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Cuba through 1959

Did the Cuban Revolution begin on January 1st, 1959, when the dictator Fulgencio Batista fled the island, leaving a new revolutionary government to take power? Or did it begin on July 26th, 1953, when Fidel Castro's guerrilla force attacked the Moncada Barracks in its first dramatic action? Or in the various revolutionary uprisings in 1844, 1868, 1895, 1912, or 1933, unfinished or aborted revolutions that failed to achieve their goals, but contributed to the island's revolutionary identity?

Colonial History

Some Cuban accounts argue that the Cuban Revolution began in 1511 when the Taíno Indian Hatuey (who had fled to Cuba, pursued by the Spanish, from neighboring Hispaniola) took up arms against the Spanish colonizers. A statue of Hatuey in Baracoa, Cuba (Figure 1.1), proclaims him "the first rebel of America."¹ Clearly the Cuban revolutionaries, and Cuban historiography, emphasize a long tradition of anti-colonial struggle on the island leading up to 1959.

Estimates of Cuba's indigenous population prior to 1492 range from a low of 100,000 to a high of 500,000. Within a few generations, a combination of military conquest, enslavement, and above all, diseases introduced by the Spanish, had virtually wiped out the natives as a distinct people. Nevertheless, both biologically and culturally, indigenous survivals shaped the society that emerged from the ruins. The Spanish adopted Taíno words for places, products, and phenomena that were new to them.

A History of the Cuban Revolution, Second Edition. Aviva Chomsky.

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Figure 1.1 Bust of Hatuey in the main plaza of Baracoa in eastern Cuba. “Hatuey: The First Rebel of America. Burned at the Stake in Yara, Baracoa.” Oriente Workers Lodge. *Source:* Felix Hinz: “Baracoa. ‘Cortésillo’ y la ciudad española más antigua en Cuba” (2008), www.motecuhzoma.de/Baracoa-es.htm.

(Some of these words, like *hurricane*, *barbecue*, and *canoe*, also made their way into English.) By choice or by force, indigenous women intermarried and reproduced with Spanish men. Indigenous foods and customs shaped the Spanish-dominated culture that emerged on the island.²

During much of the colonial period, the Spanish focused their attention on their mainland empires based in Mexico and Peru. The Caribbean was important strategically and geopolitically, because Spanish fleets carrying gold and silver from the mines on the mainland had to pass through there, and French, Dutch, and British pirates sought their share of the booty. These latter countries also succeeded in establishing control of some of the smaller islands, although the Spanish managed to hold on to Cuba, Puerto Rico, and half of Hispaniola. (The French took the eastern half, calling it Saint-Domingue, while the Spanish dubbed their half Santo Domingo.) Although Cuba was the largest island in the Caribbean, its population was small: in 1700, only 50,000 people lived there.³

The British, French, Dutch and Danish, lacking the source of riches the Spanish had found in the mainland, set about establishing sugar

plantations on their islands. The Portuguese did the same in Brazil. Together they imported millions of slaves between the mid-1600s and the early 1800s. Brazil, Saint-Domingue, Jamaica and Barbados in particular became huge exporters of sugar. The Spanish islands, though, were imperial backwaters until the late 1700s, with smaller populations, and more diversified and subsistence production.

The big influx of enslaved Africans into Cuba, and the sugar export economy, started towards the end of the 1700s, as the Spanish attempted to increase their empire's economic efficiency through a series of measures known as the Bourbon Reforms. Meanwhile the American and French Revolutions, followed by the Haitian Revolution, dramatically altered the global economy. The world's largest sugar producer, Saint-Domingue (which restored its Taíno name, Haiti, after the slave rebellion that freed it from France), retreated entirely from global markets, and soon Spain's mainland colonies followed the United States and Haiti in fighting for and eventually achieving independence. In the nineteenth century Spain turned its full attention to its much-reduced Caribbean empire, with Cuba as its centerpiece.

Over a million Africans were brought to the island in less than a century. Enslaved Africans continued to pour into Cuba until 1866, and slavery itself was not abolished until 1886. Between 1790 and 1867, 780,000 arrived.⁴ A substantial proportion of today's population of Cuba is at least partly descended from these Africans: estimates range from 30 percent to 60 percent.

Others arrived in Cuba also. As British pressure to end the slave trade increased, Cuban planters turned to China, and in the middle of the nineteenth century some 100,000 Chinese were imported to work in conditions not far removed from slavery. Large numbers of Spaniards continued to arrive both before and after Cuba gained its independence in 1898. U.S. investors, including both individual planters and well-known companies like Hershey and the United Fruit Company, began to take over the production of sugar in the late nineteenth century. In the early years of the twentieth century, the United States orchestrated a large influx of migrant workers from U.S.-occupied Haiti to labor on the plantations. Sugar workers also migrated from the British Caribbean. Refugees came from Europe, including Jews fleeing the Nazis and Spanish Republicans escaping the 1936–39 Civil War and subsequent Franco dictatorship.

In an influential body of work in the 1940s, Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz argued that Cuba's population was characterized by the phenomenon of *transculturation*. Each successive group of migrants, he explained, was "torn from his native moorings, faced with the problem of

disadjustment and readjustment, of deculturation and acculturation.” Cuba’s history, “more than that of any other country of America, is an intense, complex, unbroken process of transculturation of human groups, all in a state of transition.”⁵

The United States may seem to share Cuba’s multiracial, transculturated character, and in many ways it does. There are, though, some major historical differences. Africans formed a far greater proportion of Cuba’s population, and they continued to arrive in large numbers during most of the nineteenth century. This presence meant that African languages, religions, and cultures remained much more alive in twentieth-century Cuba than in the United States.

In the United States, the independence movement was carried out by whites – many of them slaveholders – and the nation established in 1776 committed itself to maintaining the slave system. Not until almost a hundred years later were blacks granted citizenship. Even then, the country’s white leadership was committed to a policy of territorial expansion and racial exclusion.

In Cuba, colonial rule lasted over a century longer, and slavery was understood as a part of the colonial system, firmly rejected by many leaders of the independence movement. “To be Cuban comes before being white, before being black, before being mulatto,” white independence leader José Martí announced in an oft-repeated phrase. Independence would create a country “with all, and for the good of all.”⁶

The Cuban War of Independence began in 1868 when plantation owner Carlos Manuel de Céspedes issued the “Grito de Yara,” freed his slaves, and called upon them to join him in fighting for Cuba’s independence. He was soon joined by Antonio Maceo, the “Bronze Titan” – the mixed-race son of a Venezuelan farmer and a free Afro-Cuban woman, Mariana Grajales. Together with José Martí these three formed the pantheon of Cuban independence leaders, highlighting for future generations the diversity that the movement represented. The Mayor of Havana officially named Grajales as “the mother of Cuba” in 1957. Each of these heroes of independence today has a Cuban airport bearing his or her name: Cuba’s main international airport in Havana is named after José Martí (as are its National Library and other important institutions), while the airports in Santiago, and Guantánamo and Bayamo are named, respectively, after Maceo, Grajales, and de Céspedes.

National independence, then, and national identity, were associated with ideas of racial equality and racial unity in Cuba in a way very different from in the United States. This does not mean, of course, that anti-black racism did not, and does not still, exist in Cuba. No society whose

history is based on centuries of racially based exploitation can free itself overnight from the structures and ideas built into this kind of system. Even within the independence movement some, like Céspedes, argued for a gradual abolition that would accommodate the interests of the sugar plantocracy. Still, the relationship of anti-black racism to nationalism, and the relationships of blacks to the independence movement and ideology, were very different in Cuba from in the United States. After 1902, nationalist ideas about the integral connection between foreign, colonial domination and racial inequality only strengthened.

The experience and meaning of independence in Cuba were also shaped by the role of the United States in the process. Cuba fought for and obtained independence in a continent that was increasingly dominated by its northern neighbor. Martí echoed the sentiment of Simón Bolívar, leader of the Latin American independence movements three-quarters of a century earlier, who famously stated that “The United States ... seem[s] destined by Providence to plague America with torments in the name of freedom.”⁷ In 1823, the Monroe Doctrine announced U.S. intentions to police the hemisphere (for its own good, of course). The United States extended its control westward, challenging newly independent Mexico and climaxing in a war that added over half of Mexico’s territory to the United States in 1848. In 1891, Martí penned the similarly oft-quoted essay “Our America” in which he warned of the U.S. threat. He used the phrase “Our America” to refer to Latin America, which he contrasted to the other America – the United States.

“Our America is running another risk that does not come from itself but from the difference in origins, methods, and interest between the two halves of the continent ... The scorn of our formidable neighbor, who does not know us, is Our America’s greatest danger ... Through ignorance it may even come to lay hands on us ...” To challenge the threat of U.S. domination, Martí argued, Latin America must embrace its non-European origins – the very origins that the United States rejected. Latin America must “make common cause with the oppressed, in order to secure a new system opposed to the ambitions and governing habits of the oppressors” and, in particular, reject the “wicked and unpolitical disdain for the aboriginal race” that characterized the United States, which “drowns its Indians in blood.”⁸

Nevertheless, Cuban attitudes towards the United States were decidedly mixed. Significant numbers, especially of white Cubans, saw the United States as a beacon of freedom and progress, and believed that Cuba’s best hope for the future lay in becoming a part of the nation to the north. While Cuba’s historians have tended to downplay or demonize annexationists (just as U.S. historians have de-emphasized the many

Americans who supported the British rather than the independence movement at the end of the eighteenth century), they constituted an important voice both before and after independence. Czech scholar Josef Opatrný argued that in the mid-nineteenth century, annexationist sentiment was in fact a first step towards a move for independence, as it sowed the seeds of imagining a Cuba separate from Spain.⁹ Cuba's tri-color national flag was in fact designed in 1848 in the United States by the Venezuelan émigré Narciso López, who modeled it after the Texas Lone Star, and led several annexationist incursions into Cuba.¹⁰ But the United States was also home to many Cuban émigrés, like Martí himself, who were some of the strongest fomenters of the idea of independence.¹¹

The outcome of Cuba's wars of independence, on and off between 1868 and 1898, consolidated what President McKinley called "ties of singular intimacy" between Cuba and the United States.¹² Refusing to recognize Cuba's independence fighters as belligerents, the United States invaded the island in 1898, and established a four-year military occupation. When U.S. forces withdrew in 1902, they left in place the Platt Amendment, which turned the island into a virtual U.S. protectorate. The Amendment, written by the U.S. Secretary of War and included in Cuba's new constitution as a condition for U.S. withdrawal, gave the United States control over Cuba's foreign and economic policies, the right to intervene militarily to protect U.S. property in Cuba, and the right to develop coaling and naval stations on the island. Under the last provision, the United States established its base at Guantánamo Bay, which it retains to this day over Cuban protests.

U.S. political, military, and economic influence dominated the island during the period leading up to 1959 and oversaw the economic distortion, political corruption, and repression that characterized that 60-year period. Except for Puerto Rico, no other Latin American country enjoyed – or endured – such a lengthy and intense relationship with the United States. The relationship shaped Cuban culture, the Cuban economy, Cuban politics, and Cubans' sense of national identity. Cubans refer to the period after 1902 as the "neo-colonial" period, or the "pseudo-republic," to indicate the compromised nature of the country's independence.

The Colony in the Republic

"The colony lives on in the republic," José Martí had written in 1891. Cuba was then still a colony, but he was referring to the cultural and intellectual adherence in other countries of Latin America to European ideas,

including ideas about European racial superiority. Martí, who was killed in 1895 shortly after returning to Cuba to fight in the island's war of independence, did not live to see the colony living on in the Cuban republic. But he surely would have agreed with some of the critiques and protests regarding the new social order that emerged there during the first decades of the twentieth century.

The abolition of slavery in 1886, Afro-Cuban participation in the independence movement and army, and the very experience of the wars opened some doors towards challenging racial inequality and white racism. Post-independence developments, though, did much to restore white supremacy. The occupying U.S. army wasted no time in demobilizing the notably multiracial independence army, and adding U.S.-style racism to the complex mix that already existed in Cuba. Plantation owners, both Cubans and from the United States, sought to re-establish control over their labor force in the aftermath of abolition and black mobilization.

Some blacks adopted the ideas of another important independence fighter, Juan Gualberto Gómez, who argued after independence that through education and self-improvement blacks could individually overcome racial inequality. Others believed that blacks had to organize for social change, and formed the Independent Party of Color (PIC) to promote black interests. The slaughter of some 3000 blacks in a wave of military and paramilitary violence in 1912, ostensibly aimed at the PIC, put an end to black political organizing for many years.¹³

Still, as Cuban American historian Alejandro de la Fuente has argued, despite deep racial prejudices and inequities imbedded in Cuban society by slavery, the independence ideology emphasizing racial unity led, among other things, to the establishment of universal (male) suffrage after independence. Universal suffrage meant that white politicians had to take black voters and their interests into account, and that mainstream political parties were open to black candidates. An official commitment to Martí's anti-racist stance meant that certain forms of institutionalized racism could not be implemented in Cuba as they were in the United States. In some ways, the situation in pre-revolutionary Cuba resembled that in the United States today. Racial discrimination was outlawed and officially disavowed, including at the voting polls. Nevertheless, racial inequality was widespread, and racism continued to permeate attitudes and institutions.¹⁴

An influx of Haitian and Jamaican migrants to the U.S.-owned plantations in eastern Cuba added another ingredient to the complex national and racial landscape. Despite their ostensible commitment to anti-racism, some white Cuban intellectuals argued that the influx of blacks threatened

Cuba's racial balance. They even tried to woo Afro-Cubans into a nationalist, anti-imperialist, anti-immigrant stance that was based on anti-black stereotypes and racism. They argued that Cuban blacks were *not really black* because of their Cuban nationality, but that an influx of foreign blacks would destroy Cuba's racial harmony. And they invoked the colony, recalling the old association of colonial status with slavery. Once again, white foreigners were bringing blacks into the country to work on their plantations. Racial ideas and realities in Cuba presented a complicated landscape, but one in which the colonial heritage seemed very alive.¹⁵

The colony also lived on in the export economy and the economic distortions it entailed. Foreign capital and foreign products poured into the country after independence, but they did not create a rising tide that lifted all boats. Instead, the sugar boom displaced small farmers and provided meager wages. Rural folk flocked to the cities in search of jobs and a better life, but urban infrastructure served the wealthy and the small middle classes, not the burgeoning slums. With little in the way of a manufacturing sector, informal employment was the only path open for many poor migrants. Independence from Spain had not brought the economic independence or prosperity that many had hoped for. Historian Louis A. Pérez echoed Martí's prophecy in his own analysis of the results of independence. "Many contradictions of colonial society remained unresolved," he wrote in 1995. "The United States had ... rescued and revived the moribund colonial order ... In all its essential features and in its principal functions, the republic gave new political form to the socio-economic infrastructure of the old colony."¹⁶

Cuban politics remained hostage to the United States, while U.S. companies and investors took control of the major sectors of Cuba's economy. By 1905, 60 percent of Cuba's rural land was owned by U.S. citizens or companies. U.S. investors also controlled 90 percent of Cuba's tobacco trade, the country's iron, copper, and nickel mines, its railroads, and its electricity and telephone systems.¹⁷ U.S. economic historian Leland Jenks analyzed U.S. economic control in Cuba in his provocatively titled book *Our Cuban Colony* in 1928. Scott Nearing and Joseph Freeman used Cuba as a key example in their *Dollar Diplomacy: A Study in American Imperialism*.¹⁸

In the United States, the critical approach offered by Jenks and Nearing and Freedman was superseded in the mid-century by a more triumphalist narrative that framed U.S. foreign policy as benevolent and disinterested. Samuel Flagg Bemis famously opined, in 1943, that while "the United States has been an imperialistic power since 1898," its "comparatively mild imperialism was tapered off after 1921 and is fully liquidated now ...

United States imperialism ... was never deep-rooted in the character of the people, that it was essentially a protective imperialism ... against intervention by the imperialistic powers of the Old World. It was, if you will, an imperialism against imperialism. It did not last long and it was not really bad.¹⁹

William Appleman Williams's *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1959) initiated what came to be known as the revisionist school of U.S. diplomatic history, which dismissed Bemis and others' idealized interpretation and once again argued that U.S. policies were guided by imperialist and economic motives. Historians like Philip Foner and Louis A. Pérez developed this perspective with respect to Cuba. With the U.S. intervention in 1898, Pérez argued, "a Cuban war of liberation was transformed into a U.S. war of conquest."²⁰ In numerous works focusing on the pre-1959 period, Pérez explored the impact of U.S. political and economic control in Cuba.

Cuban historians also developed a critique of U.S. colonialist policies in the 1920s. As David Healy points out, Cuban historiography followed a more consistent trajectory, building on those early works to develop an analysis of Cuban history as a prolonged struggle for independence, beginning in 1868 and continuing through 1959. The U.S. intervention in 1898 crushed the possibility of independence that Cubans had been fighting for since 1868, and U.S. economic control, and repeated military interventions, in the first half of the twentieth century, maintained Cuba's neocolonial status until the 1959 Revolution.²¹

Political and economic turmoil also characterized the first half of the twentieth century. When the price and demand for sugar were strong, the economy boomed. When prices and demand crashed, as in 1921, the results were devastating. The 1921 crash led to a bank collapse, and a preview of the Great Depression. Prices shot up while unemployment skyrocketed. The population responded with strikes, demonstrations, and protests.²²

Even in boom times, the fruits of economic growth were not evenly divided. For many Cuban workers and peasants who had supported or fought for the cause of independence, Pérez explains, "the dream of *patria* turned quickly into a nightmare." "The Cuban proletariat discovered that, for them, the transition from colony to republic meant a descent into destitution."²³ The boom and bust was inherent in the economy's overdependence on one product.

Foreign domination and widespread poverty contributed to another essential characteristic of pre-revolutionary Cuba: corruption. With few economic alternatives, Cubans turned to an increasingly corrupt public

sector for enrichment, or for survival. “By 1925 corruption was an integral part of republican Cuba’s daily economic and political life,” write Sergio Díaz-Briquets and Jorge Pérez-López. “Low-level officials, often appointed as political patronage, depended on petty corruption to supplement meager salaries or accumulate savings, given their lack of job security in a highly politicized civil service. And just as petty corruption was rampant, so was grand corruption. To survive and prosper, businesses had to ‘take care’ of public officials. The most ambitious and entrepreneurial, ironically, looked to political corruption.”²⁴ In the 1920s, “the spectacle of republican politics was played before an incredulous national audience. There seemed to be no limit to political abuses, no end to revelations of spectacular graft and accounts of official corruption in all branches” of government.²⁵

Resentment of the status quo, and especially of Cuban subordination to the United States, coalesced in the 1920s in a number of artistic and intellectual movements that challenged both Eurocentrism and U.S. domination with a revitalized Cuban nationalism. Cuban intellectuals were finally following José Martí’s advice, and concentrating not only on Martí himself, but on a spectrum of authors from Latin America, challenging the idea of U.S. and European superiority. They were also reading critical U.S. and European authors, ranging from Marx, Engels, Trotsky, and Stalin, to those in the United States like Scott Nearing, Joseph Freeman, and Leland H. Jenks, who denounced U.S. imperialism in Cuba.

The intellectual currents of the 1920s incorporated a new valorization of things African, including, especially, the African-influenced musical genre of *son*. “In the context of the barrage of North American merchandise, films, literature, sports events, and music that entered Cuba during these years, *son* represented an important symbol of national identity” notes ethnomusicologist Robin Moore.²⁶ In this respect, Cubans played a part in the worldwide phenomenon of *négritude*, in their own way. *Négritude* drew together blacks in the French-speaking world, from independent Haiti to the French colonies of the Caribbean and West Africa, asserting the value and promotion of black experiences and cultures.

Black Cuban intellectuals also looked to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the flourishing of black intellectual and cultural life that it encompassed. Afro-Cuban writers like poet Nicolás Guillén and newspaper columnist Gustavo Urrutia developed close ties with U.S. colleagues like poet Langston Hughes and Afro-Puerto Rican Arthur Schomburg, curator of his own African-themed collections at the New York Public Library. White Cuban intellectuals like Fernando Ortíz and Ramiro Guerra y Sánchez were deeply influenced by these currents in black

thought as they struggled to analyze Cuba's colonial history and its ongoing economic and political dependence. Critiques of U.S. imperialism in Cuba, of white supremacy in the United States, and of Cuba's own history of racial inequality, were all intertwined.

Numerous organizations grew out of the ferment of the 1920s. University students founded the FEU, or *Federación Estudiantil Universitaria*, in 1923. The country's growing anarchist, socialist, and other labor organizations formed a national labor federation, the *Confederación Nacional Obrera de Cuba* (CNOC) in 1925. Some CNOC leaders founded the *Partido Comunista de Cuba* (PCC) later the same year. During its first decade, the PCC followed the lead of the Comintern (which it had quickly affiliated with). It focused first on developing political influence within the urban labor movement, and then shifted after the Comintern declared its "Third Period" in 1928 and instructed the world's Communist parties to create their own organizations based on the philosophy of class struggle. In the early 1930s, the Party expanded its reach into the rural areas, organizing agricultural workers and peasants, becoming one of the largest and strongest Communist parties in Latin America.

The Depression hit Cuba's export-dependent economy brutally. Wages and employment contracted, and organized protest grew. The corrupt government of Gerardo Machado, who had stretched his term in office first by pressing Congress to extend it, and then by running unopposed for a second term, increasingly resorted to violent repression of peaceful protests. By the early 1930s, Cubans ranging from sugar workers to urban workers to students and intellectuals were moving to direct action and armed rebellion.

The PCC and the labor movement affiliated with it played a major role in a series of political upheavals in 1933. While the Communists concentrated on labor organization and protest, other groups like the ABC Revolutionary Society and the *Directorio Estudiantil Universitario* took up arms against Machado. The government responded with growing repression, including outlawing both the PCC and the CNOC as well as other political and social organizations. Even the United States came to see Machado as a liability, and began to work behind the scenes to orchestrate his removal.

Intense backroom maneuvering between the U.S. Ambassador, Sumner Welles, and the Cuban military resulted in Machado's resignation and his replacement by Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, a little-known outsider, in 1933. The new government lasted less than a month before it was overturned by another military revolt, quickly joined by students and others. This time a group of radical reformers took the helm, with

former university professor Ramón Grau San Martín as President and revolutionary anti-imperialist Antonio Guiteras as Minister of the Interior.

The new government called itself revolutionary, and proceeded to implement a series of social, political and labor reforms, including unilaterally abrogating the Platt Amendment. U.S. Ambassador Sumner Welles deemed it “frankly communistic.”²⁷ “For one hundred days,” historian Louis Pérez writes, “the provisional government devoted itself to the task of transforming Cuba with exalted purposefulness ... This was the first government of the republic formed without the sanction and support of the United States. Under the injunction of ‘Cuba for Cubans,’ the new government proceeded to enact reform laws at a dizzying pace.”²⁸ Its pro-labor policies echoed – and in some cases prefigured – those of the New Deal in the United States, including creating a Ministry of Labor, raising wages, legislating the eight-hour day, and creating a system of Workers Compensation. These changes challenged U.S. political control, as well as the interests of U.S. investors on the island. Grau’s government further challenged foreign economic control with measures that cut the rates charged by (U.S.-owned) utility companies, and initiated an agrarian reform. “The defense of Cuban interests,” Pérez states bluntly, “jeopardized U.S. interests.”²⁹ Meanwhile, the labor uprising had taken on a life of its own. Sugar workers – many of them affiliated with the PCC – seized the plantations they worked on and established self-governing soviets. The United States quickly concluded that the new government was far too radical for its purposes. Increasingly alarmed, Ambassador Welles turned to the Cuban army.

The 1933 revolt against Céspedes had been set off by a group of low-level officers led by Sergeant Fulgencio Batista. Grau San Martín quickly promoted Batista to Colonel and turned the command of the army over to him. But Welles too had his eye on Batista as a potential, more controllable, replacement for Grau. While refusing to recognize the new government, Welles privately cultivated Batista, suggesting to him that “the very great majority of the commercial and financial interests in Cuba who are looking for protection ... could only find such protection in himself” and that the United States would look approvingly on an overthrow of the revolutionary government.³⁰ Batista did just that in January of 1934, and this time, it lasted. The United States helped by immediately offering recognition to the new Batista regime. Directly, or behind the scenes, Batista would remain a power-maker until 1959. From 1934–44 and 1952–59 he ruled directly.

While Batista succeeded in crushing the armed opposition to his takeover, he eventually made peace with Cuba’s Communist Party. In a 1935

about-face, the Comintern abandoned the Third Period for the idea of the Popular Front, in which the parties were urged to participate in elections and ally with what they termed bourgeois political parties and organizations to form a Popular Front against the threat of fascism. The Cuban Communist Party interpreted this dictum as a mandate to work with the Batista government. In return, Batista enacted some of the labor reforms that the CNOC had been demanding and even invited two Communist leaders, Juan Marinello and Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, to serve in his Cabinet.³¹

Reformism remained in the air, but the gap between reformist goals and ideologies, and political and economic realities, only grew. For example, a wide spectrum of Cuba's political groups participated in the writing of a new Constitution in 1940. The Constitution enshrined many of the reformist goals of 1933, including political and economic freedoms and guarantees. With no enforcement mechanisms, however, it remained a document representing dreams rather than realities.

In 1944, Batista stepped down when the opposition Auténtico Party won the elections. But reformist hopes gave way to an if anything more corrupt and unequal reality. "Embezzlement, graft, corruption, and malfeasance of public office permeated every branch of national, provincial, and municipal government. The public trust was transformed into a private till," Pérez concludes.³² When Batista led a second coup in 1952, there was little organized opposition.

The new military government also had little to offer in the way of solution to Cuba's deep structural problems: overdependence on a single crop (sugar), political and economic subordination to the United States, and grinding poverty and inequality. What it did provide was repression. Opposition was banned. The Communist Party, with which Batista had previously collaborated, was declared illegal in 1953, partly to adhere to U.S. Cold War policy. The Cuban labor movement was taken over by pro-government leaders. Other organizations, like Afro-Cuban clubs and societies, followed suit as collaboration became necessary for survival.

While all agree that Cubans of African descent were disproportionately represented among the country's poor, scholars have disagreed about the relationship of the Batista government with Cuba's black population. Black social organizations in the 1950s – like most formal organizations in Cuba – had been purged, coopted, and were essentially controlled by the government. Thus it is not surprising that they expressed support for Batista. Batista himself was of mixed race, and some of his conservative opponents attacked him on the basis of his race, using epithets like "el mulato malo" and the "black beast" to refer to him.³³

One could say that there were at least two Cubas in the 1950s. One was the 1.5 million who were jobless or who belonged to the rural poor, including landless workers and *campesinos* with small plots. These impoverished Cubans survived mostly on rice, a few beans, and sugar-water, creating the “naked children, their swollen stomachs testifying to an unbalanced diet and infection from parasitic worms” that sociologist Lowry Nelson found everywhere in rural Cuba in 1950. At the other end of the spectrum, the 900,000 or so wealthiest Cubans controlled 43 percent of the country’s income. These were the people who had money to spend on frequent shopping jaunts to Miami, luxurious, air conditioned homes, and even mausoleums complete with “elevators, air conditioners, and telephones” to make sure they continued to enjoy a high level of comfort in the afterlife. In between, another 3.5 million struggled to make ends meet. Cuba’s close integration with the U.S. economy meant that almost everything Cubans bought was imported from the United States, and the cost of living was as high or higher than in the United States. But Cuban wages were much lower, and Cubans had none of the social services and guarantees that U.S. citizens enjoyed.³⁴ In many ways, the country was ripe for revolution.

Revolution: A War, or a Process?

A song by Carlos Puebla, a troubadour who chronicled the events of the early revolutionary years, captures some of the heady optimism of the revolutionary victory and its rejection of the past:

They thought they could go on forever here, earning their 100% profits
 With their apartment houses, and leaving the people to suffer.
 And go on cruelly conspiring against the people
 To continue exploiting them... And then Fidel arrived!
 The party was over:
 The Comandante arrived and ordered it to stop!

Many of the actors and events in Cuba’s revolutionary history have been elevated to mythical status, not only in Cuba, but around the world. In 2000, *Time Magazine* named Che Guevara as one of the 100 most important figures of the previous century. “His figure stares out at us from coffee mugs and posters, jingles at the end of key rings and jewelry, pops up in rock songs and operas and art shows,” *Time* noted.³⁵ In Cuba, it is impossible to pass a day without confronting Che’s image. Schoolchildren chant “¡Seremos como el Che!” – we will be like Che – to launch the



Figure 1.2 Print by Cuban artist Sandra Ramos, “Seremos como el Che” (We will be like Che). *Source:* Sandra Ramos, 1993, “Seremos como el Che.” Etching/aquatint 40 × 50 cm. © Sandra Ramos

school day (Figure 1.2).³⁶ The United States has its American Revolution, Declaration of Independence, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Statue of Liberty as symbols of what many believe to be the essence of the country and its national identity. Cuba elevates figures from its nineteenth-century revolutionary war against Spain to heroic status, and it does the same with many of the people and events central to the 1959 Revolution. None quite reaches the iconic status of José Martí, whose bust is ubiquitous in public places and whose name graces numerous institutions. But the leaders of the 1959 Revolution have also achieved outsized status in Cuba.

Che Guevara became the most mythologized leader for several reasons. Unlike the other revolutionary leaders, he was not Cuban. Rather, he was a Marxist physician from Argentina, who left his country to devote his life to the revolutionary cause. He was also something of a revolutionary philosopher, leaving his mark on Marxist thought with his ideas about guerrilla warfare and, even more, about the goals and nature of socialism. He was the architect of some of the most radical and utopian

economic reforms implemented in Cuba in the early 1960s, when it seemed to many that virtually anything was possible. He also came to symbolize the Revolution's commitment to internationalism, to solidarity with revolutionary movements from Africa to Latin America. Finally, he died a martyr, trying to bring his revolutionary theories to the mountains of Bolivia, in 1967. Thus his image has forever remained associated with the sense of infinite possibility of the early days of the Revolution, rather than with the compromises made through the decades of revolutionary power.

Behind the various heroes are the organizations and movements they participated in or led, and the many others whose work, and names, did not make it into the history books. The July 26th Movement that initiated a revolutionary war against the Batista government in 1953, a year after the coup, and led the final victory march into Havana on New Year's Eve, 1958, brought together a diverse and complex set of leaders and organizations.

The group took its name from its first action: the July 26th, 1953 attack on the Moncada Barracks in eastern Cuba that initiated the uprising against Batista. Fidel Castro, who led the attack, like most of the other predominantly young men who joined him, was involved with the student movement and the Ortodoxo Party, founded in 1947 by former student leader Eduardo Chibás to resurrect the ideals of the 1933 reform movements. "The Moncada showed us the road to follow," Carlos Puebla sang, "And since that great example, for us it is always the 26th."³⁷

The plan was to take the barracks, and call upon the population to rise up in rebellion. It was a miserable failure in military terms. The attack was repelled, and 61 out of the 160 or so attackers were killed. Many of the others were captured on the spot or, like Fidel, shortly after escaping the scene. Cuba's Communist Party condemned the attack as "adventurism guided by bourgeois misconceptions" and for suffering "lack of theoretical cohesion and ideology."³⁸

But as Puebla's lyrics suggest, Moncada came to occupy an exalted spot in revolutionary historiography as symbolizing the beginning of a complete break with Cuba's past. For its audacity, its youthfulness, and its sheer drama, as well as for launching Fidel Castro's long career as a revolutionary, the meaning of Moncada has expanded over the years. Even the bullet holes in the building have been recreated and maintained as a tourist attraction. In a further symbolic gesture, the barracks were converted, after the revolutionary victory, into an educational complex.

From prison, Fidel penned his own defense. He freely admitted his participation in the attack, but turned the speech into a wide-ranging

denunciation of the Batista regime and defense of the right to resist illegitimate authority, citing everything from Cuba's 1940 Constitution to Montesquieu, St. Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther. The U.S. Declaration of Independence, he reminded the court, declared that a government's authority rested on the consent of the governed. "Condemn me – it does not matter!" he concluded stirring. "History will absolve me."³⁹

The document also outlined a revolutionary project. Castro appealed to Cubans who were unemployed, to the *campesinos* and farm laborers, and to the urban professionals for whom political corruption closed all opportunity. He laid out the five "revolutionary laws" that the Moncada attackers intended to implement: restoration and implementation of the 1940 Constitution, an agrarian reform putting land in the hands of those who tilled it, obligation of employers to share profits with workers, guaranteed markets for small sugar farmers, and confiscation of all enterprises obtained through fraud and corruption. All of these revolutionary laws, he emphasized, were based on the Constitution itself, which restricted large landholdings and provided labor rights.

It was a program that could unify Cuba's fragmented opposition – but during most of the 1950s, various organizations and ideologies competed for the population's support in bringing about political change. Some advocated armed uprising, while others, like the now-banned Communist Party, believed that the organized labor movement must be the chief protagonist. It was not until 1958 that the July 26th Movement emerged as the conclusive leader of the struggle. "To reach January 1st, 1959," Julia Sweig suggests, "the 26th of July not only had to mount a two-year military campaign [two years, because it began in 1956 when Castro returned from exile] but also a political campaign against many of the forces that were also seeking an end to the Batista regime."⁴⁰ In a way, it's a backwards-looking history that now proclaims the Moncada attack as the first shot of the Revolution. At the time, it appeared to be one more crazy, failed scheme.

If the Moncada attack came to symbolize the opening of the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro's return to the island after being released from prison and sent into exile in Mexico, with some 80 other revolutionaries on the yacht *Granma* in 1956, constitutes the second act. The *Granma* today rests proudly in Havana's Museo de la Revolución, and Cuba's main daily newspaper, the official organ of the Communist Party's Central Committee, takes its name from the boat.⁴¹

As a military expedition, however, the *Granma* landing was not much more successful than the Moncada attack. An uprising planned in the city of Santiago to coincide with the boat's arrival was quickly crushed,

and government forces greeted the *Granma* as it landed and succeeded in killing most of the 82 would-be rebels. Fidel and his brother Raúl Castro, along with Che Guevara, escaped into the Sierra Maestra mountains of eastern Cuba. “They thought they could go on, swallowing up more and more land,” sang Carlos Puebla, “without even knowing that there in the Sierra, the future was dawning.”⁴²

The mountains of eastern Cuba proved fertile ground for rebellion. Since colonial times they had harbored their share of outlaws, squatters, and rebels.⁴³ The expansion of the U.S.-dominated sugar plantation economy into eastern Cuba during the early twentieth century only increased the ranks of the dispossessed and the discontented.

The rural rebellion has held the place of pride in Cuban historiography. Che Guevara’s *Guerrilla Warfare* promoted and popularized the idea of the *foco* – the theory that a small group of dedicated guerrilla fighters could set off a mass uprising through spectacular acts, and that peasant uprising was the key to revolution in Latin America. The sierra strategy was to defeat Batista’s army in the countryside.

One reason that the sierra became so important in Cuban historiography of the Revolution is because of how it shaped revolutionary ideology and programs. Leaders like Fidel Castro and Che Guevara were fighting for radical change before they spent time in the sierra. But it was during those sierra years that the goals of the July 26th Movement developed and crystallized. “Among the factors influencing the development of the post-revolutionary health ideology, the single most important was the guerrillas’ confrontation with the abject poverty and enormous health problems of the rural population,” Julie Feinsilver argues.⁴⁴ Rural poverty had to do with lack of money, but it also had to do with lack of jobs, lack of social services, and lack of education. From an urban, middle class vantage point, it was not so easy to see the deeply imbedded, structural nature of rural poverty. Living with the rural poor was a consciousness-raising experience. Two key aspects of the later revolutionary program grew from the sierra: one, the need for a fundamental redistribution of resources that focused on the countryside; and two, the need for nation-building and consciousness-raising, by bringing urban Cubans face to face with the realities of rural poverty.

The sierra was also important to the revolutionary ideology that linked the 1950s uprising directly to the failed struggles for national independence and social justice of the past. Eastern Cuba was where the War of Independence had begun, where it had radicalized, and where the Cuban cause found its “first and most ardent supporters.”⁴⁵ The July 26th Movement aimed to fulfill the project that José Martí and so many others

had died for. In 1898, U.S. occupation forces prevented the Cuban rebel army from entering the eastern capital of Santiago. “What happened in 1895 will not happen again,” Fidel proclaimed on the verge of entering Santiago on December 31, 1958. “This time the *mambises* will advance on Santiago de Cuba!”⁴⁶

Still, the sierra may have been less key to the Revolution in military terms than the historiography has suggested. Recently historians have turned to the urban organizations and emphasized their important role in the July 26th Movement. The *llano* (plains, in contrast to the sierra or mountains) strategy aimed to force Batista’s resignation through urban insurrection. Julia Sweig argues that from 1957–58 the urban underground wing of the Movement, led by middle-class youth and focusing on acts of sabotage leading up to a general strike, held center stage in Cuba’s revolutionary war. It was only after the general strike planned for April, 1958 failed that Fidel and Che’s sierra movement emerged preeminent in the revolutionary coalition.⁴⁷ Lillian Guerra argues that the mythical status accorded to the struggle in the *sierra* was part of a move by Fidel and his trusted circle to consolidate power by sidelining urban radicals and their well-organized movements.⁴⁸

Curiously, a U.S. journalist, writing for the *New York Times*, gave Fidel Castro’s sierra guerrillas’ revolt an unexpected boost and contributed to the sierra’s mythmaking qualities. *Times* reporter Herbert L. Matthews travelled into the sierra to interview Fidel in February, 1957, just months after the failed *Granma* expedition. His explosive report appeared on the front page of the *Times* and brought Castro into U.S. living rooms. “He has strong ideas of liberty, democracy, social justice, the need to restore the Constitution, to hold elections,” Matthews reported. Another *Times* reporter would later dub Matthews “the man who invented Fidel.”⁴⁹

Until March of 1958, the United States stood behind its ally Batista, supplying his government with arms and ammunition. Just as the rebels were unifying and gaining strength, the government lost its most important pillar of support when the United States cut off military aid. What Batista hoped would be a final offensive against the rebels in the summer of 1958 failed, and the rebel counteroffensive that began in August proved inexorable. Batista’s army, though large and well equipped, was poorly trained and poorly motivated. As 1958 drew to a close, the rebel armies took city after city and moved in on the capital, as the United States scrambled ineffectually to derail a July 26th victory or to impose an alternative that they believed would be more amenable to U.S. control.⁵⁰

Much ink has been spent in the United States trying to pinpoint when, exactly, the Cuban Revolution became a socialist revolution, or when

Fidel Castro became a Communist. It's important to remember that Communist and other Marxist political parties and organizations were active in Latin America throughout the twentieth century. The Communist parties were generally those that allied with the Comintern, while other independent Marxist parties and organizations followed different leaders, methods, and goals. Despite U.S. preoccupation with Communism, the Soviet Union and the Comintern generally did not support the idea of armed revolution in Latin America, and they did not support the revolution in Cuba in the 1950s. Soviet-aligned parties like the PCC (which renamed itself the Partido Socialista Popular [Popular Socialist Party or PSP] in 1944) were involved in labor organizing, and often in electoral politics, but generally not in armed resistance. The PSP was a late and reluctant participant in the July 26th Coalition that led Cuba's armed revolution, joining it only in the summer of 1958, when the fall of the Batista regime was virtually assured.

Much more important to Latin America's revolutionary movements has been the ideology and legacy of Che Guevara. Mexican commentator Jorge Castañeda, author of a popular study of the Latin American Left as well as a biography of Che Guevara, argues that Che's legacy for Latin America lies primarily in his commitment to revolutionary violence and guerrilla warfare, and in the obstacles that his larger-than-life romanticism places in the way of more "modern" leftist alternatives.⁵¹ In this perspective, Che and his Marxist thought have only served to lead many Latin Americans – both would-be revolutionaries, and even more so, those unwillingly caught up in their struggles – to their deaths.

But Che's legacy, and his place in the Cuban and the global popular imagination, go beyond his military feats and his theorizing about guerrilla warfare. Just as important was his reformulation of socialist ideas. In his many and well-translated writings, Che argued that Communism could not be reduced to a mere reformation of the economy. Rather, "Communism is a phenomenon of consciousness" – a means of overcoming alienation, of creating a "new man." "I am not interested in dry economic socialism," Che wrote. "We are fighting against misery, but we are also fighting against alienation ... Marx was preoccupied both with economic factors and with their repercussions on the human spirit. If communism isn't interested in this too, it may be a method of distributing goods, but it will never be a revolutionary way of life."⁵²

Cuban historian and philosopher Juan Antonio Blanco (who now teaches at Miami-Dade College) echoed this strain in Che's thought in an interview in 1993: "Che's criticism of the Soviet Union and the socialist

camp was that they were obsessed with the economic construction of socialism and that they were disregarding the moral and spiritual factors of socialist societies. Che once said in an interview that he was not interested in economic socialism. If you disregard the spiritual factors and only attempt to deal with economic factors, you are not going to get rid of alienation. For both Che and Fidel, socialism was not simply a matter of developing a new way of distribution. It was a question of freeing people from alienation at the same time.”⁵³

The idea of the *hombre nuevo* or New Man found strong echoes in alternative and revolutionary movements around the world, even after the idea of guerrilla warfare had faded. Historian Van Gosse has argued that the New Left in the United States took more than a little inspiration from Cuba’s attempt to create a new, humane form of socialism.⁵⁴ From the Counterculture of the 1960s to the New Age movements of the 1990s, critiques of the spiritual and human poverty of capitalism and materialism referred to Che’s positions. Most recently, President Hugo Chávez in Venezuela announced the country’s commitment to creating the *hombre nuevo* there: “The old values of individualism, capitalism and egoism must be demolished,” he declared.⁵⁵

Although public U.S. pronouncements on the Cuban Revolution emphasized the issue of “Communism,” a close look at internal U.S. government correspondence at the time shows a somewhat different concern. In the early years of the Revolution the issues of Soviet influence, human rights, or military threat to the United States rarely surface in U.S. diplomatic correspondence. Instead, what the State Department and the diplomats on the ground worried about was what kind of economic policies Cuba was going to pursue, and in particular, how U.S. businesses in Cuba would be affected. Further, they were quite concerned about how the Cuban example might inspire other Latin American countries to attempt similar economic transformations to the detriment of U.S. investors. As J. C. Hill of the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs at the State Department put it in September, 1959, “There are indications that if the Cuban Revolution is successful other countries in Latin America and perhaps elsewhere will use it as a model and we should decide whether or not we wish to have the Cuban Revolution succeed.”⁵⁶

When Fidel Castro’s troops made their triumphant entrance into Havana on New Year’s Day, 1959, the war was over, but the revolution was just about to begin. In Cuba, “the Revolution” refers to a 50-year process of consciously creating a new society with many different phases, twists and turns.