

The 64th Anniversary of the Cuban Revolution: An Unprecedented Chapter in World History

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Global Research, January 02, 2023

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [History](#)

First published on January 1, 2019, minor edits

Today, Cubans are commemorating the 64th anniversary of their independence. On this day in 1959, the Cuban Revolution was successfully conducted by Fidel Castro's 26th of July Movement[i] and became an enduring symbol of resistance to neo-colonialism, capitalism, and hegemony. As a result, Cuba's corrupt and brutal dictator, Fulgencio Batista (1901-1973), who had the full backing of the US government, left the island and escaped to the Dominican Republic, along with some of his loyal supporters. The victory of the Cuban Revolution meant that January 1, 1959 marked the first time in 467 years that Cubans were not subject to serfdom and exploitation by a foreign power.

Spain was the first country to exercise dominion over Cuba, beginning in 1510. However, Spain's defeat at the hands of the Americans in the Spanish-American War of 1898 did not bring about the emancipation that Cubans were expecting, as the island was subsequently transformed into a US neo-colony.

In the period between the conclusion of the Spanish-American War in 1898 and the victory of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, the US exercised imperial power over Cuba, exploiting its natural and human resources, and dictating its domestic and foreign policies. When Batista, who was supported by Washington since 1933, came to power via coup d'état on March 10, 1952, he and his corrupt associates immediately collaborated with Washington and the American mafia to facilitate the continued exploitation Cuba's resources.

In particular, he permitted the American mafia to take control of all the casinos on the island in exchange for millions of dollars being deposited into his Swiss bank account (Díaz-Briquets and Pérez-López 2006, 77). Meanwhile, throughout the entire period when Americans exercised imperial power over Cuba, Washington used its authority to advance the interests of American corporations, which ended up controlling all of the economic sectors on the island, in addition to gaining ownership of the best agriculture land, mines and natural resources. In fact, '[b]y the 1950s, the U.S. controlled 80 percent of Cuban utilities, 90 percent of Cuban mines, close to 100 percent of the country's oil refineries, 90 percent of its cattle ranches, and 40 percent of the sugar industry'[ii]. The domination of Cuba at the hands of the Americans was best explained by Fidel Castro (October 10, 1968 in Manzanillo) when he stated:

the Yankees took over our economy. In 1898, US holdings in Cuba amounted to 50 million pesos; in 1906 they amounted to some 160 million; and in 1927, to 1.45 billion...I don't believe there is another country in which economic penetration has taken place so incredibly quickly, allowing the imperialists to

take over our best lands, all our mines, our natural sources. They controlled the public services, the greater part of the sugar industry, the most efficient industries, the electricity industry, the telephone service, the railroads, the most important businesses and the banks.

The island was essentially a playground for Americans, featuring gambling, drug trafficking, the mafia, gangsters, and prostitution, with Batista serving as their loyal puppet. Although Batista's dictatorial and corrupt regime oppressed the Cuban population, violated human rights and committed countless crimes against democratic principles (equality and freedom), it was never criticized nor condemned by Washington. Batista's dictatorial rule was accompanied by extreme rural poverty, misery, illiteracy, an increase in the number of sex workers, exploitation, and high unemployment rates. Almost half of Cuba's adults and 37.5% of the total population were illiterate, and as much as 70% of all children did not have access to a teacher during the period of US dominance. Furthermore, most Cubans could not obtain housing or access decent healthcare services, and electricity and water infrastructure were very limited. These conditions, exacerbated by American domination in all segments of the economy, led to most Cubans experiencing exploitation, racism, police brutality, starvation and humiliation. Women were particularly vulnerable to exploitation, as many girls from urban areas elected to serve as prostitutes for American tourists and businessmen. It did not take very long for the American mafia operating on the island to realize that they could profit from this situation, which eventually led to them operating almost 300 brothels in Havana to supplement the money they earned from selling illegal drugs.

These appalling conditions inspired Fidel Castro and approximately 165 of his compatriots to make an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the Batista dictatorship on July 26, 1953. Following their failed attack against the Moncada military barracks near Santiago de Cuba, Castro was sentenced 15 years in prison, of which he served only two years on account of a strong amnesty campaign that was organized by relatives and colleagues of the prisoners, as well as opponents of the Batista regime. After his release, Castro relocated to Mexico because of threats made against his life by the Batista government. There he organized, trained and armed a new group of revolutionaries that came to be known as 'the 26th of July Movement', commemorating the date of his first attempt to overthrow the Batista regime.



Fidel Castro and Camilo Cienfuegos, January 1959

By the time the 26th of July Movement was ready to attempt its overthrow of the Batista regime, it counted a total of 82 revolutionaries within its ranks, including Fidel, as the main organizer, Camilo Cienfuegos (1932-1959), Raúl Castro, Ernesto Ché Guevara (1928-1967), and Juan Almeida Bosque (1927-2009). In November 1956, all 82 of these revolutionaries left Mexico for Cuba on a 10-day voyage aboard a yacht called Granma, which only had the capacity to carry 12 passengers. Upon arriving in Cuba, they advanced to the Sierra Maestra mountain range in order to meet up with other supporters of the revolutionary movement against the Batista dictatorship. However, they were met by many attacks from the Cuban Army, and only 12 of the 82 revolutionaries survived to reach Sierra Maestra. Nonetheless, the survivors of the Granma yacht and supporters of the revolutionary movement on the island continued the guerrilla war by organizing resistance groups in towns and cities across the island. The Batista government responded by arresting and torturing large numbers of civilians in an effort to weaken and eventually defeat the revolutionaries. It was unsuccessful, as the guerrilla war prevailed in 1959, overthrowing one of the most brutal and repressive dictators in Latin American history, who managed to murder more than 20,000 Cubans and transform the country into a police state during his seven years in power, all with the full backing of his supporters in the United States.



Sierra Maestra, 1957, Fidel Castro (fourth from left)

After the revolution, Fidel Castro governed Cuba, first as Prime Minister from 1959 to 1976, then as President from 1976 until 2008. From the outset, his government consistently defended and promoted anti-imperialism and instituted measures aimed at ending the colonization, humiliation and exploitation of Cuba at the hands of the United States, which included shutting down all casinos and brothels on the island, marginalizing the mafia, and curtailing international tourism. One of the first acts of the new government was to nationalize foreign enterprises and utilities, including banks and telephone companies, most of which belonged to American companies. Additionally, refineries that were controlled by American corporations such as Shell and Esso were nationalized and Cuba signed a trade agreement to purchase oil from the Soviet Union. The Castro government also instituted a number of land and agrarian reforms, including measures aimed at limiting land ownership and forbidding foreigners from purchasing or possessing land in the country. In an effort to improve Cuban living standards, education and health care were made universally accessible to all citizens without exception. The Castro socialist regime also made large investments in housing construction and infrastructure improvements, which included building 600 miles of roads in six months. Through such actions, Cuba earned the reputation of being 'the first territory free from imperialist domination in Latin America and the Caribbean' (Fidel Castro, May 1, 2003 Havana).

American officials were unanimously opposed to the Cuban Revolution and the socialist reforms being implemented by the Castro government, viewing them as direct attacks against US interests in Cuba. President Dwight Eisenhower became furious with Castro's nationalization process and anti-imperialist policies and retaliated decisively, eventually breaking off diplomatic relations with the island on January 3, 1961. Eisenhower also responded by collaborating with the mafia and approving efforts on the part of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to overthrow Cuba's socialist government, which came to be

known as the 'Program of Covert Action Against Castro'. These efforts culminated in the invasion at the Bay of Pigs on April 17, 1961, where approximately 1,400 Cuban exiles that were trained, armed and funded by the CIA attacked Cuba in an attempt to topple Fidel Castro's socialist regime. Although this failed invasion was executed when John F. Kennedy was President, the CIA began planning this operation in March 1959, when the Eisenhower administration was still in power.

Subsequently, in 1962, the Kennedy government imposed a full commercial, economic and financial embargo on Cuba, which blocked virtually all trade between the two countries and banned U.S. citizens from travelling to the island. Since being instituted, the trade embargo has been accepted as the best mechanism to reverse the socialist revolution by all of the subsequent US administrations. The rationale behind the imposition of the embargo was best explained by Lester D. Mallory, former deputy assistant Secretary of State, on April 6, 1960:

The majority of the Cuban people support Castro. There is no effective political opposition... The only foreseeable means of alienating internal support is through disenchantment and disaffection and hardship... every possible means should be undertaken promptly to weaken the economic life of Cuba... a line of action which... makes the greatest inroads in denying money and supplies to Cuba, to decrease monetary and real wages, to bring about hunger, desperation and overthrow of government.

The US embargo is widely accepted as the primary obstacle to the development of the Cuban economy since 1962, with the Cuban Foreign Ministry estimating total damages at more than \$1.1 trillion as of 2014. Regardless, Washington does not consider the economic embargo to be a violation of human rights and insists that regime change is a prerequisite for lifting it, which runs counter to world opinion.

In addition to the commercial, economic and financial blockade, the Americans also employed a wide variety of other tactics aimed at destabilising and destroying Cuba's socialist regime, which included funding Cuban exiles to organize terrorist attacks and sabotage the island's economy, engaging in chemical and biological warfare, imposing economic and political sanctions that inhibited Cuba's ability to access credit and loans from international banks and prevented free trade, and supporting CIA efforts to assassinate Fidel Castro. Although some estimates put the total number of CIA assassination attempts against Fidel Castro at 638, he has managed to become one of the world's longest serving leaders of a nation. Interestingly, against the backdrop of all these attacks and efforts to reverse the Revolution, Fidel Castro consistently expressed his willingness to enter into negotiations to normalize relations with the US; however, he made it explicitly clear that while economic problems could be discussed, communism was not on the table. Specifically, Castro (May 1, 1961 in Havana) stated that:

Cuban people are capable of establishing their own government. We have never considered the possibility of discussing this. We will discuss only matters that do not affect our sovereignty.

In 1991, Cuba formally requested UN assistance in ending the blockade. Since then, the UN General Assembly has voted on a non-binding resolution criticizing the ongoing impact of the embargo every year, which has passed with overwhelming support on each occasion. In the most recent vote held in October 2018, 189 of the 193 member states comprising the General Assembly voted for the non-binding resolution, with only the U.S. and Israel voting

against it and Moldova and the Ukraine abstaining. In fact, no more than four countries have ever voted against this resolution over its 27-year history, with the U.S and Israel being the only two countries that have opposed it every time. Support for the resolution has grown steadily, as evidenced by the declining number of abstentions since the initial vote, as members of the General Assembly, including many U.S. allies, cannot justify the devastating economic impacts of the embargo on the daily lives of the Cuban people.

The trade embargo targets all Cuban people indiscriminately, which directly violates articles 2[iii], 13[iv], and 25[v] of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). In fact, a thorough investigation conducted by the American Association for World Health[vi] in 1997 declared that 'the U.S. embargo of Cuba has dramatically harmed the health and nutrition of large numbers of ordinary Cuban citizens...the U.S. embargo has caused a significant rise in suffering-and even deaths-in Cuba. For several decades the U.S. embargo has imposed significant financial burdens on the Cuban health care system...since 1992 the number of unmet medical needs-patients going without essential drugs or doctors performing medical procedures without adequate equipment-has sharply accelerated. This trend is directly linked to the fact that in 1992 the U.S. trade embargo—one of the most stringent embargoes of its kind, prohibiting the sale of food and sharply restricting the sale of medicines and medical equipment—was further tightened by the 1992 Cuban Democracy Act.'[vii] Furthermore, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights also confirmed 'the impact of such sanctions on the human rights of the Cuban people and, therefore, insists that the embargo be lifted.'[viii]

After enduring significant hardships from repeated attempts to destroy Fidel Castro's socialist regime on the part of Americans, Cubans were hit particularly hard by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which produced what came to be known as the 'special period' from 1989 to 1995. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba lost its most important trade partner and the large subsidies emanating from the socialist block. Approximately, 80% of Cuban exports were destined for the Soviet Union, while a similar magnitude of imports originated there. As a result, the Cuban economy collapsed, contracting by more than 40% in 1992 alone. This led to severe shortages of basic needs, including food and medication, which resulted in malnutrition and a significant increase in serious health problems during the special period. Of course, the US could never pass up such a grandiose opportunity to tighten the screws further by enacting measures to strengthen its embargo against Cuba with the passage of the Cuban Democracy Act in 1992 and the Helms-Burton Act in 1996.

In response to the hardships associated with the special period, Fidel Castro's government initiated a number of quasi-free market economic reforms and sought foreign investment to reinvigorate the economy, which included permitting small-scale private enterprises, reopening the island to foreign tourism in 1993-94, and investing in biotechnology. In fact, the reforms implemented during the special period are the reason why many of the hotel and resort chains currently operating on the island are actually joint ventures between the Cuban government and foreign companies, primarily from Spain and Canada. That would suggest that Cuba has been trying to rejuvenate its socialist system since the Soviet Union collapsed in 1989, as opposed to abandoning its ideals in favour of capitalism.

Despite the disastrous economic consequences of the special period and the strengthening of the American embargo that accompanied it, Cuban socialism continued to produce many impressive achievements, including the attainment of full employment, universal access to free education and health care services, and improving social justice. As a result, the island

was able to achieve higher literacy rates and life expectancy, and lower child mortality, child malnutrition, and poverty rates compared to any other Latin American country (Navarro, 2014, Vandepitte, 2011). In fact, the World Bank acknowledged that Cuba's international 'success in the fields of education and health, with social services that exceeds those of most developing countries and, in certain sectors, are comparable to those of the developed nations.' Furthermore, according to estimates from the United Nations Development Program, Cuba ranks third in Latin America on the Human Development Index (HDI). More precisely, according to the United Nations Human Development Report 2017, 'Cuba's 2017 HDI of 0.777 is above the average of 0.757 for countries in the high human development group and above the average of 0.758 for countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.'

In addition to its success in areas of human development, Cuba has also been active in providing practical foreign aid in the form of sending highly-trained specialists, such as teachers, doctors, and engineers, to developing countries where they are urgently needed. Since 1959, Cuba has sent more than 300,000 healthcare professionals to various countries in Latin American and Africa that were otherwise unable to meet the health care needs of their citizens on their own. This is a practice for which Cuba is particularly well-regarded.

Currently, around 50,000 Cuban health workers are operating in 66 countries. To put that figure into perspective, in 2014, 'Cuban medical staff were caring for more than 70 million people in the world, more than the whole G8 plus the World Health Organisation and Médecins Sans Frontières put together.'[ix]Cuba also helps combat doctor shortages by providing free medical school for students from various developing countries. In fact, Havana's Latin American Medical School is 'the largest medical school in the world', producing approximately 29,000 doctors from 90 countries since 2005. The quality of the Cuban health care system has been acknowledged by former US president Jimmy Carter, who stated that: 'Of all the so-called developing nations, Cuba has by far the best health system. And their outreach program to other countries is unequalled anywhere.'

Castro's government was also well-known for its commitment to the environment, as demonstrated by the country's sustainable use of natural resources and its efforts to combat over-consumption and global warming. Since 2006, Cuba was the only country in the world that managed to attain sustainable development, as defined by the United Nations Development Programme. In 2014, Cuba registered a low ecological footprint[x]of less than 1.8 hectares per capita, well below the 2.8 world average.

Outside of the western mainstream press, Cuba is actually widely-renowned for its commitment to peace, social justice, equality, and humanitarian aid since its socialist Revolution in 1959. Nowhere else in the world did the 'spirit of international solidarity become so deeply rooted' than in Cuban (Fidel Castro 2003). In 1963, Fidel Castro's government organized the 'Committee in Solidarity with Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia', which sought to provide these countries with assistance during the Vietnam War by sending Cuban medical professionals, engineers and technological advice. Castro's government was also an enduring supporter of Palestinian liberation, as evidenced by Cuba becoming the first country to recognize the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964. In addition to consistently expressing solidarity with the Palestinian cause, Castro permitted numerous Palestinian students to study in Cuba, sent 4,000 Cuban soldiers to defend Syrian territory from invasion by the Israelis during the Yom Kippur War in 1973, and condemned Israel's sealing off of the Gaza strip in 2012 as a 'Palestinian Holocaust'. Fidel Castro also condemned the disastrous NATO-led military intervention of Libya that commenced in March 2011. Such actions and strong positions have made Fidel Castro highly-respected

throughout the Arab world since the early years of the Cuban Revolution.

Cuba also played a prominent role in liberation movements on the African continent. For example, in 1961, Cuba supported the National Liberation Front in its fight against French colonialism in Algeria. Subsequently, in October 1963, after Algeria had been liberated from France, Cuba sent troops to help safeguard Algeria's recently acquired independence against Moroccan expansionism during the Sand War (Fidel Castro, May 1, 2003 Havana). Cuba also sent material and military assistance in support of the Marxist Movement for the Liberation of Angola in the late 1960s. After Angola gained independence from Portugal in November 1975, Cuba supported the leftist People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) by sending 25,000 troops to help repel interventions on the part of South Africa and Zaire, which were supported by Washington. After Zaire and South Africa withdrew their forces, Cuban troops remained to support the MPLA government during much of the Angolan Civil War (1975-2002), eventually leaving in 1991.

The impact of the Cuban Revolution was not limited to freeing Cubans from subservience to American domination; it was also viewed as a model for national liberation movements opposing imperialism and colonialism throughout Asia, Africa, and South and Central America. 'The case of Cuba is not an isolated one. It would be an error to think of it only as the case of Cuba. The case of Cuba is that of all underdeveloped nations. It is the case of the Congo, it is the case of Egypt, it is the case of Algeria, it is the case of Iran, and finally, it is the case of Panama, which wants its canal back. It is the case of Puerto Rico, whose national spirit they are destroying. It is the case of Honduras, a portion of whose territory has been seized. In short, without specifically referring to other countries, the case of Cuba is the case of all underdeveloped and colonized countries...The problems of Latin America are like the problems of the rest of the underdeveloped world, in Africa and Asia. The world is divided up among the monopolies, and those same monopolies that we find in Latin America are also found in the Middle East. Oil in Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and in every corner of the earth is in the hands of monopolistic companies that are controlled by the financial interests of the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and France...The monopolistic interests are not concerned with the development of the peoples. What they want is to exploit the natural resources of our countries and exploit the peoples.'[xi]

The Cuban people have been struggling against the 'most formidable imperial power ever known to humankind' for 60 years. It could be said that, 'never has the world witnessed such an unequal fight' when considering the relative sizes, populations, and military strengths of the two countries (Fidel Castro, May 1, 2003 Havana). However, despite these disparities in favour of the US, 'Cuba crushed the Bay of Pigs mercenary invasion organized by a US administration, thereby preventing a direct military intervention...In 1962, Cuba confronted with honor, and without a single concession, the risk of being attacked with dozens of nuclear weapons...It stoically endured thousands acts of sabotage and terrorist attacks organized by the US government. It thwarted hundreds of assassination plots against the leaders of the revolution' (Fidel Castro, May 1, 2003 Havana). Cuba was able to achieve these victories because 'there is something more powerful than weapons, [no matter how sophisticated and powerful those weapons may be]: ideas, reason and the morality of cause' (Fidel Castro, May 1, 2003 Havana). These are things that are not 'born of human beings' nor do 'they perish with an individual' (Fidel Castro, June 23, 2007).

'Long live free Cuba! Long live the Victorious Revolution!' (Fidel Castro)

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Notes

[i]The 26th of July Movement became Cuba's Communist Party in October 1965.

[ii]<https://revcom.us/a/056/cubahist-en.html>

[iii]'Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.'
(<http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>)

[iv]'(1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state' and '(2) everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.'
(<http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>).

[v]'(1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control'
(<http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>).

[vi]'The American Association for World Health (AAWH) was founded in 1953 as a private, non-profit charitable and educational organization, and serves as the U.S. Committee for the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). Its purposes are to inform the American public about major health challenges that affect people both here and abroad, and to promote cooperative solutions that emphasize grassroots involvement.'
(<http://archives.usaengage.org/archives/studies/cuba.html>)

[vii]<http://www.medicc.org/resources/documents/embargo/The%20impact%20of%20the%20U.S.%20Embargo%20on%20Health%20&%20Nutrition%20in%20Cuba.pdf>

[viii]<http://www.amnestyusa.org/pdfs/amr250072009eng.pdf>

[ix]<http://www.theindependentbd.com/arcprint/details/55858/2016-08-15>

[x]An ecological footprint refers to the biologically productive area that is necessary to provide for everything that a person uses including fruits and vegetables, the consumption of energy, fibers, space for buildings and roads, etc.

[xi]Fidel Castro speaking at the United Nations General Assembly in 1960.

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