

The July 26 Movement

After an amnesty was granted to prisoners in 1955, Castro and his followers, now known as the July 26 Movement, moved to Mexico in order to plan to overthrow the Batista government. Che Guevara joined them in 1956. Within eighteen months, the July 26 Movement launched another attack on the Batista regime. Che and Castro organised an expedition to Cuba by boat that would launch their campaign against Batista. Their plan ran into problems when a hurricane hit their tiny boat in the Gulf of Mexico, causing them to arrive two days late and in the wrong place. Rather than meeting supporters as they landed, they were bombed by government forces. Three days after landing in Cuba in December 1956, most of the rebels were either killed or captured by government troops. Only about twenty of the original eighty-two-member force survived and regrouped in the Sierra Maestra mountains, an isolated and unpopulated area. Over the next three years they stayed in the mountains and fought government troops, building a well organised, but still small guerrilla movement. By the middle of 1958, there were only 300 rebels in the Sierra Maestra.

The Batista regime became increasingly unpopular because:

- the Cuban economy depended on United States demand for its sugar – Che Guevara called Cuba ‘the sugar factory of the United States’
- Cuba had become a playground for the United States with gambling, prostitution and large-scale corruption flourishing and the American Mafia an increasing presence
- the sugar industry, although providing well-paid employment, could only offer seasonal work for four months per year
- Batista had come to power through a military coup and refused to allow democratic reforms, including implementing the democratic 1940 constitution
- poverty was widespread in the countryside and there were few welfare or social services.

Castro gained support by:

- creating an image through the media as the legitimate leader of anti-Batista forces
- promising land reforms and the implementation of the democratic constitution of 1940.

At no stage did Castro declare himself a communist before coming to power.

Guerrilla warfare

The July 26 Movement, also known as the **Fidelistas**, focused on guerrilla attacks on government troops. Guerrilla warfare relies on the support of the majority of the people. Enough people have to be alienated from the government in order to give support for guerrilla fighters. In other words, guerrilla warfare is

just as much about politics as it is about fighting. Guerrilla fighters also need to be prepared to fight for as long as the enemy remains.

The Chinese communist leader, Mao Zedong, described guerrilla warfare as having the following rules:

- When the enemy advances – we retreat.
- When the enemy stops – we harass.
- When the enemy avoids battle – we attack.
- When the enemy retreats – we follow.

Che Guevara outlined the principles behind the **July 26 Movement's** guerrilla campaign.

- Popular victory against an oppressive government was possible through an armed struggle.
- It was not necessary to wait until all the conditions for making revolution fell into place, the insurrection could create them.
- The insurrection should take place in rural areas.

Guevara criticised the traditional communist parties, which had abandoned the notion of revolutionary violence, stating that, ‘The duty of revolutionaries is to make revolution’. He stressed the importance of political will (‘voluntarismo’) and a vanguard of committed militants (‘foco’) to create the revolution.

The first priority of the July 26 Movement was to gain support of the local villagers in the Sierra Maestra. The active support of the local people was vital if the movement was to get supplies, shelter and protection. They also realised that they needed to maintain and increase their level of support in urban areas as well. In July 1957, the rebels published the *Sierra Manifesto*. This was an outline of the major policies of the July 26 Movement:

- freedom for all political prisoners
- freedom of the press
- the implementation of the democratic constitution of 1940.

The July 26 Movement divided into two parts, the Sierra and the Ilano – the underground, urban wing of the movement led by Frank Pais.

The Fidelistas come to power

Although the number of rebels was small, support for Castro grew in the cities. Students, particularly, supported Castro. Demonstrations, arson attacks and bombings in the cities by July 26 supporters met with vicious reprisals by the police and army. Batista's order to the police was reportedly ‘No wounded! No prisoners!’ The urban war against Batista led to more deaths than the entire guerrilla war in the Sierra Maestra. It is estimated that 20 000 – mostly young – Cubans were killed in urban areas.

The harshness of Batista's reaction to opposition only served to drive many previously moderate Cubans to side with the rebels and take part in the urban uprising. Support for Castro also began to grow outside Cuba, particularly within Mexico and the United States where supporters sent money, food and weapons. The underground support network (called the *Ilano* or 'the rope' by Guevara) established between Havana and the guerrillas was a vital lifeline. Members of the Communist and Orthodox Parties also sent aid and reinforcements to the Sierra Maestra.

The July 26 Movement was effective in using propaganda to gain support. This included setting up a pirate radio station and granting an interview to *The New York Times* in 1957. When the article was published, Castro gained an international profile and his stature as the leader of the anti-Batista forces grew. By 1957, some sections of the Cuban army began to support Castro. In 1958, the rebels called for a general strike against the government but it failed – fear of government reprisals was too strong. In May 1958, a meeting took place in the Sierra Maestra at which the leaders of the *Ilano* were criticised for the failure of the strike. This gave Batista time to move more troops into the Oriente province, driving the rebel army back into the Sierra Maestra. The Sierra group took control of the entire movement and Fidel Castro was created commander-in-chief for the first time.

The final months

The final blow for Batista came with the American government withdrawing its support for Batista by refusing to supply the Cuban armed forces. During the second half of 1958 events moved swiftly.

May Batista began an offensive designed to finally destroy Castro's forces. The Cuban army, although vastly outnumbering the rebels, was not adequately trained for the dense terrain of the mountains. Battalions were easily isolated and quickly defeated in surprise

attacks by the well-trained and highly mobile July 26 guerrillas. The capture of 450 of Batista's men gave the rebels over 600 new weapons.

July The battle of El Jigue proved a decisive victory for the July 26 Movement and marked the beginning of the rebel counteroffensive.

August Two separate groups of fighters (or columns) left the Sierra Maestra. The first group, led by Camilo Cienfuegos, moved towards Pinar del Rio in the western end of Cuba. The second group, led by Che Guevara, moved towards Las Villas province in central Cuba. After several humiliating defeats at the hands of the rebels, Batista's army was pushed back.

October Law Number Three of the Sierra Maestra was proclaimed by the July 26 Movement. It granted ownership to tenant farmers, squatters and sharecroppers working on areas of land less than 67 acres (27 hectares).

December Despite harsh conditions the two groups of fighters led by Cienfuegos and Guevara captured a number of towns. This resulted in the rebels effectively controlling half of Cuba. The Fidelistas continued to push towards Havana, taking towns as military support for Batista fell away. On 1 January, Batista fled Cuba and the Fidelistas triumphantly entered Havana.

Source 9.5

Truong Chinh, leader of the North Vietnamese National Assembly, speaking in 1974

To achieve good results in guerilla and mobile warfare we must mobilise the people to support our armed forces enthusiastically and to fight the enemy together with them. The people are the eyes and the ears of the army, they feed and keep the soldiers. They are an inexhaustible source of strength for the army.

Questions

Study Source 9.5

a What principle of guerrilla warfare is described?

- b What does Truong Chinh mean when he describes the people as 'the eyes and ears' of the army?
- c Using the information in this chapter, describe the specific steps taken by the July 26 Movement to win the support of the people of Cuba.
- x Using Source 9.5 and the information in this chapter, assess the reasons why guerrilla tactics were successfully used by the July 26 Movement in Cuba.

Source 9.6**Panic after an anti-government demonstration is attacked, 1958****Questions**

Study Source 9.6.

- Describe the content of this photograph.
- What does this photograph show you about the reasons why unrest in urban areas increased in 1958?
- What impact do you think the publication of such photographs would have had on attitudes towards Batista's government?

Source 9.7**Fidel Castro meets American Vice-President Richard Nixon in Washington, April 1959****Questions**

Study Source 9.7.

- Why do you think Castro travelled to the United States in early 1959?
 - What does this photograph reveal about the attitude of the American government towards Castro in 1959?
- ✕ What impact do you think the publication of such photographs would have had on Castro's standing in both the United States and Cuba?