

CHAPTER FOUR

NUCLEAR TERROR: THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the USA and USSR emerged as the most powerful nations in the world. Their wartime strategic alliance, however, was soon replaced by extreme nervousness and suspicion of each other's agendas. While the USA was now the supreme capitalist nation, the USSR, the original communist state, was expanding into Europe and had become the West's rival in the race for nuclear arms and space exploration. For years the nuclear weapons each side accumulated acted as a deterrent for war and brought a level of stability, but there was always the fear that the other side might use its weapons.

From 1933 to 1959 the Caribbean island of Cuba was ruled by right-wing dictator Batista, and its economy was controlled by America, which bought Cuba's sugar crop. In 1959 the Marxist Fidel Castro and his rebel army overthrew Batista. The USA refused to trade with the new communist leader and in 1961 President John F. Kennedy's CIA, with Cuban rebels, sought to overthrow

Castro at the Bay of Pigs. Though a dismal failure for Kennedy, it convinced Castro to seek the protection of the USSR.

The most terrifying moment of the Cold War (*see* p.00) came the following year during a 'week that changed the world'. In October 1962 an American U-2 spy plane spotted Soviet nuclear missile bases under construction in Cuba, just 150 km (90 miles) from the USA. If deployed, the missiles could reach Miami, New Orleans and Washington, DC. It was a threat that the US could not tolerate. In a nationwide televised speech Kennedy announced:

'I call upon [USSR] Chairman Khrushchev to halt and eliminate this clandestine, reckless and provocative threat to world peace and to stable relations between our two nations.'

Kennedy declared a 500-mile naval blockade around the island, preventing further Soviet shipments, and warned the Russians that any missile attack from Cuba would incur 'a full retaliatory response' from the US against Russia itself. He also demanded that the bases be shut down and the missiles removed. Khrushchev claimed that the blockade 'constituted an act of aggression'; he refused to back down and Soviet warships carrying weapons continued to sail towards Cuba. Kennedy then threatened to invade Cuba, ordering that bomber planes

with a nuclear payload should be prepared for action. His Secretary of Defence, Robert McNamara, announced as he walked out of the Oval Office: 'I thought I might never live to see another Saturday night.'

Fortunately for the world, neither leader wanted the devastation of a nuclear war. Kennedy commented on the absurdity of the situation: 'It is insane that two men, sitting on opposite sides of the world, should be able to decide to bring an end to civilization.' So, after a suitable display of muscle, Kennedy and Khrushchev brought the world back from the brink of war and began to negotiate.

As a result, the Soviet warships turned back from the blockade and the USSR removed its missiles from Cuba in return for Kennedy's promise that the US would never invade the island. There was another clause to the agreement, one that was kept secret from the American public for twenty-five years to prevent the government from appearing weak: the US agreed to remove its own nuclear missiles from Turkey, where they threatened to jeopardise any future Russian invasion of Western Europe.

These frightening weeks had lasting repercussions. The two superpowers began negotiations that led to nuclear test bans, and the leaders installed hotline telephones between the White House and the Kremlin. The threat of a hot war between the world's superpowers had been replaced by a spirit of cooperation.

Fidel Castro (1926-)

The child of wealthy Cuban farmers, Fidel Castro was aware from an early age of the huge economic and social inequalities in his country. While still a teenager, he organized his father's workers into a labour strike for better conditions. He studied law at university and joined a radical political party, taking part in revolutionary activities in the Dominican Republic and Colombia.

In 1953 Castro led a failed assault on an army barracks in Santiago, hoping to inspire a popular uprising. He later went into exile in Mexico where he trained a guerrilla army that included Che Guevara (*see p. 00*). Back in Cuba he led a revolt against Batista's authoritarian US-backed government and Castro's guerrilla warfare won him the country in 1959.

Castro immediately introduced communist changes, including seizing land and nationalizing industries that were foreign-owned, resulting in a trade embargo by the US. His health began to fail in 2006 and he eventually handed over the reins of government to his brother Raúl.

In 2015 Pope Francis helped bring about a rapprochement between Cuba and the USA, which Castro viewed with caution in case it should change his communist nation.