

Introduction

ON JANUARY 1, 1959, the Cuban people ushered in the new year with unprecedented celebration. Fulgencio Batista, the nation's dictator who had taken power via a military coup in 1952, had fled the country during the pre-dawn hours, his government toppled by a revolutionary movement composed of an array of pro-democracy organizations. By the end of the struggle, the largest and most important of these organizations was the 26th of July Movement, headed by former student activist and lawyer Fidel Castro. The 26th of July had battled Batista from guerrilla bases in the Sierra Maestra Mountains of eastern Cuba as well as through organized political cells in the cities that, along with the other opposition groups, employed tactics ranging from public protests to unrelenting sabotage. Throughout the conflict the 26th of July had expertly courted the international press, thereby winning admirers and supporters from around the world who became both intrigued and enthralled by the Caribbean island nation's romantic, bearded mountain rebels. Other anti-Batista groups that had played a pivotal role in overthrowing the dictator, less interesting visually, were largely ignored by the international press. When Castro's victory column entered Havana a week after Batista's flight, the young leader—riding atop a tank as though in a modern-day Roman triumph—was exalted as a conquering hero by the domestic and international news media

and was cheered wildly by countless thousands packing the capital's streets, balconies, and rooftops. Cubans of all classes were eager for the Revolution to fulfill its promises of peace, prosperity, honest government, and, above all, a return to the democratic Constitution of 1940.

The nation Castro took over was among the most developed in Latin America. Its modern infrastructure was among the best in the region and its middle class the largest.¹ Cuba had also ranked highly in virtually every standard of living indicator, from nutrition, literacy, and health care to automobile ownership, telephone ownership, television ownership, and daily newspaper circulation.² The island's greatest deficiency, which everyone believed the democratic Revolution would ameliorate, was its often dysfunctional political life. Despite some previous success with democracy, a more recent history of political "gangsterism," public corruption, and military dictatorship had frustrated many Cubans to the point of political apathy and soured many well-meaning citizens on civic participation.³ Solving the political problems, it was hoped, would also allow the nation to address its other major challenge: the obvious disparity that existed in living standards between the cities and the countryside. Thus, longing for real democracy, the rule of law, honest government, and solutions to lingering social problems, the Cuban people looked hopefully to the Revolution and its larger-than-life leader.

Disappointment was not long in coming for pro-democracy Cubans. Although Castro filled his first government with well-known, anti-Batista liberals who possessed strong democratic credentials, real power lay with him and his inner circle. Among the Revolution's first moves was to abolish all political parties; the promised free elections, meanwhile, were postponed and then never held. In addition, Revolutionary tribunals were empowered soon after the takeover to convict alleged "war criminals" through show trials carried out with little or no regard for legal procedure and often before fiery crowds demanding "*iParedón!*" (the execution wall).⁴ The large number of highly publicized firing squad executions (as well as executions that were not quite as heavily publicized) shocked the democratic sensibilities of many in Cuba and brought condemnation from around the Americas. Then, within months, the first signs of Communist infiltration surfaced with

the arrival of individuals delivering Marxist instruction within the ranks of the Rebel Army. Soon, to the consternation of many, members of Cuba's Communist Party, which had played virtually no role in Batista's overthrow, began assuming important government positions.

Within months many of the liberals in the government, including the appointed president, Manuel Urrutia, had either broken with Castro or been purged by him. Although Castro would repeatedly deny during this period that he or his Revolution was Communist, it began to become obvious that the liberals had been used merely as a facade to give the leader time to consolidate his authority behind the scenes and to lay the groundwork for ushering Marxist rule into Cuba. By 1960 many of his former democratic allies, including commanders and veterans from the war against Batista, had launched a number of movements to "save" the democratic Revolution from becoming a Communist dictatorship under the young leader.

Any lingering questions as to the Revolution's ideological direction were answered in February 1960, with the arrival of a Soviet scientific exhibition in Havana and a visit from Soviet first deputy premier Anastas Mikoyan. Following the visit Cuba and the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations and forged close economic ties. In the months that followed the Castro regime abolished the free press (much of which had originally been openly supportive of his revolution), confiscated large sectors of the private economy, shut down or took over the island's independent professional organizations, ended the historic autonomy of the University of Havana, crushed the independence of labor organizations, harassed the Catholic Church and its adherents, and brutally suppressed all rival political movements. The regime's diatribes against the United States, as well as its favorable pronouncements regarding Communism, increased in frequency.

As the Revolution's turn to Communist dictatorship unfolded, the democratic opposition to Castro grew. The various and often divided pro-democracy groups began battling Castro's forces in the cities, towns, and countryside across Cuba. The regime, meanwhile, expanded its political police and, in September 1960, created the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs), a national block-by-block, building-by-building citizens' vigilance organization designed

to root out counterrevolutionary activity at the neighborhood level. A citizens' militia was also created to defend the Revolution against its enemies. Castro's pro-democracy opponents were soon packing the political prisons and increasingly becoming victims of the regime's firing squads.

In January 1961 Cuba and the United States broke off diplomatic relations. The prospect of having a Soviet ally in its backyard was, of course, unacceptable to the Americans. Several months prior to the official break, the U.S. government had started granting political and military support, as well as providing military training, to pro-democracy Cubans battling the regime. Their collaboration culminated in the Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961, which failed to oust Castro due to the sweeping, last-minute, and politically motivated changes to the military strategy imposed by the Kennedy White House. The invasion's failure allowed Castro to eliminate his remaining opposition and fully consolidate his power. Later that year he formally declared himself a Marxist-Leninist.

Cuban Refugee Waves Prior to 1980

Some scholars divide Castro-era immigration to the United States into distinct "waves." The First Wave brought more than 215,000 Cubans to the United States, mostly on commercial flights, between Batista's 1959 ouster and the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, when commercial flights between the two nations were banned.⁵ The largest number of Cuban exiles settled in Miami, Florida, the closest sizable American city to Cuba.

At the very beginning of this period, only a small number of Cubans—made up mostly of Batista associates who feared retribution—felt the need to flee the country.⁶ Indeed, in early 1959 few Cubans had reason to fear what was ostensibly a democratic revolution. When it became clear later that year and throughout 1960 that Castro was guiding Cuba toward Communist dictatorship, the number of Cubans choosing United States exile increased exponentially. It would swell after the failure of the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion. A disproportionate number (although by no means all) of the emigres at this stage were