

An Introduction to the Cuban Missile Crisis

The Cold War was in large part a war between two countries, the United States and the Soviet Union. It was in this way that the war began, shortly after the end of the Second World War, as a result of the mutually antagonistic territorial ambitions of both powers. At the same time, however, the cold war was a collision of the great rival political ideologies of the 20th century: American democracy and Soviet communism. As a result, the struggle transcended nationality, transforming the entire world into a battlefield where supporters of these ideologies would clash over the control of nations. Since the Soviet Union and the United States both had nuclear weapons, an open war between the two nations was unthinkable. Instead, their conflict was displaced to other nations, the Soviets backing communist regimes, and the Americans backing democracies.

In this vicious "war by proxy", the two nations would, on several occasions, come close to a shooting war as developments in peripheral countries could not always be restrained by the threat of nuclear force. Between the late 1940's and the Cuban missile crisis in the fall of 1962, conflict erupted over Korea, Hungary, West Berlin, and Cuba. In Korea in 1950, communist leaders, with the approval and assistance of the Soviet Union, tried to unite the entire country under a communist government; the U.S. sent in troops, prompting the Korean war. In divided Berlin, the communist threat to take the U.S.-held western half of the city was always present. Soviet premier Joseph Stalin cut off supplies to West Berlin for a time in 1948 in an attempt to take over; the U.S. response was to organize the famous "Berlin Airlift." In 1961, to halt the flow of East German citizens streaming across the border to West Berlin, the Communist East Germans began to build the Berlin Wall, leading to another diplomatic crisis. Negotiations with the Soviets on this topic were of little use, because the Soviet premier at the time, Nikita Khrushchev, badly wanted to make the U.S. withdraw from Berlin entirely.

In Cuba, a socialist government under the leadership of Fidel Castro had taken power in 1959, and soon began taking aid from the Soviets. President Kennedy, anxious not to have a communist country as a neighbor, organized and equipped a group of Cuban exiles and sent them to "liberate" their homeland. This 1961 "Bay of Pigs Invasion" ended in disaster for the exiles and intense embarrassment for the U.S.

The war by proxy went hand in hand with nuclear armament to defend each country's allies. For the U.S., this meant placing offensive ballistic missiles, aimed at Russia, in Western Europe and Turkey. For the Soviet Union, this meant sending such missiles to Cuba, which they did in the summer of 1962. It was this move that triggered the crisis. On October 14, 1962, an American U-2 spy plane flying over Cuba photographed an installation of medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles (MRBM's and IRBM's) capable of striking targets as far away as 2,200 miles. Such missiles could carry nuclear warheads in the megaton range — powerful enough to level most of Manhattan in seconds. From such weapons, no city in the continental U.S. could be safe. As better intelligence came in, it became clear that the Soviets had assembled a total of 36 missile launchers at 9 different bases. It was immediately clear that these were not intended for defense but for possible offensive action.

At the time of the Cuban Missile crisis, the cold war and anti-communist sentiment were strongly supported by the U.S. government and people. The fifties were the "McCarthy Era", a time when

suspected communists or communist sympathizers could be drummed out of governmental office and subjected to character assassination by the press. When John Kennedy was elected president in 1960, it was hoped that he would be "tough" on communism, by standing up to the Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev and not allowing any more countries to be given over to the communists. The Congressional Republicans were particularly vocal in their criticisms of the president when, after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, he refused to send in American troops to support the insurgents. The missile- and moon-races prompted by the Cold War also stimulated the American economy and bolstered national pride. Thus, in the fall of 1962, the American public was demanding an uncompromising attitude toward communism.