

## Cuba under Fidel Castro

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<[http://travel.nytimes.com/frommers/travel/guides/caribbean-and-bermuda/cuba/frm\\_cuba\\_3173020044.html](http://travel.nytimes.com/frommers/travel/guides/caribbean-and-bermuda/cuba/frm_cuba_3173020044.html)>.

The new government immediately set about restructuring Cuban society: It reduced rents, instituted agrarian reform, and limited estates to 400 hectares (1,000 acres). As part of a comprehensive nationalization program, the government expropriated utilities, factories, and private lands. The fledgling government also embarked upon wide-ranging programs designed to eradicate illiteracy and provide universal healthcare and free schooling.

The Revolution's lofty aims were mitigated by cruder attempts to consolidate state power. The transition to a centralized, all-powerful state antagonized many Cubans, mostly elites. Castro placed the media under state control, as it remains today, and he promised elections that were never held. Local Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs) kept tabs on dissenters. In the early years of Castro's reign, many thousands of people suspected of opposing the Revolution were interrogated, imprisoned, or sent to labor camps, along with other social "undesirables," such as homosexuals and priests.

In just 3 years after the triumph of the Revolution, nearly a quarter of a million Cubans — mostly professionals and wealthy landowners — fled the country. They settled in nearby Florida and established a colony of conservative Cuban Americans, which, in the coming decades, achieved not only economic success, but also a level of political clout that was disproportionate to its size.

Washington, opposed to Cuba's political evolution and spurred on by politically active Cubans living in Miami, continued to try to isolate Castro in Latin America. Just 1 year after Castro took power, in 1960, the U.S. government launched a trade embargo against Cuba in retaliation for Cuba's state appropriations and seizures of the assets of U.S. businesses. The trade embargo, which Cuba terms a blockade, and travel restrictions later imposed on most U.S. citizens, continue to this day. In 1961, the United States broke diplomatic relations with Cuba, and CIA-trained Cuban exiles launched an attempt to overthrow the Castro government. The Bay of Pigs mission was an utter fiasco and a severe black mark against the Kennedy administration. Cuba's resistance strengthened Castro's resolve to stand up to the United States.

**Questions:**

1. Why do you think many Cubans decided to leave the island after Castro came to power?
2. What is a "trade embargo"?
3. How has the embargo impacted Cuba?
4. Why do you think the U.S. enacted this embargo? What are the effects of the embargo?

Castro had not revealed any Communist leanings in the decade since coming to power, but soon after the Bay of Pigs, Castro declared himself a Marxist-Leninist. Some historians have argued that the aggressive ploys of the U.S. government were fundamental in pushing the Cuban government into the arms of the American enemy in the Cold War, the Soviet Union and its Eastern bloc of potential trading partners. The USSR was only too eager to develop a strategic relationship with an ideological opponent of Washington in the backyard of the United States. By the end of the 1980s, the USSR dominated Cuban trade and provided Cuba with subsidies worth an estimated \$5 billion annually.

In the fall of 1962, the Soviet Union under Nikita Khrushchev installed 42 medium-range nuclear missiles in Cuba. A tense standoff ensued when President Kennedy ordered a naval blockade on the island and demanded that the existing missiles be dismantled. The world waited anxiously for 6 days until Khrushchev finally caved to U.S. demands to turn back his ships. The possibility of a nuclear war was averted in return for a U.S. promise never to invade Cuba.

Another 200,000 people abandoned Cuba as part of the Freedom Flights Program between 1965 and 1971. In 1980, Castro lifted travel restrictions and opened the port of Mariel (west of Havana); during the Mariel Boatlift, at least 125,000 Cubans — many of whom Washington charged were criminals and drug addicts — made it to U.S. shores before President Carter forced Castro to close the floodgates.

**Questions:**

1. What were some of the reasons for Castro forming an alliance with the Soviet Union?
2. Why did this anger the U.S.?
3. What benefits did this alliance with the Soviet Union provide for Cuba?

**The Special Period**

Soviet trade and subsidies propped up Cuba's heavily centralized and poorly performing economy until the end of the 1980s. But the fall of the Berlin Wall and dismantling of the Soviet Union suddenly left Cuba in an untenable position, as supplies of food, oil, and hard currency were cut off while the U.S. trade embargo continued.

The Cuban government initiated a "Special Period" in 1990 -- a euphemism for harsh new austerity measures and hardship to be borne by the large majority of Cubans. Rationing of basic goods had existed for most of Castro's years in power, but limited government distribution now included many more necessities. During the Special Period and years since, most Cubans found it virtually impossible to subsist on rations alone.

Complicating the delicate situation was the 1992 Cuba Democracy Act, which broadened the U.S. embargo to cover a ban on trade with Cuba for foreign subsidiaries of U.S. companies. Though the U.S. government denies that its trade embargo can be blamed for the shortcomings in the Cuban economy and resulting shortages of food and medicine, many analysts believe that the embargo has greatly exacerbated the difficulties experienced by ordinary Cubans. Meanwhile, Castro held onto power and made few concessions, even using the U.S. trade restrictions to his advantage: They gave him something and someone to blame for Cuba's grinding poverty and lack of goods.

With the economy in shambles, the Cuban government has been forced to introduce a limited number of capitalist measures. Foreign investment, which has taken the form of joint ventures primarily in the fields of tourism and mineral and oil exploration, has been openly encouraged. Castro, with inescapable irony, legalized the U.S. dollar in 1993 — even establishing state-owned, dollar-only stores, small-scale private enterprises like *casas particulares* and *paladares* (private homestays and restaurants), and the introduction of private farmers' markets. While these capitalist

initiatives have benefited some Cubans, giving them access to dollars (through jobs in tourism or relatives sending remittances from abroad), the dual economy has ultimately turned many other Cubans into have-nots, unequal in a socialist society.

**Questions:**

1. What is the "Special Period"?
2. What caused this to occur, and how did this impact Cubans?
3. What did the Cuban government do to try to solve this financial problem?