

A History of the Mariel Boatlift

On April 1, 1980, Hector Sanyustiz stopped the bus he was driving in the residential area of Miramar in Havana. His heart pounded as he put his plan in motion. He looked at his companion Raúl, and four others entered the bus. A trickle of sweat dripped down his spine as he gripped the steering wheel and tested the acceleration. The engine revved to life.

Hector looked at his new arrivals. “Brace yourselves,” he said. Hector moved the gear shift into drive, and the bus plunged forward. He turned the wheel, hand over hand, and rammed deliberately against the gates of the Peruvian embassy. His intention was to evade the Cuban police, jump the fence, and seek political asylum. Cuban guards began shooting, injuring two of the asylum seekers and killing one of their own guards in the crossfire.

Hector was symbolic of a disillusioned generation born into the Cuban revolution that began in 1959 when Fidel Castro successfully established the first socialist state in the Western Hemisphere. After overthrowing Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista, Castro swiftly began to seize land and businesses and nationalize industry. On April 14, 1961, Castro declared Cuba a socialist state, and a few days later, on April 17, the United States launched the unsuccessful Bay of Pigs invasion.¹

Tensions continued to mount between the United States and Cuba, and on February 7, 1962, the United States enacted a trade embargo that

severed all economic and diplomatic relations with the island. The confrontation between the two countries took a turn for the worse in October 1962, when Cuba allowed the Soviet Union to place on its soil Soviet ballistic missiles aimed at the U.S. mainland. This confrontation ended thirteen days later when the Soviets pulled their missiles off the island, and the United States promised not to invade Cuba.

From 1962 to 1970 the newly established government consolidated power by eradicating almost all political opposition and banning private enterprise. Consequently, thousands of Cubans continued to leave the island into exile until approximately 1973, when those departures came to a complete standstill as Castro's government tried to prevent the massive drain of professionals and skilled workers.²

In an attempt to increase economic output, Castro focused most of Cuba's resources on its main export, sugarcane. However, the Cuban economy did not improve and was sent into its most notable freefall in 1970, after the failed *zafra de los diez millones*, or "ten-million-ton sugar harvest," when the Cuban government attempted to break all sugarcane production records, and it failed. In an effort to help its communist ally, the Soviet Union devised a plan to subsidize most of the Cuban economy that included purchasing Cuban sugar at above market price. However, the Cuban people continued to suffer food shortages through most of the 1970s with substantial rationing of even the most basic everyday necessities such as milk, rice, and beans.³

In the meanwhile, many of the exiles who had fled Cuba in the sixties and seventies enjoyed success in their adopted countries but had not been allowed to visit their homeland since their departure. Knowing full well that most of these Cubans were now much more financially stable than what the official government propaganda claimed, Castro schemed to improve the country's economy by establishing new relations with the United States and the Cuban exile community. The government began working toward this economic strategy by softening its confrontational tone with both the exiles and the United States.

In 1977, during the Carter presidency, both countries established Interests Sections, in lieu of embassies, in Havana and Washington, D.C. In cooperation with some of the exile leaders, Cuba hosted a dialogue with

the Cuban community abroad, the Cuban exiles who until then had been labeled as stateless and traitors. As a conciliatory gesture, in August 1979 the Cuban government released 2,400 political prisoners, most of whom agreed to go the United States. For the first time since 1959, the government allowed Cuban exiles, who until then had not been permitted to return to their country, to visit their relatives on the island without fear of persecution.⁴

This last concession was critical to the Cuban government's goal of injecting cash into its failing economy. Beginning in January 1979 and for approximately the next two years, more than 100,000 Cubans came back to their first homeland as tourists, for short visits that were controlled and paid for in dollars. During these brief stays they boasted of their achievements in the United States, illustrating those successes with photos of fancy cars, beautiful houses, and vacations around the world.

They also brought with them a lot of gifts. As Carlos Morales recounts in his interview in the documentary *Voices from Mariel*, "They went from being the so-called 'traitors' to becoming the 'givers,' Cuban Santas of sorts." The picture that the government had painted during twenty years of propaganda was redrawn. Many Cubans realized that life outside the island was not what the regime had depicted.

Cubans who had grown up with the revolution felt betrayed, and they began to seek ways to leave the island by any means necessary. One of them, Luis de la Paz, recalls in his interview that he felt cheated by what he was seeing. Many young Cubans also wondered how it was possible that these exiled Cubans, who until recently had been the enemy and so-called "traitors," could now go to the hotels and visit the tourist attractions. After all, these places were strictly forbidden to the average Cuban who had remained on the island and sacrificed for the revolution.

This situation prompted many Cubans to want to leave the country, even if escaping was their only option. Some Cubans fled on boats and makeshift rafts, sailing through the Gulf of Mexico. Others stowed away in the wheel wells of airplanes leaving the island, while others entered certain Latin American embassies that respected the right of political asylum. The most daring Cubans came up with stunts ranging from vaulting over fences with poles to crashing a vehicle through the gates of



Cubans at the Port of Mariel preparing to board the boats that would bring them to Key West, Florida, May 17, 1980. By permission of Susy Ferrer Aviles.

the embassies, like Sanyustiz did. These sometimes extreme tactics were often disparaged or used as propaganda by the Cuban government. In Hector Sanyustiz's case, the Cuban press hid the fact that the bullet that killed one of their guards was the result of friendly fire; instead, Sanyustiz and the other assailants were publicly accused of causing the death. The Cuban government asked the Peruvian embassy to return the "criminals" to face revolutionary justice. Ernesto Pinto Bazurco, the highest ranking Peruvian officer, who was serving in the absence of the Peruvian ambassador in Cuba, refused.⁵

On April 4, reacting to Bazurco's direct challenge of not returning those seeking exile, Fidel Castro withdrew all police protection from the Peruvian embassy. Believing that no other Cubans would dare to enter, Castro unwittingly unleashed a crisis. Just two days later, 10,856 people—mostly young adults, students, workers, and families, some with very small children and even infants—managed to cram into the quarters and gardens that surrounded the small mansion. Many more Cubans who wanted to enter the embassy were unable to do so, as the Cuban

government decided to reinstate the embassy protection and dispatched a police operation that prevented any new arrivals from sneaking into the already overcrowded compound.

Castro was bewildered by the situation, surprised that so many people wanted to leave the country. He called the Cubans inside the embassy “criminals” and “the scum of society.” To reinforce his words, he sent in his own government agents disguised as asylum seekers to create unrest. Approximately five days after the refugees had entered the embassy, the Cuban government distributed boxes of food to those crowded in the compound, and this gesture became yet another form of propaganda. The Cuban government distributed an insufficient number of food boxes, with the primary objective of filming the bickering that ensued among the hungry refugees over the meager rations. These images were broadcast on Cuban national TV and around the world to discredit and demoralize the refugees.

In an effort to control portrayals of the crisis, the Cuban authorities kept foreign reporters off the island by delaying visas for two weeks.



Overloaded boats leave the Port of Mariel to sail to Key West, May 17, 1980; the cement factory is visible in the background. By permission of Susy Ferrer Aviles.