The crisis was planned in Washington behind a smokescreen of anti-Soviet propaganda ... The self-blockade of the Western powers hit the West Berlin population with harshness. The people were freezing and starving. In the Spring of 1949 the USA was forced to yield.

Source: From: http://www.johndclare.net/cold_war9.htm


3 Containment and brinkmanship: The Cuban Crisis
You have already looked at the US policy of containment as a way to prevent the spread of Soviet influence. Another tactic that both the USA and the USSR employed in their attempts to either contain one another’s influence or spread their own influence was brinkmanship. Brinkmanship is the practice of pushing dangerous events to the brink (edge or verge) of disaster in order to achieve the most advantageous outcome. The Cuban Crisis is a good example of both containment and brinkmanship.

The two most powerful men in the world in the early 1960s: (a) JF (John) Kennedy, the US President and (b) Nikita Khrushchev, Premier of the USSR, in Vienna, Austria, in June 1962.
3.1 The Cuban Crisis as an example of containment and brinkmanship

The Berlin crisis was hardly over when Cuba became a flashpoint in the Cold War in 1962 and the USA and USSR came close to a nuclear war. Kennedy was president of the United States, and Khrushchev the leader in the USSR.

Cuba is an island about 145 kilometres off the coast of Florida. Until 1959, the USA had strong political and economic interests in Cuba. It was a poor country whose economy was dependent on the sale of its sugar harvest to the USA. In 1959, Fidel Castro and a small group of revolutionaries overthrew the brutal dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista who had been in power since 1953. At this stage, Castro was not a convinced Marxist, although some of his comrades were. His plans to reform Cuba, which included the nationalisation of land, looked Communist to the US government. When Castro applied to the USA for loans, he was refused and the USA threatened to cut off its sugar imports from Cuba. Castro then turned to the USSR and in February 1960 signed a trade agreement with Russia. Cuba sent sugar to Russia, in return
for oil, machines and money.

In July 1960, the USA carried out its threat and cut trade with Cuba. In retaliation, Cuba nationalised all US-owned companies. The USSR then undertook to buy Cuba’s sugar. In January 1961 the US cut diplomatic ties with Cuba.

Meanwhile, a group of anti-Castro Cuban exiles in America had been planning a counterrevolution. In April 1961, supported by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), they invaded Cuba from the US bases in Guatemala, landing at the Bay of Pigs. They were hoping to be supported by an uprising within Cuba, but this did not happen and the invasion failed. This was an embarrassment for President Kennedy. In response to the failed invasion, Cuba asked for weapons from the Soviet Union to defend Cuba against the USA. In December 1961, Castro declared himself a Marxist. The US was
now convinced that Cuba had become a Soviet satellite state.

Discuss and debate

What happens to leaders of revolutions?
Work in groups.
History shows that many revolutionary leaders, who fought for the freedom of their people, become dictators after overthrowing oppressive, dictatorial governments. Sometimes, they become even more oppressive than the governments they overthrew. Identify one or two examples and discuss why you think this happens in so many cases.

The Cuban Crisis deepens
In June 1962, Cuba received shipments of Soviet arms: patrol boats, ground-to-air missiles and MIG-21 fighter planes. By September medium-range offensive missiles and IL-28 bombers arrived. On 14 October 1962 an American U2 spy plane photographed a nuclear missile base being built on Cuba. This would bring the main cities of North America within range of the missiles. Kennedy’s advisers told him that he had 10 days before the missile bases would be ready.
On 16 October, Kennedy set up a Committee of the National Security Council to advise him and put US troops on the alert. On 22 October he announced a naval blockade of Cuba, placing Cuba in ‘quarantine’ until the missile sites were removed. The USA announced that they would consider an attack by Cuba anywhere in the Western hemisphere as an attack by the USSR on the United States:

*It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union.*

(Source: JF Kennedy, 22 October 1962, from *1962 Year In Review: ‘Cuban Missile Crisis’*, United Press International,
Inc. 1962)

Meanwhile, 20 Soviet ships were heading for Cuba. Kennedy's ultimatum put Khrushchev on the defensive. His response was that the only purpose of the missile sites was to defend Cuba against attack. He accused the US of piracy and warned that the USSR would have a fitting reply.

As the ships grew closer to Cuba the world waited to see what would happen. The first Russian ship reached the naval blockade. It was an oil tanker and was allowed through. The other ships carrying missiles turned back.

As the crisis developed, Kennedy and Khrushchev exchanged a number of letters. Khrushchev insisted that the missiles on Cuba were for the defence of Cuba and that the Soviet Union had no aggressive intentions. On October 26 Khrushchev proposed that the missile bases would be dismantled in exchange for a US promise not to invade Cuba. The next day Khrushchev sent another letter offering to dismantle the missile sites if the USA dismantled their Jupiter missile bases in Turkey. The US presence in Turkey was a threat to the USSR.
Publicly, Kennedy accepted the terms of the first letter: a promise not to invade Cuba in return for the USSR dismantling of the missile bases on Cuba. However, secret negotiations were being carried out and the deal struck was that the USA would promise not to invade Cuba and would withdraw the Jupiter missiles in Turkey in return for the dismantling of the Cuban missile sites. Part of the deal was that Kennedy would never publicly acknowledge its terms. It is only recently that the full story can be told as documents in the USA and USSR are being declassified.

A US Navy Lockheed plane flying over a Soviet Freighter in December 1962 carrying 12 IL-28 airplanes bound for Cuba (Source: NATO Archives)
FIGURE 5 A map showing the areas of the Americas within range of the Cuban missiles

On 28 October Khrushchev announced that he would dismantle the missile bases and return them to the Soviet Union, expressing his trust that the United States would not
invade Cuba. There is evidence that Cuba really was afraid that the US was planning to invade the country. According to Nikita Khrushchev’s memoirs, in May 1962 he had the idea of placing intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Cuba as a means of countering an emerging lead of the United States in developing and deploying strategic missiles. He also presented the scheme as a means of protecting Cuba from another United States-sponsored invasion, such as the failed attempt at the Bay of Pigs in 1961.

Evidence has also emerged of the very real Cuban fear, both before and after the Bay of Pigs landing, of a US invasion and therefore Khrushchev’s claim that the missiles were only there to defend the Cuban Revolution was probably true.

We now know that in the build up to the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy had carried out covert actions against Castro and Khrushchev had secretly deployed missiles. At the time it was believed that the world had been brought to the brink of war and Kennedy’s public tactics became known as brinkmanship – where his determination not to give in to Khrushchev had made Khrushchev back down and a nuclear war had been averted.
More recent research has shown that the crisis was resolved after a series of secret meetings in which Kennedy offered the Soviet ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin, not threats of nuclear retaliation, but a diplomatic deal. Kennedy promised that the US would not invade Cuba and the US Jupiter missiles in Turkey would be withdrawn. Furthermore, the terms would never be publicly acknowledged by the US. While Kennedy gained prestige from the crisis, Khrushchev lost prestige in the USSR and was later dismissed from office after a coup. China broke away from the USSR.

The USSR and the US had come close to a nuclear war, and once the crisis had ended, they realised they could not afford to come this close to war again. There was a thaw in the Cold War at a diplomatic level due to détente:

- In June 1963 a Washington–Moscow ‘hot line’ telephone link was set up for direct contact between the presidents of each country.
- In August 1963 a Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was signed which banned nuclear testing above ground.
- In 1968 a Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty was signed, which attempted to stop the spread of nuclear weapons to
countries that did not already have them.

Activity 4  Source-based activity: The Cuban Missile Crisis

**Historical skills:** Extract and interpret information from a number of sources; Evaluate the usefulness of sources, including reliability, stereotyping and subjectivity; Recognise that there is often more than one perspective of a historical event.

Work alone. Study **Sources 10-14** carefully before answering the questions. Take note of the mark allocation for each question, as this will guide you with regards to the length and depth required for each question.

1. Refer to the letter in **Source 10**.
   1. What warning is Castro informing Khrushchev about in the letter?  \(2 \times 1\) (2)
   2. Do you think there is evidence in this letter to indicate solidarity between Cuba and the USSR? Explain your reasoning with evidence from the source. \(1 \times 3\) (3)
   3. What impression did Castro hope to give Khrushchev
about the USA by referring to their actions as those of ‘imperialists’? (2 × 2) (4)

2. Refer to the letter in SOURCE 11.
   1. From your own knowledge, explain what Khrushchev is referring to when he mentions the ‘ultimatum’. (1 × 2) (2)
   2. Extract evidence from the source to show that Khrushchev believes that Kennedy’s ‘ultimatum’ leaves the USSR with no choice but to ‘defend’ itself by taking action. (1 × 2) (2)
   3. What two actions, mentioned in the letter, does Khrushchev find particularly objectionable? (2 × 2) (4)
   4. Explain the term brinkmanship in terms of Cold War politics. (1 × 2) (2)
      1. Does the evidence in the letter illustrate the use of brinkmanship by Khrushchev? Use evidence from the source to justify your reasoning. (1 × 5) (5)
      2. How would you describe the tone of Khrushchev’s letter? Explain your answer with evidence from the source and indicate why it was necessary for him to adopt this tone. (1 × 3) (3)
5. Compare the two letters in **SOURCE 10 and 11** and then answer the following questions:
   1. How are letters such as these two useful in understanding the development of the Cuban Missile Crisis?  
      \((3 \times 2) (6)\)
   2. What are the limitations of using letters such as these as historical sources?  
      \((2 \times 2) (4)\)

3. Refer to the photograph in **SOURCE 12**. One of the slogans encourages Kennedy to “Let the UN handle the Crisis”. Why was this crisis not handed over to the UN to deal with?  
   \((1 \times 3) (3)\)

4. Compare the two cartoons in **SOURCE 13 and 14**.
   1. Explain how the two cartoonists depict the political tension between Khrushchev and Kennedy as leaders during this Cold War crisis. Use a clue from each cartoon to justify your reasoning.  
      \((2 \times 3) (6)\)
   2. Is there evidence of bias in each cartoon? Explain your answer briefly but clearly, using evidence from each cartoon.  
      \((2 \times 2) (4)\)

**[Total marks: 50]**
Source 10 Fidel Castro writes to Khrushchev

This is a letter to Nikita Khrushchev from Fidel Castro regarding defending Cuban air space:

October 26, 1962

Dear Comrade Khrushchev,

Given the analysis of the situation and the reports which have reached us, [I] consider an attack to be almost imminent – within the next 24 to 72 hours. There are two possible variants: the first and most probable one is an air attack against certain objectives with the limited aim of destroying them; the second, and though less probable, still possible, is a full invasion. This would require a large force and is the most repugnant form of aggression, which might deter them. You can be sure that we will resist with determination, whatever the case. The Cuban people’s morale is extremely high and the people will confront aggression heroically.

I would like to briefly express my own personal opinion.

If the second variant takes place and the imperialists invade Cuba with the aim of occupying it, the dangers of their
aggressive policy are so great that after such an invasion the Soviet Union must never allow circumstances in which the imperialists could carry out a nuclear first strike against it.

I tell you this because I believe that the imperialists’ aggressiveness makes them extremely dangerous, and that if they manage to carry out an invasion of Cuba – a brutal act in violation of universal and moral law – then that would be the moment to eliminate this danger forever, in an act of the most legitimate self-defence. However harsh and terrible the solution, there would be no other.

This opinion is shaped by observing the development of their aggressive policy. The imperialists, without regard for world opinion and against laws and principles, have blockaded the seas, violated our air-space, and are preparing to invade, while at the same time blocking any possibility of negotiation, even though they understand the gravity of the problem.

You have been, and are, a tireless defender of peace, and I understand that these moments, when the results of your superhuman efforts are so seriously threatened, must be
bitter for you. We will maintain our hopes for saving the peace until the last moment, and we are ready to contribute to this in any way we can. But, at the same time, we are serene and ready to confront a situation which we see as very real and imminent.

I convey to you the infinite gratitude and recognition of the Cuban people to the Soviet people, who have been so generous and fraternal, along with our profound gratitude and admiration to you personally. We wish you success with the enormous task and great responsibilities which are in your hands.

Fraternally,

_Fidel Castro_


Source 11 Khrushchev to Kennedy

_This is an extract of a letter written by Khrushchev to Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis:_

Dear Mr. President,
Imagine, Mr. President, what if we were to present to you such an ultimatum as you have presented to us by your actions. How would you react to it? I think you would be outraged at such a move on our part. And this we would understand.

Having presented these conditions to us, Mr. President, you have thrown down the gauntlet ...

You, Mr. President, are not declaring a quarantine, but rather issuing an ultimatum, and you are threatening that if we do not obey your orders, you will then use force. Think about what you are saying! And you want to persuade me to agree to this! What does it mean to agree to these demands? It would mean for us to conduct our relations with other countries not by reason, but by yielding to tyranny. You are not appealing to reason; you want to intimidate us.

No, Mr. President, I cannot agree to this, and I think that deep inside, you will admit that I am right. I am convinced that if you were in my place you would do the same ...

The Soviet government considers the violation of the freedom of navigation in international waters and air space to
constitute an act of aggression propelling humankind into the abyss of a world nuclear-missile war. Therefore, the Soviet government cannot instruct captains of Soviet ships bound for Cuba to observe orders of American naval forces blockading this island. Our instructions to Soviet sailors are to observe strictly the generally accepted standards of navigation in international waters and not retreat one step from them. And, if the American side violates these rights, it must be aware of the responsibility it will bear for this act. To be sure, we will not remain mere observers of pirate actions by American ships in the open sea. We will then be forced on our part to take those measures we deem necessary and sufficient to defend our rights. To this end we have all that is necessary.

Respectfully,

_N. Khrushchev_

Moscow

24 October 1962

Source 12 American women voice their opinion on the Cuban Crisis

The photograph shows women in a crowd of nearly a thousand in Washington in 1962 asking world leaders for restraint during the Cuban Missile Crisis. They belonged to Women Strike for Peace, a United States women’s peace activist group founded as part of the movement for a ban on nuclear testing.

Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, photographed by Phil Stanziola, a New York World-Telegram and the Sun staff photographer
Source 13 A cartoonist’s view of Khrushchev and Kennedy’s brinkmanship

The British cartoon of 29 October 1962 shows Kennedy and Khrushchev arm-wrestling for power, sitting on nuclear weapons. The caption reads: “OK Mr President, let’s talk.” It was drawn by Leslie Gilbert Illingworth. It appeared in the 29 October 1962 edition of the British newspaper *The Daily Mail*.


Source 14 A cartoonist’s view of the outcome of the Cuban Missile Crisis

This cartoon was published on 1 November 1962, just four days after the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was created
by Herbert Lawrence Block, commonly known as Herblock and provides a view on the outcome of the Cuban Missile Crisis. It has the caption: ‘Let's get a lock for this thing’.

Source: *Washington Post*, Washington DC, USA, 1 November 1962

4 Who was to blame for the Cold War?

This section shows the different interpretation of events that occurred during the Cold War and explains why different accounts exist.