

Cuba: Ten Years Old

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(Editor's note: On New Year's Day in 1959, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and their victorious guerrilla army strode into Havana. The day before, Fulgencio Batista, the ruthless dictator who had been the prime object of the political and military movement led by Fidel, fled in an airplane to the Dominican Republic, en route to Spain.

For the bearded men (*barbudos*) and their female *compañeras*, the march into Havana was both an end and a beginning. It was the end of a period of armed struggle for power, a fight launched on July 26, 1953, with an attack on one of Batista's army barracks. And it was the beginning of a new age—the ongoing Cuban revolution which was to take steps toward the construction of communism, the development of socialist man and the destruction of U.S. imperialism throughout the Americas.

On the occasion of the Tenth Anniversary of the victory of the Cuban Revolution, Liberation News Service staffer Allen Young offers this capsule history of the struggle for power of the Cubans, while LNS staffer and photographer Miriam Bokser is on her way to Havana to represent them in the anniversary festivities.)

Fidel Castro was, in many ways, typical of Havana university students. He came from a wealthy family. He was active in left-wing student politics. He had little to do with the Communist Party. He got a law degree and thereby won the right to be called "Doctor."

In 1952, Fidel ran for congress on the ticket of a left-of-center bourgeois political party, but he didn't win. In the same year, Fulgencio Batista, who had headed an authoritarian government in Cuba on previous occasions, took power by a coup d'etat, ousting a constitutionally-elected reform-minded president.

As the Batista government assumed an overtly dictatorial form, Fidel gathered 125 friends, most of them students or recent graduates, for an armed attack on Fort Moncada barracks in Oriente province. The army easily repelled the attack, killing and wounding dozens. Fidel was jailed, but as a member of the "high bourgeoisie," he avoided the possible death sentence. At his trial, he gave his now-famous "History Will Absolve Me" speech, in which he outlined his program for political and social reform based on the social democratic Constitution of 1940.

Fidel got a prison sentence, but he was released during an amnesty in 1955 and went to Mexico via the United States. In the U.S., he made contact with Latin American men and women in exile from Batista and from a dozen other despots. Batista was well-known for his repressive policies and his illegitimate rule, and Fidel was able to convince the exiles—many of whom were experienced bourgeois politicians—of the need for armed struggle.

With money and pledges for more, Fidel went to Mexico, accompanied by some recruits, including Camilo Cienfuegos, a pitcher for the San Francisco Seals. Camilo, who died during the guerrilla war, is the most famous martyr of the Revolution.

In Mexico, Fidel met two very important men. One was Ernesto Che Guevara, an Argentine-born doctor who had traveled throughout the continent and who had a keen political and strategic sense about the impending struggle. The other was General Alberto Bayo, a Spanish loyalist officer who served with the anti-fascist guerrilla movement in Morocco in the 1930s.

Under Bayo's direction; Fidel, Che and the band of men and women they got together went into training on a rented farm.

Fidel was arrested by the Mexican authorities, but he was released. They bought more guns and purchased a 62-foot yacht called the *Granma*, so named by its original owner, a Texan. (*Granma* is the name of the daily organ of the Communist Party of Cuba.)

The trip from Mexico ran into bad weather and took six days—far too long—and many of the men suffered seasickness. When the boat landed on a peninsula in Oriente Province on Dec. 2, 1956, there were 82 men aboard. But Batista's men spotted the yacht and engaged the men and women immediately in armed combat. Only 12 survivors made it into the protective cover of the Sierra Maestra mountains.

The next two years of Cuban history—1957 and 1958—are fraught with mystery and contradictions. The guerrilla army, under the leadership of Che Guevara, engaged in continual harassment of Batista's army, while undermining the national network of transportation and communications. Every effort was made to win the support of the people in the countryside, to promote defections from Batista's army, to carry on political education. The guerrilla army grew. Batista's army was largely impotent to deal with the struggle in the countryside—it was not trained in counterinsurgency and there were no U.S. advisers. And the people supported the guerrillas, who meticulously tried to apply revolutionary principles in the field.

One of Che's biggest victories was not against Batista forces, but was a pact made with another guerrilla band, the Escambray Front, largely under the direction of William Morgan, a North American ex-Marine and soldier of fortune. The Escambray units joined under the single banner of Fidel's 26th of July Movement in 1958.

Meanwhile, Fidel was carrying on a very delicate task of building a political movement that was broad based. Probably, he could not have built such a movement had his program been clearly developed and labeled as the revolutionary communist program it is today. Fidel got support in the cities from men and women of all ages, in all classes, for it was in the city that Batista's crimes were most visible. It was there that the torture and death (20,000 murdered), the corruption, the gangsterism and the decadence were most visible.

Even U.S. corporations gave money to Fidel, while liberals in the State Department and the CIA agreed that Batista had to go. Fidel was an unknown character, and since he appeared pretty much like 'any bourgeois reformer to the spies who checked him out, Washington was unconcerned.

For that matter, Fidel's political revolution—the elimination of Batista and the institution of bourgeois democracy—did not threaten U.S. interests.

Cuba's Communist Party, known as the People's Socialist Party, originally saw Fidel as an adventurer, and their support for him even after armed struggle in the Sierra began was minimal. In mid-1958, a high-ranking Communist party official, Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, met with Fidel in the hills and from that moment on, despite some internal disputes, the Communists gave full support to the 26th of July Movement. Carlos Rafael today commands great respect and responsibility in the revolutionary government, though other old-line Communists, notably Anibal Escalante, are doing common labor as political prisoners.

Of course, Fidel Castro and his comrades were fighting for far more than a "political" revolution. The struggle of the bearded ones and the women who fought alongside them was a struggle for sweeping social change. After the triumphant march into Havana in 1959, the contradictory alliances that Fidel built began to fall apart. By allowing free emigration, and concentrating on the youth, the Cubans sought national consolidation.

Social revolution meant Cuba could no longer depend on U.S. trade and capital. The island nation looked to the socialist world, and it received an embrace which the Cubans have never allowed to become a suffocating bear hug. The liberals in Washington and Havana fell away in anger, horror and vindictiveness.

In Cuba, with the political and social revolution finally consolidated, and the contradictions largely eliminated, the job of building a new age could begin.

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