

## What impact did the Cuban Revolution have on the Cold War?

### What did Castro stand for?

US interests in Cuba were widespread, so there was no doubt in Washington that the Cuban Revolution would affect the USA. People in America began to question the new regime and to wonder where Castro's sympathies lay. Was he a communist or a nationalist? Was he anti-American or just pro-Cuban?

Castro's revolution was supported by diverse groups, ranging from communists and prominent businessmen to leaders of the Catholic Church. In the Cold War climate, the USA was naturally concerned about Castro's communist support. In addition, although the USA suspended arms shipments to Cuba, Washington refused to recall the military advisors it had sent to assist the Cuban air force in bombing Cuban rebels. As a result, the US government alienated both sides – it weakened Batista's forces and incited Castro's anger. These factors contributed to uncertainty in the USA about how Cuba's relationship with its near neighbour would now develop.

Castro's beliefs have been the subject of considerable historical debate. Some orthodox historians have argued that Castro was a communist with a long-term plan. However, others claim that he had no detailed ideology when he seized power. John Aldred notes that 'Castro's seizure of Cuba was the first time an apparent Marxist–Leninist revolt had succeeded in establishing control of a state since Mao Zedong's revolution in China in 1949'. This view is contested by Leslie Dewart, who argues that there is no evidence to suggest that Castro was a 'dedicated agent of international communism'.

Levine and Papatotiriou believe that Castro was 'without a sharp ideological orientation, though he was against American hegemony in Latin America'. They comment that early relations with Washington were not antagonistic and that within six months of the revolution, the USA officially recognised Castro's regime. Allan Todd notes that even when Castro began a general programme of nationalisation in 1960, he was still not a member of the Cuban Communist Party, although he 'came to rely increasingly on [the communists] to provide administrators for his reform programmes'.

To begin with at least, Castro was outwardly ambiguous about his own beliefs, and such caution suggests that he was very much a realist. Historians have spent many years trying to define his political beliefs. However, it seems that above all else Castro was a nationalist with socialist leanings and a tendency to adapt to a situation as the need arose – a politician who would work with anyone for Cuba's benefit.

**Activity**

What do *you* think Castro's intentions were? Split into groups of four and then into pairs. Using the information in this book and any other sources available, gather evidence both for and against Castro being a communist. Draw up a table with two columns headed 'Communist' and 'Nationalist', to highlight different points in the debate. In your groups of four, one pair should present an argument for Castro being a communist and one pair an argument against. As you gather evidence, consider the following:

- historiography
- a lack of/the presence of ideology
- US reactions
- responses of traditional supporters
- responses of people who might not be counted as allies (such as the business community and the Catholic Church).

**The aftermath of the Cuban Revolution****Searching for friends**

Castro visited the USA in April 1959 in the hope of securing US aid to improve the situation in Cuba. He was careful to emphasise his plans for radical land reform, which he felt the US would approve of. Addressing a meeting of the United Nations in New York, Castro stated that – like other developing states – Cuba remained neutral in the Cold War. Despite this, US president Eisenhower declined to meet Castro, and he was not warmly received by vice-president Nixon.

How might Castro have reacted to being shunned by Eisenhower? In what ways might this have influenced his future plans for Cuba?

On his return to Cuba, Castro introduced the radical Agrarian Reform Law, which limited *latifundia* (large estates) to 1000 acres. This broke the monopoly of land held by the wealthy few. Castro divided nearly half of all Cuban farmland into smaller plots for peasants and small farmers, or for plantation workers who had no land at all. The law also provided for the nationalisation of large ranches, to be run as farming co-operatives. These changes gave Cuban agricultural workers greater influence and a financial stake in the system. However, the USA was concerned that the law banned foreigners from owning agricultural land. Washington was also worried by the appointment of the communist Nuñez Jimenez as head of the reform programme. Despite these concerns, Eisenhower knew that the USSR was watching events in Cuba unfold, and realised that any aggressive US action against Cuba might force Castro to seek an alliance with Moscow.

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A succession of events in 1960 increased tensions between Cuba and the USA. Firstly, Castro accused Cuban exiles in Florida of flying bombing missions against Cuba. He then nationalised all US-owned oil refineries in Cuba. In response, Eisenhower introduced economic sanctions and stopped buying sugar from Cuba. Castro turned to the USSR for economic assistance, and Nikita Khrushchev agreed to provide Cuba with \$100 million in aid and a sugar contract.

Castro's dealings with the USSR heightened US fears of communist influence on its doorstep, and these fears seemed confirmed when Castro concluded a trade agreement with Communist China. Eisenhower could no longer ignore the risk of Cuba becoming a Soviet base. He authorised plans for Castro's overthrow, and training began for the Bay of Pigs invasion (see page 57).

#### **Castro turns to the USSR**

The USA cut off diplomatic relations with Cuba in January 1961. Initially, the USSR's response to this was hesitant, but Moscow soon realised that this was an opportunity to gain a foothold less than 100 miles from the US and to alter the Cold War balance of power. The failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961 gave both Castro and Khrushchev confidence that they could stand against the USA.

When Castro openly declared his communist sympathies in December 1961, the US felt its actions against Cuba had been entirely justified. The USSR regarded Castro's announcement as evidence of his development from bourgeois nationalist leader to revolutionary democrat. However, Castro's motives for declaring himself a communist may have been more practical – he needed Soviet support to consolidate his revolution and prevent a potential US invasion.

Soviet involvement in Cuban affairs led to the establishment of missile bases on the island to counteract the threat of the USA – a move that triggered the Cuban Missile Crisis (see page 58). In negotiating the removal of the missiles, the USA promised never to invade Cuba and to remove its own missiles from Turkey.

Some historians have argued that if the US government had not tried so hard to undermine Castro, the Cuban Missile Crisis might never have occurred. For example, John Aldred cites the USA's attitude as the main cause of the crisis, believing that the Soviets acted defensively and only intended the missiles to be a deterrent to US attack. However historians might choose to interpret events, the result was that Castro was able to develop his agenda without fear of US invasion.

What did the USSR stand to gain by supporting Cuba?

## Castro and the Cold War after 1962

After 1962, Castro's main foreign policy goal was to liberate poorer nations from the domination of wealthier ones. He voiced strong support for international revolution, based on his intense dislike of imperialism in general and the USA in particular.

The US government's tactic of weakening Cuba by applying a trade embargo won Castro sympathy from several nations already hostile to the USA. As a result, Cuba's prestige and influence on the international stage increased.

### Cuban influence in the Americas

The Cuban Revolution had significant influence in the Americas. It either provoked hatred and derision, or it won praise for representing the ideals and aspirations of many ordinary Latin Americans.

Che Guevara (see page 159) left Cuba in 1965 to help revolutionaries in Bolivia. In 1967, US-trained forces captured and executed him. In death, Guevara became a martyr to many idealistic, reforming young Latin Americans. Guevara's legend was linked with Castro's in encouraging revolution in the Americas. This concerned the USA, but the USSR also had misgivings about Castro's desire to export revolution.

Castro's victory marginalised Cuba from the Latin American mainstream, and the USA encouraged a right-wing reaction that introduced a number of military dictatorships across the Americas in the 1970s. Despite this, Castro maintained good relationships with several states in the region.

In Chile, President Salvador Allende's socialist beliefs led him to form a friendship with Castro. The Cuban leader made a month-long visit to Chile and offered Allende advice. The political right believed that the Chilean 'path to socialism' was an effort to recreate the Cuban Revolution in Chile, and this was of major concern to the USA. In 1973, Allende was killed during a CIA-backed coup, and a right-wing military dictatorship was established. You will learn more about the situation in Chile in Chapter 7.

In Peru, General Juan Velasco stated his aim of achieving justice for the poor. He nationalised industries and exerted greater government control over economic activity. The media became increasingly influenced by left-wing intellectuals, and Velasco also made major purchases of military hardware from the Soviet Union. Castro praised Peru as a 'new phenomenon' with 'a group of progressive military playing a revolutionary role'. Velasco and Castro became close associates, diplomatic relations were established between Cuba and Peru, and Castro sent advisors to assist Velasco.

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Castro developed similar relations with Panama's General Omar Torrijos and Ecuador's autocratic Velasco Ibarra. Neither of these leaders took definite steps towards establishing socialist systems in their countries, such as nationalising industries, but both made it clear that they were prepared to act relatively independently of the USA, and this encouraged Castro's support.

However, during this period it was only in Nicaragua that a real revolution similar to that in Cuba took place. Here, a guerrilla band from the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) succeeded in overthrowing the right-wing dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza in 1979. The Sandinistas established a socialist government, aimed at achieving social and economic justice and pursuing an independent foreign policy.

#### Activity

Using this book and other sources available to you, consider why the majority of Latin American states in the 1960s and 1970s were right-wing and militaristic. Write a paragraph explaining your views.

*Sandinista rebels celebrate the overthrow of the government in Nicaragua in June 1979*



In 1981, US president Ronald Reagan condemned the FSLN for supporting Cuba in encouraging Marxist revolutionary movements in other Latin American countries. The CIA began funding, arming and training Nicaraguan rebels, many of whom were former members of Somoza's National Guard. The Sandinistas were voted out after a decade, partly due to being undermined by the USA.

### Activity

Research the history of another country in the Americas during the 1970s, such as Bolivia, Argentina, El Salvador, Guyana or Venezuela. Did Castro have any impact on the political development of your chosen country? Did the Cuban Revolution inspire opposition groups? Did it influence governments either way? How did the superpowers react?

### Cuba and the Cold War in Africa

Throughout the 1970s, Castro grew increasingly willing to assist liberation struggles outside the Americas – most notably in post-colonial Africa. This brought another geographical dimension to the Cold War, as Castro involved Cuba in a series of revolutionary campaigns in the developing world from 1974 to 1981.

Relations between Cuba and the USSR had become strained after Castro declared his aim of encouraging international revolution. By 1970, however, the situation between the two countries had improved. In particular, Castro won back Soviet trust by speaking out in support of the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the USSR and its Warsaw Pact allies in August 1968. A downturn in Cuba's economy also meant that Castro was more in need of Soviet support than ever. He still hoped for revolution in the developing world, but expressed his commitment to liberation through internationalism.

An opportunity for Castro to prove this commitment came with the collapse of a dictatorial regime in Portugal in 1974. When the new Portuguese government announced plans to grant independence to Angola – an oil- and mineral-rich African colony – a power struggle began between various groups in Angola.

Civil war erupted in Angola between the Soviet-backed MPLA, the US-backed FNLA, and UNITA, which was supported by China, South Africa and Israel. Later, after China withdrew, the USA supported UNITA. By 1975, 12,000 Cuban troops were actively fighting for the MPLA, supplied with Soviet weapons. Cuban forces were a significant factor in the MPLA's victory in 1976 and in the creation of the People's Republic of Angola (PRA). Although Cuban troops left in 1977, Castro promised military aid if Angola faced threats from South Africa or the USA in the future.



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In 1977, Castro also involved Cuba in a Cold War power struggle in the Horn of Africa, where a liberation movement in Eritrea was fighting against occupying forces from Ethiopia. To begin with, the USSR and Cuba gave aid to the liberation movement, but a coup in Ethiopia led to a new government that proclaimed allegiance to the USSR rather than the USA. As a result, Cuba and the USSR began providing military aid to the Ethiopian army in Eritrea. They also supported Ethiopia in its efforts to take the the Ogaden region from Somalia.

Between November 1977 and February 1978, Castro sent around 17,000 soldiers to Ethiopia. With Cuban support, Ethiopian units won several victories, and in March 1978 the Somali president announced the withdrawal of his army from the Ogaden region.

US president Jimmy Carter was alarmed by these events, believing that Castro was motivated purely by a desire to oppose the USA. However, Castro claimed that he was following through on his belief in internationalism, and consolidating Cuba's role on the world stage. Before 1959, the outside world – especially the USA – had influenced Cuba. Now Cuba was influencing other countries.

**SOURCE C**

[This was] a source of pride and opportunity to so many Cubans with between 11,000 and 20,000 serving on 'internationalist duty' in up to 37 countries by the 1980s ... an experience that impressed itself on thousands of mostly young Cubans ... having their eyes opened by contact with countries that were mostly poorer than Cuba.

Kapcia, A. 2000. *Cuba – Island of Dreams*. New York, USA. Berg. p. 201.

How did the USA interpret Castro's policy of internationalism? How did Cuban people see their role on the world stage? What was the impact of the Cuban Revolution on the Cold War?

## Did the Cold War influence Castro's domestic policy?

### Background to domestic reforms

Castro's plans for domestic reform were intended to complement his international policies. He had lived among rural peasants and understood the difficulties they faced; this experience helped shape his social policy.

## The INRA

After seizing power, Castro's coalition of radicals and moderates established the National Institute of Agrarian Reform (INRA), with Castro himself as president. The INRA had broad responsibilities – dealing with both agrarian reform and industrial development – and the organisation effectively became the unofficial government of Cuba, embracing all domestic policy. However, when the Marxist Nuñez Jimenez was appointed as its chief executive, many moderate members of the programme resigned in protest against Jimenez's communist policies.

By 1960, almost all anti-communists or non-communists had left the government, and power lay with Castro and a few of his closest associates – known as *Fidelistas*. The cabinet now had full executive and legislative powers. Castro had the authority to sack existing judges and appoint new ones, and the press came under the control of communist-led trade unions.

## The CDRs

Despite the promise made by the USA at the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis that it would not invade Cuba, Castro still feared an attack. To help defend against this, he established groups known as Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDRs). By late 1961, every city, town, neighbourhood, factory and workplace in Cuba had a CDR. The purpose of these units was to identify opponents of the revolution, to stifle counter-revolutionary opinions and to spread government information. By the late 1970s, the CDRs were also involved in sporting and cultural initiatives and promoting health campaigns.

The CDRs were effective mass organisations for both surveillance and education, consolidating the revolution and enforcing domestic policy. They were also a vital link in the communications network, and a means by which the average Cuban could contribute to the aims of the revolution.

Why were the CDRs important to Castro in consolidating his regime? How did these committees fulfil an important social role within Cuba? What other examples in history are there where a government has introduced organisations like the CDRs?

Cuba's economy was transformed from a capitalist system, dominated by US investment, to a socialist one in which the state owned most enterprises and set plans for all sectors of the economy. In terms of economic development, Castro successfully addressed many issues, and advances were made in general living standards, health care, education, industry and agriculture.



**The Cold War and the Americas 1945–81****Health care**

Before the revolution, health care in Cuba was better than in many developing countries. Cuban doctors were well-trained in modern (US-influenced) practices, and medicine was a widely respected profession. However, most doctors were based in and around the cities, and people in rural areas had limited access to healthcare facilities.

When Castro came to power and began his reform of the healthcare sector, more than half of the doctors in Cuba – unhappy with his socialist policies – left to find work in the USA. Soon there were fewer than 3500 doctors in Cuba, only 16 professors of medicine and a single medical school. In a country with a population of 6 million, the lack of doctors and other health professionals was a major problem. The US embargo on Cuba also hit medical supplies, which badly affected people who depended on imported medicine. This meant that Cuba urgently needed to produce its own pharmaceuticals.

Castro believed that good health care was the right of all citizens, and that providing it was the government's responsibility. He wanted a unified national healthcare system that would provide universal, accessible and free health services. In the 1960s, therefore, Castro began a recruitment drive for the new Rural Health Service, and set about establishing hospitals in rural areas. In addition, he opened 160 community clinics in urban areas, and began a national children's immunisation programme. Equally importantly, more health personnel were trained.

By the 1970s, the government had made significant investments in general hospitals and factories to produce pharmaceuticals. Community clinics took responsibility not just for providing primary health care, but also for health education, disease prevention and family planning.

As more young Cubans qualified in the health professions, many of them chose to take part in international service abroad, providing free medical care in Africa and Latin America. By the 1980s, the healthcare system in Cuba was so successful that it earned praise from the World Health Organization, and was regarded as an example of how a viable health service could be established in developing countries.

In addition to health care, Castro identified the need to raise general living standards in Cuba. Before 1959, less than 20% of the rural population had running water and only 10% had electricity. However, the hospital-building programme was given priority and, while 16,000 housing units a year were being built by the late 1970s, this was still 10,000 a year less than under Batista. Overall, though, the poor enjoyed a substantial rise in living standards under Castro's regime.

Why were Castro's healthcare policies so successful? How might Castro's health policy have overlapped with his foreign policy?

## Women's rights

In 1960, Castro's government established the the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC). The aim of this organisation was to promote women's welfare and education, and to guarantee them equal pay. The FMC was deeply involved in the 1961 Cuban literacy campaign (see the section on education below). It also recruited and supplied labourers when many trained workers left Cuba after the revolution.

Castro actively encouraged women to join the labour force, and thousands answered this call. However, many women left when the combination of family and work proved too difficult to maintain. During the 1970s, therefore, the government initiated reforms that would make it easier for women to return to work, including the establishment of day-care centres. By the mid 1970s, though, women still only made up 25% of the workforce. In 1975, the FMC began a national inquiry to find out why this was. The result was the Family Code of 1975, which gave men and women equal rights and equal responsibilities in the home. The government also subsidised family planning and offered free abortions. By 1981, the female labour force had almost doubled from what it had been in 1959.

### Activity

Using the internet and any other resources available to you, find out more about the FMC. Why was it so important to women in Cuba?

## Education

When Castro took power in 1959, 22% of Cubans over the age of 14 were illiterate and 60% of the country was classified as having 'poor literacy'. Initiating a successful education programme was therefore vital for the new government. Castro believed that for Cuba to prosper its citizens must be able to contribute to society. To do this, they must be educated. As a first step towards this, Castro nationalised all educational institutions – including church schools – and created a system operated entirely by the government.

Castro designated 1961 as the 'year of education', and launched a huge literacy campaign. 'Literacy brigades' were sent into the countryside to build schools, train new teachers and teach the largely illiterate peasant population to read and write.

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John Stanley

Excerpt 2

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Supporters of the revolution saw this as an opportunity to contribute to the success of the new government. However, Cold War politics were never far from Cuban life, and US-sponsored counter-revolutionaries began a wave of attacks to terrorise farming communities and reduce support for the literacy campaign. Teachers, students and peasants were tortured, and some were murdered. Despite this, literacy initiatives and education reforms continued throughout the 1960s. With financial assistance from the USSR, Cuba was able to develop a free education system from kindergarten through to university.



*Members of Castro's 'literacy brigades' wave books in the air during a parade in Havana in 1961; thousands of students spent time in the countryside, working to eradicate illiteracy*

There were differences in the standards available in rural education centres and those in urban areas, but overall there were great improvements after the revolution. Technical education, engineering and medicine were favoured over humanities and social sciences. This led Castro's opponents to accuse him of stifling the study of history, economics, politics and philosophy, in order to prevent analysis or discussion of non-communist theories or capitalist principles. Some people also criticised what they felt was an overly regimented approach to pre-university learning. The dismissal of staff believed to be 'politically unsuitable' added weight to this argument.

Nonetheless, by 1980, adult literacy in Cuba had dropped to less than 6%. This meant that Cubans had an education system and standard of literacy that was unequalled in Latin America.

Why do you think Castro's education policies between 1959 and 1981 were successful?

## Industry

Before the revolution, Cuban industry was almost exclusively based on sugar – a crop with a limited domestic market. Cuban industry and agriculture were interdependent, and unemployment and poverty were widespread. The US controlled Cuba's profitable national resources, and banks, electricity and other areas of industry were dominated by US capital – including 25% of the best agricultural land in the country. Castro considered unequal land distribution to be the greatest social evil in Cuba. When he came to power, he immediately began a system of reforms designed to reduce US control, broaden Cuban industry and improve the lives of the Cuban people.

### SOURCE D

The inequities ... and the injustices of land misuse were so great in Cuba, that land reform was the minimal measure that a genuine thorough and efficient social reform programme could have undertaken.

*Dewart, L. 1964. Cuba, Church and Crisis. London, UK. Shed and Ward Ltd. p. 34.*

What does Source D reveal about Castro and his 'diagnosis' of the situation in Cuba in 1959? What else does it suggest about the revolution?

## The sugar crisis

Before 1959, around 90% of Cuba's raw sugar and tobacco exports went to the USA. This changed dramatically after the revolution, when Washington introduced an embargo on Cuban goods. Castro resolved the problem in the short term by establishing a trade agreement with Khrushchev, by which the USSR purchased a substantial amount of Cuban sugar. By 1961, sugar production had increased by more than one-third. This allowed Castro to invest more in agriculture, and he also allowed farmers to sell any surplus. However, sugar made up 75% of all Cuban exports, which meant that the country was still overly reliant on

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this crop as its main industry. The US embargo continued to affect Cuba, and by 1963 sugar production had dropped to 3.8 million tonnes – the lowest since 1945. Castro found himself facing an economic crisis, and introduced food rationing to try and ensure a fair distribution of food among the people. The USSR expressed a willingness to provide further investment, but there were conditions attached.

**SOURCE E**

The Russians seemed uneasy about underwriting a socialist utopia in the Caribbean. In mid-1963 they put their foot down. The Cubans must slow down the industrialisation drive and improve their planning. They must recognise Cuba's comparative advantage: sugar ... Fidel, ever on the initiative, now embraced sugar, which he had so recently spurned ... he announced that in 1970 Cuba would break all records of production: it would harvest 10 million tons.

*Skidmore, T. E. and Smith, P. H. 2001. Modern Latin America (5th Edition). New York, USA. Oxford University Press. p. 279.*

Over the next few years, Castro carried out a campaign to increase sugar production in Cuba. He built more sugar mills and aimed to produce 10 million tonnes of sugar a year by 1970. Although the eventual quota fell short of this (the 1970 harvest was 7.5 million tonnes), this still marked Cuba's highest ever production level. Despite this, Castro felt that his 'sugar quota battle' had failed, and he took personal responsibility for this in a long speech in Havana in July 1970. He even offered to resign, but the adoring crowds were dismayed by this suggestion.

**Nationalising industry**

As part of the trade agreements made with the USSR shortly after the revolution, Cuba received 3000 tonnes of Soviet crude oil. However, many of the oil refineries in Cuba were US-owned, and these plants refused to process the oil. As a result, Castro nationalised the refineries and soon did the same with many other businesses. He took banks, sugar mills and large factories out of private – overwhelmingly US – ownership, and organised them into collectives or co-operatives.

By 1961, Castro had brought nearly all Cuban industry under state control. As industry minister, Che Guevara devised a four-year plan to stimulate industry and increase consumption, which would help to improve the diet and living standards of the Cuban people. Despite this plan, Cuba lacked the raw materials and expertise to rush into industrialisation.

## Ties to the USSR

By the early 1970s, Castro realised that he needed a new approach to industrial policy. He therefore restructured the sector in four key ways: he introduced new management systems, gave the private sector a greater role in both industry and agriculture, announced that pay would be linked to output, and pressed for greater economic interaction with the West. At the same time, Castro strengthened state control over both education and mass media, and gave communists and unions much more significant roles. In 1972, Cuba joined Comecon – the economic and trading union of communist states. Castro signed a 15-year deal with the USSR, which increased the Soviet subsidy to Cuba's economy.

It was evident to many that Cuban industry was heavily dependent on the USSR, and that the reorganisation was based on Soviet models of economic and political decision-making. There were some who wondered whether Cuba had simply exchanged dependency on one Cold War superpower for another, and whether Cuba was being exploited by the USSR in its Cold War rivalry with the USA. However, Cuban ties to the USSR never resulted in the level of direct foreign ownership that had caused so much anger under Batista. Between 1975 and 1981, the Cuban economy grew by just over 4% a year, compared to an average of 1.2% across Latin America.

What evidence is there to suggest that Castro simply replaced US domination with Soviet domination?

Some historians believe that the Cuban economic success was purely the result of Soviet subsidies. However, the amount of Soviet aid was about the same as that received by US-backed regimes in other Latin American countries. Cuba's industrial dependency on the USSR had a political price, too, including the need to supply troops and social service personnel to Angola and Ethiopia in support of Soviet interests there. However, Cuba was also one of the few developing countries to provide foreign aid. Throughout the 1970s, Cubans built housing, roads, airports, schools and other facilities in Guinea, Tanzania and around 20 other Asian, African and Latin American countries.

In summary, the deterioration in US–Cuban relations led Castro to form an alliance with the USSR at a key moment in the Cold War. Whether or not he exchanged control by one foreign power for another is a matter for debate, but Cuba's significance in the outside world – and the significance of the outside world to Cuba – was changed forever by the Cuban Revolution. Once a strong US ally, Cuba eventually became the USA's enemy, taking steps towards the USSR from alliance to dependency.



# End of chapter activities

## Paper 3 exam practice

### Question

‘Castro’s triumph over Batista was inevitable.’ To what extent do you agree with this statement?

[20 marks]

### Skill focus

Avoiding a narrative-based answer

### Examiner’s tips

Even once you have read the question carefully (and so avoided the temptation of including irrelevant material), produced your plan and written your introductory paragraph, it is **still** possible to go wrong.

By ‘writing a narrative answer’, history examiners mean providing supporting knowledge that is relevant (and may be very precise and accurate) **but** which is not clearly linked to the question. Instead of answering the question, the answer merely **describes** what happened.

The main body of your essay/argument needs to be **analytical**. It must not simply be an ‘answer’ in which you just tell the story. Your essay **must address the demands/key words of the question**. Ideally, this should be done consistently throughout your essay, by linking each paragraph to the previous one, in order to produce a clear, ‘joined-up’ answer.

You are especially likely to lapse into a narrative essay when answering your final question – and even more so if you are getting short of time. The error here is that, despite all your good work at the start of the exam, you will lose sight of question and just produce an account rather than an analysis. Even if you are short of time, try to write several *analytical* paragraphs that link to the key words of the question.

A question that asks you the extent to which you agree with a statement expects you to come to judgements about success/failure, the relative importance of a factor/individual, or the accuracy of a statement. You need to provide a judgement on the views expressed in the statement. Very often, such a question gives you the opportunity to refer to different historians’ views.

A good way of avoiding a narrative approach is to continually refer back to the question, and even to mention it now and again in your answer. This should help you to produce an essay that is focused on the specific aspects of the question, rather than just giving information about the broad topic or period.

For this question, you will need to cover the following aspects of Castro's defeat of Batista:

- Castro's aims – or even his lack of aims/ideology. What might this say about Batista and his supporters? What do historians say about Castro and his revolution?
- Castro's tactics and their consequences (for example, leadership, leaving Cuba when he was released from prison, gathering forces, training, his 'hearts and minds' policy during his period in the mountains of Cuba, organisation of resistance to Batista in the towns and the countryside).
- Batista's actions and their results (for example, the 1953 rebellion and its consequences, Batista's domestic policies). Was there a point at which Batista could have saved himself? Would resigning have defeated Castro's plan? Should Batista have held elections as the public demanded? Comment on the living standards of the Cuban people, corruption in Batista's regime, contrast with Castro – and ask, were guerrilla actions lawful?
- US/foreign intervention – key moments of support and withdrawal for Batista and Castro.

Having considered both sides, you will then need to make a judgement in your concluding paragraph as to how 'inevitable' Castro's success in defeating Batista really was. Were there moments when Batista nearly/could have prevented Castro's triumph, making his ultimate victory anything but inevitable? If so, what secured Castro's success and set him apart from Batista?

## Common mistake

Every year, even candidates who have clearly revised well and have a good knowledge of the topic, and any historical debates surrounding it, still end up producing a mainly narrative-based or descriptive answer. Very often, this is the result of the candidate not having drawn up a proper plan.

The extracts of a student's answer on page 180 show an approach that essentially just describes Castro's campaign against Batista's government, without any analysis of his aims, his degree of success or failure, and without offering sufficient discussion of Batista's actions, decisions or policies.

## Sample paragraphs of narrative-based approach

This example shows what examiners mean by a narrative answer – it is **not** something you should copy!

Fidel Castro entered Havana in January 1959 after a three-year guerrilla campaign to oust President Batista, who had fled to the Dominican Republic on 31 December 1958. Batista was a corrupt, brutal dictator, dependent on the USA, having turned Cuba into an American colony.

But with Cuba being only 90 miles at its nearest point from the tip of Florida's Key West, the politics and economics of that island were crucial to Washington during the Cold War. Unrest in Cuba was a strategic worry for Washington, so it is little surprise that the USA initially supported Batista.

Castro's first attempt to overthrow Batista took place on 26 July 1953, when a group of revolutionaries led by him stormed the garrison at the Moncada army barracks in Santiago. The assault failed. Fidel and his brother Raúl escaped, but later gave themselves up to avoid a massacre of suspects. They were both jailed, but were released by Batista in 1955 as part of an amnesty designed to improve his image. Fidel left Cuba, and by doing so he distanced himself from further plots against Batista and discord between plotters. He went to Mexico to plan Batista's downfall and build a new revolutionary force, which became known as the 26 July Movement.

It was here that he met Che Guevara, whose input would be invaluable to Castro's revolution, as they trained and prepared their army to return to Cuba. Guevara joining up with Castro was important as they left Mexico for Cuba in November 1956 ...

The rest of the essay continues in the same way, with relevant facts about Castro's actions, as well as a comment on the significance of Guevara, hinting at some notion of 'inevitability'. However, there is no real attempt to balance the answer by analysing Batista's role during 1953–58, nor does the candidate address the concept of 'inevitability' in the opening. The answer begins as a narrative.

## Activity

In this chapter, the focus is on avoiding writing narrative-based answers. Using the information from this chapter, and any other sources of information available to you, try to answer **one** of the following Paper 3 practice questions in a way that avoids simply describing what happened.

Remember to refer to the simplified Paper 3 markscheme on page 219.

## Paper 3 practice questions

- 1 Analyse the reasons for Castro's victory in the power struggle with Batista from 1953 to 1959.
- 2 Why were Castro's industrial and agricultural reforms only partially successful?
- 3 To what extent was Batista's Cuba an American 'colony'?
- 4 Compare and contrast the influence over Cuba of both the USA and the USSR in the period 1945–81.
- 5 Assess the impact of the Cuban Revolution and its aftermath on superpower relations between 1956 and 1981.