

= Fidel Castro in the Cuban Revolution =

The Cuban communist revolutionary and politician Fidel Castro took part in the Cuban Revolution from 1953 to 1959 . Following on from his early life , Castro decided to fight for the overthrow of Fulgencio Batista 's military junta by founding a paramilitary organisation , " The Movement " . In July 1953 , they launched a failed attack on the Moncada Barracks , during which many militants were killed and Castro was arrested . Placed on trial , he defended his actions and provided his famous " History Will Absolve Me " speech , before being sentenced to 15 years ' imprisonment in the Model Prison on the Isla de Pinos . Renaming his group the " 26th of July Movement " ( MR @-@ 26 @-@ 7 ) , Castro was pardoned by Batista 's government in May 1955 , who no longer considered him a political threat . Restructuring the MR @-@ 26 @-@ 7 , he fled to Mexico with his brother Raul Castro , where he met with Argentine Marxist @-@ Leninist Che Guevara , and together they put together a small revolutionary force intent on overthrowing Batista .

In November 1956 , Castro and 81 revolutionaries sailed from Mexico aboard the Granma , crash @-@ landing near to Los Cayuelos . Attacked by Batista 's forces , they fled to the Sierra Maestra mountain range , where the 19 survivors set up an encampment from which they waged guerrilla war against the army . Boosted by new recruits that increased the guerilla army 's numbers to 200 , they co @-@ ordinated their attacks with the actions of other revolutionaries across Cuba , and Castro became an international celebrity after being interviewed by The New York Times . In 1958 , Batista launched a counter @-@ offensive , Operation Verano , but his army 's use of conventional warfare was overwhelmed by Castro 's guerrilla tactics , and the MR @-@ 26 @-@ 7 eventually pushed out of the Sierra Maestra and took control of most of Oriente and Las Villas . Recognising that he was losing the war , Batista fled to the Dominican Republic while military leader Eulogio Cantillo took control of the country . With revolutionary forces controlling most of Cuba , Castro ordered Cantillo 's arrest , before establishing a provisional government with Manuel Urrutia Lleó as President and José Miró Cardona as Prime Minister , ensuring that they enacted laws to erode the power of the Batistanos .

= = The Movement and the Moncada Barracks attack : 1952 ? 53 = =

In March 1952 , Cuban military general Fulgencio Batista seized power in a military coup , with the elected President Carlos Prío Socarrás fleeing to Mexico . Declaring himself president , Batista cancelled the planned presidential elections , describing his new system as " disciplined democracy " ; Castro , like many others , considered it a one @-@ man dictatorship . Batista moved to the right , solidifying ties with both the wealthy elite and the United States , severing diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union , suppressing trade unions and persecuting Cuban socialist groups . Intent on opposing Batista 's administration , Castro brought several legal cases against them , arguing that Batista had committed sufficient criminal acts to warrant imprisonment and accusing various ministers of breaching labor laws . His lawsuits coming to nothing , Castro began thinking of alternate ways to oust the new government .

Dissatisfied with the Partido Ortodoxo 's non @-@ violent opposition , Castro formed " The Movement " , a group consisting of both a civil and a military committee . The former agitated through underground newspaper El Acusador ( The Accuser ) , while the latter armed and trained anti @-@ Batista recruits . With Castro as the Movement 's head , the organization was based upon a clandestine cell system , with each cell containing 10 members . A dozen individuals formed the Movement 's nucleus , many also dissatisfied Ortodoxo members , although from July 1952 they went on a recruitment drive , gaining around 1 @, @ 200 members in a year , organized into over a hundred cells , with the majority coming from Havana 's poorer districts . Although he had close ties to revolutionary socialism , Castro avoided an alliance with the communist PSP , fearing it would frighten away political moderates , but kept in contact with several PSP members , including his brother Raúl . He later related that the Movement 's members were simply anti @-@ Batista , and few had strong socialist or anti @-@ imperialist views , something which Castro attributed to " the overwhelming weight of the Yankees ' ideological and advertising machinery " which he believed

suppressed class consciousness among Cuba's working class .

Castro stockpiled weapons for a planned attack on the Moncada Barracks , a military garrison outside Santiago de Cuba , Oriente . Castro 's militants intended to dress in army uniforms and arrive at the base on July 25 , the festival of St James , when many officers would be away . The rebels would seize control , raid the armory and escape before reinforcements arrived . Supplied with new weaponry , Castro intended to arm supporters and spark a revolution among Oriente 's impoverished cane cutters . The plan was to then seize control of a Santiago radio station , broadcasting the Movement 's manifesto , hence promoting further uprisings . Castro 's plan emulated those of the 19th century Cuban independence fighters who had raided Spanish barracks ; Castro saw himself as the heir to independence leader and national hero José Martí .

Castro gathered 165 revolutionaries for the mission ; 138 stationed in Santiago , the other 27 in Bayamo . Mostly young men from Havana and Pinar del Río , Castro insured that ? with the exception of himself ? none had children , and ordered his troops not to cause bloodshed unless they met armed resistance . The attack took place on July 26 , 1953 , but ran into trouble ; 3 of the 16 cars that had set out from Santiago failed to get there . Reaching the barracks , the alarm was raised , with most of the rebels pinned down outside the base by machine gun fire . Those that got inside faced heavy resistance , and 4 were killed before Castro ordered a retreat . The rebels had suffered 6 fatalities and 15 other casualties , whilst the army suffered 19 dead and 27 wounded .

Meanwhile , some rebels took over a civilian hospital ; subsequently stormed by government soldiers , the rebels were rounded up , tortured and 22 were executed without trial . Those that had escaped , including Fidel and Raúl , assembled at their base where some debated surrender , while others wished to flee to Havana . Accompanied by 19 comrades , Castro decided to set out for Gran Piedra in the rugged Sierra Maestra mountains several miles to the north , where they could establish a guerrilla base . In response to the Moncada attack , Batista 's government proclaimed martial law , ordering a violent crackdown on dissent and imposing strict censorship of the media . Propaganda broadcast misinformation about the event , claiming that the rebels were communists who had killed hospital patients . Despite this censorship , news and photographs soon spread of the army 's use of torture and summary executions in Oriente , causing widespread public and some governmental disapproval .

= = Trial and History Will Absolve Me : 1953 = =

Over the following days , the rebels were rounded up , with some being executed and others ? including Castro ? transported to a prison north of Santiago . Believing Castro incapable of planning the attack alone , the government accused Ortodoxo and PSP politicians of involvement , putting 122 defendants on trial on September 21 at the Palace of Justice , Santiago . Although censored from reporting on it , journalists were permitted to attend , which proved an embarrassment for the Batista administration . Acting as his own defense council , Castro convinced the 3 judges to overrule the army 's decision to keep all defendants handcuffed in court , proceeding to argue that the charge with which they were accused ? of " organizing an uprising of armed persons against the Constitutional Powers of the State " ? was incorrect , for they had risen up against Batista , who had seized power in an unconstitutional manner . When asked who was the intellectual author of the attack , Castro claimed that it was the long deceased national icon José Martí , quoting Martí 's works that justified uprisings .

The trial revealed that the army had tortured suspects , utilizing castration and the gouging out of eyes ; the judges agreed to investigate these crimes , embarrassing the army , which tried unsuccessfully to prevent Castro from testifying any further , claiming he was too ill to leave his cell . The trial ended on October 5 , with the acquittal of most defendants ; 55 were sentenced to prison terms of between 7 months and 13 years . Castro was sentenced separately , on October 16 , during which he delivered a speech that would be printed under the title of History Will Absolve Me . Although the maximum penalty for leading an uprising was a 20 years , Castro was sentenced to 15 , being imprisoned in the hospital wing of the Model Prison ( Presidio Modelo ) , a relatively comfortable and modern institution on the Isla de Pinos , 60 miles off of Cuba 's southwest coast .

= = Imprisonment and the 26th of July Movement : 1953 ? 55 = =

Imprisoned with 25 fellow conspirators , Castro renamed " The Movement " the " 26th of July Movement " ( MR @-@ 26 @-@ 7 ) in memory of the Moncada attack 's date . Forming a school for prisoners , the Abel Santamaría Ideological Academy , Castro organized five hours a day of teaching in ancient and modern history , philosophy and English . He read widely , enjoying the works of Karl Marx , Vladimir Lenin , and Martí but also reading books by Freud , Kant , Shakespeare , Munthe , Maugham and Dostoyevsky , analyzing them within a Marxist framework . He began reading about Roosevelt 's New Deal , believing that something similar should be enacted in Cuba . Corresponding with supporters outside of prison , he maintained control over the Movement and organized the publication of History Will Absolve Me , with an initial print run of 27 @,@ 500 copies . Initially permitted a relatively high amount of freedom within the prison compared to other inmates , he was locked up in solitary confinement after his comrades sang anti @-@ Batista songs on a visit by the President in February 1954 . Meanwhile , Castro 's wife Mirta gained employment in the Ministry of the Interior , having been encouraged to do so by her brother , a friend and ally of Batista 's . This was kept a secret from Castro , who found out through a radio announcement . Appalled , he raged that he would rather die " a thousand times " than " suffer impotently from such an insult " . Both Fidel and Mirta initiated divorce proceedings , with Mirta taking custody of their son Fidelito ; this angered Castro , who did not want his son growing up in a bourgeois environment .

In 1954 , Batista 's government held presidential elections , but no politician had risked standing against him ; he won , but the election was widely considered fraudulent . It had allowed some political opposition to be voiced , and Castro 's supporters had agitated for an amnesty for the Moncada incident 's perpetrators . Some politicians suggested an amnesty would be good publicity , and the Congress and Batista agreed . Backed by the U.S. and major corporations , Batista believed Castro to be no political threat , and on May 15 , 1955 the prisoners were released . Returning to Havana , Castro was carried on the shoulders of supporters , and set about giving radio interviews and press conferences ; the government closely monitored him , curtailing his activities . Now divorced , Castro had sexual affairs with two female supporters , Natty Revuelta and Maria Laborde , each conceiving him a child . Setting about strengthening the MR @-@ 26 @-@ 7 , he established an 11 @-@ person National Directorate ; despite these structural changes , there was still dissent , with some questioning Castro 's autocratic leadership . Castro dismissed calls for the leadership to be transferred to a democratic board , arguing that a successful revolution could not be run by committee . Some then abandoned the MR @-@ 26 @-@ 7 , labeling Castro a caudillo ( dictator ) , although the majority remained loyal .

= = Mexico and guerrilla training : 1955 ? 56 = =

In 1955 , bombings and violent demonstrations led to a crackdown on dissent ; Castro was placed under protective armed guard by supporters , before he and Raúl fled the country . MR @-@ 26 @-@ 7 members remaining in Cuba were left to prepare cells for revolutionary action and await Castro 's return . He sent a letter to the press , declaring that he was " leaving Cuba because all doors of peaceful struggle have been closed to me . Six weeks after being released from prison I am convinced more than ever of the dictatorship 's intention , masked in many ways , to remain in power for twenty years , ruling as now by the use of terror and crime and ignoring the patience of the Cuban people , which has its limits . As a follower of Martí , I believe the hour has come to take our rights and not beg for them , to fight instead of pleading for them . " The Castros and several comrades traveled to Mexico , which had a long history of offering asylum to leftist exiles . Here , Raúl befriended an Argentine doctor and Marxist @-@ Leninist named Ernesto " Che " Guevara , a proponent of guerrilla warfare keen to join Cuba 's Revolution . Fidel liked him , later describing him as " a more advanced revolutionary than I was . " Castro also associated with the Spaniard Alberto Bayo , a Republican veteran of the Spanish Civil War ; Bayo agreed to teach Fidel 's rebels the

necessary skills in guerrilla warfare , clandestinely meeting them at Chapultepec for training .

Requiring funding , Castro toured the U.S. in search of wealthy sympathizers ; Prío contributed \$ 100 @,@ 000 . Castro later claimed that he had been monitored by Batista 's agents , who orchestrated a failed assassination against him . Batista 's government bribed Mexican police to arrest the rebels , however with the support of several Mexican politicians who were sympathetic to their cause , they were soon released . Castro kept in contact with the MR @-@ 26 @-@ 7 in Cuba , where they had gained a large support base in Oriente . Other militant anti @-@ Batista groups had sprung up , primarily from the student movement ; most notable was the Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil ( DRE ) , founded by the Federation of University Students ( FEU ) President José Antonio Echevarría . Antonio traveled to Mexico City to meet with Castro , but they disagreed on tactics ; Antonio thought that it was legitimate to assassinate anyone connected to the government , something Castro thought rash and ineffective .

After purchasing a decrepit yacht , the Granma , on 25 November 1956 Castro set sail from Tuxpan , Veracruz , with 81 revolutionaries armed with 90 rifles , 3 machine guns , around 40 pistols and 2 hand @-@ held anti @-@ tank guns . The 1 @,@ 200 mile crossing to Cuba was harsh , and in the overcrowded conditions of the ship , many suffered seasickness , and food supplies ran low . At some points they had to bail water caused by a leak , and at another a man fell overboard , delaying their journey . The plan had been for the crossing to take 5 days , and on the ship 's scheduled day of arrival , 30 November , MR @-@ 26 @-@ 7 members under Frank Pais led an armed uprising against government buildings in Santiago , Manzanillo and several other towns . However , the Granma 's journey ultimately lasted 7 days , and with Castro and his men unable to provide reinforcements , Pais and his militants dispersed after two days of intermittent attacks .

= = Guerrilla war in the Sierra Maestra : 1956 ? 58 = =

The Granma crash @-@ landed in a mangrove swamp at Playa Las Coloradas , close to Los Cayuelos , on 2 December 1956 . Within a few hours a naval vessel started bombarding the invaders ? fleeing inland , they headed for the forested mountain range of Oriente 's Sierra Maestra . At daybreak on 5 December , a detachment of Batista 's Rural Guard attacked them ; the rebels scattered , making their journey to the Sierra Maestra in small groups . Upon arrival , Castro discovered that of the 82 rebels who had arrived on the Granma , only 19 had made it to their destination , the rest having been killed or captured .

Setting up an encampment in the jungle , the survivors , including the Castros , Che Guevara , and Camilo Cienfuegos , began launching raids on small army @-@ posts to obtain weaponry . In January 1957 they overran the outpost near to the beach at La Plata ; Guevara treated the soldiers for any injuries , but the revolutionaries executed the local mayoral ( land @-@ company overseer ) Chicho Osorio , whom the local peasants despised and who boasted of killing one of the MR @-@ 26 @-@ 7 rebels several weeks previously . Osorio 's execution aided the rebels in gaining the trust of locals , who typically hated the mayorals as enforcers of the wealthy landowners , although they largely remained unenthusiastic and suspicious of the revolutionaries . As trust grew , some locals joined the rebels , although most new recruits came from urban areas . With increasing numbers of volunteers , who now numbered over 200 , in July 1957 Castro divided his army into three columns , keeping charge of one and giving control of the others to his brother and Guevara . The MR @-@ 26 @-@ 7 members operating in urban areas continued agitation , sending supplies to Castro , and on 16 February 1957 he met with other senior members to discuss tactics ; here he met Celia Sánchez , who would become a close friend .

Across Cuba , militant groups rose up against Batista , carrying out bombings and acts of sabotage . Police responded with mass arrests , torture and extrajudicial killings , with corpses hung on trees to intimidate dissidents . In March 1957 , Antonio 's DR launched a failed attack on the presidential palace , with Antonio being shot dead ; his death removed a charismatic rival to Castro 's leadership of the revolution . Frank Pais was also killed , leaving Castro the unchallenged leader of the MR @-@ 26 @-@ 7 . Castro hid his Marxist @-@ Leninist beliefs , in contrast to Guevara and Raúl , whose beliefs were well known ; in doing so , he hoped to gain the support of less radical dissenters

, and in 1957 he met with leading members of the Partido Ortodoxo . Castro and Ortodoxo leaders Raúl Chibás and Felipe Pazos drafted and signed the Sierra Maestra Manifesto , in which they laid out their plans for a post @-@ Batista Cuba . Rejecting the rule of a provisional military junta , it demanded the setting up of a provisional civilian government " supported by all " which would implement moderate agrarian reform , industrialization and a literacy campaign before introducing " truly fair , democratic , impartial , elections " .

Batista 's government censored the Cuban press , and so Castro contacted foreign media to spread his message . Herbert Matthews , a journalist from The New York Times , interviewed Castro , attracting international interest to the rebel 's cause and turning Castro into a celebrity . Other reporters followed , sent by such news agencies as CBS , while a reporter from Paris Match stayed with the rebels for around 4 months , documenting their routine . Castro 's guerrillas increased their attacks on military outposts , forcing the government to withdraw from the Sierra Maestra region , and by spring 1958 the rebels controlled a hospital , schools , a printing press , slaughterhouse , land @-@ mine factory and a cigar @-@ making factory .

= = Batista 's fall and Cantillo 's military junta : 1958 ? 1959 = =

Batista had come under increasing pressure by 1958 . His army 's military failures , coupled with his press censorship and the police and army 's use of torture and extrajudicial executions , were increasingly criticized both domestically and abroad . Influenced by anti @-@ Batista sentiment among their citizens , the U.S. government ceased supplying him with weaponry , leading him to buy arms from the United Kingdom . The opposition used this opportunity to call a general strike , accompanied by armed attacks from the MR @-@ 26 @-@ 7 . Beginning on 9 April , it received strong support in central and eastern Cuba , but little elsewhere .

Batista responded with an all @-@ out @-@ attack on Castro 's guerrillas , Operation Verano ( 28 June to 8 August 1958 ) . The army aerially bombarded forested areas and villages suspected of aiding the militants , while 10 @,@ 000 soldiers under the command of General Eulogio Cantillo surrounded the Sierra Maestra , driving north to the rebel encampments . Despite their numerical and technological superiority , the army had no experience with guerrilla warfare or with the mountainous region . Now with 300 men at his command , Castro avoided open confrontation , using land mines and ambushes to halt the enemy offensive . The army suffered heavy losses and a number of embarrassments ; in June 1958 a battalion surrendered , their weapons were confiscated and they were handed over to the Red Cross . Many of Batista 's soldiers , appalled at the human rights abuses that they were ordered to carry out , defected to Castro 's rebels , who also benefited from popular support in the areas they controlled . In the summer , the MR @-@ 26 @-@ 7 went on the offensive , pushing the army back , out of the mountain range and into the lowlands , with Castro using his columns in a pincer movement to surround the main army concentration in Santiago . By November , Castro 's forces controlled most of Oriente and Las Villas , and tightened their grip around the capitals of Santiago and Santa Clara . Through control of Las Villas , the rebels divided Cuba in two by closing major roads and rail lines , severely disadvantaging Batista 's forces .

The U.S. realized that Batista would lose the war , and fearing that Castro would displace U.S. interests with socialist reforms , decided to aid Batista 's removal by supporting a rightist military junta , believing that General Cantillo , then commanding most of the country 's armed forces , should lead it . After being approached with this proposal , Cantillo secretly met with Castro , agreeing that the two would call a ceasefire , following which Batista would be apprehended and tried as a war criminal . Double @-@ crossing Castro , Cantillo warned Batista of the revolutionary 's intentions . Wishing to avoid a tribunal , Batista resigned on 31 December 1958 , informing the armed forces that they were now under Cantillo 's control . With his family and closest advisers , Batista fled into exile to the Dominican Republic with over US \$ 300 @,@ 000 @,@ 000 . Cantillo then entered Havana 's Presidential Palace , proclaimed the Supreme Court judge Carlos Piedra as the new President , and began appointing new members of the government .

Still in Oriente , Castro was furious . Recognizing the establishment of a military junta , he ended the ceasefire and continued on the offensive . The MR @-@ 26 @-@ 7 put together a plan to oust

the Cantillo @-@ Piedra junta , freeing the high @-@ ranking military officer Colonel Ramón Barquín from the Isle of Pines prison ( where he had been held captive for plotting to overthrow Batista ) , and commanding him to fly to Havana to arrest Cantillo . Accompanying widespread celebrations as news of Batista 's downfall spread across Cuba on 1 January 1959 , Castro ordered the MR @-@ 26 @-@ 7 to take responsibility for policing the country , in order to prevent widespread looting and vandalism . Whilst Cienfuegos and Guevara led their columns into Havana on 2 January , Castro entered Santiago , accepting the surrender of the Moncada Barracks and giving a speech invoking the wars of independence . He spoke out against the Cantillo @-@ Piedra junta , called for justice against human rights abusers and proclaimed a better era for women 's rights . Heading toward Havana , he met José Antonio Echevarría 's mother , and greeted cheering crowds in every town , giving press conferences and interviews . Foreign journalists commented on the unprecedented level of public adulation , with Castro striking a heroic " Christ @-@ like figure " and wearing a medallion of the Virgin Mary .

= = Provisional government : 1959 = =

Castro had made his opinion clear that lawyer Manuel Urrutia Lleó should become president , leading a provisional civilian government following Batista 's fall . Politically moderate , Urrutia had defended MR @-@ 26 @-@ 7 revolutionaries in court , arguing that the Moncada Barracks attack was legal according to the Cuban constitution . Castro believed Urrutia would make a good leader , being both established yet sympathetic to the revolution . With the leaders of the junta under arrest , Urrutia was proclaimed provisional president , with Castro erroneously announcing he had been selected by " popular election " ; most of Urrutia 's cabinet were MR @-@ 26 @-@ 7 members . On January 8 , 1959 , Castro 's army entered Havana . Proclaiming himself Representative of the Rebel Armed Forces of the Presidency , Castro ? along with close aides and family members ? set up home and office in the penthouse of the Havana Hilton Hotel , there meeting with journalists , foreign visitors and government ministers .

Officially having no role in the provisional government , Castro exercised a great deal of influence , largely because of his popularity and control of the rebel army . Ensuring the government implemented policies to cut corruption and fight illiteracy , he did not initially force through any radical proposals . Attempting to rid Cuba 's government of Batistanos , the Congress elected under Batista was abolished , and all those elected in the rigged elections of 1954 and 1958 were banned from politics . The government now ruling by decree , Castro pushed the president to issue a temporary ban on all political parties , but repeatedly stated that they would get around to organizing multiparty elections ; this never occurred . He began meeting members of the Popular Socialist Party , believing they had the intellectual capacity to form a socialist government , but repeatedly denied being a communist himself .

In suppressing the revolution , Batista 's government had orchestrated mass human rights abuses , with most estimates for the death toll typically placing it at around 20 @,@ 000 . Popular uproar across Cuba demanded that those figures who had been complicit in the widespread torture and killing of civilians be brought to justice . Although remaining a moderating force and opposing the mass reprisal killings advocated by many , Castro helped set @-@ up trials of many Batistanos , resulting in hundreds of executions . Although widely popular domestically , critics ? in particular from the U.S. press ? argued that many were not fair trials , and condemned Cuba 's government as being more interested in vengeance than justice . In response , Castro proclaimed that " revolutionary justice is not based on legal precepts , but on moral conviction " , organizing the first Havana trial to take place before a mass audience of 17 @,@ 000 at the Sports Palace stadium . He also intervened in other trials to ensure that what he saw as " revolutionary justice " was carried out ; when a group of aviators accused of bombing a village were found not guilty at a trial in Santiago de Cuba , Castro ordered a retrial in which they were found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment .

Acclaimed across Latin America , Castro traveled to Venezuela to attend the first @-@ anniversary celebrations of Marcos Pérez Jiménez 's overthrow . Meeting President @-@ elect Rómulo

Betancourt , Castro proposed greater relations between the two nations , unsuccessfully requesting a loan of \$ 300 @,@ 000 @,@ 000 and a new deal for Venezuelan oil . Returning home , an argument between Castro and senior government figures broke out ; the government had banned the National Lottery and closed down the casinos and brothels , leaving thousands of waiters , croupiers and prostitutes unemployed , infuriating Castro . As a result , Prime Minister José Miró Cardona resigned , going into exile in the U.S. and joining the anti @-@ Castro movement .