The USA and events in Cuba, 1959–62

Cuba

In 1959 the Americans helped the Cubans to win independence from Spain. From that time, the USA played a major part in Cuban affairs. The Americans built a huge naval base at Guantanamo and American companies invested heavily in Cuban industry. American companies had large stakes in most Cuban companies, particularly in mining and agriculture. In 1959 the Americans helped the Cuban military officer Fulgencio Batista to establish himself in power. His government became increasingly corrupt and repressive, and many Cubans saw him as a symbol of the American control of Cuba.

In 1959 Batista was overthrown by Fidel Castro. The new leader proposed reforms to improve the economy of Cuba and in particular to end corruption in government and the exploitation of the Cuban peasants and sugar mill workers. Castro began appointing communists to his government and signed a trade agreement with the Soviet Union in which Cuban sugar would be swapped for machinery, oil and economic aid.

Not surprisingly, the USA was extremely concerned to see an island that was only about 150 kilometres away from its southern coast adopting what looked like communist policies and establishing such friendly relations with the Soviet Union. It decided to take action to bring Castro into line. In the summer of 1960, the USA stopped buying Cuban sugar and later in the year it banned all trade with Cuba. Then, in January 1961, it broke off diplomatic relations with Cuba.

The Americans hoped that these measures would starve Castro into submission. But they seemed to have pushed him closer to the Soviet Union. The Americans were aware that among the 'assist' that Castro was receiving from the Soviet Union were weapons. Consequently, in April 1961 the new American president, J. F. Kennedy, decided to support an invasion of the 'Cuban exiles'. These were a group of Cubans who had fled the country when Castro took over. They wanted a return to the days of Batista.

The Bay of Pigs

The exiles received military training, weapons and transport from the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and aimed to launch an attack on the coast of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. They intended to establish a base for guerrilla activities against Castro and were confident that the Cuban people would support them. But the Bay of Pigs invasion was a disaster. A force of 1,400 exiles landed in Cuba, but found themselves facing over 20,000 Cuban troops. There was no popular uprising to support the invasion, and those Cubans who were not killed were quickly taken captive. Even though Kennedy was able to claim that there was no direct American government involvement in the invasion, Castro and Khruchev knew that it had been planned by the CIA. Kennedy had been humiliating.

Consequences of the invasion

The Bay of Pigs invasion convinced Castro that he needed more support from the Soviet Union to defend himself against possible American attacks. In September 1961, Khruchev publicly announced that he would provide arms to Cuba. Within months Castro had an army with the latest military equipment, such as tanks and missiles, and large numbers of 'technicians' to help train his troops.

The USA was alarmed at what was happening in Cuba. In July 1961, Castro had nationalised all American industries and in December he had announced that he himself was a communist. Now he had a well-trained army with many of the most up-to-date modern weapons.

What the Americans were most concerned about was nuclear weapons. Khruchev did not give Castro nuclear weapons, but his friendship with the Cuban leader meant that there was every chance that he might try to station nuclear weapons on the island. In September 1962, President Kennedy warned the Soviet Union that he would not allow Cuba to become a base for Soviet nuclear missiles. Khruchev assured Kennedy that he had no intention of doing so. In fact, however, he had decided as early as May that if weapons could be stationed on Cuba without detection, that was what he would do.

QUESTIONS

1. Why were the Americans so concerned about what happened in Cuba?

2. Do you agree that the Bay of Pigs incident was a disaster for the USA?