

Cuba and Vietnam

Cuba

In October 1962, America and Russia came close to a war over what historians call the "Cuban Missile Crisis". Cuba was ruled by the pro - Russian leader, Fidel Castro, who had overthrown the right - wing dictator, Batista in 1959. This alarmed America as Cuba was just 90 miles away ; America was concerned that the friendship between Castro and Khrushchev could threaten the American mainland should Castro agree to allow Russia to station troops and weapons there.

Relations between America and Russia had worsened since 1960 and the new American president, Kennedy was anxious to help overthrow Castro. In 1961, Kennedy backed an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow Castro - known as the "Bay of Pigs" incident

In October 1962, Cuba became a major cause of concern when U2 spy planes photographed missile base on Cuba. It was clear that Russia was intending to use Cuba as a base for a future attack on America. Kennedy had to respond to this crisis as it was known that Russian ships were on their way to Cuba carrying missiles for the bases. Kennedy consulted his advisers and chiefs of staff. He had 3 main courses of action : (a) launch an invasion of Cuba using the navy and army (b) bomb Cuba using the airforce (c) a "blockade" of Cuba - this would mean an encirclement of Cuba using the navy, preventing any ships from arriving. Kennedy decided to use the blockade option.

When the Russian ships reached the "blockade line", they turned around. It seemed as if America had won, particularly when Khrushchev contacted Kennedy and agreed to withdraw the missiles. But the situation became confused when a day later, Khrushchev contacted Kennedy for a second time and said that he would only remove Russian missiles from Cuba in return for America's promise to remove her missiles from Turkey. Kennedy took a chance and decided to respond only to the first of the two telegrams. It worked ; Khrushchev decided against pushing for his extra demands and withdrew his missiles from Cuba.

The crisis had important effects on relations between Russia and America : a "hot line" was set up linking the two leaders by a telephone link ; talks began on the scaling down of nuclear missiles - the 1963 Test Ban Treaty.

Vietnam

The country of Vietnam had been a colony of France before World War Two. During the 1950's, the French lost control of the country and in 1954, it was divided into two states : communist north and non - communist south. America had already experienced the effects of communism in Korea (1950 - 1953) and was determined to help protect south Vietnam from the threat posed by the north Vietnamese communists, the Vietcong.

At first, America chose to support Diem, the head of the south Vietnamese government but he proved unpopular and was overthrown in 1963. The new American president, Johnson, decided instead to take a tougher line over Vietnam and so sent American troops to Vietnam in 1964.

By 1968, 500,000 American troops were in Vietnam fighting the Vietcong. Unfortunately, the "high - tech" American army struggled against the guerilla tactics of the Vietcong in the dense jungles of south east Asia.

Nixon, the new American president, elected in 1968, had a very different attitude towards Vietnam. He realised that America could never defeat the Vietcong and so decided that America's best policy was one of withdrawal of troops but only after the training of the south Vietnamese to carry on the war themselves.

Finally, in 1973, a cease fire was agreed between north and south, which gave America the opportunity to withdraw. The war continued until 1975, when the Vietcong finally won control of the south.

America's involvement in Vietnam was a disaster. It had been intended as a check to the spread of communism in south east Asia but had failed - 55,000 American troops had died in the process.