

History of the Cuban Revolution of 1959

The history of the Cuban Revolution is as contested as the island itself. To understand it, one must balance the stories told by those who fought in the Sierra Maestra with the recollections of the many who fled Havana for Miami. Between these narratives lies a tangled truth: a revolution born of national aspirations, hardened by Cold War realities, and shadowed by foreign influence.

Batista's Cuba and the American Connection

By the 1940s, Cuba had enjoyed brief democratic openings. But Fulgencio Batista, who had first risen to prominence in the 1933 “Sergeants’ Revolt,” soon dominated the political stage. In 1952, when it became clear he would lose elections, Batista seized power in a coup. His regime quickly aligned itself with U.S. economic and political interests. Washington recognized Batista within days, valuing his staunch anti-communism at the dawn of the Cold War.[1]

Economically, American corporations controlled much of Cuba’s sugar, utilities, and infrastructure. But it was in Havana’s casinos and nightclubs where U.S. influence was most visible. Organized crime figures like Meyer Lansky forged a partnership with Batista, transforming Havana into a glittering playground for tourists, gamblers, and mobsters. Batista’s government took a cut of the profits, while Lansky’s syndicate operated casinos with near impunity.[2] For many Cubans, this corruption symbolized the loss of sovereignty and the degradation of the nation.

Seeds of Revolution

Amid growing resentment, a generation of young Cubans sought change. Fidel Castro, a lawyer from eastern Cuba, had already attempted a failed assault on the Moncada Barracks in 1953. Imprisoned and later exiled to Mexico, he regrouped with a small band of revolutionaries, including Ernesto “Che” Guevara, an Argentine doctor radicalized by his travels,[3] and Camilo Cienfuegos, a charismatic young Cuban with deep roots among the working class.

Their vision was not uniform. Fidel dreamed of national independence and justice under a strong central leadership. Che Guevara viewed the Cuban struggle as a spark for continental revolution, an anti-imperialist war stretching beyond Cuba’s borders. Camilo Cienfuegos, beloved by peasants and soldiers alike, seemed less ideological—he embodied the warmth, courage, and humility that made the revolution a human cause.[4] Other figures, such as the lesser-known Uber Matos, a schoolteacher turned guerrilla commander, also contributed in critical ways. Matos, however, would later denounce the revolution as it turned toward communism, a reminder of the internal fractures from the very beginning.[5]

The Guerrilla War

Landing from the yacht *Granma* in 1956, Fidel’s group was nearly annihilated. Yet through resilience, propaganda, and local support, they rebuilt in the Sierra Maestra mountains. The

guerrillas waged a campaign of ambushes, sabotage, and rural mobilization. Radio Rebelde, broadcasting from the mountains, carried the message of resistance across the island.[6]

The revolutionaries depended heavily on the loyalty of campesinos, who provided food, shelter, and recruits. Batista's military, demoralized and corrupt, increasingly relied on repression—bombing villages, torturing prisoners, and alienating the population.[7] By 1958, support for the guerrillas had spread into urban underground networks, unions, and student organizations.

Collapse of Batista's Regime

The final months of 1958 saw coordinated offensives. Camilo Cienfuegos and Che Guevara led pivotal columns across central Cuba, winning victories in places like Santa Clara. Batista's army crumbled, plagued by desertions and lack of legitimacy. On January 1, 1959, Batista fled Havana for the Dominican Republic, later settling in Spain. The revolutionaries marched triumphantly into Havana, welcomed by massive crowds.[8]

Diverging Paths: Revolutionaries and Refugees

For revolutionaries, this was a victory of dignity over corruption, sovereignty over foreign domination. Fidel spoke of restoring the 1940 Constitution, of agrarian reform, and of ending dependency on the United States.[9] Camilo Cienfuegos, with his wide grin and cowboy hat, became a symbol of the revolution's joy. But his sudden disappearance in October 1959, when his small plane vanished over the ocean, created enduring mystery and suspicion. Official accounts blamed an accident, but some exiles whispered of foul play, seeing Camilo as too popular, too independent.[10]

Che Guevara, meanwhile, pressed for deeper radicalization—agrarian collectivization, industrial nationalization, and alignment with socialist states. Uber Matos, once a respected comandante, resigned in protest over the revolution's communist direction. Fidel had him arrested and sentenced to two decades in prison,[11] which exiles in Miami cited as evidence that the revolution betrayed its democratic promises.

From exile communities in the United States, especially in Miami, the revolution was remembered differently. Refugees recalled lost businesses, confiscated properties, and the silencing of dissent.[12] For them, Fidel was not a liberator but a dictator who substituted Batista's corruption for ideological tyranny. The warmth of Camilo became a memory of "what might have been," a road not taken when Cuba's revolution veered toward Moscow.

U.S.–Cuban Relations and the Mafia's Fall

The revolution immediately threatened U.S. interests. Agrarian reform expropriated large estates, many owned by Americans. The casinos and hotels of Havana, once run by Lansky and other mafia figures under Batista's patronage, were shut down or nationalized. What had been a Las Vegas of the Caribbean was dismantled almost overnight.[13] For Cuban exiles, the

closure of this corrupt nexus was less important than the broader reality: the revolution had cut ties with the United States, the island's economic lifeline.

In Washington, skepticism turned to hostility. By 1960, the U.S. imposed an embargo on Cuban sugar and trade.[14] Fidel turned to the Soviet Union for support, sealing the island's alignment in the Cold War. The Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, organized by the CIA and carried out by Cuban exiles, ended in humiliation and cemented Fidel's anti-U.S. stance.[15] From then on, Cuban refugees carried two intertwined memories: the trauma of displacement and the conviction that their homeland had been captured by ideology and foreign power.

Remembering the Revolution

Today, the Cuban Revolution is remembered in multiple registers. For those who fought in the Sierra, it was a just war against tyranny, foreign domination, and organized crime. Fidel, Che, and Camilo remain heroes in Cuban state memory, their images plastered on murals and plazas. Camilo's absence is sanctified each October with pilgrimages to the sea. Che's portrait still hangs over Havana's Plaza de la Revolución, an icon of defiance.

Among Cuban exiles, the story is starkly different. In Miami, the revolution is mourned as the theft of a nation—where the dream of sovereignty was twisted into dictatorship, and where voices like Uber Matos's were silenced. The revolution is remembered less for toppling Batista than for driving hundreds of thousands from their homes.

Conclusion

The “real” history of the Cuban Revolution lies not in a single version but in the interplay of these memories. Batista's Cuba was indeed corrupt, beholden to U.S. business and mafia interests. The revolution that toppled him carried genuine aspirations for justice and independence. Yet as the revolution radicalized, internal dissent was crushed, alliances with Moscow hardened, and exile communities grew.

For Cubans on the island, the revolution remains a national milestone, for better or worse. For Cubans in exile, it is a wound that has not healed. What unites both stories is the sense that Cuba, caught between domestic ambitions and foreign powers, remains in search of its full sovereignty. The Revolution, in triumph and tragedy, is the defining chapter of that struggle.

References (selective)

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