



The Effects of Spanish Colonialism on the Cuban Revolution

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Introduction

“The revolution is dictatorship of the exploited against the exploiters.” Fidel “El Comandante” Alejandro Castro Ruz

On the 27th of October 1492, Italian explorer Christopher Columbus on mandate from the Spanish crown, landed at Puerto de Nipe as he was searching for a route to India which was believed to be a peninsula in the Asian mainland. With the Papal Bull of 1493 Pope Alexander VI commanded Spain to “conquer and convert all the pagans present in the New World to Catholicism” and with this began the colonisation of the Americas. In 1511 Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar set out from the Spanish colony in the island of Hispaniola to make the first Spanish settlement in Cuba.

Columbus promised the Spanish crown of vast amounts of gold from the Americas, but this was not true, and Spaniards instead established sugar and tobacco as Cuba’s primary exports. This “*economic prosperity*” came at a grave cost, as the Spaniards introduced the scourge of slavery to the island, importing African slaves to toil in the sugarcane and tobacco fields. This combined with the high level of corruption of the Spanish administration and the general dissatisfaction of the public regarding the policies implemented by the Spanish led a prominent planter Carlos Manuel de Céspedes to call on “men of all races” of Cuba to fight against the Spanish Empire.

This kicked off the Ten Years’ War between the Cuban Liberation Army and the Spanish Empire. This was the first of a series of conflicts the Cubans had to fight against the Spanish Empire before an American intervention and short Military rule eventually gave them a republic.

The new republic was plagued with coups and instability, with the Sergeants’ Revolution allowing a certain Fulgencio Batista to gain power. Even Batista’s administration was plagued with the same problems as the republic before which forced a revolution.

The subtle connection between the Spanish colonisation and the revolution is not a topic often discussed, albeit indirectly the Spanish colonisation had a huge role to play in how the revolution came about and its causes. The colonial legacy left many social issues in the country from economic exploitation to racial injustice and slave trade, the Spanish had indeed caused a lot of the problems which the revolution aimed to target.



The United States' Military Rule (1898 – 1902, 1906 – 1909) and Cuban Independence (1902)

Since the early 1800s the Spanish Empire was facing a problem in the Americas. The colonies it had established in the continent were now fighting wars for their independence, however, even though all of these Spanish liberals like Antonio Castillo and Emillio Castelar sought to give the Spanish Empire new meaning. Castillo clarified in an address to the University of Madrid in 1882 that his view of the Spanish nation was based upon the idea of a shared linguistic and cultural ties and more importantly he included the phrase “on both sides of the Atlantic” tying Spanish colonies together.

The popular opinion at the time was that the Spanish had civilised the natives living in the Spanish colonies like Cuba and had done “*god’s work*” by promoting Christianity in the New World whereas in reality the Spanish had brought to Cuba diseases, slavery, and racial inequality which would eventually become the basis for the independence movement and consequently the revolution.

Following the 1816 presidential election James Monroe took office as the fifth American president and enunciated the Monroe Doctrine which stated that the US would not tolerate colonial expansion by European powers in the Americas and would not tolerate intervention in the affairs of already independent states in the hemisphere. This showed American despise for colonial powers and the influence they yield over the Americas; this was because the influence the colonial powers had intervened with American interests.

Prior to the American Civil War, the pro-slave elements planned to purchase Cuba and turn it into a slave state to further their cause and proposed the Ostend Manifesto of 1854 but was rejected.

Following the Ten Years’ War and the Little War both of which were crushed by the Spanish authorities the political climate of Cuba had turned unstable, this deterred the US economic interests as shipping firms who were heavily reliant on trade with Cuba suffered losses due to the prolonged conflict. Other American businesses engrossed in the Cuban sugar and tobacco sectors along with the shipping firms pressured US president McKinely to act and end the independence movement.

The goal of both the Spanish and Americans was stability not war but how the stability if achieved and how it would affect the people of Cuba and their future is something the US and Spain had to solve diplomatically. However, the solution that was reached by both parties did indeed have a strong impact on Cuba’s future vis-à-vis the revolution.

The Cuban Independence Movement ended with the conclusion of the Spanish-American War and ratification of the Treaty of Paris of 1898 under whose mandate Spain ceded all its

West Indies territories along with Guam and the Philippine Island to the US. After nearly four centuries of Spanish colonial rule the island of Cuba had now ended up in the rule of the US.

The simple cause for this war and the American rule of Cuba was Spain and its attitude towards its colonies. Spain heavily depended on Cuba for prestige and trade, by 1850 Cuba had already replaced the colony of Saint-Domingue as the most profitable Spanish colony in the area with 34.2% of all its exports going to Spain. At this time the popular opinion is that the Spanish crown had uplifted the quality of life on the island and to some extent this was true, the establishment of roads and rail had made the life on the island easier, but these developments were only available to the rich and upper-class Cubans and the white Spanish colonists and the common person was excluded for accessing these developments.

The Spanish had also brought African slaves as labour and even after four hundred years these slaves were treated as property. It was this where policy of the Spanish along with the constant wars the Spanish fought with other powers such as the British and Americans, in for example the War of Jenkins' Ear, led the Cubans to a fight for independence.

These wars which involved Spain and other global powers always endangered the future of Cuba and after the Spanish-American War this future was at its bleakest. With the implementation of Teller Amendment and Platt Amendment both of which aimed at increasing American influence on the affairs of the island. The Platt Amendment went as far as to give the US the power to intervene with Cuban independence at the moment albeit under the name of “in order to maintain a certain level of protection of life.”

These amendments by the US meant that the political atmosphere of Cuba was designed to be unstable right from the beginning, these policies made sure that the US could at any moment interfere with Cuba's internal affairs especially when the leadership of the country is starting to implement policies which affect US interests. It was this designed failure of the government that would lead to the revolution.

Batista's Dictatorship (1952 – 1959) and The Cuban Revolution (1953 – 1959)

Born in the Oriente province of Cuba on 26th January 1901 Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar would go on to become the one of the controversial leaders in the history of the Cuba taken a whole revolution to unseat him.

In 1940 Cuba had ratified a new democratic constitution which allowed for democratic elections. Batista resigned from the military to focus on his political career competing in the elections. He won to become president serving a four-year tenure but could not stand for re-election as consecutive terms were not allowed by the constitution. He decided to stand for

president again in 1952 but opinion polls showed he might lose and in fear planned and successfully executed a coup d'état making himself president.

In the decades after the independence Cuba experienced a lot of political instability enduring revolts, coups and yet another occupation by the US. In his second term Batista only further antagonised the public by forming links to organised crime and allowing the US to have a monopoly in the Cuban economy. Here we can see how the US first supported Batista's regime but then switched sides.

The revolution started with the attacks on the Moncada Barracks on the 26th of July 1953 when Fidel Castro and Paul Castro gathered 70 fighters and attacked the military installation and ended with Batista fleeing to Spain on New Year's Eve 1958. After the revolution Manuel Urrutia Lleo was made president of the new country and Fidel Castro was made prime minister.

The revolution started because the corruptive nature of Batista's regime was a gift of the colonial era with the Spaniards' corruptive practices being carried into the republic and with snollygoster politicians bringing it into wider use. The legacy of the colonial era can still be seen in how America's influence established by the Platt and Teller amendments was still very much strong in Cuba and it is this influence and corruption that ultimately led to the revolution.

The Revolution and Spanish Colonialism: The Connection and Causation

Racism, famines, poverty, violence, and oppression were the harsh realities of the colonial era. Ever since the day Columbus set foot on the shores of Cuba in 1492 the fate of the island was decided, it would end in a bloody war for independence. The colonisation of the island brought in many of the "*ideals*" of the time such as a class-based hierarchy, slavery, and economic exploitation.

All of these "*ideals*" had a profound impact on the future of the country. The Spanish administration was highly corrupt and like every other colonial piece of land this corrupt administrative system was passed on to the independent republic.

The new republic was plagued with the same problems as the colonial era. The nation's public infrastructure was mainly built by the Spanish and only for the benefit of the rich and the elite which meant that the common person was virtually disconnected from the country's infrastructure. The education system too was mainly focused on the rich and the elite ignoring the common man and considering the fact that the majority of the country was made up of plantation workers this is not surprising. Both of these issues are a star legacy of the colonial era. However, these are just the practical issues that the colonial era left but there are many more moral issues which were posed by this era.



In 18th century Spain the phenomenon of a town's society being structured into segments with each segment having their own sort of role was common, this was class-based hierarchy that all of Europe worked. This system of hierarchy was brought to various colonies of the European powers. The natives of the land were treated as the lowest class, however, some natives who supported the European power and proved themselves to be useful were placed higher in this hierarchy. This problem plagued the country years after the Spanish and even to this day can be seen in the rural areas of the country.

This hierarchy excluded a certain group of people who were considered below everyone, the African slaves brought by the Spanish. The African slaves brought to the island by the Spaniards to work in the sugar and tobacco plantations were treated as property by the Spanish, the cruelty of racism is something we can feel even today.

The Spanish did indeed open up Cuba to the world, when the Spanish left the island, they had made Cuba a centre for trade in the region and the Cuban economy was booming due to this trade but there was a downside to Cuba being this important in the geopolitical situation of the area. It was the growth in American interest in the island which eventually, as we know, led to the US having immense amounts of influence on Cuban affairs, another leading cause for the revolution.

The colonisation of Cuba by the Spanish laid the foundation for the Cuban Revolution. The revolution, led by Castro and Guevara, sought to overthrow the corrupt administration of Batista who was seen as a puppet controlled by the Americans. The revolutionaries started a guerrilla war against the Batista regime, gaining support from the peasants, workers, and intellectuals.

Decades of struggle against social injustice, imperialism, and colonialism culminated in the Cuban Revolution. It stood for the victory of the Cuban people's aspirations for sovereignty, self-determination, and rejection of foreign exploitation and dominance.