**Is it fair to say that the Attack on the Moncada Barracks**

**was a failure for The 26th of July Movement?**

History SL Internal Investigation

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**Identification and Evaluation of Sources**

This investigation will focus on the failures and successes of the attack on the Moncada barracks led by Fidel Castro in 1953, this is an interesting event to discuss since according to evidence, the attack succeeded by failing in a way. Thus, my research question is: Is it fair to say that the Attack on the Moncada barracks in 1953 was a failure for The 26th of July Movement?

The first source I will evaluate is *My Life*, the biography of the leader of the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro.[[1]](#footnote-1) The source provided me with extensive details of the attack from the perspective of the leader of the Movement which lead the attack on the Moncada Barracks. It is made up of interviews made by Ignacio Ramonet with Fidel Castro, in which he makes recollections of his life, especially of the Cuban revolution.

A value of the source lies in its origin, since it was written by the man who lead the rebels on the attack which means no one would know the attack better than him. A value of the purpose of the text is that it is meant to inform people who may not be familiar with the attack. A value of the content is the nature of the very explicit questions that Ramonet asks Castro, leading to detailed answers on the events.

A limitation of the first source’s origin is that it was written in 2007, which is a long time after the events, perhaps Fidel Castro did not remember the events in all their detail. A limitation of the source’s purpose is that Fidel may have wanted to seem to be a good, quick thinking leader in his biography, leading to playing down of negative events and amplification of positive ones. A limitation of the content is that while the Moncada attack was unquestionably a significant event, the biography focuses only one chapter on the attack itself and another chapter partially on the attack’s consequences, this meant there was no room for extensive analytical possibility.

The second source I will evaluate is a secondary source, “*The Moncada Attack: Birth of The Cuban Revolution*”, which is a book by a historian that fled Castro’s Cuba: Antonio Rafael De la Cova.[[2]](#footnote-2) The source provides a more sceptical view of the attack on the Barracks.

A value of the origin of the source is that the author is from Cuba and had lived under Fidel Castro’s dictatorship, he had first-hand experience under Castro’s rule. A value of the purpose is that the source wants to challenge the consensus of Fidel Castro’s claims,[[3]](#footnote-3) which means the author had to investigate and provide very valid arguments to support his unique opinions. A value of its content is that, due to it being a secondary source, it has a collection of perspectives and details rather than only one side of the events.

A limitation of the second source is that the author was not directly present as Fidel Castro attacked the barracks. A limitation of the purpose is that looking at the publishing time, this book may have been a direct response to Fidel Castro’s biography, which was also published in 2007. This means that the two sources may have to be used in conjunction in order to get the full picture that the arguments in the books.

**Investigation**

To answer the question of whether the attack was a failure for the anti-Batista movement, it is important to analyse why the attack took place, what the attack was meant to achieve, and compare it with the consequences of, and responses to the attack to determine the aspects of success that were achieved through of the attack. Ultimately, the attack on the Moncada Barracks was a military failure, due to inefficient planning and execution, however, the attack was a success in terms of gathering mass support for the 26th of July Movement, which would ultimately lead to the Movement’s victory in 1959.

There were two main aims for the attack on the Moncada Barracks for Fidel’s movement. Firstly, the attack was meant to gain strategical military resources, the rebels had to secure the weapons inside the Barrack, since the army in the barracks had the necessary armoury upgrade for the rebels to continue their cause.[[4]](#footnote-4) Secondly, it was to initiate a mass uprising against Batista,[[5]](#footnote-5) in addition, Fidel’s rebels would aim to capture radio stations to broadcast propaganda for the anti-Batista movement.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The attack on the Moncada barracks was a military failure. This was due to a series of reasons which lead to unlikely odds of victory for the Movement. Most of the 1200 recruited combatants[[7]](#footnote-7) were very young, most of them being between twenty to twenty-four years of age.[[8]](#footnote-8) A few combatants were boys as young as nineteen and seventeen,[[9]](#footnote-9) and neither the combatants or the planners had extensive combat experience.[[10]](#footnote-10) The rebels were outnumbered around fifteen to one, 160 young inexperienced rebels were to fight in the attack against around 1500 trained soldiers in the barracks.[[11]](#footnote-11) According to a rebel, Lester Rodriguez, there originally were supposed to be 250 rebels in the attack, however, only 160 were called in due to insufficient weapons in the rebel’s armoury.[[12]](#footnote-12) Furthermore, the rebel’s armoury consisted mostly of a mitch match of 0.22-calibre rifles and 0.12-gauge shotguns, which were no match for the army’s well equipped armoury in head-to-head combat.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The rebel army was put through amateur training, consisting of general training in the campus of the University of Havana[[14]](#footnote-14) and shooting practice in farms.[[15]](#footnote-15) The training was not well organized, since during the attack on the barracks itself, some combatants who had missed previous shooting practices would end up fighting with guns without ever having handled a gun before.[[16]](#footnote-16) Despite all these issues in the planning, Fidel Castro was still confident, even after the attack, that the rebels could have conquered the Moncada barracks with the existing rebel army[[17]](#footnote-17) if it weren’t for unexpected mistakes made during the attack.[[18]](#footnote-18) However, Fidel may have staged his confidence in the attack to keep up his appearance as the undoubted leader of the revolution.

Mistakes were made partially due to Fidel Castro’s approach to the attack. Fidel Castro was not a professional military strategist capable of leading an army on such a daring operation, he only had limited military understanding from previous military experiences in his life.[[19]](#footnote-19) Thus, the development of the plan for the attack on the Moncada Barracks was strongly influenced by important historic events in the Cuban history, such as Carlos Manuel de Cespedes’ uprising for the independence from Spain in the end of the previous century,[[20]](#footnote-20) which had begun in Moncada making the barracks a symbolic site to initiate a revolution,[[21]](#footnote-21) rather than developing the attack based on modern war tactics. Fidel’s team overestimated their abilities to the extent that no retreat plan was developed in case the attack failed.[[22]](#footnote-22) This emphasizes Fidel’s inexperience in the field.

Fidel Castro kept the objective of the attack a secret from most of the combatants that were meant to attack the barracks, until the day before the attack.[[23]](#footnote-23) This was further evidence of him overestimating the combatants’ abilities, thus proving his inexperience. According to the rebels, he did so to maintain the integrity of the mission.[[24]](#footnote-24) This may have been justified, since despite such measures of secrecy, rumours of the attack had reached Batista’s army officials.[[25]](#footnote-25) However, Fidel Castro may have predicted that some of the already outnumbered rebels may not have participated if they knew what the true objective was, thus, he decided to keep the objective a secret in order to maintain more combatants. As his team explained the plan of attack, many of the combatants argued the plan could not be achieved.[[26]](#footnote-26) The secrecy of the plan meant that some of the already inexperienced combatant’s did not have time to mentally prepare for such an attack, resulting in some refusing to participate.[[27]](#footnote-27) The combination of the excessive secrecy and the planning lead to some mistakes during the attack, such as a vehicle loaded with weapons making wrong turn, and getting lost, therefore it could not support the rebels during the fight.[[28]](#footnote-28) These issues lead to the attack’s military failure.

Despite the military failure of the attack, the consequences proved to be a turning point for the revolutionary movement. 95% of the rebel deaths occurred after the attack on the Moncada barracks in the form of systematic executions by the Batista regime,[[29]](#footnote-29) however, Batista’s terror tactics backfired and lead to public outrage.[[30]](#footnote-30) Fidel knew that all he needed to begin the revolution was to challenge Batista, and the people would follow.[[31]](#footnote-31) The attack paved way for the Revolt at Santiago on the 30th of November of the same year.[[32]](#footnote-32)

The attack on the Moncada Barracks lead to Fidel Castro’s defence in court. Fidel Castro openly admitted to his role in the attack and used the trial as a means of spreading his message to the whole nation in the form of the famous speech, “History Will Absolve Me.”[[33]](#footnote-33) While Fidel Castro lacked in military skill, he proved to be witty in political manoeuvres.

As a result of the Moncada attack and Fidel Castro’s defence in court, mass support was gained for Fidel Castro’s Movement, which would be renamed to “The 26th of July Movement” in honour of the attack.[[34]](#footnote-34) While Fidel Castro was in jail, his supporters kept the flame of revolution alive through public demonstrations, until the survivors of the attack on the Moncada Barracks were let out of prison.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Through this investigation we can conclude that the attack on the Moncada Barracks itself was undoubtedly a failure in terms of achieving its military goals. However, the attack was an absolute success in terms of gathering mass support from the population and fuelling the revolution, which ultimately resulted in the defeat of Batista.

**Reflection**

During my History IA process, I had several obstacles to overcome. I knew from the start that I wanted to investigate Fidel Castro’s rise to power, since I have always found the Cuban Revolution to be a fascinating part of history. However, the main issue was a lack of sources, with most sources being overshadowed by Fidel Castro’s own biography, this meant that I would only get one overall perspective. However, I found an excellent source by historian Antonio Rafael De la Cova, which was the key to getting a perspective that challenged Fidel’s claims and building the full picture. This taught me how important it is for historians to look at a magnitude of different perspectives in order to avoid bias. Furthermore, I discovered that in some cases, finding enough good sources is a challenging endeavour. For a topic such as mine, a guerrilla warfare, very few official documents were written down, and what was written down is mostly narrative recollection of events by the same people, the rebels. As per the famous saying: ‘History is written by victors’. Not even Fidel’s court transcript could be deemed very useful for my research since Fidel’s famous court appearance was rigged from the start, thus, the court transcript turned out to be a speech that relied on strong language and emotion rather than concrete facts that could be useful for my investigation. These complications demonstrated to me that possibly the most important skill for historians is critical thinking, since they can never take any shared knowledge by the letter, because shared knowledge from history often inaccurate, and they need to use reason as well as their intuition to know where to look and how to piece together the often contrasting perspectives into a together that is cohesive.

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