

History: The Cold War
Lesson 20 of 30

Worksheet:

Why did the Cuban Revolution change relationships between the superpowers?



What was the context of Cuba in 1959?

Cuba is an island that is located south of the USA, just **145km from the US mainland**. In 1898, Cuba gained its independence from Spain and **became part of the American sphere of influence**. Consequently, since the beginning of the twentieth century, there had been a **strong American influence in Cuba**. The USA also benefitted economically from its allegiance with Cuba; **American businesses had invested lots of money in Cuba and owned much of the land**. By the 1950s, the USA controlled most of Cuba's industry, railways and electricity production and also bought lots of Cuba's main export, sugar. It also supported the country's ruler, **Fulgencio Batista** even though **he was very unpopular with the Cuban people**. However, in 1959, this harmonious relationship was set to change. In **January 1959**, a Cuban **nationalist** called **Fidel Castro** overthrew **Batista** and **took control of Cuba**. This sparked a chain of events that quickly escalated into a **major confrontation between the superpowers** and one of the **most intense flashpoints of the Cold War**.



What was happening in Cuba?

After **Castro** had overthrown **Batista**, in an event that came to be known as the **Cuban Revolution**, **Castro** proceeded to **nationalise all businesses and industries in Cuba**. This meant that the **Cuban government took over all land in Cuba that was owned by foreign nationals** which caused Americans with businesses in Cuba to lose their land and companies. Although the US government refused to recognise the scheme, **Castro** took the land anyway and declared that it would instead be used to help the ordinary people of Cuba. In response to this, the **USA banned the import of Cuban sugar** which **threatened to bankrupt the Cuban economy**. Also, because **Castro** was a **socialist**, who had some connections to Communism, the **USA refused to recognise the new Cuban government**. Threatened with economic collapse, **Cuba turned to the USSR for support**.



What was happening in Cuba?

Khrushchev was keen to develop relations with Cuba because it would **suit the USSR to have an ally so close to the American mainland.**

Consequently, he offered to fill the financial void left by the USA and **to buy the Cuban sugar.** As **Castro** began to appoint more communists to his government, Cuba and the USSR **enshrined their relationship in an agreement in 1960.** **Khrushchev** agreed to **continue to buy Cuban sugar and provide economic aid,** as long as Cuba remained the **USSR's Latin American ally against the USA.** The agreement also contained a secret clause saying that **Cuba would receive arms from the USSR** and from the end of 1959, the USSR began to fulfil this promise and sent weapons to Cuba. It was clear that Cuba was now firmly established as the USSR's ally on the USA's doorstep.



How did the USA react to events in Cuba?

The Americans responded in **anger and fear to this new relationship**. In October 1960, **Eisenhower banned all trade with Cuba**. He also authorised a **CIA** plan under which **Cuban exiles living in the USA would be trained in preparation for an invasion of Cuba**. This was because, if such an invasion were to occur, the USA wanted to **disguise its involvement**. While it was keen to prevent the USSR from establishing allies in key locations, and containing the spread of communism, the USA **still wanted to avoid provoking a direct conflict** with the USSR. The USA also did not want to be seen as a country that was trying to influence the way an independent country was ruled. By sending Cuban **exiles** to attack **Castro's** forces, it would look like **Cuban people rising up against Castro**. The Americans hoped that this would make **Castro**, and therefore **Communism, look unpopular** and undermine it.



How did the USA react to events in Cuba?

In January 1961, **Kennedy** succeeded **Eisenhower** and **broke off all diplomatic relations with Cuba**. He also **accepted and continued the CIA training scheme** and supported its plans for an invasion of Cuba. **Kennedy** was very keen to take action to prevent the USSR from having a communist ally so close to the USA. If this meant supporting a plan to overthrow **Castro**, then we would do it. Over the next few months, the **CIA** trained the **exiles** in Florida and Guatemala. In total, \$45 million was spent on the project. The **exiles** called themselves **La Brigada 2506** and by the time they had completed their training, **they numbered around 1500**.

On **15th April 1961, the planned attack began**. The USA first bombed part of the Cuban air force, although halted in their plans to continue the bombing the next day. **On 17th April, La Brigada 2506** landed at the **Bay of Pigs** in Cuba. The **CIA** had placed great hopes on the mission. Surely, as soon as the exiles arrived in Cuba, local people would rise up and support them? Also, the attack was a secret – the **CIA** believed that **Castro would be completely unprepared for an attack**.



How did the USA react to events in Cuba?

The **CIA** got it completely wrong. Contrary to their beliefs, **Castro** was a very popular leader. This meant that, when the Cuban **exiles** landed, they were **overrun by hostile forces including 20,000 Cuban soldiers who were ready and waiting for their arrival**. It soon became clear that **Castro** had known all about the 'secret' mission – the **exiles** had **blown their cover** when they were overheard discussing plans for the invasion in Miami. Also, despite their training, the **exiles** were really **completely unprepared for the attack**. They had little real military experience and the Americans' desires to make the attack look like a Cuban effort meant that they could not send in their own soldiers or weapons to support. After the Cuban air force sunk **La Brigada's** supply ships, they were also left without any resources. By contrast, the **Cuban army were well armed, well trained and well organised**. Since 1959, they had been secretly receiving arms from the USSR and so 1,500 inexperienced and ill-supported troops were really no match for them. By 19th April, **100 members of La Brigada had been killed and 1100 were imprisoned**. The **'Bay of Pigs' invasion had failed**.



What were the consequences of the **Bay of Pigs** invasion?

It soon became obvious that America had been involved in the **Bay of Pigs** invasion, so it became a **humiliating failure for the USA**. America also appeared **hypocritical**. They had accused the USSR of trying to spread their influence in Eastern Europe. Now it looked like the Americans were acting in exactly the same way: supporting armed uprisings in order to restore their influence in an independent country.

The failure of the invasion also **made Communism look better**. The USSR was quick to point out that the **people of Cuba were happy under the leadership of the pro-communist Castro** and they had **shown little support for the Cuban exiles' attempts to restore American influence**. **Khrushchev** said this clearly showed that Communism was popular.



What were the consequences of the **Bay of Pigs** invasion?

Finally, the **Bay of Pigs** created **stronger relations between Cuba and the USSR. Castro declared himself a communist** and asked **Khrushchev** to **help him defend Cuba against any future attack** from the USA. In September 1961, **Khrushchev publicly announced that he would provide arms to Cuba**, even though he had been doing this in secret since 1959. It appeared that **Kennedy's** fears of a having a Communist enemy on his doorstep had been dramatically realised.



Glossary

Bay of Pigs - an area on the southern coast of Cuba

CIA (Central Intelligence Agency)– US office which coordinates and conducts intelligence activities

Exile – a person who is separated from his or her own country or home



Glossary

Import – to bring in from another country, especially as something to be sold

Nationalise – to bring under government ownership or control

Socialist – a person who supports the idea that the whole community rather than individuals owns all of its property and resources



Comprehension Questions

1. Where is Cuba?
2. Why did the Cuban Revolution lead to Cuba establishing a relationship with the USSR?
3. What did the USA do in 1961 in response to the Cuban Revolution?
4. Why did the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion improve the reputation of communism?
5. Challenge question: Why did the Cuban Revolution change relationships between the superpowers?

