

# FIDEL CASTRO



FROM GUERRILLA TO WORLD STATESMAN

## Fidel CASTRO

Richard Platt

WATTS

### Fidel Castro

In 1945 Fidel Castro was an unknown law student. Today he is the leader of the only communist state in the western hemisphere.

*Twentieth-Century History Makers* examines the lives of some of the most famous and infamous personalities of the last 100 years and assesses the impact each had on the world in which we live today.

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# Introduction

Just 150 km (90 miles) of sea separate Cuba, the biggest island in the Caribbean, from Florida, mainland America's most southern state. You can sail across in just a few hours, but the two places could not be more different.

Nicknamed "the sunshine state", Florida is best known for holidays, retirement homes and Disneyland. Cuba is famous for sugar, cigars and communism.

Cuban people each have about \$1,500 a year to buy everything they need. People in Florida spend this amount every 19 days.

As part of the United States of America, Florida holds regular elections in which everyone votes to choose who will make state and national laws. Cuba holds elections, too, but voters don't have much of a choice. For there is only one political party in Cuba: the Cuban Communist Party. Its leader, Fidel Castro, rules the only communist nation in the western half of the world. He has governed Cuba, more or less on his own, for more than 40 years.

This book is Fidel Castro's story. As you turn the pages, you'll find out how the

son of a wealthy Cuban sugar farmer became a lawyer and politician. You'll read how he fled to Mexico, and gathered weapons and comrades to start a rebellion against Cuba's government. And you'll discover how, despite blunders and setbacks, and against powerful opposition, Castro's revolution eventually succeeded.

► Castro continues to voice strong political views. He is shown here criticizing the United Nations for being unrepresentative and a front for a "new colonialism".



# Old Cuba

**Castro began his fight against Cuba's rulers because they were greedy and corrupt, and did not treat Cuba's people fairly.**

Unfairness was nothing new to Cuba: the island had a history of injustice stretching back to the time, 500 years ago, when it was first discovered by Spanish explorers. The Spaniards claimed the island for Spain, and took the land of the native people as their own. In the 18th century descendants of those Spanish settlers began to farm sugar cane, using slaves brought from Africa in conditions of great cruelty.

Cuba's Spanish rulers were corrupt, inefficient and unpopular. A feeling of injustice built up until, in 1868, Cubans began fighting the Spanish for independence (the right to govern themselves, free of Spanish control). The war lasted ten years and achieved almost nothing.

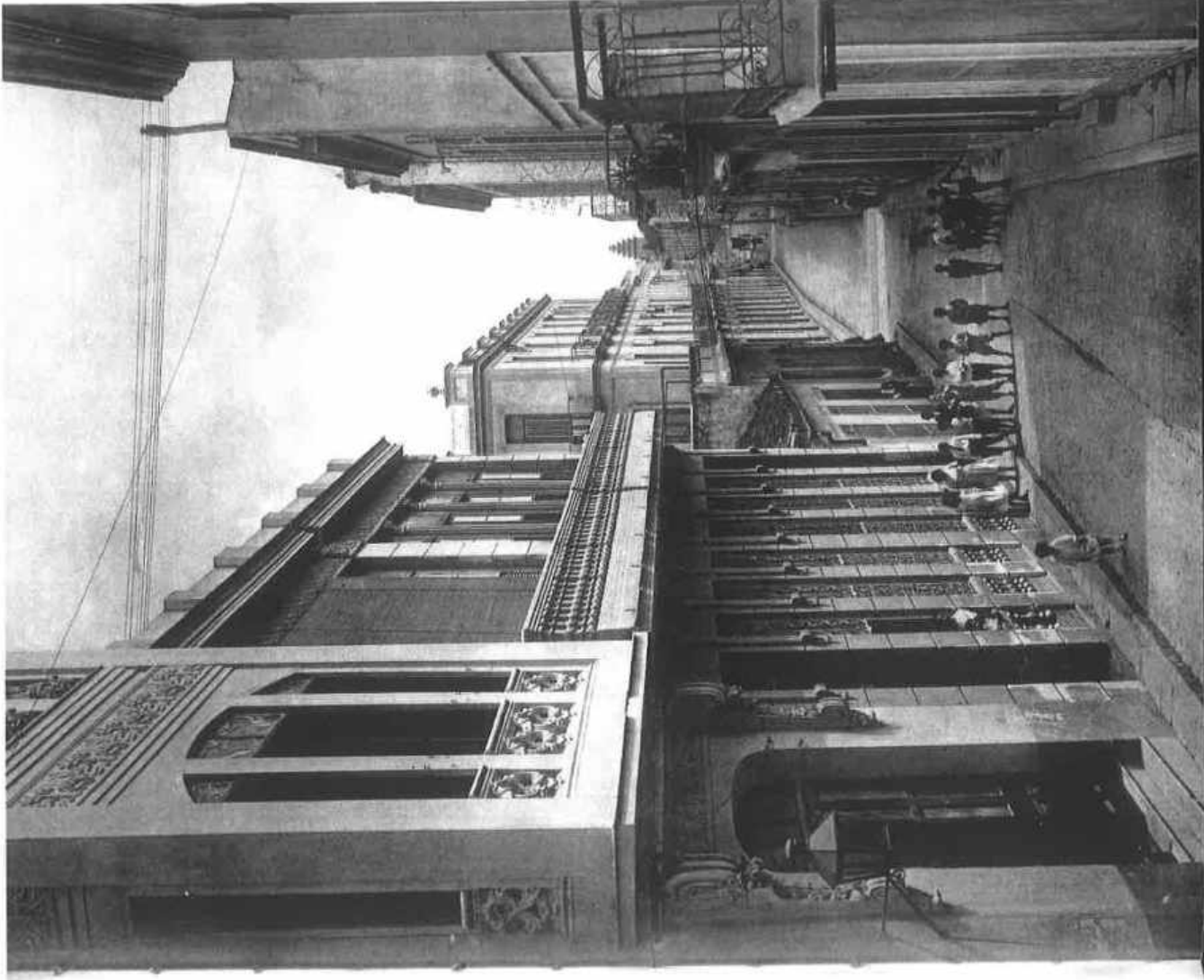
In the years that followed, the influence of the United States grew in Cuba. American companies bought greater amounts of sugar and other goods, and Cuban ports bustled with ships bringing American imported goods. US

firms bought up land and opened offices in the capital, Havana.

When the independence movement flared up again at the end of the 19th century, Cubans now had a powerful ally in their fight with Spain. With help from the United States, Cubans at last won their independence in 1899, but there was a price to pay. The Americans did not want Cuba ruled by revolutionaries, so when the war of independence ended, US troops stayed on. They helped to make the island safe, and repaired the damage war had caused. But they also made sure that any new government would respect the United States, its people and its businesses.

Before the Americans left in 1902, they guided the Cubans in the creation of a new constitution (rules of government). Although this prepared Cuba for fair elections, it also gave the United States

▶ A street in Havana, the capital of Cuba, in 1926, the year Fidel Castro was born.



## 20th-Century History Makers: FIDEL CASTRO

the right to rule Cuba directly if the country ever became a danger to its much bigger neighbour.

### Independence and elections

Cubans voted for the first time in 1901, but the elections did not bring them the justice and fairness they had hoped for. Instead of governing wisely, the politicians looked for ways to increase their power and make themselves rich. For the first half of the 20th century, most of Cuba's rulers were corrupt. They took bribes and cheated at elections to make sure that they would win again and again. For example, Tomás Estrada Palma, Cuba's first president, rigged elections to Congress. His supporters made sure that he could not lose the presidential elections in 1905. Mario Menocal, elected in 1912 and again in 1916, was wealthy when he took office, but was an astonishing \$40 million richer after eight years as president.

Cuban people who were outside the golden circle of rich politicians and their friends had a very hard time indeed. Most country people were extremely poor. Few owned their own farms; three-quarters of Cuba's land belonged to foreigners. Afro-

Cubans, the descendants of the sugar-farm slaves, faced special hardships, because racial prejudice kept them in the worst jobs and homes.

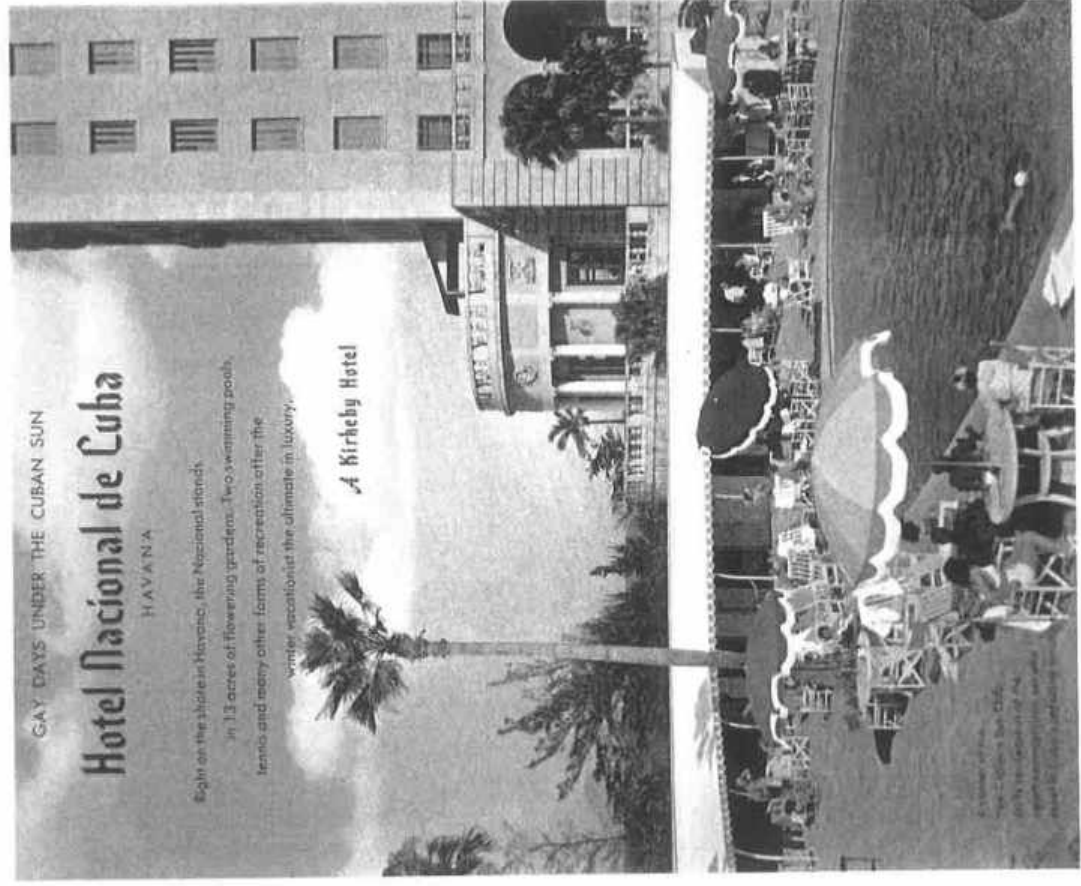
Cuba's social injustice and corrupt governments angered Fidel Castro. He believed it was his mission to lead his people to a better, fairer future in which everyone had the same opportunities. How he set out to achieve this aim is an astonishing story of luck, stubbornness and wild ambition.

### King Sugar

The sweet taste of sugar made Cuba rich in the 19th century, and poor in the 20th century. By 1860 slaves on Cuba were growing a third of all the world's sugar and high prices meant that the island flourished.

But as other countries started to grow sugar, prices fell. Prices could change very quickly, too: the value of a crop often doubled or halved from one year to the next. Even in a good year, sugar workers suffered, because they had jobs for only a few months during the harvest season. At other times they were unemployed.

▶ Advertising posters encouraged wealthy Americans to come to Cuba for their holidays. Most Cuban people gained little from tourism.



# Schoolboy and student

A single gunshot rang out across the village of Birán, in Cuba's most eastern province, Oriente. Instantly, the children playing in a nearby field dropped their game and ran home. Fidel Castro led the charge.

For besides being the fittest, he was also the hungriest of them. And the echoing shotgun blast was just their mother's signal that dinner was ready!

The house they crowded into was a curious, untidy collection of wooden rooms on stilts. Chickens and turkeys scratched in the shade beneath. Not far away there was a large barn, a repair shop and a slaughterhouse. Looking at the ramshackle place, only the size hinted that Fidel's father, Angel, was the wealthiest farmer in the area. He employed hundreds of peasant workers to grow and cut sugar cane.

There was the usual crowd for dinner. Servants and visitors ate with the family, and there were many children to feed. Pedro Emilio and Lidia were the oldest. When their mother had died, soon after

Lidia was born, Fidel's father had married the family maid, Lina. Fidel was their fourth child together, after Ángela, Agustina and Ramón. Fidel also had a younger brother Raúl, and later two more sisters, Enma and Juana, would swell the family further.

## Classroom troublemaker

Family dinners and games in the cane fields ended when Fidel reached the age of four and was packed off to a local school. He did not like the change. At home he could do more or less what he liked. At school he was supposed to sit still, study and obey his teachers. He didn't. Instead, he caused trouble.

► Fidel, dressed in his best clothes, at the age of three. These were the carefree days of childhood.



Within a year the school and his parents had had enough. They sent Fidel to live with his godparents in Santiago, Cuba's second largest city. At a private school there, priests taught Fidel.

Fidel didn't like his second school any better than the first, even when two of his brothers joined him in classes. Fidel argued with his teachers. He fought other students. He was always in trouble. He saw school as a jail, and longed for the holidays. When the school told his father that the Castro boys were "the three biggest bullies" in the school, all three were brought home — to Fidel's delight.

His joy did not last long. When term began again, his father sent him to an even stricter church school, again in Santiago. There, Fidel at last found something he was good at: sport. He was strong and fit, and made the boxing, soccer and baseball teams. In his classes, though, he did as little as he could get away with, scraping through his exams by last-minute swotting.

At sixteen, Fidel changed schools again — this time moving to the island's capital, Havana. And once more, it was his sporting ability that gave him an advantage. In his classes he did well in

subjects that interested him — farming, history, geography and Spanish, the language of Cuba. But in other subjects, he worked just hard enough to graduate, and in 1945 won a place at the law school of Havana University.

### Fidel studies revolution

In 1945 Havana University was an exciting and dangerous place. Cuba's political parties all had student members, and within the university grounds political arguments were often settled with fights or shootings. The victors in these gang battles hoped to gain more power not just in the university, but everywhere in the country. For just as politics was an important part of student life, so students played an important part in Cuban politics.

There was also money at stake: student gangsters controlled the sale of textbooks, and could fix grades by threatening professors. Fidel may have been enrolled on a law course, but he ended up joining a school for revolutionary politics.

Fidel loved the excitement and danger, and many of the people he knew were members of two of the most important gangs, the Socialist Revolutionary

Politics was sucking Fidel in: when anti-government politicians formed a new group, the Cuban People's Party, he joined. In angry writings he criticized Cuba's rulers and the violent gangsters. But his enthusiasm for politics did not stop at speeches and articles. Fidel was hungry for action, and soon he tasted it.

### Toppling dictators

To the east of Cuba lies the Caribbean's second-biggest island. The Dominican Republic at the eastern end of this nearby island was a dictatorship. The country's president kept all political power for himself, and ruthlessly crushed opposition. Dominican people living in

Movement (MSR) and the Insurreccional Revolutionary Union (UIR). The MSR was an anti-communist revolutionary socialist party which fought the influence of the United States. The rival UIR seemed to have few policies except the elimination of its opponents. At first Fidel avoided getting too closely involved with these "action groups". He realized that by joining either he would gain many enemies, and win few friends.

After just a year at university, Fidel had already learned some vital political skills. His speech at a university festival was such a well-composed attack on Cuba's corrupt government that it made front-page news in the island's papers.

▼ Fidel's family farm was in eastern Cuba, in a landscape not dissimilar to this. Their house was also a low wooden structure, but bigger than this one.





Cuba planned to sail home and liberate their country from the dictator's grip. In spite of his father's pleas and his mother's tears, Fidel joined them in the summer of 1947, and began training as a revolutionary fighter in a remote area of Cuba. By mid-September the 1,200-strong amateur army was ready.

They never reached their destination. Before they had even sailed out of sight of land, the Cuban navy stopped the revolutionaries' four cargo ships and arrested everybody they could find. Fidel escaped by dropping over the side and swimming to the shore.

Six months later, he saw for the first time the power of ordinary, angry people. He had flown to Bogotá, Colombia's capital, for a student conference. While he was there, gunmen shot and killed a political leader who was a hero among the country's poorest people. Riots began as soon as news of the assassination spread. Fidel watched in amazement from the balcony of his hotel. Mobs of rioters were overturning cars, taking over the radio station and invading government

buildings. He went down and mingled with them as they stormed a police station and stole guns. The excitement was electrifying, but the danger was obvious, too, and he wisely slipped back to Cuba.

### Law school studies

Fidel spent the next two years much as he had spent the previous three. He built a reputation as a fierce and reckless opponent of the government – and neglected his law studies. When exam time came, he had to make a superhuman effort to pass. For the spring and summer of 1950 he dropped politics completely, burying himself in university work. His intensive studies paid off and, in September, he graduated and opened a law office with two fellow students in Havana's business district.

Fidel's studying and campaigning left him little time for social activities. He was painfully shy with women and, unlike most of his fellow students, he never went dancing in Havana's many nightclubs. Nevertheless, when he met philosophy student Mirra Díaz-Balart, Fidel was enchanted. They married in autumn 1948, and had a son, Fidelito, a year later.

◀ *Angela, Ramón and Fidel (aged eight) pose for a photo in 1934. At this time Fidel was going to a private school in Santiago.*

# Lawyer and rebel leader

Fidel Castro was no ordinary lawyer. Unlike many lawyers he was not interested in making money. His only clients were poor peasants and city slum dwellers. He rarely got paid and, when he did, he was more likely to be given fruit and vegetables than cash.

Castro did not look like a lawyer, either. He did not wear a neatly-pressed suit. He looked as if he had slept in his clothes. Often he had.

His personal life was in chaos. His father had given him a brand-new car as a college graduation present, but he lent it to a friend who smashed it beyond repair. The electricity to his flat was cut off because the bill wasn't paid. Debt-collectors took away his furniture. And he paid as little attention to his wife and son as he did to his bank account.

Castro cared about only one thing: politics. He even used his law practice to advance his political career. By pleading the hopeless cases of Cuba's poor, he believed he could get a reputation as a champion of the people.

## Dangerous ideas

It was a fine idea, but Castro faced many obstacles. His political opinions were very extreme, and his methods put him in great personal danger. He openly accused politicians of corruption and produced evidence that they had taken bribes. This made him a target for the political gangsters who supported his opponents. To protect himself, Castro never went anywhere without a revolver, and he did not hesitate to use it.

Castro's views were so extreme that he began to lose support even within his own party, now nicknamed the "Orthodoxo" party. He had wanted to run

▲ Castro's gift for impassioned speech-making served him well as a lawyer and, later, as a political leader.





for the Cuban Congress in the 1952 elections but Roberto Agramonte, the Orthodox's presidential candidate, made sure that Castro's name was not on the list of official candidates.

It took more than a trick like this to stop Castro. He visited Havana's poorest district, La Pelusa, where he led opponents of a government plan to tear down the neighbourhood and build a grand square. Castro had helped the slum dwellers by holding rallies at which he explained how they could fight for their rights; and he also won 50 pesos compensation for each home affected. These campaigns made him a local hero and he had no difficulty getting the people of the slums to nominate him as an Orthodox candidate.

### The campaign trail

Castro's election campaign was spectacular and novel. He used a regular spot on a radio programme to spread his message. Besides making speeches and writing pamphlets, Castro sent individual letters to all the Orthodox supporters in the region –100,000 of them. Mail-campaigns like this are common in today's elections, but in 1950s Cuba they were unheard of.

He might as well not have bothered, for Cubans never got the chance to cast their votes. On 10 March 1952, two months before the elections were due, there was a military *coup* (a sudden, illegal change of power). Cuba's retired president, Fulgencio Batista, took control of the country with the help of the Cuban army. There was no opposition: in fact many Cubans were delighted. They hoped Batista would end corruption, and control the armed gangs who were making everyday life dangerous. But Batista began to rule Cuba as a dictator, throwing opponents in prison and disbanding political parties. He also stole enormous sums of public money.

Conditions in Cuba improved at first. As he had promised, Batista cracked down on the gangsters. By doing deals with the labour unions, the dictator stopped strikes that had been harming the country's businesses. But within a year, these advantages began to seem less important to many Cuban people than the political rights that Batista had taken away from them.

► The Batista family lived extremely comfortably on their estate outside Havana, benefiting from the corrupt dictatorship of the father, Fulgencio Batista.



### “Down with Batista!”

Opposition to the dictator grew. Directly after the coup, Castro had found little support for his violent aim of forcing Batista from power. But as time went by, more and more people joined the underground revolutionary movement he was building.

They were not just attracted by Castro’s aims. It was his personality and character that excited his followers. Castro had charisma — the ability to capture people’s imagination, and make them believe anything was possible. His appearance helped, too: at more than 1.8 m (6 ft) tall, and heavily built, he almost glowed with power.

Castro knew he had to be very wary and careful: Batista had spies everywhere. For example, when he heard of the coup, Castro guessed (correctly, as it turned out) that the secret police would come to arrest him. So he left the tiny apartment where he was living with his wife and son, and went to stay with his sister Lidia, about a kilometre away. From there he moved to the safety of the houses of sympathizers of the rebel movement, including the luxury home of Natty Revuelta. Intelligent, wealthy and

beautiful, Natty was drawn to Castro’s idealistic politics, but she also found him very attractive: they later became lovers, and had a daughter, Alina together.

Moving regularly from house to house in Havana, Castro gathered around him a small group of people he could trust. Together they laid plans for a daring guerrilla attack on government forces.

All agreed that without weapons they could do nothing, so they hatched a secret plot to steal guns and ammunition from the Cuban army. In the city of Santiago, a 15-hour drive away from Havana, Moncada Barracks (army base) had huge stores of arms. If they could attack the barracks, there would be enough guns for everyone.

### Hitting the barracks

The plotters worked in great secrecy. Castro sent a spy to Santiago and he returned with a sketched map of Moncada. An army officer who opposed the government gave them a hundred uniforms. A member of the group rented a nearby house and bought a few rifles.



*Fulgencio Batista inspects a US tank, a gift of military aid from the US government which supported his regime.*

On 26 July 1953 everything was ready. The 200 revolutionaries set off for the barracks in cars. At the guard house to the barracks one of them shouted, "Let the general in!" The simple trick worked. Instead of checking the suspicious car, the guards sprang to attention. Instantly, the other revolutionaries jumped out and knocked them to the ground.

But the carefully laid plan started to go wrong when other sentries raised the alarm. Firing wildly, Castro's men rushed to where their maps showed the armoury (weapons store) to be. When they got there, they found a barber's shop! There was worse to come – most of Castro's fighters got lost in Santiago's streets. The daring attack suddenly looked badly planned. Eight of the attackers lay dead; many more were injured. Within a day or so, the army rounded up most of the rest.

### **Rounding up the rebels**

Five days after the attack an army patrol found Castro fast asleep on the floor of a peasant's shack and arrested him. He was put on trial in Santiago along with about a hundred of his followers. When the trial began, Castro spoke in his own defence. Whenever he was asked a question, he

turned his reply into an attack on the government. His proud speeches embarrassed the judge, and Castro did not appear in public court again. His trial was held later, in secret, and he was given a 15-year prison sentence.

While in prison, Castro was shocked to learn that his wife, Mirra, had been sacked from a job at the Interior Ministry. He had not even realized she had been employed by the Batista government, and he felt bitter and betrayed. He immediately began divorce proceedings. Later, when the split was complete, Mirra married again, and moved to the USA.

However, this personal tragedy was overshadowed by a political project. Castro was writing a long revolutionary statement called *History Will Absolve Me*. The title was a phrase Castro used to defend himself at his trial. He meant that in future years, everybody would see that he was not guilty.

### **Spreading the word**

In *History Will Absolve Me*, Castro set out his plans for Cuba. These included: giving people back their political freedoms; giving land to the people who farmed it; allowing workers to share

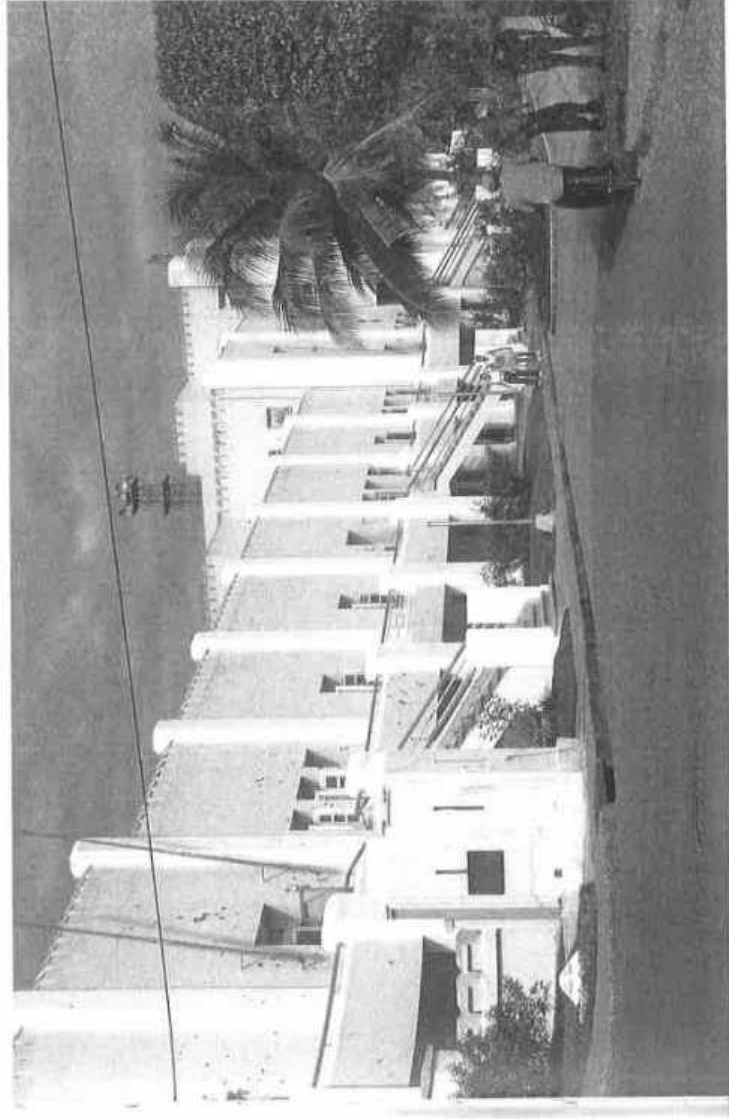
company profits; and seizing the property of corrupt politicians.

These were dangerous ideas, and Castro had to smuggle his writings out of the prison. The booklet was eventually printed and distributed by Castro's sister Lidia and two women revolutionaries who had avoided prison: Melba Hernandez and Haydée Santamaria.

### **Guerrilla warfare**

Castro planned to defeat Cuba's dictator with a *guerrilla war* – making small-scale attacks, constantly changing bases, and using sabotage and terrorism. By avoiding formal battles wherever possible, and by making surprise attacks, guerrilla fighters are able to defeat much larger armies of regular troops. However, fighting a successful guerrilla war demands exceptional leadership, support from the local people and troops who are totally dedicated to victory.

▼ *The Moncada Barracks in Santiago, scene of Castro's chaotic defeat, is now a museum to the July 26th Movement.*



# Rebels in waiting

The revolutionaries convicted for the Moncada attack spent less than two years in prison. As soon as the jail gates slammed behind them, a campaign for their release began. At the beginning of May 1955, Batista's government bowed to public pressure, and the prisoners were pardoned.

Castro was released from prison in a blaze of publicity. He was greeted by Melba, Haydée, his sister Lidia and Nary Revuelta. Newspaper photographs show him in a crowd of admiring women. But when the excitement died down, he found himself on the fringes of Cuban politics. Even before the coup he was too extreme and unpredictable to be selected as an Orthodoxo election candidate.

With a dictator in power, the party considered him even more dangerous. This did not worry Castro. From Lidia's flat where he was staying, he continued with his attacks on Batista just as he had before the suicidal attack on the barracks.

Castro may have been the most famous opponent of the government, but he was not the only one. Other groups were more violent, planting bombs and shooting Batista's agents. Eventually, the

dictator became impatient of this terrorist activity, and stopped pretending he was a moderate ruler. Cuba's short period of freedom ended: newspapers were censored or closed down, and the secret police rounded up, beat up or simply killed anyone they suspected of plotting against the government.

## One-way ticket to Mexico

Castro's movement was in serious danger. The leader began a wandering lifestyle, moving from one safe house to another, and never sleeping in the same place for more than one night. Castro's brother Raúl was accused of blowing up a cinema. The charge was invented – Batista's agents probably planted the bomb themselves –

▶ The front cover of Fidel Castro's book, *History will Absolve Me*, written while he was imprisoned after the Moncada Barracks defeat.



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but it was clear that Havana was getting too hot for the rebels. In mid-summer Raúl fled to the safety of Mexico. Castro followed him a fortnight later; his sister Lidia sold her refrigerator to pay for the trip.

In Mexico Castro could carry on the fight without immediate danger. He quickly made himself at home in the capital, Mexico City, living in a cheap hotel and eating meals with friends. Although it was possible to live very cheaply – anyone with eight cents a day to spend would not starve – Castro was nevertheless permanently penniless. Most of the money sent by supporters was spent on the rebel movement. To pay for the printing of a pamphlet, he took his overcoat to a pawn shop, and left it as security for a loan.

### The one-eyed soldier

From his Mexico base Castro bombarded his supporters in Cuba with revolutionary messages, and continued his attacks on Batista. He also began serious planning for the armed invasion that he was convinced would start a revolution. He recognized that the Moncada Barracks attack had failed because he knew

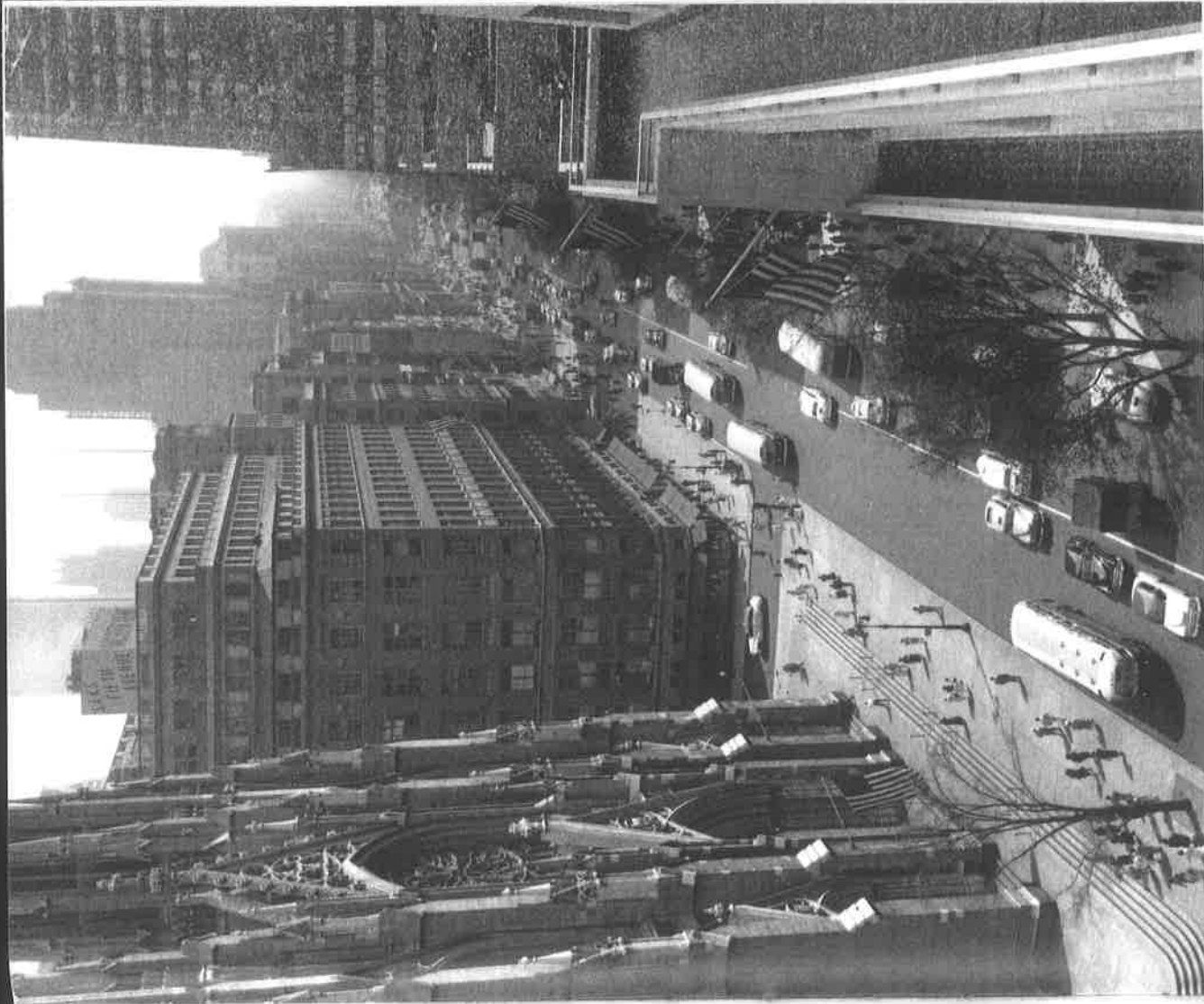
nothing about warfare, so he looked for someone to help him train his invasion forces. He chose Alberto Byo, a one-eyed, Cuban-born soldier who had taught guerrilla warfare to the Spanish army. The white-haired old man was amused, but flattered – Castro had no money, no weapons and no soldiers to train.

However, he was charmed and impressed by the big Cuban, and agreed.

Castro and his friend Che Guevara formed the core of the new revolutionary group. It was now named the July 26th Movement after the date of the attack on the Moncada Barracks. The movement grew gradually in strength, as supporters arrived from Cuba. Most of these recruits had left their homeland to escape persecution by the muscular and well-armed “security police” that Batista employed to eliminate or terrify his opponents.

Castro would soon have all the rebels he needed, but he lacked money and guns. With one, he could buy the other, so he set off on a fund-raising tour of the United States. He did not expect any

▶ New York City in the 1950s – one of the places Castro visited on his highly successful fund-raising tour of the United States.



support from American people, who were generally happy with Cuba's dictator. But there were many Cubans living in the USA. They had been emigrating to the USA since the late 19th century, and many had left in the 1950s to escape the country's economic problems. There was a large Cuban community of workers and businessmen in New York, and Cuban cigar workers had found jobs and settled in Tampa, Florida. These people filled Castro's meetings, and emptied their pockets of dollar bills at the end.

### Castro promises freedom

In his speeches to packed halls, Castro made a promise: "I can inform you with complete certainty that in 1956 we will be free . . ." With these words, he set himself a deadline: he would lead an invasion of Cuba within 14 months.

Soon after his return to Mexico, Castro was joyfully reunited with his son. Fidelito flew from Havana with Lidia, and during the remaining time in Mexico Castro saw the boy whenever his revolutionary preparations allowed.

This wasn't as often as he would have liked, for – as usual – training and planning pushed almost everything else from Castro's mind. The small rebel army learned to shoot on a city rifle range. They marched and exercised to improve their stamina; they climbed mountains and slept on the bare ground so that they could endure the hardship of a guerrilla campaign. By spring 1956 they had outgrown their network of houses in the city, so Castro moved them to a walled ranch where they could train out of sight of curious onlookers – and Batista's spies.

Castro took enormous care to keep his activities in Mexico quiet, but at the same time he needed to drum up support for the movement back in Cuba. This made secrecy impossible, and Batista's secret police had no trouble rounding up members of the July 26th Movement in Havana. Batista's power did not stop at Cuba's shores. He paid assassins \$20,000 to kidnap and murder Castro in Mexico.

### Ernesto "Che" Guevara

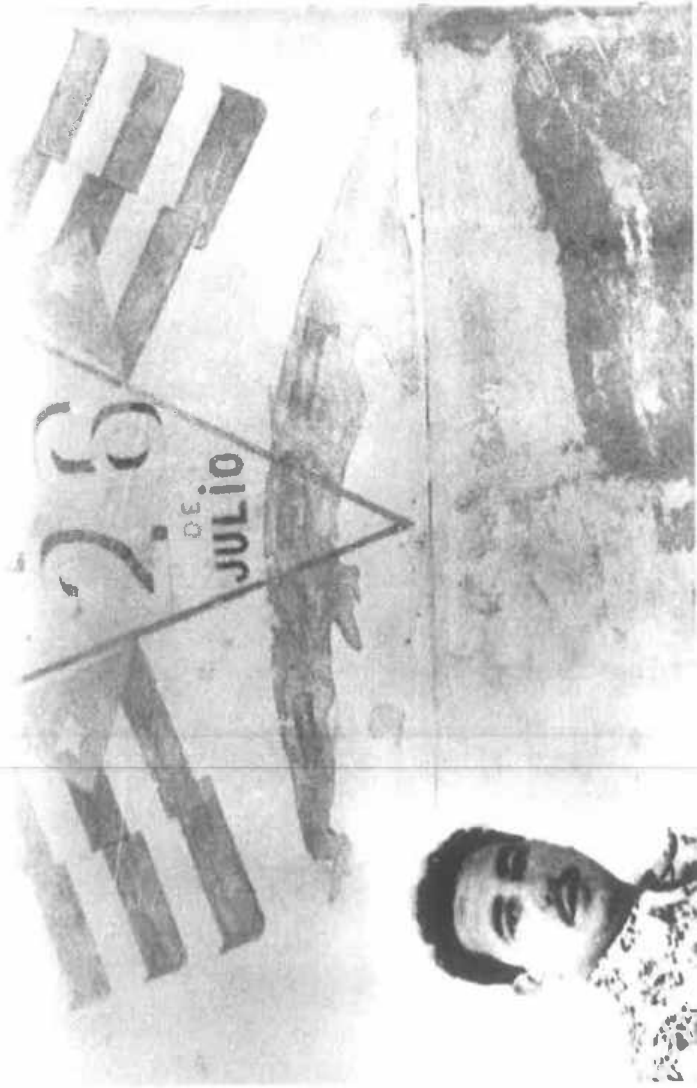
In Mexico Castro met other revolutionaries who shared his reasons for fleeing their home country. His most important contact was Argentine medical-school graduate Ernesto Guevara.

Ernesto – later nicknamed "Che" – had heard of Castro, and was impressed when they met. The two became close friends and would remain so until shortly before Che's death. Their personalities matched perfectly. Che was a brilliant planner and thinker, but preferred to stay in the background. Castro was a born leader, a brilliant speaker and an overpowering character, but lacked Che's political genius.



◀ Whilst in Mexico City, Castro posed for this photograph taken in front of a partly finished symbol of his July 26th Movement.

▶ Che Guevara (in photo) was the ideal partner for Fidel Castro in the struggle to overthrow Cuba's dictator.



When the plan was discovered, the dictator looked for other ways to eliminate his irritating opponent.

### Back in jail

On 20 June Mexico City police arrested Castro in the street, and imprisoned him along with many other members of his group. Later they swooped on the ranch, but not before the rebels had shipped out the store of guns and ammunition they had been collecting there. Castro was accused of planning Batista's assassination, and of being a communist. He denied both charges, and it was true that he had no links with Cuba's Communist Party. If anything the Cuban communists were rivals, rather than allies of the July 26th Movement.

After pressure from respected Mexican politicians, most of the rebels were released within three weeks. The charge against Castro was reduced to staying in Mexico after the visitor's permit on his passport had expired, and a week later he too was released. Che and one other

rebel were kept behind bars until the end of July.

Free once more, they returned to their invasion plans. Even news of the death of his father in October scarcely distracted Castro from his urgent mission. Being arrested and imprisoned had taught him a valuable lesson – Batista's influence reached even to Mexico. They were no longer safe anywhere. In any case, Castro had promised he would free his country in 1956. The revolution could wait no longer.



◀ Aerial view of Mexico City from the mid-1950s. At first this seemed a safe place for Castro to plan his revolution but he soon realized that Batista's power reached into Mexico.

# Che and Fidel fight for freedom

"Where is the mother ship? When do we get to the real ship?" One of Castro's rebels simply could not believe his eyes as he boarded the *Granma*. Surely Castro could not launch his revolution from a 13 m (43 ft) motor yacht? But that is exactly what he intended to do. This was the mother ship.

Castro had spent \$20,000 on a patrol torpedo boat in Miami, but the American government, which was sympathetic to Batista, refused to let it sail. Castro's second choice, the *Granma*, was far less suitable. It was a pleasure boat designed to carry 12 passengers. 24 people was a crowd, but just about possible.

Castro and his revolutionaries set off from the coast of Mexico. In rain-swept Tuxpan harbour 81 revolutionaries clambered on board the *Granma* and loaded their guns and supplies. Fifty more were left behind, for fear the ship would sink. Finally, at 1.30 on the morning of Sunday 25 November 1956, the *Granma* cast off from her moorings, and sailed uncertainly down the Tuxpan River.

## Sea-sick comrades

When they reached the sea, the commandos sang the Cuban national anthem. Some shouted "Viva la Revolución!" and "Down with Batista's dictatorship!" Their joy did not last long. When the ship left the shelter of the river estuary, it took the full force of the storm that was swirling across the Gulf of Mexico. Within minutes, many of the rebels were being violently sick. Overloaded, the *Granma* wallowed in the swell, and her badly-maintained diesel engines struggled against the tearing wind.

▲ Raul, Castro's younger brother (on the right), also became a revolutionary and took part in the 1956 attempted coup. He is pictured here with Che Guevara.





Castro had estimated that the crossing would take five days. So before leaving, he had sent coded messages to supporters in Cuba, telling them the revolution would start on Friday morning. By dawn on Friday, the *Granma* had completed only three-quarters of her voyage. The bad weather had slowed progress, and one of the engines was failing. The ship could cruise at only 7 knots, instead of the 10 that the plan called for. Without a radio transmitter, Castro had no way to warn his comrades on land that he was running late. So at 7 a.m. on Friday the revolution started – without its leader, and without the promised invasion.

In Santiago, 28 rebels attacked the police headquarters, and set fire to the police barracks. But they were no match for the 400 specialist anti-guerrilla troops stationed in the town. After a day of street fighting, the Santiago rebellion collapsed.

Almost everywhere else on the island, anti-Batista groups were too weak to take up arms. Not *quite* everywhere, though. On a beach near Bécic, 24 revolutionaries scanned the horizon for a sight of the *Granma*. They waited . . . and waited. By Saturday morning Castro had still not

appeared. When they heard the news that the Santiago uprising had failed, they realized they could wait no longer. Bitterly disappointed, they slunk away to their homes.

### Shipwrecked on Cuba

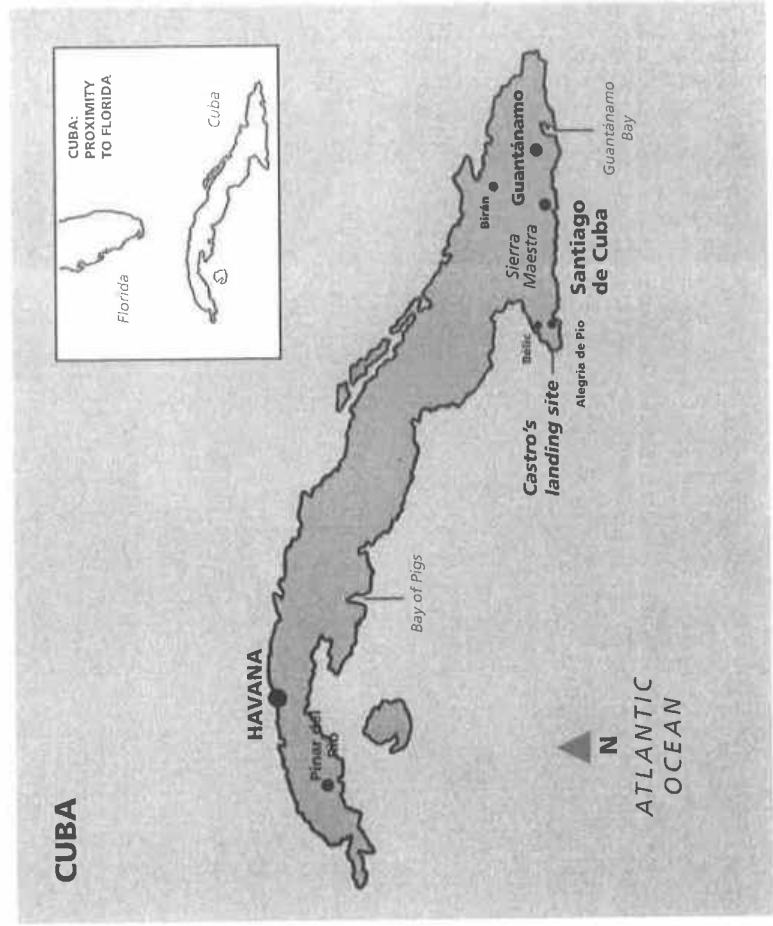
The *Granma* finally reached Cuba at dawn on Sunday, but not quite as Castro had expected. Thanks to bad navigation, they were 1.5 km (1 mile) from the beach where they had planned to land. Instead of beaching the ship and leaping on to the sand, they ran aground on a mud-bank hundreds of metres from the shore. To reach dry land, they had to jump in the water and wade ashore with whatever equipment they could carry. “This wasn’t a landing, it was a shipwreck!” was how Castro remembered their return to Cuban soil.

Worse was to come. A mangrove swamp lined the shore. Castro’s force had to fight their way through a jungle of leaves, and clamber over barriers of roots. None of them was really fit for the ordeal: their ship had carried only enough supplies for five days. After a week on board all of them were tired, hungry and thirsty.

The landing took two hours. When the rebels had regrouped, they set off inland. The first Cuban they met was Pérez Rosabal, a simple charcoal burner. Castro hailed him grandly: “Have no fear. I am Fidel Castro. We have come to liberate the Cuban people!” As Rosabal shared what little food he had with a handful of

ravenous rebels, explosions ripped across the coast. Castro’s landing had not been as secret as he had hoped, and the Cuban airforce were bombing the mangrove swamp.

The map below shows some main towns and cities in Cuba and some of the places mentioned in this book.



## The rebels head for the hills

Afraid that the shelling would spread inland, Castro ordered his resting men to their feet. The rebels headed for the safety of the Sierra Maestra – Cuba's rocky, mountainous spine. This wild area was almost deserted. When rain fell, it would turn the mountain roads to mud, putting the revolutionaries' camp beyond reach of a ground attack. To Castro and his men, the mountains were a safe haven. Reaching them, though, meant a long march through difficult country.

Fortunately for the rebels, most of the peasants they met were sympathetic to the revolutionary cause. They received shelter, food and drink, and were guided on their way. Nevertheless, it was a gruelling march, and the weary rebels were still very hungry. To sustain themselves they cut and chewed sugar cane. Experienced soldiers would have known to collect the chewed stalks, but Castro's men were raw recruits. They dropped the stalks where they finished them, leaving a record of their route as clear as any map. By the fourth day, the rebels could walk no farther. As night fell,

they flopped down on a low hill above a cane field at Alegría de Pío.

At 4.30 next morning, the sound of gunfire jolted them awake. Batista's spies had directed the army to the general location of Castro's forces. The trail of cane led them straight to the rebel camp.

Unprepared, groggy from sleep, and mostly barefoot, Castro's men made easy targets. Three were killed on the spot; 40 were captured, and either executed or imprisoned; 20 just disappeared.



► The failure of the first attempt at revolution forced Fidel and the other survivors to take to the hills where they trained themselves in guerrilla warfare.

# Viva la revolución!

When the attack at Alegría de Pío scattered the rebel force, Castro fled into a cane field with a pair of his comrades. "I was commander-in-chief of myself and two others," he later joked, but at the time he wasn't laughing.

After five days hiding in the cane field, Castro and his companions decided it was safe to move. In fact, they had to move, safe or not. They were gasping with thirst, and starving. They crept warily from the field, and when they were sure that the army was no longer searching for them, they struck out for the mountains.

## Just a minor setback

Castro was as usual supremely confident. For him the cane field attack was not a defeat, it was simply the first battle of the revolution. His optimism gave the other two men strength, but it was hard going. They pushed on, and after two nights' walking reached the shack of a sympathetic coffee farmer. He sheltered the three men, fed them, then led them further into the hills, to the home of a member of the July 26th Movement.

Before long more rebels who had fled the ambush joined them, swelling the guerrilla army from three to 20. Castro was delighted to find that among the reinforcements were his brother Raúl and Che Guevara. Che had been shot in the shoulder, and though his wound was painful, it was not serious enough to require hospital treatment.

The rebels realized that the mountains offered them security they could not find anywhere else on the island. If they could reach the highest peaks, they could easily beat off Batista's army attacks. So they pressed on. Their march to the mountains eventually became a way of life, for in the following months they never stayed in one place for more than a few nights. Constantly moving from camp to camp kept them safe.

Initially forced into the mountains for their own safety, Castro's rebel soldiers became skilled in guerrilla warfare.

### First ambush

Though their numbers were increasing steadily, they still had few weapons. To get more, Castro decided in mid-January to attack an army post. He chose a small guard-post on the coast. The ragged rebel army moved into positions above the post. For two days they just watched, and prepared for action. They launched their attack in the early hours of the morning, and when the soldiers refused to surrender, Che Guevara and another rebel set fire to the wooden barracks, driving out the soldiers. In this, their first real military action, the guerrillas captured nine rifles, a submachine gun, ammunition, food and medicines.

Later similar raids on small, badly defended garrisons would win them more guns and bullets. Supporters in the lowlands helped supply them, too: one rebel woman climbed to their mountain camp with nine sticks of dynamite and 300 machine-gun bullets hidden under her skirts!

However, it was the resourceful peasants of the Sierra Maestra who were usually the rebels' guardians, guides,

messengers, allies and recruits. The peasants were used to hardship and hunger; they knew every rock on every mountain; most hated the Batista dictatorship, and sympathized with Castro's aims. They kept the rebels supplied with food, and led them to the safest places where they could not be found.

### Betrayed to the enemy

Not all of the peasants were loyal to the rebel cause, though. One peasant betrayed their hideout to the army, and the rebels came close to losing everything they had gained. At the end of January the informer guided military aircraft to Castro's mountain camp. One bomb scored a direct hit on the stove where breakfast was cooking. Fortunately there were no casualties, and the incident taught the rebels a valuable lesson: they became doubly cautious of traitors.

A fortnight or so after the attack, Castro met a woman who was to become his lover and closest companion for nearly a quarter of a century. Celia Sanchez had been an important member of the rebel movement since the Moncada attack. She had sent food to



◀ A rare photograph showing a rebel making petrol bombs at a secret location.

## 20th-Century History Makers: FIDEL CASTRO

Castro and his comrades in jail; it was Celia who got hold of the charts (sea maps) of the coast of Cuba where the *Granma* came ashore. But until February 1957 she had never seen the organization's leader face-to-face.

The two were powerfully attracted to each other, and though her work took her away from Castro at first, in the autumn she returned to the Sierra Maestra to share the rugged life of the rebels – and Castro's bed. As well as his lover, she was his trusted friend, reliable secretary and careful housekeeper. As another rebel remembers: "Celia never left him, Celia was always with him."

The rebels' strength grew throughout 1957. By July there were 200 rebels hiding in the mountains, and they had begun to take control of some of the more remote regions. By the following year, they were ready to expand rebel territory further north. Castro's brother Raúl commanded the advancing force of guerrillas. To exaggerate their strength, Raúl's group was named "Column No. 6" – even though columns 2, 3, 4 and 5 never existed.

While Castro was training his warriors in the mountains, he did not neglect

propaganda – spreading news and rumours in support of the revolution. He knew he had to persuade *all* the people of Cuba that he could beat the Batista regime. He set up a radio station, *Radio Rebelde*, on a mountain-top, beaming rousing stories to the island. And he gave interviews to newspaper and TV journalists.

### A hero in New York

When an American writer visited the mountain hide-away, Castro ordered his men to march up and down constantly outside. He also pretended that the camp was just a small outpost, and that there were many much bigger camps elsewhere in the mountains. The reporter was taken in, and his article in the *New York Times* made Castro look like an unbeatable hero.

This horrified Batista, and he ordered that the *Times* should be censored before it was put on sale on the island. Clerks obediently snipped the articles from the front pages, but a few copies slipped through the net. Sympathizers

▶ Wearing his July 26th Movement armband, Castro interrogates a prisoner at one of the rebels' strongholds.



## Castro schemes for power

Even within the July 26th Movement, not everyone recognized Castro's authority. The struggle for power and leadership reached a climax when the Movement organized a general strike at Easter 1958. Radio messages called on everyone to stop work, go into the streets and protest. The strike was a flop. By blaming the Movement's organizers in the cities and lowlands for the failure, Castro managed to undermine and eliminate his rivals.

By summer 1958 Batista realized he could not cling on to power unless he crushed Castro's rebels. So the dictator's generals planned a major attack. 10,000 troops would surround the Sierra Maestra and gradually advance to encircle the rebels. Aircraft and battleships offshore would attack the rebel bases.

Castro had only 300 guerrillas; each of them had fewer than 50 bullets. It seemed like an unequal battle – but Castro was becoming used to unequal battles. The rebels may have been few in number, but each one of them was determined to win. Thanks to their wanderings over the Sierra Maestra hills, they were familiar with every peak and valley. Government

in the USA also reprinted the articles, and secretly shipped them to Cuba.

Circulated hand-to-hand, the articles transformed Castro's image. Before he had looked like a no-hoper, a dreamer with a few loyal but half-mad hangers-on. Batista had even claimed he was dead. But the *New York Times* built Castro up into a real guerrilla leader, suggesting for the first time that the day might soon come when he ruled Cuba.

Castro was not the only one scheming to destroy the dictator – there were many other rival organizations. In March 1957 student revolutionaries had stormed the presidential palace, and Batista only narrowly escaped assassination. Two months later another former president of Cuba paid for an invasion very similar to Castro's – but the army rounded up and shot most of those who took part. Cuba's Communist Party also wanted to grab power, and saw Castro as an obstacle, not an ally.

◀ Another photograph of Castro interrogating a prisoner at a mountain hideaway; he appears fierce despite the over-sized glasses.



## 20th-Century History Makers: FIDEL CASTRO

troops could not have been more different: many were conscripts – they were being forced to fight – and they had never before left Cuba's towns and lowlands.

### Fidel is finished?

The campaign was optimistically code-named "FF" for *Fin de Fidel* (The End of Fidel). It began around 20 May, and at first, Batista forces made rapid progress. Cuban government aircraft pounded the rebel bases, killing and wounding many fighters. The planes were refuelling and reloading with bombs at the United States base at Guantánamo. Raúl Castro was furious that the US were helping the dictator in this way, so he took 49 American hostages – marines, and mining and sugar-plant workers. This trick ended the air campaign. Batista knew that if a bomb killed a hostage, he would lose American support.

As the campaign dragged on, it turned in the rebels' favour. On the ground, the conscript soldiers were no match for Castro's dedicated volunteer fighters, who showered bullets from mountain peaks they held. As the summer ended, so too did the battles. With the army retreating,


### Why is there a US base on Cuba?

Guantánamo Bay at Cuba's southern end is one of the world's largest natural harbours. At the end of the 19th century, the United States recognized the importance of the bay and built a military base there. From it they could control the Windward Passage, the 80-km (50-mile) wide strait between Cuba and Hispaniola that is the main shipping route to the Panama Canal.

When the US handed back Cuba to its people in 1902, they kept the base, and have operated it ever since, in spite of many requests from Castro that US troops should leave the island. In 2002 the base was used as a jail for Al Qaida prisoners of war captured by American troops in Afghanistan.

Castro's rebels could afford to celebrate. They had taken hundreds of weapons from prisoners, and had even captured two tanks.

For Batista, it was the beginning of the end. Support for Castro had been growing rapidly right across the country as Radio Rebelde reported stories of government retreats and setbacks.

 As the revolution progressed, Castro's army became better armed. Here, rebels with a machine gun keep watch over a road leading to Havana shortly before the victory over the Batista regime.



### Fighting back against Batista

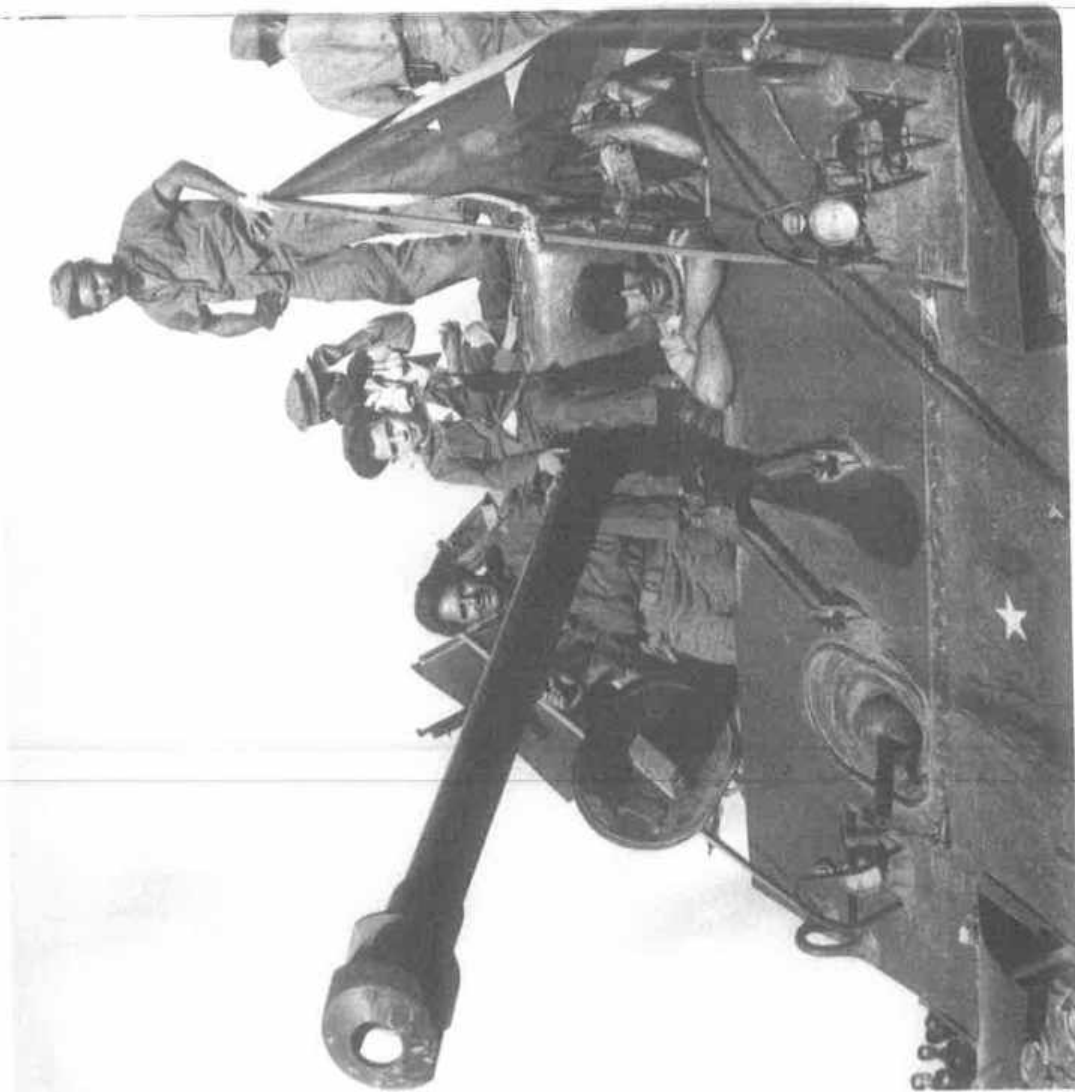
By mid-August, Castro's fighters had had time to recover from the summer attacks. They were fit and eager to make the final push against the dictatorship. He led a group to a province east of Havana; another group moved into position west of the capital, and a third advanced on Santiago. Castro himself stayed in the mountains until November, then led his troops towards Guisa. Capturing this small town, some 50 km (30 miles) away, would give the rebels control of a crucial road.

But the soldiers defending Guisa did not give up the town easily. They fought off Castro's attack, and the Cuban airforce supported them, bombing rebel troops around the town. After ten days' fighting, though, the defenders realized that no further troops were coming to help them, and they retreated to the west. Rebel fighters cautiously moved in, capturing more weapons – a tank, mortars and bazookas. Cheered by the victory, Castro advanced along the road to

Santiago. By Christmas he was a day's march from the provincial capital.

### The dictator flees

Meanwhile, at his estate outside Havana, Batista had realized he did not have much time left. There was open opposition to his government both in Havana and in the countryside, and he could no longer rely on his soldiers and airmen. At the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve, he resigned. Two hours later he fled to safety in the Dominican Republic. Castro had won!



◀ Fidelito, Castro's son, straddles a tank gun on 8 January 1959, the day so long awaited by his father, when Castro marched triumphantly into Havana.