



THE EVOLUTION OF CUBA’S RESISTANCE MOVEMENT AND ITS COLD WAR IMPACT

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Abstract:

This study analyzes the development of the Cuban resistance movement and its transformation into a geopolitical instrument capable of projecting existential fear at the global level. Rather than focusing solely on the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the research examines the political, social, and ideological conditions that allowed Fidel Castro to establish a regime of strategic value to the Soviet Union. Beginning with Cuba’s shift from Spanish colonial rule to U.S. influence after the Spanish–American War, the paper traces the rise and fall of leaders such as Gerardo Machado and Fulgencio Batista, highlighting the socio-economic inequalities and political instability that fueled dissent. It distinguishes between rebellion- direct action against a domestic regime and resistance-organized opposition to foreign domination, while demonstrating how Castro’s 1959 revolution fused both, combining the overthrow of Batista’s dictatorship with an anti-U.S. campaign. Drawing on case study methodology, the research explores the role of communist ideology, the integration of guerrilla warfare techniques inspired by Mao Zedong, and the significance of Ernesto Che Guevara’s involvement in structuring a disciplined insurgency. The paper further examines external factors, such as U.S. intervention attempts, notably the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, and the deepening Cuba–Soviet alliance that culminated in the deployment of Soviet nuclear missiles on the island. The findings confirm the hypothesis that the consolidation of Cuba’s resistance movement, supported by Soviet military and economic aid, intensified global existential anxiety by bringing the world to the brink of nuclear war, thereby leaving a lasting imprint on Cold War geopolitics.

Key words: Resistance, Revolution, Cuban Missile Crisis, Rebellion, Cold War.

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Introduction:

In academic circles, the "Cuban Missile Crisis" is widely regarded as one of the most critical events of the 20th century. This event brought the world to the brink of nuclear war in 1962. At that time, the global political order was defined by a bipolar international system, in which the United States and the Soviet Union represented two opposing poles of power. Churchill's famous remark about the "Iron Curtain," widely recognized as marking the onset of the Cold War, had by then reached a decisive and perilous juncture with the Cuban Missile Crisis. The crisis did not merely threaten to draw the curtain more tightly; it placed those on both sides of it in a profound state of existential peril. There are many reasons that can help explain how the United States and the Soviet Union reached such a precarious state, but one of the key factors lies in the decisions made by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and Soviet Defense Minister Rodion Malinovsky. Khrushchev and Malinovsky held a meeting on the Black Sea coast, where they discussed the strategic threat posed by the U.S. nuclear weapons stationed in Turkey. These weapons had the capacity to destroy cities in southern Ukraine and Russia within six to seven minutes¹. As a response, they concluded that the Soviet Union must place nuclear missiles in Cuba in order to restore the balance of power.

This raises a fundamental question: why did the Soviet Union choose to cooperate with Cuba?

To answer this research question, it is necessary to analyze the internal political situation in Cuba at the time. This article will examine the Batista dictatorship and the revolutionary movement that overthrew it. The Cuban Revolution represents a unique case for understanding the conceptual framework of resistance movements, as it combined both rebellion and resistance. This duality allows for a clearer distinction to be made between rebellion and resistance as political phenomena.

The central aim of this article is not to analyze the Cuban Missile Crisis itself, but rather to explore how Fidel Castro established a regime that captured the attention of Soviet leaders and came to be perceived as a geopolitical counterbalance to the United States.

The core hypothesis of this article posits that „**the evolution of Cuba's resistance movement allowed it to cast an existential fear over the entire world.**”.

To structure and conduct this analysis effectively, the article will employ the case study method, grounded in analytical reasoning.

The Cascade of Revolutions in Cuba: Prior to the Spanish-American War, Cuba was part of the Spanish metropole. Following the U.S. victory, American influence over former Spanish colonies significantly increased, and as early as 1901, the United States began to expand its political and economic control over Cuba, exerting even greater influence than Spain had before the war. Economically, this was most evident in the export of sugar and tobacco from Cuba to the U.S.² In 1925, President Gerardo Machado came to power and established an autocratic regime. Cuba became a

¹აბაშიძე, ზურა. 2009. *ცივი ომი - წარსული თუ დღევანდელი?* თბილისი.

²Bamford, Tyler. 2023. <https://usnhistory.navylive.dodlive.mil/Recent/Article-View/Article/3491710/the-global-impact-of-the-spanish-american-war/>. 08 14. Accessed 06 08, 2025.

highly profitable location for American businessmen who, through bribing Cuban officials, operated with impunity, enriching themselves while local workers were paid meager wages. Although national wealth appeared to increase, a widening gap between social classes emerged, where the rich grew richer and the poor sank further into deprivation.

This growing disparity was rooted in the corruption and abuse of power under Machado's regime. Social polarization also became visible within the military ranks, where lower-level officers and enlisted personnel suffered in comparison to their senior counterparts. The global Great Depression of 1929 further deepened the crisis. Popular dissatisfaction began to manifest in forms of nonviolent resistance: student-led protests were organized against the regime, and among the military, a faction of junior officers and non-commissioned officers formed an opposition group aligned with the ABC movement, referred to as "La Junta." This group often held secret meetings in the Colombian embassy.

On August 19, 1933, the Machado regime assassinated Sergeant Hernandez, a member of this group. At his funeral, an unknown sergeant named Fulgencio Batista delivered a strikingly emotional speech that signaled the rise of a new revolutionary leader.³ Later that month, Batista issued a manifesto calling on the military to rebel in the name of dignity and honor. Although he requested the ABC to help publish and disseminate the manifesto, they refused, and thus the collaboration between La Junta and the ABC ceased. Instead, students joined La Junta's cause, and in September 1933, the so-called "Sergeants' Revolution" overthrew Machado's government.

Although nominal leadership passed to Manuel Cuesda, head of the "100-Day Government," it was clear that Batista became the de facto ruler of Cuba. He assumed the position of supreme military representative and gradually consolidated power. In 1940, Batista was officially elected president. The revolution that brought him to prominence was, notably, bloodless. At the same time, it is important to distinguish between rebellion and resistance: rebellion refers to collective actions against an internal regime, while resistance typically targets foreign occupation. Nevertheless, their operational forms are often similar. During this period, there was no sign of anti-American resistance; on the contrary, Batista's subsequent close cooperation with the U.S. suggests that Washington may have supported the sergeants' success.

An ideological analysis of the Cuban population reveals that many Cubans initially viewed the United States as a liberator from Spanish colonial rule. Thus, they did not perceive U.S. influence as domination. It was Fidel Castro and his ideological allies who initiated resistance against U.S. control. Unlike the Sergeants' Rebellion, which was primarily an internal uprising, the revolution launched by Castro in 1959 represented a synthesis of rebellion against Batista's regime and resistance against U.S. influence. In this way, his movement embodied both forms of struggle: rebellion against domestic authoritarianism and resistance against foreign hegemony.

³The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. 2024. *Cuban Revolution*. 09 24. Accessed 08 08, 2025.

It is crucial to examine the reasons behind the uprising against Batista. Both rebellion and resistance require the achievement of three strategic goals:

- Establishment of effective civil administration;
- Development of a disciplined military structure;
- Balanced socio-economic progress.⁴

Although Batista was initially considered a progressive leader: introducing a constitution in 1940, granting women's rights, and investing in education. Despite this he failed to win the 1944 elections. Carlos Prío Socarrás came to power, and Batista went into exile in the United States. His electoral defeat reflected public discontent with persistent corruption and widespread poverty, while American businesses continued to profit. In short, Batista failed to achieve the third strategic goal: social and economic development.

On the international front, the United States was preoccupied with World War II and had little capacity to engage with Cuban affairs. Socarrás, too, struggled to stabilize the domestic political landscape, and by 1952, Cuba had plunged into political uncertainty. Globally, the Cold War was intensifying, and communist ideologues sought to establish a foothold in Cuba. The U.S. was determined to prevent this, both for economic and geopolitical reasons. Seizing the opportunity, Batista returned to Cuba and, leveraging U.S. political support and his influence within the Cuban military, seized power through a coup in 1952. By cancelling elections, Batista installed himself as a dictator and a loyal U.S. satellite.

Unlike his earlier tenure, Batista's new regime became deeply repressive: he abolished the constitution, banned political parties, and persecuted opposition figures. American influence grew even stronger in the Cuban economy, while the working class suffered greatly. These conditions intensified the appeal of communism among the population. Whereas Batista had previously used mostly nonviolent methods to rise to power, the uprising against him was distinctly violent.

A key moment in this new phase of rebellion occurred on July 26, 1953, when Fidel Castro and his supporters launched an armed attack on the Moncada military barracks - the second-largest in Cuba. The attack involved 160 rebels, including Castro's brother, Raúl. Although the rebellion was suppressed and Castro was captured, his speech at trial - "History will absolve me"⁵, became a rallying cry for the revolution. A lawyer by profession, Castro used the courtroom to denounce Batista's regime. Though sentenced to 15 years, he was released after only two. During his imprisonment, Castro's revolutionary ideals deepened.

After his release, Castro and other rebels fled to Mexico, where he began organizing and training a revolutionary force. It was here that Argentine doctor Ernesto Che Guevara joined the movement. Their alliance was rooted in shared communist ideology, which played a central role in giving coherence and unity to revolutionary efforts. Rather than having to craft a new ideological framework, revolutionaries adopted the existing communist paradigm.

With Che Guevara's assistance, the group received training in guerrilla warfare. Guevara was well-versed in Chinese models of insurgency and frequently referenced Mao Zedong's „*On Guerrilla*

⁴საქართველოს თავდაცვის სამინისტრო თავდაცვის ძალების წვრთნების ადასამხედრო განათლების სარდლობა. 2020. *სპეციალური ძალების მიერ არაკონვენციური ომის წარმოება*. თბილისი: დოქტრინების განვითარების ცენტრი.

⁵Guerra, Lillian. 2012. *Visions of power in cuba*. Chapel Hill: The university of north carolina press.

Warfare” as a tactical guide. Thus, the rebellion became more structured, and the art of insurgency began to take shape. The rebels built underground networks and coordinated guerrilla operations against Batista’s forces. Notably, the *Granma* expedition of 1956 shifted the revolutionary front to eastern Cuba, where most of their bases were established in the Sierra Maestra mountains.

In 1959, Batista fled to Havana, and Castro’s years-long guerrilla campaign succeeded. Upon taking power, Cuba aligned itself with the Soviet Union and adopted a socialist system. The insurgency had evolved into a resistance movement aimed at curbing U.S. influence. While Cuba was not formally occupied, the resistance was political and ideological. Given the island’s proximity just 150 km from the U.S. and its pivot from American ally to Soviet satellite, Cuba became a significant threat in Washington’s eyes.

The United States responded by imposing an arms and trade embargo, which only pushed Cuba closer to the USSR. The two nations signed a memorandum in which Cuba exported tobacco at premium prices, while receiving arms and oil from the Soviet Union.

Meanwhile, supporters of the ousted Batista regime settled in the U.S., where they formed a counter-revolutionary militia known as Brigade 2506. To overthrow Castro’s government, President Eisenhower allocated \$13.1 million to the CIA for the training of this group, mainly conducted in Guatemala. In April 1961, the brigade launched a failed amphibious invasion on Cuba’s southwest coast - a mission now known as the Bay of Pigs Invasion⁶. Castro successfully repelled the attack, which not only damaged President Kennedy’s international standing but also elevated Castro to national hero status.

In the aftermath, Castro appealed to the USSR for increased military support, including the deployment of nuclear weapons on Cuban soil. This request left a deep impression on Khrushchev and ultimately led to the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

Conclusion:

The shifting centers of global power had a directly proportional impact on Cuba. Following the United States’ victory in the Spanish–American War, Cuba aligned its developmental trajectory with that of the United States, a relationship most visibly reflected in the export of tobacco and sugar. However, American investments in Cuba fueled corruption within the country’s upper elite, which in turn deepened the divide between the wealthy and the poor. This socio-economic imbalance ultimately engulfed Cuba in a cascade of revolutions

The first wave was marked by the Sergeants’ Revolution, which brought Batista to power. Later, the military coup of 1952 further destabilized the political order, paving the way for Fidel Castro’s rebellion, which culminated in his victory in 1959. Castro dramatically shifted Cuba’s foreign policy by aligning the country with communist ideology. In collaboration with the Soviet Union, he initiated a resistance movement against U.S. influence.

The failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961- secretly orchestrated by the United States, only reinforced this resistance, allowing it to grow in strength and legitimacy. Shortly afterward, Cuban leadership formally requested that the Soviet Union deploy nuclear missiles on the island. With this newfound power, the resistance movement brought the world to the brink of existential fear, as the possibility of nuclear war dramatically increased. This moment became historically known as the Cuban Missile Crisis.

⁶Rasanberger, Jim. 2011. *The Brilliant Disaster*. New York: Scribner.

Ultimately, this articles hypothesis, that, „**the evolution of Cuba’s resistance movement allowed it to cast an existential fear over the entire world.**” has been confirmed. Through a unique combination of rebellion and ideological resistance, Cuba succeeded in altering not only its internal political dynamics but also the balance of power on the global stage.

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