

# The Cuban Missile Crisis

By Jane Runyon

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The face of war was changed forever by the United States in 1945. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with atomic weapons opened a new chapter in warfare. No one had ever before used such powerful weapons in battle. Most people in the world hold onto the hope that nuclear weapons will never be used in the future. That hope came very close to being dashed in 1962. The world was on the brink of a war. Life as we know it might have been changed forever.

Fidel Castro became dictator of Cuba in 1959. He knew that the United States was trying to oust him from office from the time he began. He led a Communist government that the United States didn't particularly want just 90 miles from the country's mainland. The Bay of Pigs had been a fiasco. The weak attempt by American-backed Cuban refugees had been an embarrassing defeat. Castro knew this would not be the last attempt that the United States would make. He was intent on finding a strong country to ally himself with for protection.

The Soviet Union was in need of someone to form an alliance with also. They were falling behind in the arms race with the United States. They were not able to create as many nuclear weapons as the United States was. Even more disturbing to the Soviets was the concern that the United States had set up nuclear missiles in Turkey. These missiles would have been only 150 miles from the Soviet border. A greater concern was the capability of these missiles. The Soviets' missiles could only reach targets within Europe. The United States' missiles were capable of reaching across oceans to anywhere in the world.

Just after John F. Kennedy took the office of President of the United States, he met with the leader of the Soviet Union, Premier Nikita Khrushchev. They discussed the possibility of resolving their differences and slowing down the production of nuclear weapons. After this meeting, Khrushchev informed members of his government that he believed President Kennedy was going to be a weak president. He didn't believe Kennedy was capable of making the decisions that would have to be made to keep America strong. Based on these conclusions, the Soviets decided to form an alliance with the Cubans. Cuba would provide the land the Soviets needed to build a nuclear missile base. In return, the Soviets would provide the protection and security Castro believed Cuba needed.

By mid-summer of 1962, the Soviets were well on their way to completing a lethal missile system all around the island of Cuba. On October 15, a plane flying **reconnaissance** for the United States spotted the construction. The news was reported to President Kennedy. After meeting with his top advisors, he contacted the Soviet foreign minister and told him that the United States would not tolerate the missiles in Cuba. The foreign minister denied that any such thing was happening.

Now was the time that President Kennedy would prove Khrushchev wrong in his assessment of the president's ability. Kennedy had several options to deliberate. He could ignore the situation and hope it went away. He could invade Cuba with military forces and try to defeat the Cubans and Soviets. He could try talking the Soviets out of continuing construction. All of these solutions had serious consequences. On October 22, 1962, President Kennedy addressed the world. He announced the discovery of the missiles and his plan to deal with them. He said that he was preparing to set up a blockade around the island of Cuba. No ships would be allowed to enter or leave the country. He also stated that if any missile was fired from Cuba, it would be taken as an attack upon the United States. He demanded that all missiles be removed by the Soviets.

The next seven days were tense, to say the least. Neither side was willing to back down. People around the world prayed for clear minds to decide the fate of the world. On October 28, Khrushchev announced that his government would take the missiles apart and bring them back to the Soviet Union. The United States agreed not to invade Cuba, and the world breathed a sigh of relief. Government officials later shared their fears that a nuclear war had been just minutes away from happening. But war was averted, and a Cold War continued.



Name \_\_\_\_\_



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### Questions

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\_\_\_\_\_ 1. When was the first atomic bomb used?

- A. World War I
- B. Korean War
- C. Vietnam War
- D. World War II

\_\_\_\_\_ 2. Who became the leader of Cuba in 1959?

- A. Nikita Khrushchev
- B. John F. Kennedy
- C. Fidel Castro
- D. Robert Kennedy

\_\_\_\_\_ 3. Cuba was a Communist country.

- A. false
- B. true

4. Why did Castro fear an invasion from the United States?

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5. Why would the Soviet Union be interested in placing missiles in Cuba?

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\_\_\_\_\_ 6. Khrushchev was wrong to believe President Kennedy was a weak president.

- A. true
- B. false

\_\_\_\_\_ 7. How did President Kennedy stop the construction of missiles on Cuba?

- A. He blockaded Cuba so no materials could reach the construction site.
- B. He invaded Cuba.
- C. He let them finish construction and then blew the missiles up.
- D. He ordered the Soviets to leave the country.

\_\_\_\_\_ 8. How close were the two countries to war?

- A. years
- B. weeks
- C. months
- D. minutes

