

**To what extent was protecting Fidel Castro's communist regime from being overthrown by the United States the primary cause of the Soviet Missile Deployment in Cuba in 1962?**

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## Section A – Identification and Evaluation of Sources

This investigation will seek to answer the question: **To what extent was protecting Fidel Castro's communist regime from being overthrown by the United States the primary cause of the Soviet Missile Deployment in Cuba in 1962.** The *Letter from Khrushchev to Castro* is relevant and significant to the investigation since it represents the official Russian perspective on the causes of the Soviet missile deployment in Cuba. *"The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Historical Perspective"* is relevant and significant to the investigation since it provides a modern historical viewpoint from historians that studied each country involved. Together, the sources combine to offer contrasting perspectives for the investigation.

The origin of *Letter from Khrushchev to Castro* is Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet premier. This letter was sent to Castro by Khrushchev immediately after the Cuban missile crisis was resolved and was significant in determining the cause of the Soviet missile deployment. A value of this origin is that the letter offers the Soviet premiers' perspective on why the missiles in Cuba were placed and removed. A limitation of this origin is, since it was written by Khrushchev, the letter could have a biased Russian perspective as to why the missiles were deployed. The purpose of this letter was to inform Castro of the final decision decided and to address Castro's concerns with removing the missiles from Cuba. A value to this purpose is that it identifies the Russians reasoning for the missiles, which is what this investigation is seeking to answer. One limitation to this purpose is that this letter was written to inform Castro of the settlement and neglects to develop on how it was created. This is limiting since the settlement wasn't discussed, it's hard to evaluate how important keeping the missiles in Cuba was to Khrushchev. The content of this letter includes the agreement between Khrushchev and Kennedy and includes solutions that were created to protect Cuba. One value to this content is that it shows Khrushchev's reasoning behind

why the Soviet Union is removing the missiles. Another value to this content is that it also shows Castro's concerns for removing the missiles which widen the historical perspective. One limitation to this is that it failed to address any of Kennedy's concerns with the missiles and only shows Castro's and Khrushchev's, which limits the historical perspective.

The origin of the *Cuban Missile Crisis: A Historical Perspective* is the historians Svetlana Savranskaya, Julia Sweig, and Philip Brenner. This historical discussion is significant to determining each country's perspective on why the missiles were deployed. A value of this origin is that this discussion contains different historians representing the Russian, Cuban, and American views. This is valuable since the historical discussion contains contrasting perspectives from each of the 3 major countries in this crisis. Another value to this origin is that this discussion was conducted 40 years after the crisis occurred which gives historians time to review sources related to the crisis before forming a perspective on why the missiles were deployed. A limitation to this is that none of the historians were present during the Cuban missile crisis so they couldn't see firsthand why the missiles were deployed. The purpose of this discussion was to analyze the reasons why the Cuban missile crisis occurred for each country. One value to this purpose is that since the discussion was created to identify the primary reason for the crisis, each of the historians identified evidence for each contrasting perspective. Another value is that it identified what the primary cause for the Soviet missile deployment was, which is the task of this investigation. One limitation to this purpose is that, since this discussion determines what was to be blamed for the crisis while assigning blame, it is not free of bias from each of the historians. The content of this discussion relied heavily on what occurred prior to the Cuban Missile crisis to determine the reasons why it was caused. One value to this content is that background information was provided all throughout and prior Cuban, Russian, and American information

were analyzed. However, one limitation is that not as much evidence from during the crisis was used which could greatly improve the understanding of the entire crisis.

## **Section B – Investigation**

The Cold War erupted after World War II, and by the 1960s two superpowers, the Soviet Union and United States, confronted each other militarily on a global battlefield that stretched across nations in Europe/Asia and Latin America. Matters came to a crisis in October 1962 when the United States discovered that the USSR had placed nuclear weapons in Cuba. This led to the 13-day Cuban Missile Crisis which almost brought the world to a nuclear Armageddon. Fortunately, the crisis was resolved after tense negotiations and a last-minute pullback by the USSR and the United States. The resolution was achieved when the United States provided a guarantee to not invade Cuba but also to withdraw its missiles from Turkey, thus prompting the Russians to pull back from Cuba.

A large amount of historical material exists portraying the crisis from the American, Cuban, and Russian viewpoints. However, there is considerable debate amongst historians on what prompted the placing of the nuclear missiles in Cuba. Many viewpoints tend to suggest that the weapons were placed primarily to defend Castro's communist regime from an imminent American invasion. This was believed since there was word about a potential American invasion codenamed Operation Mongoose. This made Castro nervous since there was a prior failed invasion that the United States had supported called the Bay of Pigs. The contrary claim made by other modern historians suggests that the placement of weapons in Cuba was more strategic than defensive and was mainly placed to equalize the military imbalance caused by the United States putting missiles in Turkey.

While the official Russian reasons for placing the nuclear missiles were to defend Cuba from the U.S, many historians believe that the real/primary motivation was to restore a strategic parity between the nuclear superpowers and force the U.S to slow down and withdraw its nuclear weapons that were causing a visible power imbalance. This is demonstrated in the resolution to the crisis offered by the Americans as it was not just about invading Cuba but included an exchange deal to withdraw an equal number of missiles from Turkey which the Russians accepted. The evidence in chronological order also indicates that the events before the crisis hint that the placing of the missiles was to restore a power balance. In 1961, the United States had placed missiles in Turkey very close to the USSR. Nikita Khrushchev, during a trip to the black sea, remarked to his defense minister Malinovsky that the missiles in Turkey were 10 minutes away and that the Russians needed an equivalent response so they could “place a hedgehog in American pants” (Elleman, 2006). This comment by Khrushchev indicates his desire to find a counterattack to achieve parity with the U.S which could have ultimately led to the decision to put missiles in Cuba. The weapons were placed in secret during 1961-62, so they would be *fait accompli* when found. Soon after the missiles were discovered, the Kennedy government had a strong public reaction as they interpreted the missiles as a threat to the dominance of the United States and an attempt by Russians to coerce them on the global front. Kennedy in one of the several recordings during the crisis says he saw the link between the missiles when he noted that it was as if the Russians placed the missiles in Cuba since there was a massive number of missiles in Turkey (Kennedy, 1962). This remark shows how Kennedy quickly understood the Russian motivation for the missiles in Cuba as a counter to his prior deployments of the missiles in Turkey. This perspective is also supported by the records of a secret meeting with attorney general Robert Kennedy and Russian Ambassador Dobrynin where Kennedy offered to restore

parity by secretly pulling back the Jupiter missiles from Turkey (Dobrynin, 1962). Kennedy talks about how the US would never have offered a withdrawal of the missiles had they analyzed the Russian weapons in Cuba as only for the defense for Cuba. Both the statements by Kennedy show that the Americans also clearly assessed that the missiles were there to force a strategic parity rather than for the Cuban defense. Sheldon M. Stern, the historian for the JFK library, agrees with this viewpoint as well. He believes that the crisis arose from a global cold war confrontation that was initially led by the United States in applying nuclear power. This caused the Russians to move their missiles to Cuba to achieve perceived parity internationally and remove threats in their immediate neighborhood rather than any ideological reasons for protecting the Cuban regime. Stern says that the deployment of the missiles was a key reason for Khrushchev's decision for placing missiles in Cuba (Schwarz, 2013).

In opposition to these power balance assessments, some perspectives believe that the USSR was defending Cuba and that this was the primary reason for the nuclear weapons. Svetlana Savranskaya, director of the Russia Programs at the National Security Archive, suggests that the Soviet Union was simply a legal assistance from the USSR to Cuba since they were threatened by the U.S in the Bay of Pigs invasion (JFK Library, 2002). She states that other power balance reasons were of secondary importance to Khrushchev. Similarly, Sergei Khrushchev, son of Nikita Khrushchev, in a 2012 interview states that the Russian perspective was primarily one of protecting Cuba and as a signal to its other allies that the USSR would protect them (LaGrone, 2012). In his view, there was no need to place the missiles to counter the U.S since the missiles in Europe were equally as dangerous. Even though Sergei had first-hand access to the inner Russian circle, his analysis might be biased as the reality of the situation did not allow all motivations to be publicly disclosed and events show that the missiles were

simultaneously withdrawn from Turkey contrary to his claims. Also, the private messages exchanged by Castro implored Nikita Khrushchev for help and protection since Castro was paranoid about a U.S invasion. He had foiled the first attack in the Bay of Pigs and now feared that the second operation would overthrow him (Khrushchev, 1962). This supports the view that the weapons were required to protect Cuba rather than for global power since Cuba originally requested the weapons before the Soviets sent the missiles. Also, Khrushchev wrote to Kennedy assuring him that the reason he put missiles in Cuba was only to protect Cuba. Khrushchev then again wrote to Fidel Castro after the crisis ended and said that since the U.S had provided a non-invasion guarantee the purpose of the weapons was served. However, in the same letter, Khrushchev acknowledges that a guarantee from the U.S cannot be fully trusted, and Russians would leave other weapons for the regime to defend itself. Historian Gulia Sweig, Deputy Director of the Latin American Program, notes that this explanation left Castro dumbfounded as he was forced to accept a global compromise by the superpowers where he could not negotiate anything for Cuba (JFK Library, 2002). This indicates that despite protecting Cuba being the reason for the missiles wasn't fulfilled, Khrushchev was still willing to remove the missiles with a mere verbal compromise and the withdrawal of the missiles in Turkey.

In conclusion, the primary motive for the Soviet missile deployment in 1962 was strategic due to the missiles that were in Turkey, across from the Soviet Union. Protecting Fidel Castro's communist regime was secondary to the USSR defending itself as a global superpower.

### **Section C: Reflection**

Investigating what caused the Soviet missile deployment allowed me to practice and deal with the challenges of the method causation. While investigating the Cuban Missile Crisis, I had



trouble with identifying reasons for the Soviet missile deployment other than protecting Castro's regime since the United States had been consistently attacking Cuba before this. This investigation allowed me to practice identifying and evaluating different types of causes which helped me lead to my conclusion that despite Castro's communist regime being threatened, the main reason the Soviet Union deployed missiles was because of the missiles the United States had put in Turkey. Learning about causation and what causes certain events, allowed me to understand the difficulties modern and past historians go through. For example, historians today might include evidence only found in online or modern places when trying to determine the cause for something whereas historians in the past might have lived through the event and used their own knowledge of the time to discover the causes.

Another method this investigation allowed me to practice is the method of comparing and contrasting. When I was evaluating the source Cuban Missile Crisis: A Historical Perspective, I was struggling to understand how many historians in the discussion had differing perspectives on what caused this crisis to occur in the first place. This investigation allowed me to practice how to compare and contrast different perspectives and sources. I now understand that comparing and contrasting is difficult since different sources could include or ignore pieces of evidence that occurred to support their perspective. This exemplifies a common issue that historians often struggle with, which is being able to extract the specific information they need from sources. I now know how to compare and contrast different primary and secondary sources like a historian does.

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