

The Cuban Crisis

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The Cuban Crisis

In 1962, a new trial of strength unfolded in Cuba: for two weeks, the world teetered on the brink of nuclear war.

Since the overthrow of Fulgencio Batista's military dictatorship in January 1959, Cuba had been ruled by Fidel Castro. In the course of agricultural reform, Castro nationalised the Cuban property of American undertakings on the island, thereby incurring the wrath of Washington. In response, the pro-Communist Cuban leader moved closer to the USSR, which was delighted to find a new ally in the western hemisphere and inside the American security zone. The Cuban and Soviet regimes signed successive agreements on trade and military cooperation. In April 1961, the United States attempted to overthrow the new regime by arranging for anti-Castro exiles to land in the Bay of Pigs. The operation failed and ultimately only strengthened Castro's position. He enticed many Latin American revolutionaries to Cuba, which was the only Communist country in the Americas, and threatened the United States' prestige in the region. Khrushchev decided to secretly provide the Cubans with intermediate-range offensive missiles that could pose a direct threat to the territory of the United States.

On 14 October 1962, after Soviet freighters carrying missiles had been identified on their way to Cuba, American spy planes also photographed launchers for Soviet intermediate-range rockets.

The US President, John F. Kennedy, therefore decided to impose a naval blockade, closing off access to Cuba. Any attempt by Soviet ships to force their way through could have ignited the powder keg, provoking open conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. Europe, and in particular Germany, would inevitably have then become a theatre of war.

However, at the eleventh hour, and after repeated contact between Moscow and Washington, largely through the intermediary of the United Nations, a compromise emerged: the Soviet ships agreed to turn back, and the Americans undertook not to invade Cuba and to remove their rockets from Turkey. On 28 October, the world avoided nuclear war by a whisker and the two Great Powers returned to disarmament negotiations. In Europe, Franco-German links were strengthened by the crisis.