**Fidel Castro ruled through various positions 1 Jan 1959-24 Feb 2008.**

**Born 13 Aug 1926, Died 25 Nov 2016**

Review of the rule of Fidel Castro, using obituaries from 2016.

**Consolidation of power**

**Failure of Bay of Pigs**

US paid $53m in food and medicine for the release of 1100 prisoners captured

**Power of Castro as an authoritarian leader**

“There are few individuals in the twentieth century who had a more profound impact on a single country that Fidel Castro had in Cuba. He reshaped Cuba in his image, for both bad and good.” Robert Pastor, former national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter in the 1970s, 2014

“He was a historic figure way out of proportion to the national base in which he operated.” Louis A Perez, highly regarded Cuban scholar.

On his death Granma, the official communist newspaper of Cuba reported Maritsa Leyva who works at a factory “Honestly, from the very bottom of my heart I’m telling you, so much pain can’t fit in my chest. To say Fidel, is to say Cuba, brother, the world.”

Castro was the main moral authority in Cuba, only in 2015 meeting Pope Francis and in 2016 Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill. (Reuters)

Castro’s control of details: NY Times noted “Countless details fell to him, from selecting the color of uniforms that Cuban soldiers wore in Angola to overseeing a program to produce a superbreed of milk cows. He personally set the goals for sugar harvests. He personally sent countless men to prison.”

**Oratory skills** Justin Trudeau of Canada “a legendary revolutionary and orator”. Gott: ”Although too long-winded for European tastes, the best of his full-scale speeches were models of wit and clarity, well-prepared and delivered with the panache of a trained orator.”

**Nationalism** - Castro’s motto was “Homeland or death, we will win” “Patria o muerte, venceremos”. Ann Louise Bardach, author of 2009 book “Without Fidel: a Death Foretold”: “The possible aspects of his legacy will likely be nationalism, a sense of Cuban identity – of Cubanidad. But at a price far too steep that will leave a debt for generations to come.”

Richard Gott writing in The Guardian “Cuba under Fidel was a country where indigenous nationalism was at least as significant as imported socialism, and where the legend of Jose Marti, the patriot poet and organiser of the 19the century struggle against Spain, was always more influential than the philosophy of Karl Marx.”

Gott – Cuba’s independence impressive in Latin American context “The Dominican Republic of Juan Bosch was unable to escape US pressure in 1965, nor could Salvador Allende’s Chile in 1973. The baleful experience of Nicaragua, 30 years after the Cuban revolution, showed that the passage of time had not made the task of securing sovereignty any easier for a small Latin American state.” “After 10 years in power, safely baking in Soviet approval, Castro’s policy towards Latin America became more circumspect.” He urged caution towards new regimes in Chile and Nicaragua. Guevara had once called for “one, two, three, many Vietnams” but who was going to fund and sustain them?

**Education**

“You could say one positive legacy is that you have a lot of educated Cubans. But if you don’t create the economic conditions where people can work and make contributions, what you have is a bunch of educated waiters and waitresses.” Adriana Bosch, Cuban-born film-maker living in the USA. Produced a documentary on Castro for PBS.

**Social equality**

“What Fidel has achieved in the social order of this country has not been achieved any poor nation or even by many rich countries, despite being submitted to many economic pressures.” Jose Ramon Fernandez, former Cuban Vice-President.

Head of Russian Communist party Gennady Zyuganov “one of the political titans has died, a statesman, a person who laid the foundations of ethical politics, politics that primarily concerned themselves with the fate of an ordinary man, with a decent life for working people and with a happy world.”

Racial equality – Gott: “He was the first white Cuban leader to recognise the country’s large black, former slave population and, after initial hesitation, to make efforts to bring them into the mainstream of national life.” “His championing of them came at the same time as the civil rights movement was growing in the US and this may have contributed to the nervousness of the US government over his regime. On an early visit to the UN in New York, Castro stayed at the Hotel Theresa in Harlem, a symbolic but significant gesture.”

**Economic difficulties** Comparison made between Cuba GDP per capita, Cuba and Puerto Rico, started at similar point in 1950s.

Forbes magazine GDP comparisons: 1999 Cuba $2307, Ecuador $3809, Panama $5618, Puerto Rico $13 738

Gott: “Guevara had hoped in the early days that the island might escape from the tyranny of sugar production and diversify its economy, but Castro perceived this to be an empty dream. Sugar was the only significant product Cuba could exchange for Soviet oil.”

**Women** The National Secretary of the Federation of Cuban Women, Teresa Marelle ”with the conquest of a true emancipation, for the first time, Cuban women were protagonists of our own destiny.”

**Foreign policy**

***Friendship with Soviet Union***. Critics such as Donald Trump noted ”he turned his island over to his Soviet patrons” However, when relationship over in 1991, imports and exports dropped by approx. 80 %.

Vladimir Putin noted “The free and independent Cuba that he and his associates built has become an influential member of the international community.”

Alexander Genis Russian-American cultural critic says “For Soviet people in the early 1960s, Castro was never a live person or a real politician. He was a metaphor for the proper socialist revolution.”

The Moscow Times: “The Cuban Revolution in 1959 was undoubtedly a transformative event for Cuba. But it was also transformative for the Soviet Union. It came amid Soviet leader Nikita Khrushschev’s Thaw, a time of increased openness when Soviet society attempted to return to the romanticism of the period after the 1917 revolution and civil war….The Cuban Revolution, much like Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin’s 1961 space flight – represented a breakthrough for socialism.

Nikolai Kalashnikov, deputy director of the Russian Academy of Science’s Institute of Latin America, “there was an illusion that the idea of socialism would capture the whole world. Cuba was the first country in Latin America that could resist the US capital and defeat dictator Fulgencio Batista.” The Cuban revolutionaries were everything that the Soviet leadership in the early 1960s was not: young, handsome, and bearded, with guns and guitars. They lived in a tropical country where the sun always shined, unlike Russia. They embodied the hopes of the Soviet population. Cuba, it appeared was the bright future the soviet leadership promised…. Russians experienced Soviet-Cuban “friendship of nations” on a more personal level e.g. Soviet-Cuban friendship society. One of the most popular songs in 1960s USSR was “Cuba, my Love” about Fidel’s visit to the Siberan city of Bratsk.

***Cuban Missile Crisis*** – Gott notes “Castro’s performance during the crisis was less than heroic. The fate of his revolution was decided elsewhere. The compromise on the missiles reached between Washington and Moscow enabled his regime to survive, but the ignominious manner of its happening was to fuel Castro’s fierce sense of independence. His only success in the affair was his absolute refusal to permit US inspection of evacuated missile sites.”

***Relationship with the US***. Gott writes “Whether Castro was pushed into the Soviet camp by US mishandling in the early years, or whether that was where he planned to be all along, is a matter of historical debate. There is evidence on both sides, and Castro allowed different interpretations to flourish. Guevara and Raul Castro were certainly persuaded of the need to make an alliance with the Cuban communists, the only party that had troubled to enrol the country’s black people, and they had great hopes of economic (and later military) support from the Soviet Union. Yet for the first 10 ears of Castro’s regime – until 1968 when he supported the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Brezhnev – he fought hard to maintain Cuba’s separate identity as a developing country struggling to take its own particular road to socialism. Even when he had taken the Soviet shilling, he tried ceaselessly to build bridges elsewhere – in Latin America (to Peru, Panama and Chile); in Africa (to Algeria, Angola and Ethiopia) and in Asia (to Vietnam – Vietnam Heroico as the Cubans liked to call it – and North Korea).

***Angola*** – Richard Dowden of the UK’s Royal Africa Society notes “there is one place where Castro definitely made a difference: Angola”. In a civil war in Angola, the Soviet Union, East Germany and Cuba all supported People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola, (MPLA). The Russians sent 1000 advisers but Castro sent 3000 combat troops as well as advisers. The first attacks were in 1983, the full-scale battle took place in 1986 at Cuito Caunavale. It was the biggest battle in Africa since El Alamein in 1942. Of racial significance – Cuba’s multi-racial force was facing the largely white troops of South Africa. Mandela noted of the 1988 victory “it destroyed the myth of the invincibility of the white oppressor and inspired the fighting masses of South Africa.” Historians note that Castro sent troops as his own choice, not at Moscow’s bidding.

***Other African nations*** – in 1960s and 1970s, Cuban troops or African fighters trained by Cubans also prevailed against the Portugese in their former colonies of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. The fought against Mobutu Sese Seko who led the Congo after killing the country’s first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba who was perceived in the west as leaning towards the Soviets. In 1977 he sent 17 000 troops to help Ethiopia’s communist leader. Castro later claimed almost 400 000 Cuban troops served in Arica, “side by side with their African brothers for national independence or against foreign aggression.”

***Friendship with South Africa***. Mandela in 1991 said that Castro was a “source of inspiration to all freedom-loving people.”

***Healthcare*** – 50 000 Cuban doctors work around the world, including in 32 African countries.

***1990s*** Gott: “The policies of glasnost and perestroika espoused by Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s brought a dramatic unravelling of the Cuban revolution. Castro was always an opportunist communist rather than a true believer….Castro knew that the US had made clear to the Russians, in 1990, that future economic assistance to the Soviet Union would depend on an end to Soviet aid to Cuba….Boris Yeltsin, the new Russian leader was no friend. He had even visited Jorge Mas Cnosa, the principle organiser of the Cuban exiles in Miami, and he soon removed Russian soldiers from the island and abandoned most of the preferential economic agreements that had kept the Cuban economy afloat for so long. Hopes in the US that Cuba would go the way of the countries of eastern Europe were encouraged by legislation that sought to tighten the economic embargo…..Almost miraculously, Castro survived this period, throwing open the country to foreign tourists and permitting a dual economy in which the US dollar reigned supreme……Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, first elected in December 1998, was soon to identify himself as Castro’s favourite son. Enjoying huge oil royalties, Chavez was able to finance mutual aid that brought thousands of Cuban doctors to work in the shanty towns of Venezuela, and hundreds of thousands of gallons of oil to the thirsty refineries of Cuba. The impact on the economy was immediate. ”

**Cuban exiles**

US organised airlift between 1965-1973, 260 000 left

Mariel boatlft another 125 000 left including criminals who then brought a violent crime wave to Florida.

Perhaps 20 % of the Cuban population now lives outside of Cuba.