

A history of fidel castro history essay



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Fidel Castro was and remains a divisive figure in world politics. Through a long revolution he created a political party built on both Marx and Lenin. It turned Cuba in the context of the times from a poor miserable country to a world competitor. The policies that got put in place were quite different compared to those that other socialist states implemented and he has altered socialism to stay in power for many generations. This essay will analyze how Castro combines two ideological views, taking what he feels is most important about both to create his idea of the perfect political platform. Also showing how communism made it difficult for Cuba to create and keep relations with many countries. Having almost impossible goals for a communist country and being doubted by much of the world he introduces healthcare, education, women's rights and many other freedoms and expressions. By contrasting both how some say, how drastically Cuba improved and deteriorated from before the revolution to after, it will paint the controversial black and white picture for Fidel Castro's overall success or failure of implementing his form of communism in Cuba.

The Revolution and Rise to Power

Fidel Castro with the 26th of July Movement led a revolution that overthrew President Fulgencio Batista of Cuba on January 1, 1959. This was when they won the revolution but it actually all started six years earlier with an initial assault. Fidel led their first attack with a brigade of poorly armed and trained rebels to attack the Moncada barracks in Santiago and the Bayamo barracks on July 26, 1953. This attack was not a success, there is still a debate of the exact number of deaths but according to Castro of the 111 men who had taken part 69 died. Only 8 died in the actual crossfire while the rest were

hunted down by the army or rural guards³. Almost directly after the assault a majority of the attackers were taken captive and tortured in various locations. Castro and a small group of survivors which included Raul were not in the group who was captured directly after. They rather spent 6 harsh days in the mountains running and starving until captured. Castro was sentenced to fifteen years after an incredible and long speech to the court while Raul got thirteen years. While in prison Castro spent his days and nights reading and studying many topics but mainly political ideologies⁴. Luckily only two years later due to political pressure on Batista all military prisoners were freed including Fidel and Raul. As soon as possible they quickly fled to Mexico with the other exiles and began to prepare their revolution to take down Batista. They got special training by a Spanish civil war leader of the republican forces named Alberto Bayo. Also in this time he came to know Ernesto "Che" Guevara who was a proponent in guerrilla warfare and they joined forces⁵. Ernesto would become a very strong force in shaping Castro's political belief, saying that the only solution would be a violent revolution.

Finding Political focus

The foundations of the Cuban Marxist state evolved to involve Marxist beliefs as well as the ideas of Lenin. Castro learned from Marx and Engels and also Lenin many different concepts that shaped his political focus. From Marx and Engels and the Communist Manifesto he discovered that a small portion of the ruling class always breaks away and forms a revolutionary class. So he discovered many methods that would stop this from occurring. From Lenin on the other hand he learned how to blend theory and praxis⁶. This is meaning that he used Lenin's ideas of how to go from the theory of

communism to actually putting it into practice. With these two role models in mind he formed a pragmatic or practical, not theoretical, form of Third World Marxism. When the revolution started to unfold, Fidel indicated that Marxism means a lot more than just theory or philosophy. He thought that it serves more as a guide to daily life for problems that humanity has faced since medieval times⁷. On December 1, 1961, Castro said “ I must say with full satisfaction and confidence, that I am a Marxist-Leninist, and I shall be a Marxist Leninist until the last day of my life” ⁸. Castro thought that to achieve communism you need to evolve from underdevelopment. Meaning that you cannot be a third world country you need to be able to compete in international markets. It is necessary to construct communist consciousness at the same rate as you would develop the rate of production.

Democracy, Human Rights, and freedom of expression

Castro believes in unitary democracy rather than adversary democracy.

Unitary democracy is a government system in which all governmental power is vested in a central government and from that the regional and local governments obtain their powers. Now on the other hand, Castro does not trust adversary democracy that was strongly promoted by the liberals because he has a lot of doubt about the representative institutions. His perspective is that it only tends to the needs of the most powerful people and sectors in society⁹. There are many critics of Cuba that say that Fidel Castro is a hypocrite and that he favours the most powerful people. They back this up by saying that he has failed to bring in human rights after the revolution as he promised the people. Now this is very controversial because an important thing to remember is that human rights under socialism are

significantly different than those under capitalism. Socialism says that human rights are what people have by virtue of their humanity. Castro explains this by asking questions such as, why should some people eat till full and still have left over's while others starve? Why should some people go incredibly poor while others are excessively rich? This is stating that human rights mean that everyone of every color and race should have equal opportunity in the world¹⁰.

In Cuba after the revolution there was censorship placed on certain types of publications. The censorship was not as wide spread as the Americans seemed to portray it to be, but definitely was present. Anyone in Cuba could read or write almost anything they please from Mein Kampf because believe that students learning about history need to learn about Hitler and his Nazism. Even religious books such as the Bible and Quran were allowed for analysis and books that analyse capitalism or socialism are encouraged. All that's forbidden is any type of publication that condemns socialism or the revolution from the perspective of a capitalist¹¹. This is one of the attempts Castro made to make sure that people do not break away from revolutionary class, with ideas that capitalism and democracy are better. Now from the eyes of any democratic citizen they would say that there should be no limit on what they are allowed to read and form opinions about. It makes many Cubans think there is something that the communist are hiding from them. It starts to make many of the wonder if maybe it will offer them a better lifestyle then being just barely above the poverty line.

Antonio Gramsci was an Italian who did a lot of things ranging from writer, politician, linguist, political theorist and much more. He came up with the

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idea to use revolutionary struggle to strengthen the cultural structure. He thought that you can unify society by building a revolutionary culture that appeals to everyone¹². Castro used this idea and was very successful with it with the Cuban people. He was so triumphant with this that proportionately more Cubans participate in cultural activities than any other Latin American country. In doing this Fidel Castro decided to add sports to Gramsci's list of cultural activities. These activities already included art, dance, theatre, music, literature, and crafts.

Success of revolution?

Before the revolution

Before the revolution in Cuba a majority of the population was in complete misery. There were an approximate 600, 000 Cubans out of work and 500, 000 farmers living in small shacks at the best. A large portion of the people only worked 4 months of the year and tried not to starve the rest. The average national annual income was only \$91. 25 (US). This caused infant mortality to be 60 per 1, 000 born and also life expectancy which was 59 for males. Only 2% had running water and 43% were completely illiterate. Also, women made up only a tiny portion of the workforce, an estimated 9. 8% and many were only doing degrading low paying jobs such as prostitution¹³. During these times Batista was Cuba's President, Dictator, and close ally to the United States. Batista was a Capitalist and a huge admirer of the United States who turned very corrupt and was incredibly disliked by a majority of Cuba.

After Revolution

One of the greatest achievements of the revolution was the healthcare and education changes. These happened drastically fast and with high level of success. According to the World Health Organization in 2006 the average Cuban will live longer than the average American. Also the Cuban doctor patient ratio is 170: 1 in 2008 which is one of the best in the world¹⁴. Just to show how impressive there healthcare is, when the earthquake hit Pakistan in 2005 Cuba sent thousands of doctors that were able to see hundreds of thousands of patients. Fidel states that since the economy grew at a rate of 4 percent a year for 30 years. This made it possible to bring some increases in healthcare personal, staff, infrastructure and technology. Just in the province of Santiago in comparison from before the revolution to after the increase is extraordinary. Health facilities went from 33 to 127, doctors increased from 180 to 1470 and nurses as well went from 76 to 4529¹⁵. Now education increased at the same fast pace, almost directly after the revolution. They started by renovating old buildings and vacant hotels and casinos into schools. Then in time new buildings were constructed for the children. By June 1961 all the schools in Cuba were nationalised which intended to form a nationally coordinated strategy to improve education. Another reason for nationalizing the schools was to eliminate the cultural hold of the Catholic Church was running most of the private schools. Within only three years the numbers in primary education had risen by 80%¹⁶.

Also after the revolution, there were many other fields that Castro got straight to work trying to improve the life of the ordinary Cuban. Such as, road construction programs were created to provide employment and better

infrastructure. Telephone companies owned by American ITT and other companies were taken over and the rates were reduced. In 1959 the first Agrarian Reform Laws were implemented in Cuba. These laws took land owned by US companies and redistributed it to small farmers and rural workers who had no land. After the revolution the US stopped purchasing the sugar so Castro had to find some new connections since sugar was one of the main exports. He decided to make an alliance with the Soviet Union. They started off trading sugar for oil and then in time weapons, technology, and military assistance to Cuba. The pact with Soviet Union made the country prosper more financially than ever. The Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) which was created in 1960 has been very important in the advancement of gender equalization and health improvements¹⁷. Fifteen years later in 1975 the family code was then established which made men and women equal in law. Now today 50% of workforce is women including a majority of the medical and scientific fields being dominated by women. Also in 2007 26% of the national assembly was women.

Not everyone thought the results of the revolution were for the best for the people. That is why millions of Cubans left Cuba and set sail for the Florida coast only 90 miles away. Many of the exiles left due to before the revolution they had money and wealth and now were living only just above the poverty line. Cuba's revolutionary governments wanted to turn around the socioeconomic status quo to benefit their rural and urban poor. They did this by nationalizing almost all businesses, expropriating land and asserting state control over sugar mills, oil refineries, utilities, and transportation infrastructure¹⁸. There were two main waves of people migrating to the

Miami from Cuba. The first was immediately after the revolution where the people closest to Batista and his strong followers fled. There was an estimated 200, 000 that fled just after the revolution. Then in 1962 during the Bay of Pigs incident the immigration was put on hold until 1965. Then after mass amounts of nationalization occurred it forced many other wealthy Cubans or middle class professionals to depart as well. At this time Cuban authorities decided to allow people to leave to the USA. The American and Cuban authorities made an agreement to a program that would have twice daily " freedom flights" from Miami to Havana. By 1968 all opposition of the revolution was either in Miami or neutralized or in jail¹⁹. Even though Castro was scared to lose many trained professionals he was more scared of a counter revolution. In around 1972 the flights ended and 250, 000 more Cubans were exiled. The US government played huge roles during the years of shipping and flying to Florida. They provided liberal visa entry policies, resettlement assistance, and job training. Also the Catholic Church set up a program called operation" peter pan" where Cuban families can send children to live with host families until they are able to come to the states themselves. Even though there were good intentions this program separated some families for decades and some to this day still don't know their parents²⁰.

While the United States may have been on bad terms with Cuba since the minute Castro came into power, does not mean that Canada was in the same boat. The states had political problems with Cuba ever since it became a communist country. They have always refused to do business with a country that stands for incredibly opposite provisions as they do. Events such as

Cuban missile crisis and the Bay of Pigs only made matters worse. Now Canada seemed to reach out during these times and try to create a connection with Cuba to prosper economically. They figured that if the US was not willing to create ties with Cuba to export many of their goods then Canada would. Trade for the last couple years between Cuba and Canada has been an estimated 1 billion dollars and 22% of Cuban goods are exported to Canada. A majority of the goods that Canada exports to Cuba are oil, food and machinery. It was not until 2000 when the U. S allowed Cuba to purchase some food products, giving that they pay cash. Cuba started to purchase food a year later, when they were in dire need of food from the damage caused by hurricane Michele²¹.

Fall of Soviet Union

After the collapse of communist states in the late 1980s and then the Soviet Union its self in 1991 it gave Cuba a harsh blow economically. One of the main ways that Cuba stayed alive was due largely to its Soviet Union ties. Cuba figured that as long as they kept friends in high places in the Soviet Union they would get some type of support due to the Cuban-Soviet trade pact. But by the end of December 1991 all the friends that Cuba had in Russia were no longer in power and the pact was meaningless. It was not much longer till basically all Soviet personal had left the island. In June 1993, the last soviet troops a brigade of 500 men from the Motorized Infantry Brigade left who had been there since 1962²². A speech that Castro gave to the National Assembly he described the loss of trade and aid as “ Treacherous and devastating.” ²³ The GDP from 1989 to 1993 fell a drastic 35 percent, while the export of Cuban goods also fell but by a more

horrifying 79 percent. The 1990s were incredibly hard times for Cuba and many sacrifices had to happen for the country. They put in place a policy that was written when Castro feared the US was going to put a naval brigade around Cuba. This policy was called The Special Period and it entailed some drastic measures and sacrifices. Reduction of food subsidies, public expenditure cuts, fuel and electricity cuts, farmers were encouraged to use oxen rather than tractors and even social programs were suspended. Basically nothing was done by the Cuban Communist Party that was actually noticeable to fix the economy. It was near impossible for Cuba to compete on international markets from nickel to pharmaceutical products.

There was some compromising that Cuba allowed during the harsh times to attempt to achieve a new international reality. The National Assembly of Peoples Power, which is the legislative parliament of the Republic of Cuba and the supreme body of State power. It approved a new constitution that would replace the old soviet era document of 1976. There were a few main focuses of the new constitution. For one they no longer stood for the atheistic views of the Cuban state and allowed freedom of religion. Next the language of Marxism- Leninism and the communist party were toned down. More attention was then given to the Communist Party as the party of national unity, more for Jose Marti rather than Lenin. The last part of the constitution was to try and improve the investment possibilities. It recognized the ability of foreign joint ventures to legally own property. Cuba soon declared that many parts of the economy are open for foreign investment, as long as the state owned over 50% in each venture²⁴. Fidel was very nervous to alter their political views towards more capitalism.

Mining, tourism, energy, telecommunications and many more were the first to open to foreign investment.

The harsh times lasted until the beginning of the new millennium where they found the slightest boost economically and politically. They got this improvement through the changing composition of international geopolitics. This was when old powers such as Russia and new rising powers such as China, Brazil and India increasingly challenged the economic dominance of the US. Due to this new change, Cuba was now able to trade on its relatively high level of development in areas such as medicine and biotechnology.

Fidel believes that Cuba has not developed as quickly as he had hoped. Even though there has been an incredible amount of advances, there is too much trade with capitalist powers. Cuba will not truly prosper until capitalism crashes and Cuban products are priced internationally according to the labour required to produce them. Since the likelihood of capitalism falling in the near future is so slim, the dream of social change does not lie in the near future. For some ideologies may seem perfect on paper or in theory but when you attempt to put into practice, they can turn into a muddy affair.

End Notes

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