The Cuban missile crisis

Cuba, a large island in the Caribbean, was a significant area in the Cold War. In 1959, a revolution took place in Cuba, and Fidel Castro came to power. He introduced a Soviet-style government on the island and looked to the Soviet Union for support. There was a great upsurge in 1962 when the Soviet leader, Khrushchev, placed nuclear missiles on the island.

What happened during the Cuban missile crisis?

The crisis in Cuba was a great blow to America. A communist state had been set up only 90 miles from the USA. In April 1961, the American CIA organized an attack on Cuba. This was carried out by Cuban exiles. Their plan was to land in a remote part of the island and set up a base for guerrillas to overthrow the government of Cuba. They expected that other Cubans would rise up and join the rebellion. The invasion force landed at a place called the Bay of Pigs. The attack at the Bay of Pigs went disastrously wrong; the Americans had underestimated the strength of the Cuban armed forces and the USA had underestimated how popular Castro was. The invasion force was easily defeated by the Cuban government and there was no widespread support for the invasion from among the people of Cuba. The battle on the Bay of Pigs was humiliating for the American President, Kennedy.

The struggle for control of Cuba was not just a battle for Cuba. By early 1962, America placed a number of nuclear missiles in Turkey, within easy range of many cities in the USSR. Shortly afterwards, Khrushchev decided to place missiles on Cuba.

The Cuban crisis, 1962

![Map of Cuba and the Caribbean, showing the Bay of Pigs invasion]

**SOURCE A**

Khrushchev spoke in December 1961 to the Supreme Soviet (the parliament of the USSR):

Khrushchev reminded everyone of the tense days of October, when world leaders had been nervously following the news coming from Cuba. In those days, the world was at the brink of nuclear catastrophe. What could have caused the crisis? Khrushchev explained that Cuba had been set up by a communist government and that the USA had underestimated how popular Castro was. The invasion force was easily defeated by the Cuban government and there was no widespread support for the invasion from among the people of Cuba. The battle on the Bay of Pigs was humiliating for the American President, Kennedy.

**SOURCE B**

Fidel Castro, in a speech, said in 1962:

"Khrushchev was walking along the beach in the Black Sea on 18th November 1961. He was talking to his wife and some friends when he suddenly said, 'What if America found out that we had nuclear missiles on Cuba?""

**Activity**

The Americans considered a range of options:
- a letter of protest to Khrushchev
- bombing the missile sites
- an invasion of Cuba
- a naval blockade of the island

Imagine that you are Kennedy's assistant. Which of these options would you recommend? Remember that you would want to show Khrushchev that you mean business, but you do not want to provoke a war with the USSR.
Before Kennedy had replied to this message, Khrushchev sent a second letter on 25 October, with different demands. This second letter demanded that the Americans must take their missiles out of Turkey to remove the threat of a Cuban missile crisis.

**SOURCE E**

This is an extract from Khrushchev's letter of 25 October.

You are worried about Cuba. You say that you worry about Cuba because it is of vital interest to you. Is it of vital interest to the United States to you? You have also threatened Turkey with atomic bombs. Is it really necessary to go to extremes like this?

We agree to remove the weapons from Cuba. We agree in this and to state this commitment in the United Nations. Your representatives will make a statement that the United States will not base any weapons in Cuba.

The Americans do not know how to respond. The Americans had already stopped their missiles from Turkey but Kennedy did not want to be laughed at in the face of Soviet power. The American military leaders recommended an immediate air attack on Cuba. Kennedy was unsure. A letter was sent to Khrushchev asking him to do a deal with the Turkish missiles. As it was put, it was suggested that the Americans should ignore the second letter, but reply to the first letter accepting the Soviet proposal that the missiles should be withdrawn from Cuba. The President liked this idea and a suitable letter was sent.

The President's brother

Later on 26 October Robert Kennedy, the brother of the President, went to see the Soviet ambassador. The negotiations between Robert Kennedy and the ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin, was the key to the resolution of the crisis. Kennedy gave Dobrynin an ultimatum. He said that the Soviet Union must remove the missiles. If not, the United States would launch a nuclear attack on Cuba. Without an official deal, but if the Cuban missiles were removed, the Cubans would withdraw their missiles from Cuba. The crisis was over.

**SOURCE F**

A few days later, in 1969, Robert Kennedy's account of his crucial conversation with Dobrynin was published. He said that there could be no arrangement made under this kind of threat to surrender. However, he said that President Kennedy had been anxious to remove the missiles from Turkey and had for a long period of time. He said our judgement of that, within a short time after this crisis was out, those missiles would blow up.

**SOURCE G**

The Cuban missile crisis

Robert Kennedy. The President's younger brother negotiated with Dobrynin to end the crisis with the Soviet ambassador to deal directly.
The Cold War and the Middle East

Israel and the superpowers

Throughout much of the twentieth century there was a simmering conflict between Arabs and Israeli people over control of the land of the Middle East. In 1967 the Arab states of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq fought a war against Israel, in which Israel emerged victorious. Since that time, the United States has maintained a strong relationship with Israel, while the Soviet Union has maintained a strong relationship with the Arab states. As a result, the Cold War has become an important factor in the Middle East. The United States and the Soviet Union have often been at odds over the control of the region, and this has led to a number of conflicts and wars.

Activity

1. Explain in your own words how the Cold War led to a victory for Kennedy and a defeat for Khrushchev.
2. Discuss the relationship between the superpowers and other states.
3. Identify a period of greater stability in Soviet-U.S. relations.

Discussion points

1. Which superpower was more successful in achieving its goals in the Middle East?
2. How has the Cold War affected the Israel-Palestine conflict?
3. What role did the United States play in the Middle East during the Cold War?