

Using academic history in the classroom: Causes of the Cuban Missile Crisis

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If the Big Bang created the universe - eventually leading to life on Earth - then a big bang in 1962 threatened to end it. The Cuban Missile Crisis brought the world near to nuclear Armageddon, as the USA and Soviet Union came close to a devastating conflict. Just as the origins of the Big Bang are contested, so too is there is historical debate about the causes of the Cuban Crisis. Such a question forms part of the Higher History Cold War course and is also examined at National 5 level.

This article examines potential teaching activities which allow pupils to investigate the cause of the crisis, as well as outlining different historical opinions on this issue.

Teaching approaches

There are different activities in which pupils can engage to give them a better understanding of the events, including possible causes.

1. One useful task is the development of a timeline. Pupils can be given a list of key events from before and during the crisis, and then research each of these. This information can be used to design a timeline, including a description of events and also (for those before the beginning of the crisis) featuring discussion of why this might have caused the crisis. Relevant events from before the crisis might include the 1959 Cuban Revolution and the building of the Berlin Wall.
2. The historian quotes included in this article can also be used to provoke discussion and understanding amongst pupils. For instance, one approach would be to give a quotation from each of the possible causes listed in the article. Pupils could then undertake a research task to identify evidence which supports and/or opposes this point of view.
3. A similar task could be used develop pupil skills in historiographical research. Pupils could again be provided with a quote(s) and then asked to read other historians' work to identify supporting or counter arguments. Both these tasks will enhance pupils' understanding of events, and can also be used as part of assignment research.
4. After the tasks above, pupils could participate in a 'Triangle' discussion of events, developing their evaluation skills. This would involve pupils considering all possible causes, along with historian views and other research. They should complete the triangle by ranking the causes in order of importance, making a decision about which factors were most and least important, and why this is the case.

Cuban Missile Crisis – background and context

Following the 1959 Cuban Revolution, Cuba eventually became a Communist state, led by Fidel Castro. Having an ideological opponent so close to home caused outrage in the USA, leading to American attempts to kill Castro. This pushed the Cubans into a relationship with the Soviets.

In October 1962, an American U-2 spy plane took photographs of weapons sites in Cuba. Analysis of the images showed that the unthinkable – for the United States – had happened; the Soviet Union had placed nuclear missiles in Cuba. What followed was a near fortnight of nuclear brinkmanship. The USA demanded that the Soviets remove the weapons and imposed a naval ‘quarantine’ (essentially a blockade) of Cuba. The USSR refused to bow to this pressure, although secret negotiations were taking place between both sides.

At points each country came close to giving the order for a nuclear ‘first strike’, something which had hitherto seemed impossible. Later accounts suggest such an instruction was only minutes away from happening. This followed provocations such as the shooting down of a US spy plane, and the American navy dropping depth charges on Soviet submarines.

As the world watched with horror, events came to a swift – and peaceful – conclusion. Following behind-the-scenes discussions, the Soviets agreed to remove the Cuban weapons. The USA committed to do likewise with their nuclear missile sites in Turkey and Italy, although this deal was not made public at the time. Further détente agreements were later reached.

Possible Cause One: Soviet actions as a response to strategic missile inferiority

Given that the crisis almost became a nuclear disaster, it is pertinent to consider as a cause the impact of the arms race. This was a key feature of the Cold War; indeed, just one year before Cuba events (October 1961) the Soviets detonated the world’s largest nuclear weapon, the Tsar Bomba. This explosion however hid a simple reality; the USA was well ahead of the Soviet Union in nuclear capability, with some estimates suggesting ‘the US had a nine-to-one advantage in deliverable nuclear weapons’ (de Groot, 2005). More importantly, the Soviet Union knew this, despite leader Nikita Khrushchev’s false boasts that they were turning out missiles ‘like sausage’.

In his book, *The Bomb* Gerard de Groot argues in that eradicating this military gap was a primary influence on Soviet actions. He sees the Soviet strategy of placing weapons as a ‘quick-fix solution to a severe strategic imbalance’ which would be relatively inexpensive, in a financial sense at least, which was important given domestic spending pressures. He says that the Cuban missiles were ‘a quick and easy answer to the strategic imbalance – deterrence on the cheap’ (de Groot, 2005). Furthermore, in the words of J. P. D. Dunbabin in *The Cold War: the great powers and their allies*, ‘It seems most likely that Khrushchev found the opportunity to improve his strategic position vis-à-vis the USA irresistibly attractive’.

These are sentiments echoed by Martin Walker in *The Cold War*. He states that the Soviet military were alarmed by a growth in US weapons spending, and worried that this huge military advantage would be used to take control of areas of Soviet influence. Since the USSR had limited ability to launch ICBMs from its own soil, the placing of cheaper medium range weapons in Cuba made it possible for the USSR to present an immediate credible threat. The Soviets believed that even

if the US had more weapons, the fact Russia could devastate large areas of the United States would remove any American advantage.

Khrushchev's second motive was to create a nuclear balance.... It would take almost a decade to establish parity in ICBMs; but parity could be achieved overnight through the back door, by installing medium-range missiles in Cuba. (Walker, 1994)

David Hoffman goes further in his 2011 book, *The Dead Hand*, when he writes,

The Soviet Union, looking through an entirely different prism from the United States, saw nuclear weapons as a blunt instrument for deterrence. If attacked, they would respond with crushing punishment.

Perhaps most tellingly of all, achieving a form of parity in terms of a nuclear threat is what Nikita Khrushchev himself claims influenced him. In his autobiography, the former Soviet leader stated that:

The Americans had surrounded our country with military bases and threatened us with nuclear weapons and now they would learn just what it feels like to have enemy missiles pointing at you. (Khrushchev, 1970)

Possible Cause Two: Soviet actions as an attempt to spread communism

The Cuban revolution sparked fear across the USA that this would lead to similar events across the Americas, leaving the United States encircled by its enemies. According to Mark White, the US administration worried that events in Cuba could only inspire other communist movements:

Not only did Kennedy and his advisors conceptualise Cuba in terms of a monolithic view of communism, they also placed the country in the context of the domino theory. Time and again, they argued that the continuation of the Castro government would lead to a series of leftist revolutions throughout Latin America (White, 1995)

It is not too strong to say that Fidel Castro and his government were hated in the United States, especially by the two Kennedy brothers, John (President) and Bobby (US Attorney General). So desperate were they to see the end of Castro that they were prepared to enlist the help of the Mafia (Schlosser, 2014), even as publicly Bobby was trying to shut down the Cosa Nostra's activities.

America wanted to rid itself of a neighbouring Red Menace, and over the years contrived many elaborate attempts to remove the Cuban leader. Most famous was the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, an American-backed coup which failed and brought humiliation onto the new president. Michael Burleigh highlights the central role this played in the brewing of the crisis. He writes that the Kennedys became obsessed with removing Castro, and in doing so created the conditions which would force Cuba to seek Soviet protection:

[Castro became] the target of a highly personal vendetta pursued by the Kennedy brothers for making them lose face at the Bay of Pigs. As a result of this they would pursue Castro with a vengeance, up to and including repeated conspiracies to murder him, and when he and his Soviet patrons went to the brink of war they would match them move for move during the most deadly moment of the entire Cold War. (Burleigh, 2013)

American attempts to isolate Cuba threatened economic disaster for the island, so the USSR's commitment to instead buy Cuban sugar was desperately needed by Castro's government. With Cuba's communist revolution under threat from America, the Soviets then acted to support their new partners.

John Lewis Gaddis – using materials from Soviet archives released years after the crisis – claims that defending Castro's government was in fact the main priority for Khrushchev's government. This was in the belief that Cuba's revolution could be used to inspire similar revolts across South America. The USSR was hugely excited by Cuba's revolution, which they saw as a spontaneous communist uprising brought about without outside interference, an action they hoped to see repeated elsewhere. However, they worried that the USA would eventually succeed in removing Castro from power, ending these dreams. Gaddis says:

Khrushchev intended his missile deployment chiefly as an effort, improbable though it may seem, to spread revolution throughout South America (Gaddis, 2005)

According to Gaddis' book, *The Cold War*, Khrushchev's own private papers say:

We had to think up some way of confronting America with more than words. We had to establish that a tangible and effective deterrent to American interference in the Caribbean. But what exactly? The logical answer was missiles. (Gaddis, 2005)

Gaddis himself concludes that:

Khrushchev allowed his ideological romanticism to overrun whatever capacity he had for strategic analysis. He was so emotionally committed to the Castro revolution that he risked his own revolution, his country and possibly the world on his behalf. (Gaddis, 2005)

Robert Dallek, a US historian who specialises in presidential chronicles, sees additional motivations connected to Castro's revolution. For Dallek, the Soviet Union had concerns about China's growing influence, and worried for Russia's position as the world's primary communist state. Following the Cuban revolution – which occurred without any Soviet inspiration – there was an imperative for the Soviets to involve themselves in this process:

Khrushchev felt that Castro's support of subversion would eventually persuade Kennedy to act against him. In addition, concern that Castro was moving closer to communist China gave Khrushchev another reason to strengthen Soviet-Cuban

links. To do this, he decided to turn Cuba into a missile basis from which he could more directly threaten the United States. (Dallek, 2004)

This is a theme further developed by Michael Burleigh when he says that the Soviets felt they had to work with Cuba, in the hope of bringing about Karl Marx's vision of world revolution:

Khrushchev decided that the USSR should ride the doctrinally unpredicted wave or else be left behind in what could well be the Marxist-Leninist dream of world revolution. To do so involved co-opting the Cubans, who had won enormous prestige by defeating the Americans, in order to halt their drift towards the perfidious Chinese and to curb the Castro-Guevara combine's pretensions to becoming an autonomous ideological force in their own right. (Burleigh, 2013)

Possible Cause Three: Soviet Actions as a response to US Foreign Policy

In order to analyse the extent to which US foreign policy influenced events in Cuba, it is important to understand actions America had taken which might drive the Soviets to risk an annihilatory war. American military manoeuvres in Europe form part of this equation. The US had a notable military presence across Europe. Not only did they have soldiers based in West Berlin (something the Soviets particularly hated), they also had their own nuclear Jupiter missiles in Italy and Turkey.

The fact that the USA had its own presence in Europe whilst simultaneously denying the same right to the Soviets perplexed Khrushchev. de Groot states that:

Khrushchev could not understand why the US assumed the right to place missiles in Turkey and Western Europe but would not allow the Soviets to place missiles in Cuba (de Groot, 2005)

This is a point echoed by other historians who identify Soviet anger at US hypocrisy as an inducement to Cuban events. According to Alex von Tunzelmann in his book *Red Heat*:

Khrushchev told a visiting member of Kennedy's cabinet that the Soviet Union had armed Cuba and would continue to arm Cuba. "You have surrounded us with military bases," he observed. (von Tunzelmann, 2012)

And of course the fact that America was trying to remove Castro, a Soviet ally, encouraged action from Moscow. The Soviets could hardly hope to see a spread of world communism if they were not seen to defend countries following that path. Von Tunzelmann further explores this by saying:

"The only way to save Cuba is to put missiles there" said Khrushchev [to the Soviet Presidium]. Kennedy, he added, was far too sensible to start a nuclear war, so the point was solely to deter any American invasion. (von Tunzelmann, 2012)

It was not simply Cuba that concerned the United States, who had long held the stated goal of ensuring no European influence in American affairs. J.P.D. Dunbabin stated that:

Since the 1820s it had been a fixed aim of United States policy (enshrined in the Monroe Doctrine) to exclude from the Americas external rule or military involvement... After 1945 it was equally anxious to keep out "international communism". (Dunbabin, 1994)

Russian strategy may have been to manipulate this American desire to avoid a spread of communism on their continent. Whilst the Soviets wished to see a global revolution, a more immediate priority was reducing or even removing the United States' influence in Europe, especially in Germany. After the Bay of Pigs fiasco, the USSR took action in West Berlin by disrupting communication and supply networks into the area (de Groot, 2005). Although NATO countered this, Moscow possibly believed they could use events in Cuba to their own advantage:

Once the Cuban missile sites were operational, Khrushchev planned to announce their existence during a speech at the United Nations. And then he would offer to remove them – if NATO agreed to leave West Berlin. (Schlosser, 2014)

Possible Cause Four: Soviet actions as misguided opportunism

The personal dynamics between Premier Khrushchev and President Kennedy are worth examining too. At the time of the crisis, Khrushchev was age 68 and had led his country for almost a decade; by contrast, Kennedy was age 45 and had been in office fewer than three years. Khrushchev and Kennedy talked on different occasions, with the first meeting taking place at the 1961 Vienna summit. Khrushchev is said to have liked Kennedy, although also believed him to be inexperienced. Following the summit, Kennedy himself remarked Khrushchev "beat the hell" out of him (Dallek, 2004).

Such episodes may have led Khrushchev to see Kennedy as someone to be exploited. This could help the Soviet Union in different ways; not only might it reduce America's military advantage, it could also bring Khrushchev added prestige domestically. Khrushchev's judgement of Kennedy was predicated on a simple assumption: that the president would never risk nuclear war, even over the placement of Soviet missiles in Cuba. Dallek says:

Khrushchev convinced himself however that "intelligent" Kennedy "would not set off a thermonuclear war if there were our warheads there, just as they put the warheads on missiles in Turkey". (Dallek, 2004)

This perspective is echoed by von Tunzelmann. He said that Khrushchev sincerely believed that the US would not stop the USSR placing weapons in Cuba, and told the Cubans this himself:

“You don’t have to worry”, Khrushchev said to Che [Guevara, a Cuban revolutionary]. “There will be no big reaction from the US. And if there is a problem, we will send the Baltic fleet.” (von Tunzelmann, 2012)

However, all of this was clearly an error, Kennedy was acutely aware that a failure to act on Soviet aggression so close to the United States would be interpreted worldwide as a sign of weakness:

Kennedy could simply not afford to allow the Soviets to deploy nuclear weapons in America’s backyard ... He knew that if he permitted the deployment to stand, the American people, Congress and the United States’ NATO allies would interpret it as a complete unwillingness on his part to defend American interests. (Blight et al, 2002)

A confrontation with the USSR also benefited Kennedy in terms of his domestic political landscape. Although his administration had taken various anti-Cuban actions (such as banning most imports from Cuba to the US) Burleigh argues that most ‘voters still thought JFK and the Democrats were weak on the subject of Cuba, leading to enhanced sabre-rattling in the weeks before the mid-term polls in 1962.’ (Burleigh, 2013).

Therefore, Khrushchev’s belief was in fact a catastrophic miscalculation that could have had devastating consequences for the entire world. de Groot sums this up best when he says: ‘Khrushchev’s big mistake was in misjudging Kennedy’ (de Groot, 2005).

Possible Cause Five: Soviet actions as a distraction from domestic problems

The possibility that events in Cuba were planned by Khrushchev as a distraction from his own domestic problems is a theory some historians have also considered. Khrushchev faced a multitude of challenges to his rule. Famously his 1956 so-called ‘Secret Speech’, where he denounced Stalin, caused controversy; it angered many Stalin supporters and others believed that it showed Khrushchev’s limited commitment to communism.

Khrushchev needed to undermine this dissent. The 1961 Tsar Bomba test had shown the world that the Soviets had military power, but that was not the only audience at which a message was aimed as ‘Khrushchev was keen not only to impress those outside the Soviet Union but also those within’ (de Groot, 2005). Ordinary Soviets also had reason to be angry towards their leaders. The summer of 1962 saw KGB troops being deployed to stop public protests following food price increases (Walker, 1994). These had partly risen owing to higher military spending taking precedence over social policies.

Khrushchev faced two contrasting demands: to strengthen his military position, whilst also placating a public unhappy with poverty. Cuba may have given him a chance to fix both problems. Placing weapons in the Caribbean would help him threaten the USA (pleasing his military) without more military spending (satisfying the public). Gerard de Groot expresses this view when he says Khrushchev wanted to:

restrain military spending, against the pressure of the Kremlin hawks. The Cuba gamble might have been an inexpensive way to satisfy hawks (who demanded an answer to American superiority) while still remaining within spending goals (de Groot, 2005)

Robert Dallek echoes this, highlighting the many pressures the Soviet leader faced, and considering the way Cuban action could have alleviated these:

Khrushchev's Cuban plan also rested on a hope of regaining political influence lost because of domestic and foreign setbacks. He had failed to achieve predicted levels of food production, which had forced increases in consumer prices Most important he had failed to close the missile gap between Russia and the United States. (Dallek, 2004)

Conclusion

In reality, none of the multiplicity of events which contributed to the Cuban Crisis can be seen in isolation; whilst each has an individual influence, they also contribute to and affect one other, in explaining why the world came so near to disaster.

Khrushchev did want to defend Castro's government, however this also offered opportunities to overcome the military disadvantages the Soviets had compared to America. Furthermore, the prospect of making real Marx's dream of spreading global communism was appealing, especially if it also helped Khrushchev fight off domestic discord. Equally the Soviets were genuinely angered by the American contradiction of having their missiles in Europe, whilst stopping the Soviets doing likewise in Cuba. Nevertheless, this had been the case for many years, so Khrushchev's actions suggests he saw an opportunity to challenge what he viewed as a new and inexperienced US president.

All of these events converged to create the conditions in which the roots of potential tragedy and horror could grow. Fortunately for the world at large, the story serves as a cautionary tale of how to avoid disaster, rather than how to deal with its aftermath.

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