# Bay of Pigs Invasion

**THE BAY OF PIGS** was a failed attack launched by the CIA during the Kennedy administration to push Cuban leader Fidel Castro (1926-2016) from power. On January 1, 1959, a young Cuban nationalist named Fidel Castro drove his guerilla army into Havana and overthrew General Fulgencio Batista (1901-1973), the nation's American-backed president. For the next two years, officials at the U.S. State Department and the CIA attempted to remove Castro. Finally, on April 17, 1961, the CIA launched what its leaders believed would be the definitive strike: a full-scale invasion of Cuba by 1,400 American-trained Cubans who had fled their homes when Castro took over. However, the invasion did not go well: The invaders were badly outnumbered by Castro's troops, and they surrendered after less than 24 hours of fighting.

## Bay of Pigs: President Kennedy and the Cold War

Many Cubans welcomed Fidel Castro's 1959 overthrow of the dictatorial President Fulgencio Batista, yet the new order on the island just about 100 miles from the United States made American officials nervous. Batista had been a corrupt and repressive dictator, but he was considered to be pro-American and was an ally to U.S. companies. At that time, American corporations and wealthy individuals owned almost half of Cuba's sugar plantations and the majority of its cattle ranches, mines and utilities. Batista did little to restrict their operations. He was also reliably anti-communist. Castro, by contrast, disapproved of the approach that Americans took to their business and interests in Cuba. It was time, he believed, for Cubans to assume more control of their nation. "Cuba Sí, Yanquis No" became one of his most popular slogans.

Almost as soon as he came to power, Castro took steps to reduce American influence on the island. He nationalized American-dominated industries such as sugar and mining, introduced land reform schemes and called on other Latin American governments to act with more autonomy. In response, early in 1960 President Eisenhower authorized the CIA to recruit 1,400 Cuban exiles living in Miami and begin training them to overthrow Castro.

In May 1960, Castro established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, and the United States responded by prohibiting the importation of Cuban sugar. To prevent the Cuban economy from collapsing–sugar exports to the United States comprised 80 percent of the country's total–the USSR agreed to buy the sugar.

In January 1961, the U.S. government severed diplomatic relations with Cuba and stepped up its preparations for an invasion. Some State Department and other advisors to the new American president, John F. Kennedy, maintained that Castro posed no real threat to America, but the new president believed that masterminding the Cuban leader's removal would show Russia, China and skeptical Americans that he was serious about winning the Cold War.

## Bay of Pigs: The Plan

Kennedy had inherited Eisenhower's CIA campaign to train and equip a guerilla army of Cuban exiles, but he had some doubts about the wisdom of the plan. The last thing he wanted, he said, was "direct, overt" intervention by the American military in Cuba: The Soviets would likely see this as an act of war and might retaliate. However, CIA officers told him they could keep U.S. involvement in the invasion a secret and, if all went according to plan, the campaign would spark an anti-Castro uprising on the island.

## Why Was The Bay of Pigs Invasion A Failure?

The first part of the plan was to destroy Castro's tiny air force, making it impossible for his military to resist the invaders. On April 15, 1961, a group of Cuban exiles took off from Nicaragua in a squadron of American B-26 bombers, painted to look like stolen Cuban planes, and conducted a strike against Cuban airfields. However, it turned out that Castro and his advisers knew about the raid and had moved his planes out of harm's way. Frustrated, Kennedy began to suspect that the plan the CIA had promised would be "both clandestine and successful" might in fact be "too large to be clandestine and too small to be successful."

But it was too late to apply the brakes. On April 17, the Cuban exile brigade began its invasion at an isolated spot on the island's southern shore known as the Bay of Pigs. Almost immediately, the invasion was a disaster. The CIA had wanted to keep it a secret for as long as possible, but a radio station on the beach (which the agency's reconnaissance team had failed to spot) broadcast every detail of the operation to listeners across Cuba. Unexpected coral reefs sank some of the exiles' ships as they pulled into shore. Backup paratroopers landed in the wrong place. Before long, Castro's troops had pinned the invaders on the beach, and the exiles surrendered after less than a day of fighting; 114 were killed and over 1,100 were taken prisoner.

## Bay of Pigs: The Aftermath

According to many historians, the CIA and the Cuban exile brigade believed that President Kennedy would eventually allow the American military to intervene in Cuba on their behalf. However, the president was resolute: As much as he did not want to "abandon Cuba to the communists," he said, he would not start a fight that might end in World War III. His efforts to overthrow Castro never flagged–in November 1961, he approved Operation Mongoose, an espionage and sabotage campaign–but never went so far as to provoke an outright war. In 1962, the Cuban missile crisis inflamed American-Cuban-Soviet tensions even further.