



## **PSIR 377 - SOCIAL AND POLITICAL MOVEMENTS**

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**Cuban Revolution (1953)**

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**Abstract**

The aim of this study is to give detailed information about the Cuban Revolution process. In the study, the process that led the country to the revolution and what happened after the revolution will be explained. A communist power was established in the country after the revolution. The developments before and after the revolution have affected the whole world. Especially the post-revolution missile crisis brought the world to the edge of nuclear war.

**Key Words:** Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Cuban Revolution, Revolution.

**Abbreviations:**

M-26-7: 26th of July Movement

INAV: National Savings and Housing Institute

**Word Count:** 3675

## Introduction

Cuba was one of the Spanish colonies for 400 years. While the Spaniards made up only 8% of the population, they owned 90% of the island's wealth. The Cubans could not stand poverty any more and were defeated in the war that started with Spain. After the war, the Cubans had become closer to the United States, where they would fight in the future. After the American war with Spain, Cuba gained its independence. However, this independence did not last long. Cuban revolutionaries started a guerrilla war against Batista's rule. After years of struggle, Batista's power was overthrown. The struggle, which started under the leadership of Fidel Castro, continued with a communist power.

## Colonial Period

When Christopher Columbus discovered Cuba in 1492, he described it as this is the most beautiful land that human eyes have ever seen. If he had the opportunity to visit the island, he would have seen more than that. Because the Cuban land was as fertile as it was beautiful. These fertile lands would become the targets of the imperialist countries in the future. Since the discovery of Cuba, Spanish colonization has begun in the country.<sup>1</sup> Slaves were brought from Africa to work in the sugar industry in the country. But the conditions of workers in sugar production were getting worse. The uprisings started in the following years due to the increasing poverty and the increasing Spanish pressure in the country.<sup>2</sup> Cubans had an idea of their own destiny. They had the idea that Cuba was naturally owned by Cubans. Cubans launched an armed uprising in 1868 to fight for their independence. The struggle for freedom lasted 10 years and 80000 Spanish soldiers died, but the uprising was not successful.

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<sup>1</sup> Ernesto Domínguez López & Helen Yaffe, The deep, historical-roots of Cuban anti-imperialism, 2017, p.1. Retrieved from: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320043298\\_The\\_deep\\_historical\\_roots\\_of\\_Cuban\\_anti-imperialism](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320043298_The_deep_historical_roots_of_Cuban_anti-imperialism). Accessed June 08, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Santa Barbara, The Revolt of "the Ever-faithful Isle": The Ten Years' War in Cuba, 1868-1878, 2007, p. 1-4. Retrieved from: [http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/1868/Ten\\_Years\\_War.pdf](http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/1868/Ten_Years_War.pdf). Accessed June 08, 2020.

A large part of the Cuban countryside was destroyed by war. Taking advantage of this opportunity, American traders bought some of the sugar industry properties in Cuba. In those years, sugar production in Cuba was done in quite old ways. Therefore, new machines should be installed, new fields should be planted and railways should be built by American companies. By 1896, American investments in Cuba totaled \$ 50 million.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, Cubans were still pursuing independence. A second armed uprising began, which began under the leadership of Jose Marti. The uprising that started in 1895 was still continuing in 1896. But the Cuban people gained the sympathy of the American people and the state in this struggle. On February 15, 1898, an explosion occurred on the battleship U.S.S Maine in Havana port.<sup>4</sup> After this explosion, the effects of the Americans who wanted to intervene in the Cuban-Spanish War increased. Spain declared a ceasefire as a result of increased blood pressure. But America wanted Spain to withdraw permanently from the country for the ceasefire to be permanent. Spain denied this request and declared war on the United States on April 24. But the power of the Spanish forces was not enough to fight in a country far from its own territory. With the agreement signed on 10 August 1898, Spain gave up all its rights over Cuba. As a result of this war, Spain stopped looking for new colonies and started dealing with its own internal affairs. But the USA would have the opportunity to increase its influence on Cuba.

### **Cuba's Political Situation Before the Revolution**

In 1902, the USA recognized Cuba as an independent state. But what really happened was that Cuba was a US colony, not a Spanish colony. Colonialism remained the same, only the exploiting country had changed. Until 1933, Cuba was the US puppet state. Power was

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<sup>3</sup> Leo Huberman & Paul M. Sweezy, *Küba Bir Devrimin Anatomisi*, 2019, p.30-31.

<sup>4</sup> Louis Fisher, *Destruction of the Maine (1898)*, 2009, p.1. Retrieved from: <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/usconlaw/pdf/Maine.1898.pdf>. Accessed June 08, 2020.

overturned with a riots of Sergeant Revolt that started in 1933.<sup>5</sup> Fulgencio Batista, the leader of the rebellion, took over the armed forces and entered a long period when it would affect Cuban politics. On September 10, 1933, a temporary government was established under the presidency of Ramon Grau San Martino. The government passed important laws on political and economic life. Some political parties were dispersed in the country. The transformations that the government had to realize were realized as a result of the pressure of left-wing politicians. Members of the Presidential Palace in Havana are changing, but in reality and actually Batista ruled the country. Until 1952, Batista was the invisible ruler of the country.

### **Moncada Barracks Attack**

There was a presidential election in Cuba on June 1, 1952. Batista, one of the three candidates, was the candidate with the least votes. But Batista was not thinking of quitting power. He went to Camp Columbia, the country's largest military barracks, and took control of the army. He would forcibly regain power, as he did in 1934.<sup>6</sup> Two weeks after the military coup, a 25-year-old young lawyer argued that Batista committed a crime and should be punished. The person who fought alone against this man who seized power for the second time was Fidel Castro. Fidel, a child of a Roman Catholic family, was sent to church schools. He entered Havana University at the age of 19.<sup>7</sup> Havana University students have always been politically active. Fidel became the campus leader in the political struggle that started at that time and in improving the conditions of the poor Cuba. On October 12, 1948, Fidel married Mirtha Diaz Balart, a university student of philosophy. His wife's highly conservative family hoped that Fidel's interest in politics would be temporary, but Fidel was attending

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<sup>5</sup> Clifford L. Staten, *The History of Cuba*, 2005, p.60-61.

<sup>6</sup> Rubén G. Rumbaut, *Survivor: Cuba The Cuban Revolution at 50*, 2009, p.84-85. Retrieved from: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228217410\\_Survivor\\_Cuba\\_The\\_Cuban\\_Revolution\\_at\\_50](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228217410_Survivor_Cuba_The_Cuban_Revolution_at_50). Accessed June 09, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Steven Walker, *Fidel Castro's Childhood: The Untold Story*, 2012, Retrieved from: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331968827\\_Fidel\\_Castro's\\_Childhood\\_The\\_Untold\\_Story](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331968827_Fidel_Castro's_Childhood_The_Untold_Story). Accessed June 09, 2020.

rallies and anti-corruption student protests in Cuba, and was repeatedly arrested many times. The marriage ended in 1955 with a divorce.

After graduating from Havana University in 1950, he continued his duty as a lawyer. He also continued his political activities. He won the congress elections in 1952, but the elections did not take place as a result of the Batista coup. Fidel thought that the revolution against the power of Batista, who took power by force, was inevitable. According to him, only a government that would carry out economic reforms and revolution could be established. Fidel Castro was pursuing a goal that was tried by Jose Marti but could not be achieved in the past. With the decision that the revolution was necessary, Fidel began to gather a voluntary group. The group also needed to train using weapons and find the money for weapons and ammunition. Because Batista's agents were everywhere, they had to make these preparations secretly. After one year of preparation, Fidel and his rebel army were about 200. Fidel's target was Fort Moncada, the country's second largest military barracks. The plan was to surprise up to 1000 soldiers and take over the radio station and call on the people to support the rebel forces.<sup>8</sup> The attack was carried out on July 26, 1953. However, some of the attackers were killed right there. Others have been caught and tortured. However, Fidel and his brother Raul managed to escape following the army. The army pursued people who helped the rebels in any way and arrested innocent people. Fidel had fled to the Sierra Maestra mountains, but the army had not stopped following. Fidel was caught while sleeping in a hut and went to prison. After this incident, Raul Castro and his men surrendered from the bunkers in the mountains. The Moncada attack was unsuccessful, but Fidel thought that the revolution was not over.<sup>9</sup> With this attack, perhaps he could not seize power, but it caused

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<sup>8</sup> E. A. Grineviç, Küba Devrimin Geçtiği Yol, 1995, p.75-77.

<sup>9</sup> Luis Plazas, Revolutionary Manifestos and Fidel Castro's Road to Power, 2014, p.11-13. Retrieved from: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5785&context=etd>. Accessed June 09, 2020.

him to be recognized by the people who were fed up with the dictatorship of Batista in the country.

### **History Will Absolve Me**

The second struggle for Fidel would begin in courtrooms. The court asked Fidel if he participated in the Moncada attack. He admitted that he was very firmly involved. When the court asked why he did not resort to legal remedies, Fidel said decisively that he was impossible because there was no freedom in the country.<sup>10</sup> Fidel said that they did this revolt to improve the conditions of the Cuban people and did not regret it. Stating that there are 700,000 Cuban unemployed people in the country, Fidel told the rebellion that they aimed to support these unemployed people. He said that if they succeeded and came to power, they would reform for the welfare of the people. He stated that Cuba is an agricultural state and that the people who are engaged in agriculture add wealth to the wealth of power-holders while living in misery. He stated that he did not regret what he did and acted only by thinking about the people and made a historical statement.: "Convict me. I don't care. History will absolve me." <sup>11</sup>

### **First Encounter with Che Guevara**

Fidel Castro was sentenced to 15 years in prison. While Fidel was in prison, Batista was dealing with his own problems. Protests against his power, which he achieved with the coup, continued. During the protests, the people were shouting "Freedom to Fidel Castro". A big amnesty campaign was launched across the country. Government officials also conveyed that amnesty to Batista could eliminate the displeasure of the people. On May 2, 1955, Batista

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<sup>10</sup> Fidel Castro Internet Archive, History Will Absolve Me, Retrieved from: <https://www.marxists.org/history/cuba/archive/castro/1953/10/16.htm>. Accessed June 09, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Gunder Frank, History Will Absolve Me Promise and Record of Fidel Castro, 1961, p.150-152. Retrieved from: [https://www.epw.in/system/files/pdf/1961\\_13/4-5-6/history\\_will\\_absolve\\_me\\_promise\\_and\\_record\\_of\\_fidel.pdf](https://www.epw.in/system/files/pdf/1961_13/4-5-6/history_will_absolve_me_promise_and_record_of_fidel.pdf). Accessed June 10, 2020.



signed the amnesty law.<sup>12</sup> On May 15, 1955, Fidel and all his comrades were released from prison. Fidel Castro was welcomed like a hero from the prison he entered as a rebel. But Batista did not want this to turn into a legend. Therefore, he was constantly being followed. In July 1955, Fidel went to Mexico to be able to reconstruct. Fidel and his friends received training on guerrilla warfare. During their training, Fidel met with an Argentine doctor, Ernesto Che Guevara. But Che was enrolled in the riot army as a soldier, not a doctor. Fidel, who thinks that he is completely ready, and his accompanying 81 people left Mexico on 25 November 1956 with the yacht named *Granma*, which was 18 meters long. Fidel thought he was planning everything, but Batista's army knew about this journey. Where they landed, the army was waiting for them. In the conflict, 12 people including Fidel, Raul and Che managed to escape to the Sierra Maestra mountains. Fidel Castro believed he could still make the revolution. Che Guevara, who knew that they had to fight against a huge army with 12 people, described Fidel as out of his mind like all the leaders in history.<sup>13</sup> Fidel, who thought that it was his duty and destiny to liberate Cuba, was out of his mind with this thought. Despite the death of many of his closest friends, he did not give up. Thanks to this determination, the demolition of the dictatorship of Batista was close.

### **The end of the Batista regime**

The members of the 26th of July Movement, led by Fidel, were only 12 people in the Sierra Maestra mountains. But the truth is that they had allies all over Cuba. Fidel's speeches in court impressed the public and increased his support. In addition, students who knew political issues and reckonings and wanted a revolution also supported the movement from the very beginning. The struggle that started with 12 people grew in a short time. The most important reason for this growth was the character of the M-26-7 soldiers and their attitude

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<sup>12</sup> Ramon L. Bonachea & Marta San Martin, *Cuban Insurrection 1952-1959*, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Che Guevara, *Latin Amerika Devrimi Kita Devrimi Stratejisi*, 2019, p.16-17.

towards the people. Friendly and respectful soldiers were not arrogant and cruel.<sup>14</sup> They were anti-loot and paid for everything they received. In addition, the penalty for rape in the army was the death sentence.

The army of the M-26-7, which received the support of the farmer people in time, was fully controlling the Sierra Maestra mountain. With their radio broadcasts, they were able to reach the vast majority of the people and explain the reasons for the rebellion. The people lived in starvation due to corruption in the country, but Batista and the landlords around him used the wealth of the country for themselves. By 1957, it was no longer possible to prevent anti-Batista movements. Some of the M-26-7 soldiers were captured and executed, but the army's numbers were increasing day by day. A student's attempt to assassinate Batista was unsuccessful.<sup>15</sup> Fidel did not approve of this assassination attempt. He thought that Batista should be tried after his army was defeated. While the struggle continued, Batista's soldiers understood that they were not willing enough for this war. Also, the reason why Batista's army was weak was that he did not professionalize the army.<sup>16</sup> The war was not on the plain, but in the endless mountains. The M-26-7 army almost knew the Sierra Maestra mountains by heart. The Batista army was not used to these conditions.<sup>17</sup>

By 1958, Batista attacked the Sierra Maestra mountains with Operation Verano. The July 26 Movement soldiers were outnumbered. While Batista attacked with an army of 12,000 people, the rebellion army had only 300 soldiers. But the riot army had its advantages. The war would be fought in the mountains they knew. While government soldiers were

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<sup>14</sup> Michelle Chase, *The Country and the City in the Cuban Revolution*, 2011, p.123-125. Retrieved from: <http://www.scielo.org.co/pdf/rci/n73/n73a06.pdf>. Accessed June 10, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Frank Argote Freyre, *Fulgencio Batista: The Making of a Dictator*, 2006, p.174-175.

<sup>16</sup> Steve Pincus, *1688 The First Modern Revolution*, 2009, p.39.

<sup>17</sup> Devyn Spence Benson, *Owning the Revolution: Race, Revolution, and Politics from Havana to Miami, 1959–1963*, 2012, Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/content/qt5sb9d392/qt5sb9d392.pdf?t=mfspapa>. Accessed June 10, 2020.

mercenaries, Fidel and his friends were fighting for something they believed. Their last big advantage was that the rebel army leader Fidel had a superior ability and knew the guerrilla warfare very well.<sup>18</sup> As a result of the war, which lasted 2 months, Batista had to retreat. Fidel believed that the retreating army should be pursued. But this retreat was a trap set by Cuban general Eulogio Cantillo. Fidel fell into this trap. Fidel and Che's rebel army suffered great losses. Castro proposed a ceasefire and Cantillo agreed. The Cuban army seemed to have won the war, but the army was dispirited and some soldiers left the army. Castro and his army retreated to the mountains. But this retreat was for a very short time.

Castro now knew he had to attack. Fidel gave this task to Che, his most trusted companion. In December 1958, Che Guevara and the accompanying M-26-7 guerrillas faced Batista forces in the city of Santa Clara.<sup>19</sup> Raul Castro and Fidel Castro were fighting in separate cities. Considering that the war would be lost, Batista fled on Christmas day. But before he left, he appointed senior judge Dr. Carlos Piedra to the state.<sup>20</sup> But Fidel Castro, who heard this news, announced that someone appointed by Batista would not accept his rule and told his commanders to continue fighting. He reported on the radio that the war would continue until Batista's soldiers surrendered unconditionally. Later that day, Batista's army surrendered to Che Guevara unconditionally in Santa Clara.<sup>21</sup> The war ended in the Moncada Barracks, where Fidel Castro was first defeated on July 26, 1953. On January 1, the revolutionary army launched a big march to Havana. Fidel and his army were welcomed as heroes in Havana.

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<sup>18</sup> Ben Connable & Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*, 2010, p.22-23.

<sup>19</sup> Gary Prevost, *Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution*, 2007, p.21-22. Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1040&context=headwaters>. Accessed June 10, 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Huberman & Sweezy, *Küba Bir Devrimin Anatomisi*, p.105-106.

<sup>21</sup> Grineviç, *Küba Devrimin Geçtiği Yol*, p.190-194.

## **Revolutionary Regime**

Fidel Castro appointed Manuel Urrutia Lleó as the new president. In the same year, Fidel Castro visited the USA. Castro explained that he wants to establish good relations with the USA.<sup>22</sup> Government experience in Cuba has traditionally been the experience of mismanagement and corruption. Those in power became one of the elements of the rotten system instead of solving the problems of the country. Therefore, the first reforms of the new government would be under these conditions. The country was in a particularly bad situation especially in education. In 1953, 31% of the population aged 6 and above had never been trained. Only 3.5% of the population had high school education and 1% had university education.<sup>23</sup> On top of these figures, the revolutionary government increased the budget allocated for education. The budget was only increased by 10%, but the results were surprising. While only one school was built in the country in 57 years, 37 new schools were built in the first year of the revolution. While realizing this growth program, priority was given to rural areas with the highest training problem. In addition to reforms on education, the revolutionary government has also dealt with the problem of lack of housing. It was planned to build 10,000 houses in 1959. INAV(National Savings and Housing Institute) was established to realize the housing project.<sup>24</sup> The Cuban population increased by an average of 75,000 people each year. At least 20,000 residences had to be built each year to prevent insufficient housing. The government also increased the budget to solve this problem. The government also took important steps in animal husbandry. With the land reforms, the number of animals increased more than twice.

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<sup>22</sup> Nicholas V. Boline, *Fidel Castro's Grand Strategy in the Cuban Revolution: 1959-1968*, 2015, p.3. Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1115&context=papersandpubs>. Accessed June 11, 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Huberman & Sweezy, *Küba Bir Devrimin Anatomisi*, p.134.

<sup>24</sup> Louis A. Perez, *Cuba: Between Reform And Revolution*, 1988, p.252-253.

## **Conclusion**

The Cuban revolution had actually started painfully already since 1900. Although the parties and their ways of applying their thoughts differed slightly, in the time period until 1959, there were almost identical problems. The rebellion attempt that started under the leadership of Jose Marti turned into a total war with Spain, but Cuba lost this war. Jose Marti, who received US support in the following years, started another rebellion. After the tension between the USA and Spain increased, Spain declared war on the USA. As a result of the short war, Spain gave up all its rights over Cuba. Cuba gained its independence but could not get rid of the US pressure. US-backed Fulgencio Batista took power in a military coup. Increased poverty and unrest in the country would increase even more in the time of Batista. In the elections held in 1952, Batista lost power but continued to retain power by making a military coup again. As a result of these developments, Fidel Castro thought that the Batista dictatorship could be destroyed only by a revolution. With the belief of the revolution, he attacked the Moncada Barracks, but was unsuccessful and went to prison. But he did not give up his belief in revolution and fled to Mexico with amnesty. He would meet his most trusted companion, Che Guevara, in Mexico. Fidel returned to Cuba to start a rebellion and started a guerrilla war that would last for years. As a result of the guerrilla war, Batista fled the country and the army of revolution took over Havana. With the revolution, reforms started and the country, which was ruled by corruption for years, started to develop. In the following years, the US pressure on Cuba has increased. Fidel has become closer to the Soviet Union as a remedy. As a result of this approach, Soviet missiles were placed in the country, and the world was on the verge of a nuclear war.

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