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978-1-107-69890-1 – History for the IB Diploma: The Cold War and the Americas 1945–1981

John Stanley

Excerpt

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6 Cuba and the Cold War 1945–81

Timeline

- 1952 Mar:** former president Batista seizes power
- 1953 26 Jul:** Castro launches a rebellion, resulting in his imprisonment
- 1954 Nov:** Batista dissolves parliament and is elected constitutional president without opposition
- 1955 May:** Castro released from prison
- 1956 Dec:** Castro's rebels land in Cuba; guerrilla war against Batista begins
- 1959 Jan:** Castro's revolutionary government takes control; Batista flees to Dominican Republic
- Feb:** Castro becomes prime minister
- 1960 Jul:** all US businesses and property in Cuba nationalised
- 1961 Jan:** USA breaks off diplomatic relations with Cuba
- Apr:** US Bay of Pigs invasion fails; US trade embargo
- 1962 Jan:** Cuba expelled from Organization of American States
- 16–28 Oct:** Cuban Missile Crisis
- 1967 9 Oct:** Guevara captured and executed in Bolivia
- 1972** Cuba becomes full member of Soviet-based Council for Mutual Economic Assistance
- 1975** Cuban forces airlifted by USSR to help MPLA in Angola
- Dec:** Cuban Communist Party approves new socialist constitution; Castro elected president

Key questions

- Why were relations between Cuba and the USA historically important?
- Why was there a revolution against Batista?
- What impact did the Cuban Revolution have on the Cold War?
- Did the Cold War influence Castro's domestic policy?

The Cold War and the Americas 1945–81

This chapter examines the impact of the Cold War on Cuba from 1945 to 1981. It considers the relationship between Cuba and the USA before Castro's revolution, then looks at how this relationship changed under Castro. The effect of the Cuban Revolution on both regional and international relations is also discussed. Finally, this chapter explores the impact of the Cuban Missile Crisis – viewed by many historians as the most dangerous moment of the Cold War – and Castro's attempts to establish an independent role in world affairs while pursuing a socialist revolution in Cuba.

Overview

- The Caribbean island of Cuba was ruled by Spain until it gained independence at the end of the Spanish–American War in 1898.
- In the first decades of the 20th century, Cuba increasingly came under the influence of the USA, and soon the Cuban economy was heavily dependent on US trade and investment.
- In 1933, the army general Fulgencio Batista overthrew the Cuban government in a military coup. From this time, he effectively ruled Cuba as a dictator through a series of 'puppet' presidents. Batista protected US interests in Cuba, and grew wealthy as a result.
- By 1945, Cuba was practically a US colony – an American holiday destination and a centre for organised crime, prostitution and drugs. While rich Americans and the Cuban élite enjoyed lavish lifestyles, most Cubans lived in poverty, with limited access to health care and education.
- In 1956, Fidel Castro organised a rebellion to overthrow Batista. This developed into a three-year guerrilla war, but in January 1959 Castro emerged victorious and Batista fled the country.
- US leaders were suspicious of Castro, and their attitude eventually caused him to turn to the USSR for support. Consequently, Cuba was drawn into Cold War politics.
- After a failed US attempt to overthrow Castro in 1961, he appealed to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev for help. In response, Khrushchev sent intermediate-range ballistic missiles to Cuba.
- This triggered the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, which nearly brought the superpowers into open conflict. After several tense days, a compromise was reached and war was avoided.
- After the crisis, the USA remained hostile to Castro; as a result, Cuba moved towards the USSR, China and other communist states or non-aligned countries.
- Castro encouraged revolution by supporting any movements with anti-US sentiments in Africa and the Americas, including Nicaragua, Angola and Ethiopia.
- By the 1980s, however, the USSR could no longer provide support for Cuba's interventionist foreign policy. As Soviet aid was withdrawn, Cuba's influence on the world stage began to decline.

Why were relations between Cuba and the USA historically important?

Cuba and the USA 1898–1945

Economic factors

The USA and Cuba share a complex, connected history. Cuba was part of the Spanish Empire until the US won the Spanish–American War of 1898. Cuba gained independence from Spain, but the USA ensured that the peace terms allowed significant US control of the island. The Cuban army was immediately disbanded, removing a potential source of opposition to US domination.

The Americans began an extensive building programme in Cuba, constructing badly needed schools, roads, sewers and telegraph lines. They believed it was their duty to ‘civilise’ Cubans and integrate them into the USA’s sphere of influence. Between 1901 and 1921, the US military intervened on four occasions to help secure Cuban governments that would support the USA and help protect its growing interests. By the 1930s, the Cuban economy was supported by nearly \$1500 million of US investment.

SOURCE A

US government leaders saw these economic, moral and political responsibilities all going hand in hand. The Cubans were allowed, even encouraged, to choose a constitutional convention, which produced a charter in 1901. But the US government harboured doubts about the new country’s ability to govern itself, so Washington forced the Cubans, under protest, to incorporate an amendment (the Platt Amendment) which gave the United States the right to intervene in domestic politics at will. This proviso remained in force until 1934, making Cuba an American protectorate.

Skidmore, T. E. and Smith, P. H. 2001. Modern Latin America (5th Edition). New York, USA. Oxford University Press. p. 261.

Sugar production was a major part of the Cuban economy. American companies owned the sugar mills and controlled large areas of rural land, which produced around 75% of Cuba’s sugar. Almost all Cuban sugar was exported to the USA, and this made the island nation dependent on America, creating an unequal export economy in which foreign consumers (mainly the USA) determined the degree of prosperity or recession in Cuba. By 1959, the USA was Cuba’s largest trading partner.

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To what extent was Cuba really independent in the early years of the 20th century? What proved to be ironic about Cuba ridding itself of Spanish colonial rule?

Geographical factors

At its nearest point, Cuba is only 145 km (90 miles) from the tip of Key West in Florida. This close proximity meant that the USA had long taken an interest in Cuban affairs. Historically, the US also viewed Cuba as a key part of a broader regional policy, and understood the strategic importance of states in the wider Americas. In 1823, US president James Monroe issued the Monroe Doctrine, which declared that the USA would not tolerate any European interference in the Americas.

In 1904, Theodore Roosevelt reinforced this policy with the Roosevelt Corollary. This addition to the Monroe Doctrine stated that the US would intervene anywhere in the Caribbean and Central America if such intervention was considered necessary to protect US lives, property or interests.

A map of Cuba showing its position in relation to the USA and the Caribbean



During the Second World War, Cuban president **Fulgencio Batista** formally supported the Allies. After 1945, Cuba increasingly came to be seen as a buffer against anti-US interests in the region, and its stability was of major importance to the USA. As the Cold War developed, president Harry Truman and his successors watched closely for signs of any communist or socialist state emerging in the Americas (the USA's 'back yard').

Fulgencio Batista (1901–73) In 1933, Batista led the Sergeants' Revolt – an uprising that overthrew the Cuban government. By 1934, he had established himself as head of the armed forces, and from this time on he was the real power behind several civilian 'puppet' presidents. Batista served as the elected president in 1940–44, and enjoyed genuine popularity. However, after assuming leadership again in a 1952 coup he became a corrupt, right-wing dictator. Batista was overthrown by Fidel Castro in 1959, and died in exile in Portugal.

Why was Cuba historically important to the USA? Was Cuba more important to the USA economically or politically? What can we learn about US attitudes in general towards the Americas by reading about its attitude towards Cuba?



Theory of knowledge

History and inevitability

Commentators have said it was 'inevitable' that Cubans would eventually challenge US dominance, particularly if a radical nationalist – like Castro – came along. Is 'inevitability' as a historical concept misleading, or even unacceptable? Rather than steering us towards understanding causation, does it merely lead us towards uncritical assumptions and away from alternative arguments by suggesting that 'things just happened that way'?

Why was there a revolution against Batista?

Batista's Cuba

In September 1933, Fulgencio Batista led an army uprising that overthrew the liberal Cuban government of President Gerardo Machado, marking the start of military influence in Cuban politics. Although Batista did not formally seize power for himself, for the next few years he effectively ruled the country through a series of 'puppet' presidents. During this period, Batista emerged as the USA's preferred ruler in the Caribbean.

The Cold War and the Americas 1945–81**The new constitution and Batista's first presidency 1940–44**

In 1940, a new Cuban constitution was agreed. This was one of the most progressive constitutions of its time, encouraging land reform, public education and a minimum wage. It introduced the eight-hour working day and was the first constitution in Latin America to approve (at least in principle) the right of women to vote and work, and equal rights for different sexes and races.

The 1940 Constitution also defined the responsibilities of each branch of the Cuban government, created the role of prime minister, and established clear rules about representation in Congress. Under this new constitution, general elections were held in July 1940, and Batista became president as the leader of the Democratic Socialist Coalition – a group that included both liberals and communists.

Although Batista did not enforce all the provisions of the 1940 Constitution during his four-year presidency, he did carry out widespread reforms, including improving the education system and launching an extensive programme of public works. Batista also reinforced ties with the USA by increasing trade between the two countries. Cuba joined the Second World War on the Allied side on the day after the Japanese bombing of the US naval base at Pearl Harbor in December 1941, further strengthening the bond with the USA.

As his presidential term came to an end, Batista supported Carlos Saladrigas Zayas as his successor. However, in the 1944 elections Zayas was defeated by Ramón Grau San Martín. Batista moved to the USA, but he remained head of the Cuban army and continued to influence Cuban politics.

Batista's coup 1952

By the early 1950s, the Cuban government under President Carlos Prío Socarrás was suffering from accusations of corruption and fighting between political factions. Batista knew that Prío would lose the 1952 elections, so he decided to run for president again, this time at the head of his own party – the United Action Party. Batista's earlier popularity with the Cuban people made him believe he would be welcomed back. However, during the election campaign an opinion poll revealed that Batista was coming last in the presidential race.

Batista's two opponents, Roberto Agramonte and Aurelio Hevia, both stated their intention of making the widely respected Colonel Ramón Barquín head of the Cuban armed forces if they won the election. Unwilling to lose both the presidential election and his control of the army, Batista staged a coup before the elections could take place, removing Prío from power and establishing himself as provisional president, with backing from the army.

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Cuba and the Cold War 1945–81

Despite Batista's illegal seizure of power (which he justified by claiming that Prío had intended to stage his own coup to retain the presidency), the USA formally recognised Batista's government. This encouraged the Cuban leader to fill government positions with people who he knew would do his bidding without question.

Discussion point

Why do you think the USA officially recognised Batista's new government, even though he had overthrown a democratically elected leader?

Shortly after Batista's coup, a radical young lawyer named Fidel Castro tried to have him prosecuted. When this attempt to bring Batista to justice failed, Castro reached the conclusion that the Cuban leader could not be removed from power by any legal means.

In 1954, Batista held an election in which he was the only legal candidate. Despite formalising his power in this way, the Cuban people no longer trusted Batista, and there were public calls for new – legitimate – elections. However, no moderate political group could challenge Batista's dictatorial regime, and there was no public forum for debate on the issue. The scene was set for armed opposition or civil war.

A 10-m (32-ft) figure of Batista near the US embassy (the building on the right) in Havana; this was part of his 1954 election campaign – the words below the figure say, 'This is the man'



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On seizing power, Batista stated that he remained loyal to the 1940 Constitution, but he suspended parts of it almost immediately. This deeply angered the Cuban people. Although several of its provisions had never been implemented, the constitution was greatly respected. It was seen as an instrument of social and democratic change, and an ideal towards which Cubans should strive.

Historian Hugh Thomas writes that in April 1952, ‘Batista proclaimed a new constitutional code of 275 articles, claiming that the “democratic and progressive essence” of the 1940 Constitution was preserved in the new law’. However, few people believed Batista’s argument. Castro was furious, and became further convinced that Batista must be overthrown. Many Cuban professionals, intellectuals and members of the middle class shared Castro’s view.

Activity

Using books, the internet and other resources, find out more about the 1940 Constitution. What made it so important? Why was it never fully implemented? Which parts of the constitution might upset the USA in the post-1945 Cold War climate? Why?

Castro’s response to Batista’s coup

On 26 July 1953, Castro and a group of 165 revolutionaries stormed the garrison at the Moncada army barracks in Santiago. The assault failed and Batista’s forces killed, wounded or arrested half the attackers, although Castro and his brother Raúl escaped. Batista ordered the district military commander to kill ten rebels for every soldier that had

died in the attack until the Castro brothers surrendered.

Fidel and Raúl duly turned themselves in. They were tried alongside over 100 other rebels, and were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment (15 years for Fidel, 13 for Raúl). Yet two years later, in 1955, both were released after Batista granted them amnesty in order to improve his image.

Fidel Castro (left) gives his deposition after the failed coup of July 1953



During his trial, lawyer Fidel gave a spirited defence of his actions. In his closing speech he declared, ‘La historia me absolverá’ (‘history will absolve me’). Castro also spoke of his plans for Cuba, which included nationalising public utilities, restructuring education and controlling financial speculation. The content of his speech became the text for the Cuban Revolution, based in particular on five key laws that would have been enacted if the rebels had succeeded:

- 1 a reinstatement of the 1940 Constitution and the return of power to the Cuban people
- 2 a 55% share of profits for sugar planters
- 3 workers in mining and major industries to receive a 30% profit share
- 4 land rights for those holding less than 165 acres
- 5 people guilty of embezzlement (stealing money they had been entrusted with) or fraud to have their property seized and sold, with proceeds going to medical care, workers’ pensions and charities.

With the rebellion’s failure, however, none of this happened. After his release from prison, Castro went to Mexico to build a new revolutionary force, which became known as the 26 July Movement.

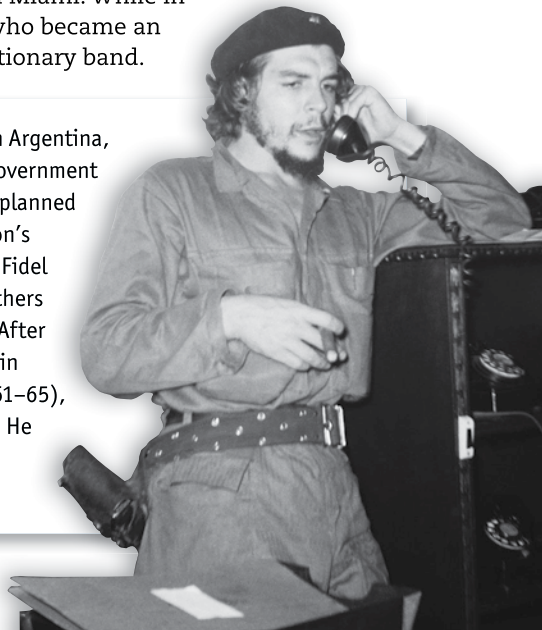
Activity

To what extent were Castro’s laws ‘revolutionary’? List them and then discuss with a partner how acceptable these might or might not be in many countries today.

Castro’s decision to leave Cuba was wise, as it distanced him from Cuban politics. By going to Mexico instead of the USA, he avoided detection by US authorities and becoming involved in the politics of the many Cuban exiles who had settled in Miami. While in Mexico, Castro met **Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara**, who became an important and effective recruit to the revolutionary band.

Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara (1928–67) Born in Argentina, Guevara trained as a doctor. In 1954, the socialist government of Guatemala was overthrown by a US-backed coup, planned by the CIA. Disgusted by such evidence of Washington’s apparent hold over Central America, Guevara joined Fidel Castro in Mexico. In 1956, Guevara, Castro and 80 others arrived in Cuba to overthrow Batista’s government. After two years of fighting, Castro became Cuba’s premier in 1959. Guevara served as minister for industries (1961–65), but left Cuba to become a guerrilla leader in Bolivia. He was captured by Bolivian and US special forces, and executed in October 1967.

Che Guevara in 1959



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Guevara was already angered by the USA's overthrow of Guatemalan president **Jacobo Árbenz** in 1954. He was inspired to join Castro after watching Cuba descend into corruption and repression, as US cultural and commercial influences grew on the island. Throughout the 1950s, Cuba was known as the 'whorehouse of America' – a playground for US businessmen and a centre for drugs, prostitution and the Mafia. Batista became the Mafia's Cuban ally through his business dealings with the gangster Meyer Lansky, who controlled gambling in Cuba (Batista allegedly received 30% of Lansky's takings).

Activity

Use the internet to find out more about the Sicilian Mafia. How has this criminal gang achieved such influence in business and politics? Why do you think the Mafia was so keen to establish itself in Cuba in the 1950s? Why might Batista want friends in the Mafia?

Jacobo Árbenz (1913–71) Originally an army officer, Árbenz was Guatemala's defence minister (1944–51) and then president (1951–54). Árbenz alarmed Washington in 1951 when he promised to convert Guatemala from 'a backward country with a predominantly feudal economy into a modern capitalist state' by limiting the influence of foreign corporations over Guatemalan politics. He also stated that he would modernise Guatemala's infrastructure without foreign capital. Árbenz's relative tolerance of the Guatemalan Party of Labour (PGT) and other left-leaning groups unnerved the US government, and prompted the CIA to draw up a plan to remove Árbenz as a communist threat. This plan was implemented in June 1954. Árbenz fled Guatemala and died in Mexico in 1971.

Castro's revolution 1956–59

In late 1956, student riots and anti-Batista demonstrations increased. Police reaction to these riots grew increasingly brutal, and protesting students were often viciously beaten. When a popular student leader was killed, his funeral became a focus for protest, and workers went on strike all over the country. Batista's response was to close Havana University and establish stricter media censorship. He ignored further calls for new elections to be held, believing that he could defeat any attempt to overthrow him by force.

Having trained their revolutionaries in Mexico, the Castro brothers and Che Guevara sailed for Cuba in late November 1956, ready to begin their rebellion. Their arrival was planned to coincide with an uprising in Havana led by Frank País, a Cuban revolutionary who co-ordinated urban underground resistance to Batista's regime for the 26 July Movement while Castro was in exile.

However, events did not go as Castro had planned. País' rebellion was rapidly crushed, and the revolutionaries landed in the wrong place. Many of them were killed or captured by Batista's forces. Only 16 of the 82 men escaped, including Guevara, Fidel and Raúl. They fled into the Sierra Maestra mountains in eastern Cuba, where they regrouped and began planning a guerrilla war against Batista.

Guerrilla warfare

Immediately after the failed rebellion, Batista spread the word that Castro had been killed when the revolutionaries landed. However, a journalist for the *New York Times* discovered that Fidel was alive and living in the mountains. When this news was published, it alarmed both Batista and his supporters in the USA. Batista ordered bombing raids on the mountains, but these caused more casualties among the peasants who lived in the Sierra Maestra than among the rebels. The mountain peasants came to be strong supporters of Castro and his group. The revolutionaries helped local people on their farms, gave them medical aid and even established basic schools in rural villages.

Fidel (centre) and Raúl (kneeling centre) Castro with Che Guevara (second from left) and other revolutionaries in the Sierra Maestra mountains, 1958



Historians Thomas Skidmore and Peter Smith note that although Castro attracted peasant support, the rebel band itself was mainly middle class, and point out that 'most revolutions in history have been led by members of a counter-élite'. With the help of Frank País, Castro also established a strong following in urban areas, which he used to orchestrate a civil resistance movement to encourage uprisings by liberal, middle-class professionals and skilled workers.

The Cold War and the Americas 1945–81

Castro's guerrilla band was small – sometimes numbering less than 200 members – while Batista had 30–40,000 troops at his disposal. Although the revolutionaries were often successful in their fight against the Cuban military, Castro realised he needed to extend his support base. In July 1957, encouraged by Frank País, businessmen and politicians who were sympathetic to Castro's cause issued the Pact of the Sierra, which called for a 'civic revolutionary front' to drive Batista from office. Despite the pact's stated intention, this revolutionary front was never established and no civic uprising occurred.

As violence and unrest spread across the country, the USA realised that time was running out for Batista. However, the US disliked the idea of Castro assuming power, mainly because he was unlikely to be as supportive of US interests in Cuba as Batista had been. The US encouraged Batista to resign, hoping that a similarly US-friendly leader could be installed before Castro took power by force. Batista refused.

Under increasing public criticism for supplying weapons to Batista, the US placed an embargo on arms shipments in March 1958. This hit Batista badly, severely limiting his military capability. He knew that this withdrawal of US support undermined his legitimacy as president.

SOURCE B

[Commerce, industry and capital] which have whole-heartedly supported President Batista since he took over the government in 1952, are growing impatient with the continued violence in the island.

Comments made by the New York Times correspondent in Havana, 1957. Quoted in Bethell, L. (ed.) 1993. Cuba: A Short History. Cambridge, UK. Cambridge University Press. p. 90.

What does Source B tell us about the attitude of business interests towards Batista by the end of 1957? Why might there be a connection between these comments and the US government embargo of March 1958?

Batista's overthrow

In April 1958, Castro's cause gained a significant boost when the communists pledged support for the revolutionaries. With forces now exceeding 5000, Castro increased his use of guerrilla tactics, carrying out bombings, sabotage and assassinations on government targets. Batista also resorted to guerrilla warfare, but the torture and

executions carried out by the government made the Cuban people even more sympathetic to the rebels. In July 1958, Castro's position as leader of the anti-Batista movement was confirmed at a meeting in Venezuela. The Pact of Caracas, agreed at this meeting, formally recognised Castro's army as Cuba's 'liberation force'.

Throughout 1958, towns across Cuba fell to Castro as his guerrilla army grew to 50,000 men and Batista's offensive collapsed. By autumn of that year, all support for Batista had evaporated and Castro's gradual advance on Havana prompted spontaneous uprisings. On 1 January 1959, Batista fled and a ceasefire was agreed. Castro entered the capital on 8 January, announcing to crowds of cheering Cubans that 'the revolution begins now'.

Why did Castro's revolution succeed?

There are several reasons for the success of the Cuban Revolution and Batista's downfall. Firstly, Batista's cruelty and disregard for human rights increased opposition and ultimately cost him US support. Many members of the middle classes who opposed Batista's regime had been arrested, tortured or killed. Batista also vastly underestimated Castro's revolutionaries, who were a determined and intelligent force.

By 1959, there was a genuine desire for change among the Cuban people. The rural poor and urban working classes had little power or influence. Trade links with the USA had stunted economic growth and caused a recession in Cuba's largely sugar-dependent economy. Unemployment stood at nearly 20%, and even some members of the middle classes and businessmen were moved by appeals for greater social justice. However, the main factor that contributed to the success of the revolution and unified Cubans in 1959 was a desire to be free from US influence and control.

Discussion point

From 1956 to 1958, Fidel Castro fought to overthrow Batista. How justifiable is any armed struggle against a government? Does it make any difference if the government is retaining power illegally through rigged elections? If the government is causing suffering to the population, should the ideal of 'the greatest good/harm to the greatest number' be used to get rid of them? Or is it always morally questionable to attack a government in power?

What was the main turning point for Castro in his revolution against Batista? What was the turning point for Batista? Were these key moments the same?