Fidel Castro: The Making Of A Revolutionary

“A revolution is not a bed of roses. A revolution is a struggle to the death between the future and the past” (“Bustle”). Fidel Castro was a political leader of Cuba who transformed his country into the first communist country in the entire Western Hemisphere. The communist revolutionary, who was one of the most prominent and important figures in Cuban history, would go on to become a symbol of the communist revolution in Latin America. Interestingly, there were three specific events that had a dramatic impact on Fidel Castro’s life: Batista’s Revolution, the Bay of Pigs Invasion, and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Before diving into how these events impacted such an important figure in Cuban history, however, we must first begin with a little biographical information on Castro.

Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz was born on August 13, 1926 in Birán, Cuba (Bourner, p. 12). His parents, Ángel Castro y Argiz and Lina Ruz González, were wealthy and prosperous Spanish sugarcane farmers who wanted their son to experience a good education. They sent Castro to a Jesuit high school in Havana named Colegio de Belén, in which he proved to be an extremely diligent student who performed exceptionally well in geography, mathematics, history, and foreign language. He also excelled at baseball and proved to be a phenomenal athlete (Bourner, p. 16). He would subsequently attend the law school at the University of Havana, where he became interested in politics, student activism, and social justice. He joined political activism clubs, including the Movimiento Socialista Revolucionaria (Socialist Revolutionary Movement), Unión Insurrectional Revolucionaria (Insurrectional Revolutionary Union), and the Partido Socialista Popular (Popular Socialist Party), in which he advocated political reform, social justice, and honest government (My Life: A Spoken Autobiography, p. 36).

Castro would temporarily leave the university in 1947 to join the Caribbean Legion, an expedition attempting to overthrow Dominican Republic dictator Rafael Trujillo. The expedition began on July 29, 1947 and consisted of over 1,200 exiled Dominicans and Cubans (“Guerrilla Leader, Dictator – and an Unrepentant Revolutionary”). However, the coup was called off because of international pressure; but this did not diminish Castro's passion for reform. Shorty afterward in 1948, Castro would participate in anti-government riots that were taking place in Bogotá, Colombia. That same year, he would marry Mirta Diaz-Balart, who was from an extremely wealthy and political family; the marriage exposed Castro to a wealthier lifestyle where he was able to create powerful political connections (“Britannica”). Just one year later, Mirta gave birth to a son, and the couple named him Fidel Castro Diaz-Balart (Bourner, p. 21). Castro would soon graduate from the University of Havana in 1950 and open up his own law offices. Now that we have our biographical information on Fidel Castro, let us begin our analysis on how Batista’s Revolution, the Bay of Pigs Invasion, and the Cuban Missile Crisis had a dramatic impact on Fidel Castro’s life.

Castro retained a strong passion and interest in political socialism and became a candidate for Cuba's House of Representatives (Bourner, p. 23). However, General Fulgencio Batista, a Cuban military officer, overthrew the Cuban government in a successful coup in 1952. Batista set up a dictatorship in Cuba and solidified his power with the military and Cuba’s elitist families (“There's More to Castro Than Meets the Eye”). His government was even was recognized by the United States. Batista’s successful coup of the previous Cuban government canceled

Castro’s elections for a seat in Cuba's House of Representatives and left him without any legitimate political platform. In his book My Life: A Spoken Autobiography, Castro himself wrote that “from that moment on, I had a clear idea of the struggle ahead” (p. 141). In response, Castro organized a group called “The Movement” and planned an insurrection. On July 26, 1953, Castro, along with approximately 150 men, attacked the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba, the second-largest military base in Cuba, in an attempt to overthrow Batista. The attack failed and many of Castro’s men were brutally killed. Castro, along with brother his Raúl, were captured and sentenced to 15 years in prison (“There's More to Castro Than Meets the Eye”). While imprisoned, he said that he was “almost nostalgic for those years in prison, because that’s the time in my life when I had the most time to read” (My Life: A Spoken Autobiography, p. 67).

Batista’s government pardoned Castro in an amnesty deal and he was released just 2 years later in 1955. Castro was sent to Mexico City where he organized an expedition against Batista called the 26th of July Movement. He would gather 80 men and set off to Oriente Province, Cuba. After immediately encountering Batista’s army, all but Castro and 12 of his men were killed. Shortly afterward, Castro fled to the Sierra Maestra mountain range where he created a guerrilla war movement against the Batista government. Within 2 years, Castro was the undisputed leader of the anti-Batista movement, and Batista would soon begin to lose power (“Guerrilla Leader, Dictator – and an Unrepentant Revolutionary”). Batista’s revolution is undoubtedly a historic event that had a dramatic impact on Fidel Castro; it was during this time that Castro was able to solidify power and take over the Cuban government. However, the United States government disapproved of Castro’s new regime.

Relations between the United States and Cuba’s government had completely deteriorated. On January 3, 1961, President Dwight Eisenhower would cut off all diplomatic relations with Cuba, and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency had begun planning an invasion to topple Castro’s government. On April 17, 1961, 1,400 men invaded Cuba at the Bay of Pigs, attempting to overthrow Castro and his regime. However, the invasion was over before it even started; hundreds of insurgents were brutally killed and over 1,100 were captured, imprisoned, and tortured (Britannica). The Bay of Pigs was significant and had a dramatic impact on Castro because he was able to capitalize on the disastrous incident and consolidate his power. He announced a complete termination of democratic elections in Cuba and intensified his relations with the Soviet Union. Most significantly, Castro agreed to release the insurgents that he imprisoned in exchange for $53,000,000 worth of food and medicine — an incident that was crucial to the development of the Cuban Missile Crisis (Bourner, p. 55).

In July 1962, Nikita Khrushchev, leader of the Soviet Union during the Cold War, secured an agreement with Fidel Castro to place Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba to prevent any future invasion attempt from the United States. In October 1962, the United States discovered the missile sites and President John F. Kennedy established a naval blockade to prevent more missiles from reaching Cuba (Bourner, p. 86). The two superpowers were on the brink of nuclear global destruction, as this was undoubtedly the climax of the Cold War. Kennedy and his administration would finally reach a tentative agreement with the Soviet Union after weeks of tense negotiations: Kennedy committed to not invading Cuba and withdrawing the nuclear missiles that the United States had stationed in Turkey if Khrushchev promised that all missile sites on the coast of Cuba would be dismantled. Both superpowers fulfilled their promises and the crisis was over within a month (“Last Living Symbol of the Cold War at Its Peak”). However, the Soviet Union’s concession to the United State’s ultimatum infuriated Fidel Castro. This

would have a dramatic impact on Fidel Castro; in the coming years, he would relieve his hostile and antagonistic rhetoric against America. “We are neighbors, and we ought to get along” (My Life: A Spoken Autobiography, p. 106). Within a decade, the Soviet Union collapsed and it was an enormous blow for Castro. “To speak of the Soviet Union collapsing is as if to speak of the sun not shining” (My Life: A Spoken Autobiography, p. 189).

I undoubtedly believe that Batista’s Revolution and the Bay of Pigs Invasion had a negative impact on Castro. Batista’s successful coup of the Cuban government left Castro without any legitimate political platform. Support for Castro’s revolution drastically expanded as a result of Barista’s corruption, dishonesty, and inefficiency. Additionally, the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion only strengthened Castro’s antagonistic behavior towards the United States. He was able to consolidate his power as the United States agreed to pay millions of dollars in food and medical supplies in exchange for the insurgents that he imprisoned. On the other hand, I believe that the Cuban Missile Crisis ultimately had a positive impact on Fidel Castro. After the Cold War had ended, Castro would soften his communistic rhetoric and hostile behavior towards many countries, including the United States. Many years later, the Obama administration reinstated diplomatic relations with Cuba.

Fidel Castro was undoubtedly one of the most prominent figures in Cuban history, governing the Republic of Cuba as First Secretary of the Communist Party of Cuba from 1961 to 2011, Prime Minister from 1959 to 1976, and President from 1976 to 2008 (“Biography”). The Cuban Revolutionary died peacefully on November 25th, 2016 in Havana. Although there were many significant events that impacted Cuba’s revolutionary leader, Batista’s Revolution, the Bay of Pigs Invasion, and the Cuban Missile Crisis truly had the most dramatic impact on the communist revolutionary.