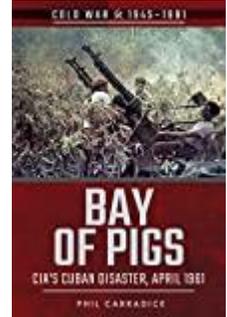


Phil Carradice. *Bay of Pigs: CIA's Cuban Disaster, April 1961 (Cold War 1945–1991)*. Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military, 2018. 128 pp. Ill. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-5267-2829-6.



Reviewed by David Hadley (Ashland)

Published on H-War (July, 2021)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Phil Carradice's *Bay of Pigs* serves as a concise narrative of the CIA-sponsored Cuban exile brigade's ill-fated invasion of Cuba in April 1961. Carradice, a Welsh broadcaster, author, and poet, provides a narrowly focused examination of the immediate decisions that prompted the United States to embrace covert action against the Fidel Castro regime and the tactical details of the invasion itself.

Written as part of a larger Cold War series by military history publisher Pen and Sword, *Bay of Pigs* is a well-produced volume, with several maps and photographs that provide additional color and clarification of the material. It is most useful as an introduction to the failed covert intervention. The work serves as a companion to Carradice's previous Pen and Sword volume, *The Cuban Missile Crisis* (2017), an event which he sees as the inevitable outcome of the Bay of Pigs. As such, the at-times farcical invasion is, in Carradice's telling, a tragicomic near-precipitator of total catastrophe.

Carradice roots the failure of the invasion in the effort to maintain plausible deniability for the US role. He argues: "The CIA-backed invasion could have succeeded—if Kennedy had not been as pre-occupied with plausible deniability. New Frontier, Camelot, whatever cliché they draped across his willing shoulders, it was something for which I have never been able to forgive him. So the Bay of Pigs adventure could have succeeded—couldn't it? Whether or not it should have is another matter" (p. 8).

He begins with a limited background chapter on the revolution in Cuba and CIA intervention in Latin America.[1] While brief, he is able to capture the oft-confused push and pull between Castro and the United States, concluding it was "fear of what Fidel and his country could become, rather than what they were [in 1960]" that caused US officials to develop "an almost pathological hatred of Cuba's leader" and the efforts to oust him (p. 24).

Earlier plans were more realistic than what ultimately was attempted. Cuban exiles were re-

cruited by the CIA into Brigade 2506, so named for the serial number of the first of them to die in a training accident, and trained in guerrilla warfare. They were to be inserted in Cuba and to establish themselves in the Escambray mountains, mirroring Castro's own tactics prior to his successful revolution. These guerrillas could then, in theory, pressure the regime and spark a larger uprising over time.

Existent anti-Castro insurgent movements already in Cuba, however, were finding only limited success, suggesting the exile brigade would not be an effective option. Such concerns led US planners, most notably the CIA's Richard Bissell, to envisage a more ambitious plot to land the brigade at Trinidad. From there, they would establish a fixed position, hopefully inspiring the larger Cuban population to rise up. If they did not, the Escambrays were nearby and the exiles could retreat there.

In response to concerns from President John F. Kennedy that Trinidad was too populous, the landing site was changed to the Bahia de Cochinos. The Bay of Pigs was isolated, but that was in part due to geography; it was surrounded by swamps, and the path to the Escambrays was narrow and easily cut off. As one of the CIA analysts commented after the fact, "reference to even the most simplistic topographic map" should have ended speculation that an escape to the Escambrays was possible (p. 56).

Aside from the poorly considered landing zone, Carradice argues, the shift to an open invasion made "the whole idea of plausible deniability ... no longer realistic" (p. 48). He identifies the decision to curtail air strikes designed to neutralize Castro's air power prior to the landing as the critical factor that was primarily responsible for the failure of the invasion and most clearly motivated by the desire for plausible deniability.

Castro's air force was undoubtedly able to inflict significant damage to the landing effort; however, the question of the cancellation of the air

strikes remains one of the perennial issues of debate around the Bay of Pigs. Those who focus on air power as the critical factor naturally identify Kennedy as the main reason for the failure of the operation. Critics of this argument often note that, given the forces arrayed against the exiles, the lack of an uprising from the population, and the loyalty of the Cuban military to Castro, it is difficult to see how air strikes would by themselves have changed the outcome.

While Carradice often aligns himself with the former argument, his approach to the controversy is not consistent. He acknowledges that the failure of a general uprising and the poorly chosen landing spot were contributing factors, but he writes that it was "above all, the lack of adequate air cover combined with an effective Castro-run air force closed the door on whatever chances the exiles might have had" (p. 121). However, he also argues that "the real tragedy of the Bay of Pigs was that no matter what happened to on the invasion beaches, it was an operation doomed to fail" (p. 15).

The dissonance in Carradice's argument stems from his narrow focus on the tactical level, where air power was decisive, at the cost of the broader strategic context that suggests Castro was unlikely to be toppled by anything short of an open and conventional invasion by the US military. While Carradice also suggests that the plan as originally conceived, of inserting guerrillas, could have succeeded, there is little either in this volume or in the broader history of anti-Castro efforts of the period to support that argument. While more realistic, and more plausibly deniable, than the ultimate invasion plan, similar efforts had already produced little in the way of results.

Broader context would have also clarified some aspects of the operation relevant beyond the tactical decisions made in the invasion. For example, while Carradice notes that the invasion preparations were not well concealed and were covered in newspapers, a noteworthy story in the

New York Times reported on the imminence of the invasion in early April, likely further influencing Kennedy's thinking with regard to plausible deniability. The earlier 1954 CIA intervention in Guatemala, briefly mentioned here, also played a significant role in shaping the agency's approach to Cuba.

Bay of Pigs is most appropriate for a popular audience seeking a readable, accessible introduction to the topic. Professional historians, though, will find greater utility in more substantial work.

Note

[1]. Carradice makes a minor error in referring to the CIA as designed to "counter the activities of Russia's KGB," missing the larger mission and purpose of the agency beyond counterintelligence (p. 21).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: David Hadley. Review of Carradice, Phil. *Bay of Pigs: CIA's Cuban Disaster, April 1961 (Cold War 1945–1991)*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. July, 2021.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=56705>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.