

BBC Bitesize GCSE History – Cold War and Vietnam

Episode 4 – The Cold War crisis

Announcer: BBC Sounds, music, radio, podcasts.

Katie: I'm history podcaster Katie Charlwood.

Datshiane: And I'm history graduate and TV and radio presenter Datshiane Navanayagam.

Katie: And this is Bitesize GCSE History.

Datshiane: This is the fourth episode in a seven-part series on the Cold War and Vietnam War.

Katie: Throughout the series we are looking at the key moments in the Cold War and the impact it had on Europe and the rest of the world. And we look at what became known as the arms race which was driven by conflicting ideologies, Capitalism and Communism.

Datshiane: In this episode we'll see the growing distrust and hostility between the USA and the USSR and how the build-up of nuclear arms was threatening to world politics. We'll also see the Cold War coming closer to the USA and the potential outbreak of nuclear war.

Katie: To help you we'll be sharing revision hints and tips on how to remember those key facts. And there'll be essay and exam tips, a quiz to test your knowledge and we'll end with a summary of everything we're about to look at.

Datshiane: And don't forget our Bitesize time-travelling reporter Kitty. Today, we'll be sending her back in time to 1962 for that moment when the world held its breath in fear. And remember that it might help you to have something to make notes on. And do feel free to press stop and rewind whenever you need to.

Datshiane: Okay. Let's get started. Nuclear arsenals. What do we mean when we talk about nuclear arsenals in the Cold War?

Katie: Having developed nuclear weapons, both the USA and the USSR then built large stockpiles of them. And these were referred to as nuclear arsenals.

Datshiane: These weapons were bombs that could be dropped by planes. But there were also rockets with nuclear bombs inside that could travel thousands of miles. Both superpowers developed intercontinental ballistic missiles or ICBMs; and also submarine launched ballistic missiles or SLBMs; and strategic bombers. This stockpile of nuclear weapons led to something called the MAD theory or Mutually Assured Destruction. This was the idea that neither side would launch a nuclear attack as they'd know that the other side could retaliate, leading to the total annihilation of both. MAD created a kind of delicate balance of power. And it prevented direct conflict between the superpowers.

Katie: In 1955, Prime Minister Winston Churchill said, and I'm going to give you my best Churchill impression, that "If both Cold War blocs enjoyed comparable levels of destructive capacity, then by a sublime irony safety will be the sturdy child of terror, and survival the twin brother of annihilation."

Datshiane: Katie, what does that mean?

Katie: Well, basically, Churchill is saying that the idea of mutually assured destruction helped keep the peace during the Cold War.

Datshiane: But the USA and USSR did come very close to war on a number of occasions, and in 1962 there were thirteen days when the world held its breath during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Katie: Okay. So, let's go over the background. Get those writing devices ready and take notes. First, the causes leading up to the crisis.

Datshiane: Cuba had a communist government and this made America uneasy.

Katie: But Cuba is just a small island. So what if it decided to have a communist government?

Datshiane: Yes, but, if you look at a map of the world, you'll see how close this small Caribbean island is to America. It's only a hundred miles away from Florida.

Katie: Hah! Communism on America's doorstep?!

Datshiane: That's exactly how they felt. And in 1959 Cuba's leader, Fidel Castro, nationalised all the American businesses in Cuba. And he began trading with the Soviet Union. So, not surprisingly, the Americans were deeply angered.

Katie: And how did the Americans respond?

Datshiane: Well, the USA cut off trade and diplomatic links with Cuba. But that led to Cuba forming closer ties with the USSR who were happy to send economic and military support. And then, Katie, things really did begin to escalate. Who, where and what happened next? You go.

Katie: In April 1961, the USA supported an invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs by Cuban exiles. Although this failed, it made Cuba feel vulnerable to further attacks. And so, what does Castro do?

Datshiane: He sought more military protection from the Soviet Union. And, in 1962 the USSR leader, Khrushchev, secretly placed nuclear missiles, which could easily reach the USA, in Cuba.

Katie: Except, they weren't all that secret. In October 1962, spy planes from the USA photographed the missile sites under construction. President Kennedy was informed and decided that the USA could not tolerate nuclear weapons so close to its shores, setting off a tense thirteen-day standoff.

Datshiane: I can feel the tension myself. So, this is a bit of a dilemma for Kennedy. Let's look at his options. He could ignore the missiles or involve the United Nations.

Katie: But both of those might make him look weak.

Datshiane: True. So, he could invade Cuba or set up a blockade around the island.

Katie: Which of course might make him look stronger but would increase the tensions.

Datshiane: I know, let's cross over back in time and space to our reporter, Kitty, who is in Washington DC on October 22nd 1962. As you're listening to Kitty, make a note of what Kennedy eventually decided to do.

Kitty: American President, John F Kennedy, has addressed the nation about the crisis in Cuba, just a hundred miles off the coast of Florida. Just days ago, American U2 spy planes captured photographs showing that the Soviet Union is constructing missile launch sites in Cuba, and experts say they could be ready to fire in just days. The situation has escalated quickly. Soviet ships are now sailing towards Cuba potentially loaded with more missiles and military supplies. Are we teetering on the brink of nuclear war? After last year's failed invasion, which made Kennedy look weak, his speech today was one of defiance and strength. He said this:

John F Kennedy: Within the past week, unmistakable evidence has established the fact that a series of offensive missile sites is now in preparation on that imprisoned island. The purpose of these bases can be none other than to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western hemisphere. To halt this offensive build-up, a strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba is being initiated. All ships of any kind bound for Cuba, from whatever nation or port, will if found to contain cargo of offensive weapons, be turned back.

Kitty: The tension is palpable because the fear of nuclear war looms large. The stakes have never been higher, and the world is waiting to see if diplomacy can avert disaster. This is Kitty reporting from the heart of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Back to the studio.

Datshiane: Thanks, Kitty. The world watched as the two superpowers approached the brink of nuclear war. After thirteen days and tense negotiations, Khrushchev agreed to remove the missiles in exchange for an American promise not to invade Cuba, as well as the removal of American not-so-secret missiles from Turkey which were aimed at the USSR. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Nuclear war had been averted.

Katie: Another consequence of the Cuban Missile Crisis was that it highlighted the need for direct communication between the superpowers to avoid misunderstandings. And so, a hotline was

established between Washington and Moscow to enable instant communication between the USA and Soviet leaders in times of crisis.

Datshiane: So, the Cuban Missile Crisis also shifted Cold War policy, as both superpowers recognised the dangers of this arms race brinkmanship. And it began a period of detente, or easing of tensions.

Katie: And this led to future arms control agreements like the 1963 Nuclear Test Ban Treaty to end testing nuclear weapons. And an agreement known as the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks or SALT. S-A-L-T. Make a note of those consequences and head over to the Bitesize website for more details.

Datshiane: The Cuban Missile Crisis was one of the most intense moments of the Cold War, leaving lasting impacts on international diplomacy, nuclear arms control and American-Cuban relations.

Katie: An exam question might ask you about the causes, key events and consequences of the Cuban Missile Crisis. So, make sure you know the timeline of events, the who, what, where and when. And most importantly the why.

Datshiane: After this podcast have a go at writing this short essay question. Explain how events in Cuba became an international crisis by October 1962. Have a listen back to that section as all of those key facts, causes and consequences are there.

Datshiane: In the meantime, a quick refresh test to remind ourselves about the Cuban Missile Crisis. Three questions, five seconds but no prizes.

Katie: What was the Bay of Pigs invasion?

Datshiane: It was a failed invasion of Cuba by Cuban exiles backed by American President Kennedy.

[correct bell sounds]

Katie: What did American U2 spy planes discover in Cuba in 1962?

Datshiane: Soviet nuclear missile sites.

[correct bell sounds]

Katie: How did President Kennedy respond to the discovery of missiles in Cuba?

Datshiane: He imposed a naval blockade around Cuba leading to a thirteen-day standoff with the USSR. Katie, let's summarise this episode.

Katie: All right. During the Cold War, the USA and the USSR built up their nuclear arsenal.

Datshiane: But, none were ever used due to the idea of mutually assured destruction, or MAD.

Katie: The nearest the superpowers came to actual conflict was over the Cuban Missile Crisis when the USA discovered that the USSR had installed nuclear weapons on the island of Cuba on America's doorstep.

Datshiane: After a failed invasion at the Bay of Pigs, the USA imposed a naval blockade and ordered the USSR to remove the missiles.

Katie: The USSR eventually backed down and the missiles were removed. And in return, the USA removed its missiles from Turkey.

Datshiane: Relations slowly improved and led to arms control talks between the USA and USSR.

Katie: Loads more on this and other history subjects on the Bitesize website.

Datshiane: In the next episode, we'll continue our look at the Cold War as it moves to conflict in Asia.

Katie: The Korean War where again those ideological differences between the USA and the USSR are once again at the forefront. Thanks for listening.