

### The 13 Days of the Crisis:

**14 October:** U2 spy-planes established evidence of a Soviet medium range missile base in Cuba.

**16 October:** The ExComm – a group of advisers was formed.

Possible solutions to the crisis:

- Invasion i.e. a direct confrontation with the Red Army.
- A “surgical” air strike which could be followed by an invasion. It was turned down because an air strike would not destroy all missiles.
- A **blockade**, or a ‘quarantine’, i.e. a naval blockade to prevent the USSR from sending components for the missiles to Cuba. It would give time for a diplomatic solution but what would happen when the Russian ships met the US marines? Was it the start of World War III?

**22 October** Kennedy gave a dramatic **TV speech** to the nation and announced the existence of nuclear weapons 90 miles away from Florida and the US **blockade**.

**24 October** One of the most dramatic days, when the **Russian ships finally turned back**. The US Secretary of State Dean Rusk said: “*We were eyeball to eyeball, and I think the other fellow just blinked.*”<sup>59</sup>

**26 October:** Khrushchev sent Kennedy a **message** where he offered to withdraw the missiles if the US promised never to invade Cuba. The same day a US U2 **spy plane was shot down** over Cuba and the pilot was killed. Several advisers now recommended an assault on Cuba. What the Americans didn’t know was that the nuclear weapons on Cuba were already operational and that the Russian military commander had been authorised to use nuclear weapons in self defence without consulting Moscow. This was a very critical day.

**27 October:** Khrushchev sent a **second message** where a deal now must include the removal of NATO missiles in **Turkey**. Robert Kennedy now secretly met the Russian ambassador Dobrynin and an agreement about the Turkish missiles was made, but it had to remain secret. Kennedy was aware that a removal required consultations within NATO and there was no time for that, a deal “*could break up the (NATO) Alliance by confirming European suspicions that we would sacrifice their security to protect our interests.*”<sup>60</sup> He was also not willing to officially admit that he had made such a commitment as a result of Soviet pressure.

Two days later, on the **28 October** Khrushchev informed Kennedy via Radio Moscow (!) that USSR had accepted the terms. Castro had not been informed and refused a UN inspection of the dismantling of the missiles.

The solution of the crisis:

- The USSR would **remove the missiles**.
- A US pledge to **never invade Cuba**.
- US Jupiter missiles should be removed from Turkey. This was not made public.

Officially it was **Kennedy who gained** politically from the crisis. He had made the Russians withdraw the missiles without a war. He had also been able to handle the internal pressure from warmongers, without starting a war. **Khrushchev** on the other hand was **criticised** not only in the USSR but he was also bitterly attacked by Mao in China. In 1964 he was forced to resign and even if according to the indictment against him it was mainly due to domestic reasons, the Cuban crisis played a role. He was blamed for “*erratic leadership, of taking hasty and ill-considered actions.*”<sup>61</sup> The Red Army, which had been substantially reduced by Khrushchev earlier, found the dismantling of the missiles in Cuba humiliating.

But there are several flaws in these conclusions. **Few or no one knew about the Turkish deal**. It is also clear that the US pledge to **never invade Cuba was a substantial victory to Khrushchev**. Kennedy’s initial aim had been a withdrawal without any conditions. So by placing missiles in Cuba Khrushchev was able to secure the Cuban revolution and to remove missiles from Turkey. Another point worth considering is the responsibility for bringing the world to the verge of a nuclear war. It is

generally believed by historians, still today, that this is the closest we have been to a nuclear war. Who was responsible for this?

**Khrushchev** was responsible for the decision to place nuclear weapons on Cuba. Formally it was the Presidium, the highest organ of the Communist Party in 1962 (it was the Politburo which was called Presidium between 1952-1966), which made the decision but it was Khrushchev's idea from the beginning and he was powerful enough to impose his will on the decision makers. He should have been aware of how serious this must have been to an American President. It was not only the tradition of the Monroe doctrine. Central America and the Caribbean was a US "**sphere of influence**" and it was a very dangerous game to surprise your enemy with nuclear weapons in such an area. Khrushchev wrote in his memoirs: "*I had the idea of installing missiles with nuclear warheads in Cuba without letting the United States find out that they were there until it was too late to do anything about them.*"<sup>62</sup> Cuba within a US sphere of influence was not comparable to Turkey. The Security adviser McGeorge Bundy said "*we felt the same way you would feel if we put missiles in Finland.*"<sup>63</sup> The US had their suspicions and Kennedy warned Khrushchev before the crisis that the US would prevent the installation of Soviet nuclear weapons by whatever means might be necessary. Khrushchev had replied that "*we do not have any bases in Cuba*" and "*we do not intend to establish any.*"<sup>64</sup>

**Kennedy** on the other hand had put enormous pressure on Cuba with the trade embargo, the Bay of Pigs invasion and sabotage in the Mongoose operation and this pressure was one of the main reasons for nuclear aid to Cuba. In 1962 the US Senate had passed a resolution by 86-1, calling for the use of force, if necessary, to stop Cuban aggression and communist activities in the Western hemisphere. It can also be argued that the US had no right to object to what the Russians were doing in Cuba due to the simple fact that they **were doing the same in Turkey**, or to use Khrushchev's own words: "*The Americans had surrounded our country with missile bases....now they would learn just what it feels like to have enemies' missiles pointing at you.*"<sup>65</sup> It can also be questioned if Soviet missiles in Cuba were a serious threat to US security and the real reason for Kennedy's actions. McNamara suggested that "*I don't think there is a military problem here....This is a domestic, political problem.*"<sup>66</sup> After his elections campaign attacking Eisenhower and after the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy couldn't afford to look like a **weak president**. The mid term elections to the Congress in November played a role. A second Cuban fiasco would be devastating for the Democrats. This domestic political factor probably affected his decision-making.

The escalation of the crisis, the blockade and spy planes over Cuba, were Kennedy's decisions. It is a very strong case to argue that a **blockade** on international water against one state is illegal and that Kennedy was responsible for the crisis.

Mikhail Gorbachev later concluded that both were to blame: "*The Cuban Missile crisis reminds me of two boys fighting in the schoolyard over who has the bigger stick.*"<sup>67</sup>

#### Historiography:

**Orthodox historians** or traditionalists like Arthur Schlesinger Jr and insiders like Theodor Sorensen (i.e. pro-Kennedy), argue that the missiles were an intolerable provocation and that Kennedy responded due to a desire to defend **legitimate security needs**, to preserve NATO and show American **credibility**. The **quarantine** was a **successful** strategy and Kennedy was a skilful leader in times of crisis.

**Revisionists** like I. F. Stone and Ronald Steel argue that Kennedy, with his background attacking the Eisenhower administration for the loss of Cuba, risked a war over Cuba for **domestic political gains**. Confrontation would make it possible to get the missiles out before the November **elections**. But it was not only a question of electoral and political pressure. Kennedy also risked a **revolt from the military** and other hardliners in different departments. The **blockade** was **irresponsible** and Kennedy is seen as neurotic. The US also has to take the blame for the deployment of **missiles in Turkey** which led to the Cuban affair.