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8th December 2016

British English edition



*Fidel Castro making a speech in 2010. Inset: pictured at the time of the 1959 Revolution*

## CASTRO

Fidel Castro was Cuba's leader for almost 50 years. On 4th December a small container, or casket, was placed inside a tomb, in Santiago de Cuba, the country's second largest city. It contained Castro's ashes.

Nine days before, Castro's younger brother, Raúl, made a live television broadcast. During it, he announced that his brother had died. Castro was 90 years old. News of his death was quickly reported all around the world. Today, the majority of people were born long after Castro seized power in 1959. Yet, most knew that he was one of the world's most famous revolutionary leaders.

Castro was born in 1926. As a young man, he studied law at a university in Cuba. Castro planned to stand in an election that was to be held in 1952. Just before the election, General Batista took control of Cuba. The following year, Castro tried

to start an uprising. It was unsuccessful. He was caught and sent to prison. After his release, Castro left Cuba and went to Mexico. There, he met several other Cubans. They too wanted to depose General Batista. Castro and his small group made plans to start a revolution. In 1956, he and his followers sailed back to their homeland. They set up a secret mountain base not far from Santiago de Cuba.

The USA's government supported General Batista. He was unpopular. The general allowed American crime gangs to operate bars, restaurants, hotels, and nightclubs in Havana, Cuba's capital city. Then, some people called Havana a 'playground' for wealthy Americans. Cubans began to join Castro's small revolutionary army. After two years of fighting, he and his supporters marched into Havana. General Batista fled and went to live in Portugal.

During the fighting, Castro gave several interviews to foreign newspaper reporters. In one recording, he said that he wanted Cuba to be a multi-party country. Elections, he explained, would be held. This is not what happened. After taking control, Castro declared that Cuba was a communist one party state. This meant that the government now owned all the land, houses, businesses, and factories. Political parties were banned. American businesses in Cuba were taken over. In 1960, the USA imposed a trade **embargo** on Cuba. Over 55 years later, it is still in place. Because of the embargo, American companies are not allowed to sell anything to Cuba, or buy goods made in the country.



Not all Cubans were happy about their country becoming a communist state. Thousands decided to leave. Many sailed on unseaworthy makeshift rafts to Florida. This state is the nearest part of the USA to Cuba. Now, Miami, Florida's biggest city, is home to many Cuban exiles.

One year after the embargo began, the American government secretly helped to organise an attack on Cuba. It became known as the 'Bay of Pigs' invasion. Castro's forces easily defeated the invading force. After this, the Cuban leader decided to work with the then communist Russian-led Soviet Union.

In 1962, Russian leaders arranged to send nuclear missiles to Cuba by ship. The Americans discovered the plan. At that time, John F Kennedy was the USA's president. He warned the Soviet Union's leader, Nikita Khrushchev, that America would attack the Russian ships if they got near Cuba. Many people expected a nuclear war to start. However, the Russians and Americans then made a secret deal. The USA agreed to withdraw its nuclear missiles from Turkey. The Soviet ships turned back. This famous incident is called the 'Cuban Missile Crisis'.

Russia continued to help Cuba. Yet, when the Soviet Union began to break up in 1991, Cuba lost its biggest supporter. Soon, Cuba had financial difficulties. Even today, the country has very poor **infrastructure**. Many buildings and roads need repair. Cuba has faulty electricity supplies and old telephone networks. The country's schools and hospitals are admired. Medics are well trained, yet there are not enough medicines. Buying aspirin is difficult. In recent years, Cuba has 'hired out' many of its doctors to developing countries. It does this to make money. Because of the American trade embargo, foreign companies have been unwilling to set up operations in Cuba.

In 2008, after leading Cuba for 49 years, Castro decided to step down. Then, he was 81 years old and in bad health. It was agreed that his younger brother, Raúl, would take his place. While Castro was leader, thousands of Cubans were imprisoned without trial. Many were **tortured**. Now, Cuba is home to 11 million people. It's thought that at least one million have left since Castro took over. Yet, in Cuba, even in death, Castro is still popular. Many Cubans blame the trade embargo for their countries

problems and not their revolutionary leader. Huge crowds took part in several ceremonies organised to commemorate Castro's death. While they mourned, Cubans in Miami celebrated.

A few years ago, Barack Obama, the American president, decided to try and improve his country's relationship with Cuba. He and Raúl Castro agreed that he could visit Cuba. The three-day trip took place nine months ago. It was an historic event. Mr Obama was the first American president to visit since 1928. He did not meet Fidel Castro. By this time, his health was very poor. It's said that, when asked, Castro refused to meet the American president.

Castro planned what would happen after he died. His body was quickly cremated. Then, a nine-day period of mourning began. Thousands walked past the casket containing Castro's ashes. His tomb is close to where his revolution started. Castro made these plans as he did not want his body **embalmed**, or preserved. This is what happened to several other well-known dictators, or communist leaders. They include: Vladimir Lenin, in Russia, Chairman Mao, in China, Ho Chi Minh, in Vietnam, and two former leaders of North Korea (father and son and both named Kim).

With Castro's death, many people expect Cuba to begin to change. This is unlikely to happen until the embargo ends. One day, the country may become a multi-party state and elect its own leaders. Castro divides opinions. Some claim that he was a hero who successfully confronted the might of the USA. Others say he was a **tyrant**. However, all agree that there is unlikely to be another revolutionary leader of Castro's fame and reputation. ■