change as a result of the Cuban Missile Crisis?

Primary Source Annotations

Letter to Nikita Khrushchev from Fidel Castro regarding defending Cuban air space. October 26, 1962

http://www.jfklibrary.org/jfkl/cmc/cmc_castro_khrushchev.html

This letter establishes the relationship between Fidel Castro and Nikita Khrushchev; one of allies. Fidel Castro's confrontational proposal includes concern about either an air attack or an invasion by the United States. Students will place the letter in the organizer under during the crisis to establish confrontation. Fidel Castro, worried about an invasion by the United States, speaks of "legitimate self-defense" and to "eliminate this danger forever." Fidel Castro is offering assistance in confronting the situation.

Letter From President Kennedy to Chairman Khrushchev, October 22, 1962. The White House. Washington, October 22, 1962.

http://www.jfklibrary.org/jfkl/cmc/cmc_correspondence.html

President Kennedy's letter to Khrushchev explaining the United States reaction to the crisis and why. His explanation references past diplomacy and a reminder of the responsibilities and commitment of the United States. The United States will stand firm intending to remove the threat with minimal action. Students may use references to Berlin and Vienna to place in the organizer under before the crisis. Students use President Kennedy's action to place in the organizer under during the crisis. Students should be looking for examples of reaction-response in the confrontation between President Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev.

Draft of President Kennedy's Letter to Chairman Khrushchev, October 23, 1962 and The Final Version of President Kennedy's Letter of October 23 as Transmitted by State Department Telegram

http://www.jfklibrary.org/jfkl/cmc/cmc_correspondence.html

This is a letter to Nikita Khrushchev from President Kennedy about observing the terms of the quarantine and discussion within the Security Council. Students will place the letter under during the crisis to establish confrontation.

Letter From Chairman Khrushchev to President Kennedy, October 24, 1962. Moscow, October 24, 1962.

http://www.jfklibrary.org/jfkl/cmc/cmc_correspondence.html

Nikita Khrushchev's reply to President Kennedy about the quarantine and accepted international practice. Nikita Khrushchev accuses President Kennedy of providing an ultimatum and violating freedom of the seas. Nikita Khrushchev instructs his ships to follow international protocol. Students will place this letter under during the crisis establishing confrontation. The idea of the quarantine as an ultimatum and violating international law. The Soviets reaction to the United States response as confrontational.

Letter From Chairman Khrushchev to President Kennedy, October 28, 1962 OFFICIAL ENGLISH TEXT OF KHRUSHCHEV MESSAGE MOSCOW TASS IN ENGLISH TO EUROPE NO.11, 28 OCT 1962.

http://www.jfklibrary.org/jfkl/cmc/cmc_correspondence.html

Nikita Khrushchev explains to President Kennedy of the aggression towards Cuba with the Bay of Pigs and the threat of invasion. The Soviets offered economic and military aid in Cuba's defense. President Kennedy promised not to invade Cuba, so it removed the threat to Cuba and Soviet assistance no longer needed. Nikita Khrushchev mentioned the violation of Cuban and Soviet air space. Students will place the letter under after the crisis and note the concerns of Nikita Khrushchev in obtaining a peaceful coexistence and a settlement on the crisis.

Department of State Telegram Conveying President Kennedy's Reply to Chairman Khrushchev, October 28, 1962. Washington, October 28, 1962, 5:03 p.m.

http://www.jfklibrary.org/jfkl/cmc/cmc_correspondence.html

President Kennedy's reply to Nikita Khrushchev welcoming peace through the United Nations and the Organization of American States. President Kennedy addressed the violation of Soviet air space, but not the Cuban air space or U-2 missions. The telegram mentions the beginning of talks for a nuclear test ban as well as future communication. Students should place the telegram under after the crisis with the idea of a peaceful coexistence.

Commencement Address at American University. President John F. Kennedy. Washington, D.C. June 10, 1963.

<http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Speeches/JFK/003POF03AmericanUniversity06101963.htm>

The commencement address is about world peace: our attitude toward peace, our attitude toward the Soviet Union, and our attitude toward the cold war. President Kennedy is seeking a détente with open communication and arms control. Students will place the commencement address under after the crisis focusing on open communication and a comprehensive test ban treaty as well as the Peace Corps. After the crisis, the United States and the Soviet Union move toward peaceful coexistence.

One of the first images of missile bases under construction shown to President Kennedy on the morning of October 16, 1962.

http://www.jfklibrary.org/jfkl/cmc/cmc_october16.html

The photo shows the aerial map of the reconnaissance photos of secret Soviet missile installation sites in Cuba. The photos are the first images shown to President Kennedy on the morning of October 16, 1962. Students are to define the difference between medium range ballistic missiles (MRBM) and intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM). They are to locate the equipment on site and think about the questions: Are the missile sites operational? If not, when? How will President Kennedy handle the situation?

Map of the western hemisphere showing the full range of the nuclear missiles under construction in Cuba, used during the secret meetings on the Cuban crisis.

http://www.jfklibrary.org/jfkl/cmc/cmc_october16.html

This is a map of the western hemisphere. Cuba is in the center where Soviet missiles are being installed. There are three circles which show the range of nuclear missiles in relation to Latin America as well as most of the United States. Students will use the map to infer the political and strategic implications of Soviet missiles ninety miles from the coast of the United States.