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Castro, Fidel (1926–2016)

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Synonyms

Cuban Revolution; Latin America; Cold War; Socialism; Soviet Union; United States; Armed Struggle

Definition

Fidel Castro (1926–2016) is often seen as the "apostle" of anti-imperialism in Latin America. Due to his unrelenting spat with the United States, the leader of the Cuban Revolution appears as the most charismatic figure from the Latin American left. His legendary struggle in the Sierra Maestra, his unbending position with regard to "American imperialism," and his apparent independence from Havana's closest ally – the Soviet Union – have made Castro a beacon of resistance and independence in Latin America and beyond.

After meeting Fidel Castro in the *Sierra Maestra* in February 1957, 2 years prior to his revolutionary triumph, the American journalist Herbert Matthews sketched a revealing portrait of the insurgent leader: Castro was not a Marxist, and his political agenda, although "vague and couched in generalities," amounted to a radical and democratic "new deal" for Cuba. It was, concluded Matthews, an "anti-Communist" program (Matthews 1957). Later, in the 1960s, when Castro's authority was solidly enshrined in a full-fledged revolutionary Cuba, the historian Theodore Draper coined the term "Castroism" to describe a rather undefinable ideology that, for tactical reasons, changed in order to justify past inconsistencies (Draper 1965, 49). Indeed, it is difficult to place Castro's political commitments within one coherent and unchanged category. Castro's leadership before and after Fulgencio Batista's fall in January 1959 was marked by instability as well as pragmatic adaptation: he embraced socialism more than 2 years after his successful insurrection; Castro's relationship with the Soviet Union (USSR) was frequently tainted by tensions, and a conscious effort was made to differentiate the Cuban Revolution from the Soviet experience; the initial nationalist discourse seemed to dilute in the 1960s and 1970s, when the Cuban authorities fostered internationalism with Third World countries, including far-reaching intervention in Africa.

Nevertheless, one term pervades most of Castro's political itinerary: anti-imperialism (adopted as a rejection of American hegemony in the hemisphere). It could be argued that Castro's most dramatic cause was the relentless fight against US imperialism and its hostile policy toward the island, which he pursued until his final days despite his declining health.

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Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz was born in 1927 in a country located fewer than 100 miles from the US coastline. This "geographic fatality" was far from being irrelevant for Cuba's history, since US proximity resulted in American domination of the island. US troops played a crucial role in the outcome of the Cuban War of Independence (1895–1898), securing a key position in Cuba's affairs for US officials until the revolution that ousted Batista in 1959. The American ambassador in Havana was often depicted as the real power in the shadows, holding a position enshrined by the 1901 Platt Amendment and that stipulated several conditions entrenching Washington's dominance of the Caribbean country. These included the right to intervene for the preservation of Cuban independence and a government adequate for the protection of individual liberties. Despite the amendment eventually being dropped in the 1930s, the USA maintained a strong grip on the Cuban political system, as well as retaining the contentious military base in Guantánamo. Not surprisingly, in order to characterize Cuba's submissive position with regard to the USA, post-revolutionary historians have labelled the Republican era (1902–1959) as a "neocolony," a "pseudo-republican" phase.

However, in Birán – a small agricultural hamlet and birthplace of Fidel Castro – the controversial nature of USA–Cuba relations did not considerably affect the daily rhythm of life. Amidst the calmness of a small village situated in the *Oriente* province nearly 500 miles from the capital, Havana, nothing indicated Castro's future meteoric rise into world politics. Fidel's father, Don Ángel Castro, was a Spanish migrant who successfully secured financial stability by growing sugarcane. His mother, Lina Ruz, second wife of Don Ángel, was a fervent Christian with a modest educational background (Vayssière 2011, 47), and her wealth would later be expropriated by her own sons as a result of the implementation of the 1959 agrarian reform. In spite of Fidel's young rebellious character, little in his childhood and adolescence suggested the radical turn his life would eventually take.

The anti-American leanings that shaped the Cuban Revolution were not yet shared by a young Fidel Castro, who, in 1940, addressed a letter to US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to express his admiration in the wake of his most recent, and final, reelection (Skierka 2004, 5). Castro's Jesuit education had a strong and lengthy influence on him. Even during the *Sierra Maestra* campaign (1957–1959), it was still possible to see Castro wearing a scapular around his neck. He would later acknowledge to the Brazilian priest Frei Betto that the "Jesuits clearly influenced me with their strict organization, their discipline and their values. They [. . .] influenced my sense of justice" (Skierka 2004, 19–20).

Castro's younger brother, Raúl (born 1931), who became the first Minister of Defense under revolutionary rule, also studied with the Jesuits, but he drew different conclusions. Raúl Castro's childhood differed from the evolution experienced by Fidel. Less independent and more attached to his family, he evinced a controversial and complex behavior. In preparatory school, where he nourished growing hostility toward religion, his performance was modest and in contrast to the outspoken personality of Fidel. In Havana, Raúl was soon approached by members of the Popular Socialist Party (PSP), the Cuban equivalent of the pro-Soviet Communist parties. Assuming an active political commitment, he benefited from the opportunity to travel to Europe and took part in the Youth International Festival held in Vienna in February 1953, before moving on to Czechoslovakia and Rumania, describing the latter as "a paradise" (Merle 1965, 120). This is not to imply that Fidel Castro's insurrectional movement was a Communist-oriented organization from its inception. On the contrary, apart from Raúl, few combatants of the action that gave birth to the 26th of July Movement ("M-26-7"), the Moncada Barracks attack, had any notion of socialist ideas. Fidel Castro himself was not a Communist.

In 1942, Castro took the train to Havana, where he was enrolled in a prestigious Jesuit school. He excelled as an athlete and was introduced by his teachers to the work of the "Apostle of Cuban Independence," José Martí (Vayssière 2011, 72), who held the crown among the revolutionary chain of heroes. Castro's interest in politics

accelerated in 1945, when he began studying law at the University of Havana. This is probably the least known period of Castro's life. Some observers have suggested that he was involved in the widespread culture of gang violence (*gangsterismo*) that permeated student activism under the presidencies of Ramón Grau San Martín (1944–1948) and Carlos Prío Socarrás (1948–1952). What seems undeniable is that those university years fed Castro's anti-imperialistic inclinations. He unsuccessfully attempted to become president of the University Students Federation (FEU), and he became enmeshed in two "initiatory experiences." The first was an aborted expedition designed to overthrow the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo in June 1947. The second was the tragic event traditionally known as *Bogotazo*. Castro landed in Colombia as a Cuban representative for a Latin American student congress, which was conceived to be held in parallel with an Inter-American Meeting of Foreign Ministers (Skierka 2004, 27). This international encounter represented an unhidden defiance of the US position in the hemisphere. During his stay in Colombia, Castro managed to meet the popular leader of the Liberal Party, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, before the latter was dramatically assassinated. The future "Comandante" witnessed firsthand the massive violence that destroyed Bogotá, provoked thousands of deaths, and triggered the infamous period known as *La Violencia* (1948–1958).

The end of the 1940s was indeed a pivotal time in Castro's life: he became affiliated with the Orthodox Party (from which he organized the clandestine and armed faction that would later conduct the Moncada attack), married the bourgeois student Mirta Díaz-Balart, and visited the country that would haunt Castro forever, the USA. But Castro had not yet clearly defined his ideological identity. His friend Alfredo Guevara tried to convince him to join the PSP, but quickly realized that Fidel was a "free electron" (Vayssière 2011, 88). As Castro acknowledged during his trip to Chile in 1971, at that time, "I had a few thoughts in my head [. . .] I had indoctrinated myself. [. . .] But, was I a Communist? I was not. [. . .] I was involved in the vortex of political crisis in Cuba [. . .] and I started to fight" (Castro 1972, 277). Castro's main contemporary political inspiration was the Orthodox Party's Eduardo Chibás, whose speeches against corruption exerted a strong influence on him (de la Cova 2007, 28). Thus far, Castro's political skills had already heralded a promising career in the electoral arena. However, Batista's coup d'état in March 1952 led to a general reassessment of the necessary political strategies. Institutional attempts to transform the country no longer appeared to be an adequate tactic, and the appeal of an insurrectional stance to overthrow Batista swiftly gained ground.

Fidel Castro was certainly not the first militant to engage in armed struggle. The National Revolutionary Movement (MNR), Women's Civic Front, Triple A, *Acción Libertadora*, and large sections of the FEU were all movements that adopted an insurrectional position prior to the Moncada events (Mencía 2013, 192–303). Among this plethora of revolutionary organizations and growing rejection of Batista's authoritarian shift, Fidel Castro began gathering together young members of the Orthodox Party, eventually amassing between 1,500 and 2,000 potential combatants. The aim of his group, initially called *El Movimiento*, was to facilitate military training in order to start carrying out armed actions against the dictatorial government. After months of preparation, they were finally ready to attempt a first blow: the Moncada Barracks attack – the "Cuban Bastille" – a failed assault that, according to Cuba's revolutionary "vulgate," has become the "birth of the Revolution" (de la Cova 2007).

In order to discredit Castro's insurgency, the Batista regime linked the "moncadistas" to the PSP – a false theory that was nonetheless sustained by the coincidental fact that the head of the Cuban communists, Blas Roca, was in Santiago in July 1953 celebrating his birthday with other party members. Accused of complicity with Castro, the Communists faced soaring repression, with their party banned and their official newspaper, *Hoy*, closed down (Cushion 2016, 36). The PSP was not the only organization affected by Batista's authoritarian rule.

More than 60 combatants were killed after the attack, and Fidel Castro, his brother Raúl, and

most of the assailants were jailed. However, paradoxically, the government's counterattack offered Castro an extraordinary opportunity to gain wider public visibility. Put on trial in September 1953, Castro opted to take up his own defense and delivered his legendary speech "History will absolve me." Castro's defense was memorable in more than one respect, and it provided the first public and coherent political outline of the M-26-7, unveiling Castro's strong reformist leanings and ideological proclivities. In addition, the manifesto was widely disseminated during Castro's months in prison, giving voice and popularity to the movement that became known as the M-26-7. Interestingly, "History will absolve me" does not refer to the Cold War's ideological clash but instead highlights the local roots of the anti-Batista struggle: "the intellectual author of this revolution is José Martí, the apostle of our independence," stated Castro. He also stressed the need to restore the 1940 Constitution, sketched the main contours of an agrarian reform, decisively attacked corruption, and outlined a wave of nationalization. It was indubitably a far-reaching and liberal agenda, but it did not bear the anti-imperialist stance that would later characterize Castro's discourse. The only mention of Cuba's geographical surroundings was rather reassuring: the island's future policy in the Americas would be one of "close solidarity with the democratic people of the continent" (Gott 2004, 50). Nothing was hinted at with regard to the Soviet Union and the Socialist sphere of power.

Batista decreed an amnesty, granting Castro and many other political opponents their release. Fidel's years in prison had been a highly formative phase, allowing him to become acquainted with the works of Marx and Lenin. This is not to say that Castro had become a socialist, but he certainly gained a more sophisticated political understanding that would encourage him to perceive his revolution within a broader international framework. In an article published by the magazine *Bohemia*, Castro was pictured reading a report on the overthrow of the leftist Guatemalan President Jacobo Árbenz (de la Cova 2007, 240). Released in May 1955 and utterly convinced that there was no electoral resolution to the crisis, Castro and his brother Raúl fled to Mexico, where they would articulate their movement and prepare an armed insurrection aimed at ousting Batista. Castro's departure did not imply a complete transfer of the revolutionary movement from Havana to Mexico City, as sectors of the M-26-7 were still active on the island and had established growing international connections, including in the USA. Moreover, other organizations were also vigorously fighting in Cuba with the purpose of dismantling the Batista regime. The Revolutionary Directorate (DR), headed by José Antonio Echeverría, who met Castro in Mexico City in August 1956, assumed a determined insurrectional stance (Mencía 2007, 190), as well as the Authentic Organization and the PSP, but the latter without immediately adopting armed struggle as its fundamental strategic line.

It was in Mexico that Castro met the Argentinian traveler of the Americas Ernesto Guevara, who had recently witnessed the consequences of the US-funded coup against Árbenz in Guatemala and nurtured a Marxist political thinking (Reid-Henry 2009). In December 1956, together with *Che* Guevara and 80 fellow combatants, Castro embarked on the yacht *Granma* in order to initiate the next phase of the struggle on Cuban territory. They landed in the *Oriente* province, but the initial plan, aimed at triggering a wide popular outburst by coinciding with an uprising in Santiago, failed. Castro and his crew stepped onto the island later than expected, which allowed the government to launch a fierce counterattack, killing and capturing several revolutionaries. The Castro brothers managed to escape, finding shelter in the *Sierra Maestra*, where they quickly established contact with an outlaw rural leader, Crescendo Pérez (Wickham-Crowley 1992, 141). The cooperation between the M-26-7 and the peasants was indeed a key feature of the Cuban Revolution, which has not been sufficiently emphasized.

Under these circumstances, Castro's guerrilla movement rapidly gained traction across the *Oriente* province, allowing the M-26-7 to split its rebel army into multiple revolutionary columns, including Column 8 Ciro Redondo led by

Che Guevara, Second Front Frank País led by Raúl Castro, and Column 3 led by Juan Almeida. As a result of this insurrectional expansion, the M-26-7 created a large *territorio libre* (free territory), within which the *barbudos* ("bearded men") provided the local population with essential social benefits such as hospitals and schools (Useem 1977, 104). As stated in a document sent to his brother Fidel in April 1958, Raúl Castro was particularly successful in rallying the local population and organizing the "free territory," thereby benefiting from the support of the peasants, who were "willing to help to infinity" (Castro 1961, 218).

The M-26-7's growing popular legitimation has to be viewed as a critical component that boosted Castro's position within the insurrectional movement. Early in 1958, the PSP validated the "armed path" promoted by the M-26-7 (Cushion 2016, 162–163), and in April 1958, as a result of a failed strike conducted by the *Llano(the M-26-7's urban underground)*, the core of the movement was transferred to the *Sierra* (Sweig 2002, 151). Castro became the indisputable leader of the Cuban Revolution.

Batista's 1958 military offensive aimed at dislodging the rebels from the mountains did not succeed, further consolidating the position of Castro's troops. Guevara headed to Las Villas, where he was welcomed by Faure Chomón, leader of the DR, and together they planned a final assault. Doomed by an irreversible revolutionary surge, alienation of the Cuban elites, and Washington's reluctance to back his regime, Batista eventually fled the island on January 1, 1959, paving the way for Castro's spectacular entry into Havana a week later.

Castro enjoyed an impressive popular support, but initially he only kept his position as head of the rebel army. Manuel Urrutia – a lawyer who had previously defended the insurgents and vindicated their armed struggle – was nominated, with Castro's green light, as first president of the revolutionary government. He was not a radical, and he wished to maintain a cordial relationship with the USA. The first cabinet reflected the new government's ideological moderation. No Communist members held a ministerial position, and the anti-imperialist discourse was expressly silenced to avoid unnecessary strains with the White House. Having replaced José Miró Cardona as prime minister on February 13, 1959, Fidel Castro led a goodwill mission to the USA in April. While giving a speech in Princeton, he evinced a moderate stance and attributed the success of the revolution to the fact that the insurgents "had not preached class war" (Gott 2004, 166). He also remarked: "We are against all kind of dictatorship. [. . .] That is why we are against Communism" (Fursenko and Naftali 1997, 9). In spite of Castro's restraint, President Dwight Eisenhower made sure to be absent during the Cuban's visit to Washington, instead opting to play golf. Castro was outraged. Some observers have pointed to Eisenhower's snub as a crucial factor establishing an irreversible distance between Havana and Washington (Castro 2009, 220).

However, as announced in "History will absolve me," the Cuban Revolution soon adopted a reformist and social inclination. A new institution was created to organize large-scale land redistribution: the National Institute of Land Reform (INRA), led by Castro since 1959. As the Cuban Revolution slipped into political radicalization, the cabinet's influence was undermined, while INRA became the "genesis of the *real* Cuban Revolution" (Anderson 2000, 386). The final blow to the moderate sectors of the government came in July 1959, when Castro appeared on television and threatened to resign "in view of the difficulties issuing from the Presidency," which, due to Castro's overwhelming popularly, forced Urrutia to step down (Brown 2017, 32). This political crisis heralded further radicalization and allowed a number of PSP members to secure more prominent positions.

Although in 1959 the Cuban Revolution went rather unnoticed in the USSR (Karol 1970, 190), Castro's mounting tensions with the USA drew attention from Moscow, eventually prompting Nikita Khrushchev to send an envoy to the island. The chosen emissary was the prominent politician Anastas Mikoyan, who returned to Moscow with an optimistic prospect of the revolution (Khrouchtchev 1971, 464). Cuban–Soviet

economic connections were quickly reinforced, raising concern in the White House. American companies (e.g., Shell, Texaco, Standard Oil) refused to refine Soviet oil, and in retaliation, the Cubans confiscated US assets in June 1960. A few months earlier, a tragic event had already cemented the irreversible rift between Washington and Havana. In March 1960, a Belgian arms shipment arrived in Havana on board *La Coubre*, a French freighter. The ship suddenly exploded, killing more than 100 people and destroying its valuable cargo. For Fidel Castro – as he stated in a speech at the funeral of some of the victims – there was no doubt that the explosion was a "premeditated attempt to deprive" the island of weapons, and he pointed to Washington as responsible for the sabotage. The blast served as an appropriate justification to push the revolution forward and adopt an increasingly hostile stance toward the USA (Fursenko and Naftali 1997, 40–42).

Castro's unmistakable anti-American posture adopted in 1960 was coupled with a belligerent international stance and a resolute willingness to operate a rapprochement with the Socialist world. The First Declaration of Havana (September 1960) formalized Castro's leftist turn and delineated the island's controversial foreign policy. He spelt out his agenda by first stressing that "the People of Cuba strongly condemn the imperialism of North America for its gross and criminal domination," before delivering a call to "fight for a liberated Latin America." The right model to attain the expected liberation was, in Castro's view, "to take up the arms of liberty" (Gott 2004, 184–185). Needless to say, the Americans were outraged with the *Comandante*'s message. They struck back in November 1960 with an embargo on US exports to Cuba. In April 1961, a CIA-trained force of Cuban exiles landed at the Bay of Pigs in an attempt to invade the country, but Castro's successful military operation delivered a major strategic defeat to the USA, boosting his authority and international prestige.

However, as the revolutionaries embraced a more defined and radicalized ideological character, the institutionalization of the political structure became indispensable. The variety of revolutionary organizations was therefore replaced by a more centralist structure. The establishment of the Integrated Revolutionary Organizations (ORI) in July 1961 responded to the need of unifying the leadership by merging Castro's M-26-7, the DR, and the PSP. But the growing ascendency of the Communists and the marginalization of several former M-26-7 and DR members provoked rising grievances, which eventually forced Castro to speak out and condemn what he qualified as "sectarianism." As a result, the first secretary of the ORI – the orthodox Marxist Aníbal Escalante – and his followers were ousted (Blight and Brenner 2002, 90), while the Soviet Ambassador in Havana, who was suspected of conspiring with the former PSP leader, was replaced by a well-known sympathizer of Castro's revolution: Aleksandr Alekseyev.

In spite of Alekseyev's goodwill, the advent of the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 further deteriorated the alliance with the Soviets. When the Americans detected the installation of Soviet missiles in Cuba and quarantined the island, Nikita Khrushchev and John Kennedy engaged in negotiations to solve a crisis that threatened to escalate into nuclear war. The Soviets agreed to remove the weapons, but Khrushchev did not consult the Cubans first. Castro was furious, and Cuba's fidelity to the USSR waned for nearly a decade: "The October Crisis influenced Soviet–Cuban relations for years," he acknowledged in a 1987 interview with an Italian journalist (Minà 1987, 111).

In this strained and delicate scenario, the island's ideological definition seemed unclear. Although Fidel Castro had firmly proclaimed the socialist character of his revolution in April 1961, and later claimed to be a "Marxist–Leninist" (December 1961), Cuba resisted outright "Sovietization." The Missile Crisis intensified Castro's independence and defiant stance, but he knew that Cuba needed to normalize relations with the Soviets, the only foreign partner able to support and defend the Caribbean island. With that goal in mind, Castro travelled to Moscow in April 1963 and again a few months later in January 1964. However, despite the spectacular staging of both trips, these gestures of goodwill exerted a short-term effect.

The tension between Havana and Moscow was shaped by the unrelenting debate over the appropriate path for a revolution. While the USSR and its Communist allies in Latin America favored "peaceful coexistence" and an institutional road to Socialism, Cuba defined a belligerent revolutionary theory based on armed struggle. The Cubans started to train Latin American guerrillas in its territory and contended that Castro's insurrectional scheme (known as *foquismo*) was applicable across the hemisphere (Spencer 2008, 98–104). As relations with the Soviets deteriorated, Cuba's stern anti-imperialist discourse tended to emphasize the disparity between Third World countries and the superpowers, rather than the Cold War's East–West scheme. Che Guevara was the most vocal critic of "Soviet imperialism." In 1965, the Argentinian gave a controversial speech in Algeria, in which he accused the Socialist countries of being "accomplices of imperialist exploitation" and urged them to "put an end to their tacit complicity with the exploiting countries of the West" (Reid-Henry 2009, 304). Fidel Castro shared Guevara's views, but he was aware of the damaging effect that this rhetoric might have on his fragile partnership with the East. While the defiant tone with regard to the USSR persisted, Cuba's solidarity with Third World states and revolutionary movements increased. In Havana, Castro hosted the Tricontinental Conference (January 1966), an international meeting gathering representatives from Asia, Africa, and Latin America sharing a "common anti-imperialist stance" (Castro 1966). The meeting offered proof that Cuba had opted for favoring connections with Third World revolutionaries instead of pro-Soviet Communist parties (Lévesque 1988, 141–146). Beyond the affiliation to the Socialist ideology oriented by Moscow, what truly justified the convergence between revolutionaries across the globe was a shared combat against "imperialism." Castro made this clear in his closing speech: "What the peoples have most in common to unite the people of three continents [. . .] is the struggle against imperialism." He later attributed all worldwide contemporary injustices to the perverse effect of US domination: "the struggle against colonialism and neocolonialism, the struggle against racism and, in short, all the phenomena which are the contemporary expression we call imperialism, whose center, axis, and principal support [is] Yankee imperialism" (Castro 1966). Beyond the concept of Communism, it is apparent that during the second half of the 1960s, the Cuban ideological pillar shaping its international policy was, first and foremost, anti-imperialism.

Castro was explicitly spelling out his reservations with regard to the Soviet model, considered too mellow and incapable of frontally defying "bourgeois" countries. He also criticized Moscow's ambition to propound a unified scheme to reach socialism and constantly highlighted Latin America's distinctiveness, such as when he singled out "the abuse of the [Soviet] manuals of Marxist-Leninism," which, in light of contemporaneous global developments, had "become outdated and anachronistic" (Fagen 1969, 136–137).

Many indications reflected Cuba's uneasiness concerning the Soviet approach based on promoting a Socialist economic system rather than emphasizing anti-imperialist struggles: while visiting the island in June 1967, Alexei Kosygin was conspicuously scorned by Cuban authorities; the first conference of the Latin American Organization of Solidarity (OLAS), held in Havana in 1967, was closed with a speech in which Fidel Castro defined guerrilla warfare as the "fundamental route" for revolution, and hinted at criticism regarding the Soviets' "financial and technical aid [. . .] to countries [such as Eduardo Frei's Chile and Raúl Leoni's Venezuela] that are accomplices in the imperialist blockade against Cuba" (Castro 1967); in January 1968, allegations denouncing a plot designed by Cuban "conspirators" in connection with staff members of the Soviet Embassy in Havana led to the "micro-faction affairs" (Blight and Brenner 2002, 134).

This strained situation soon became unsustainable. Moscow was no longer willing to support such an unreliable international partner, threatening to curtail its aid to Cuba. In addition, the armed path promoted by Castro suffered a major blow in 1967 with the death of Guevara in

Bolivia, and new "revolutionary" governments (such as that of Juan Velasco Alvarado in Peru and Omar Torrijos in Panama since 1968) showcased unexpected routes to progressive transformation, mollifying the island's belligerent posture. In this renewed context, Castro became aware of the need to resolve issues with the USSR, and he thus departed from his previous radicalism. He first announced the revolution's new approach in August 1968, after the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact forces, when he expressed his support for the Soviet action. Contrary to his former emphasis on the clash between "small" and "big" countries, this time, Castro stood up in defense of the "entire socialist community," justifying the military intervention in Prague by the fact that the Eastern country was "heading toward a counterrevolutionary situation, toward capitalism and into the arms of imperialism" (Castro 1968).

Cuba entered an era of increasingly cordial ties with the USSR. Henceforth, in most of his speeches, the Cuban leader made sure to stress Moscow's generosity and even encouraged his allies, such as the Chilean President and socialist activist Salvador Allende (1970–1973), to tighten links with the Kremlin. Anti-imperialism was now a mental scheme directed exclusively at the Americans, while US allies were usually deemed "puppets" of the superpower. When Augusto Pinochet's coup d'état ousted Allende in 1973, Castro viewed it as nothing more than work of the "hand of imperialism," which was "behind the Chilean events" (Castro 1973). Allende's fall was a painful setback for the Cubans. The Chilean left-wing coalition, Popular Unity, facilitated Cuba's reintegration within the Latin American scene. Santiago resumed diplomatic ties with Havana immediately after Allende's electoral victory (November 1970), and Castro made a controversial 3-week *tournée* of the South-American country at the end of 1971. It was the first time that the Cuban leader was officially hosted by a Latin American head of state since 1959, which helped to dismantle the island's isolation in the hemisphere. Allende's overthrow was seen in Cuba as a signal demonstrating that, in Latin America, the necessary conditions for a revolution had not yet been attained. Therefore, Havana redirected its "international duty" to Africa, where Castro found fertile ground for social and radical transformation (Harmer 2013, 85). "Our homeland is not just Cuba," stated Castro, "our homeland is also humanity" (Skierka 2004, 209). Hundreds of thousands of Cubans landed on the African continent to provide military and medical assistance, which led to renewed tensions with the Carter administration (1977–1981). Cuban intervention was particularly striking in Angola, where Castro sent 36,000 soldiers between November 1975 and April 1976, eventually achieving an unusual success that "prevented the establishment of a government beholden to the apartheid regime" (Gleijeses 2008, 126).

Havana's intervention in Africa became one of the few signs of independence with regard to the USSR. The Cuban 1970s constituted a period of increasingly friendly relations with Moscow, which also entailed the adoption of a harsher domestic policy. In a 1971 speech, Fidel Castro announced what Ambrosio Fornet has coined the *Quinquenio Gris*, a new era in which any expression of dissidence would be severely repressed, particularly in the cultural field: "Our evaluation is political. [. . .] Aesthetic values cannot exist when there is hunger, where there is injustice. [. . .] For a bourgeoisie, anything can have aesthetical value – anything that entertains him, that amuses him, that helps him to linger in his laziness and boredom as an unproductive bum and parasite. But we cannot evaluate a worker, a revolutionary, a communist, in such a way" (Castro 2001). The *Quinquenio Gris* was accompanied by a Soviet-oriented political and economic institutionalization: Cuba entered the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) in 1972; in 1975, the Cuban Communist Party held its first National Congress since its foundation in 1965, with Fidel Castro nominated as first secretary; a year later, the first revolutionary Constitution – which assumed its affiliation to "Marxism–Leninism" – was approved.

In 1979, a significant year, Cuba hosted the Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement, during which Castro's speeches highlighting the disparity between rich and poor countries were

enthusiastically welcomed by world leaders. This could have been wrongly perceived as an effort to distance the island from Moscow, but Castro's refusal to speak out against the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan at the end of 1979 proved the opposite. That same year, the Sandinista Revolution successfully seized power, reviving hopes of a revolutionary outbreak in Latin America. Havana's links to the Nicaraguan government – as well as the "Cuban-Sandinista support structure [. . .] elsewhere in Central America" (especially to the insurgency in El Salvador) – created new strains with the "imperialist enemy" and ultimately led to a series of US-backed covert actions against the Sandinistas (Hager and Snyder 2015, 28).

Under Jimmy Carter's rule, however, détente had seemed plausible. An agreement of mutual recognition was signed in 1977, but any prospect of reconciliation was destroyed by Cuba's presence in Africa and by the "Mariel affairs." The latter was a rare moment of popular discontent. In April 1980, more than a thousand Cubans occupied the Peruvian Embassy, which became a protest site for and against Castro's government. To diffuse the situation, the authorities allowed those who Castro had called *escoria* to leave the country from the port of Mariel, resulting in an exodus of 124,779 Cubans, including a significant number of criminals purposely released from prison by the authorities (Kapcia 2009, 41).

Prospects regarding Cuba–USA relations further deteriorated in 1981, when Ronald Reagan was elected president. The landing of 9000 US soldiers on the Caribbean island of Grenada (October 1981), where Castro had sent 800 Cubans – 24 of whom were killed – led the "líder máximo" to compare the Reagan administration with Nazi Germany (Quirk 1993, 822). While clashes with the White House continued to escalate, the 1980s were years of intimate ties with the Eastern world. Due to the growing access to Soviet equipment, canned food, cars, magazines, and many other products, large portions of Cuban society remember this decade with "nostalgia" (Puñales-Alpízar 2012).

However, with Mikhail Gorbachev and the advent of his reformist international agenda, the "Cuban–Soviet friendship" was put in serious jeopardy. Havana remained overwhelmingly dependent on the USSR and its sphere of influence. More than 86% of Cuban foreign trade was established with a CMEA adherent (Skierka 2004, 252). In the USSR, the willingness to continue helping Havana started to wane. The politburo decided to unveil the official figures regarding Soviet foreign assistance. In 1986, many USSR citizens realized with consternation that Cuba's annual cost amounted to 25 billion rubles (only exceeded by the expenses concerning Vietnam, which represented 40 billion rubles per year) (Zubok 2007, 299).

Fidel Castro was one of the few world leaders who anticipated the outcome of Gorbachev's perestroika (Pavlov 1994, 111), and consequently, he launched a broad national program to counter the effects of Soviet reformism. The "Rectification of errors and negative tendencies" campaign unfolded in an opposite direction to what happened in the East. It was designed to further strengthen the Socialist character of the Cuban Revolution and reject capitalist openings (Jatar-Hausmann 1999, 37) while also silencing numerous activists within the Communist Youth who openly sought to emulate Gorbachev (Kapcia 2009, 41).

With Soviet–Cuban relations deteriorating and worries of a freezing of USSR aid to Havana, Castro began to spell out his concern. In August 1989, the official newspaper *Granma* announced a ban on the distribution of *Sputnik* and *Novedades de Moscú*, two of the most popular Soviet magazines distributed on the island. Castro's apprehensions soared after Soviet participation in a 1990 meeting with leaders of the Cuban diaspora in Miami, which pushed the Cubans to condemn a gesture "that played into the hands of the enemies" (Pavlov 1994, 161). Unable to hide the now inevitable rupture with the Kremlin, Castro did not hesitate to criticize Moscow's renunciation. He distinguished between "two types of communists: good [the Cubans] and bad ones [the Soviets] [. . .] Those who do not submit to imperialism [. . .] they call inflexible. Long live inflexibility" (Skierka 2004, 247). By accusing the USSR of excessive

complicity with "imperialism," Castro was preparing his own people to face the worst crisis that the Cuban Revolution has ever experienced: the so-called "Special Period in Time of Peace."

Indeed, with the demise of the USSR and an extremely hostile international landscape, living conditions in Cuba soon crumbled. Bicycles substituted cars, constant blackouts interrupted everyday life at home and at work, the water supply was erratic, and the Cubans started to lose weight (Jatar-Hausmann 1999, 41). Economic reforms soon followed, and Castro was forced to open the country to tourism and, by doing so, to an uncontrollable flow of foreign influences. The end of the Cold War also led to a major ideological reassessment of the revolution. References to the Soviet model disappeared, while Castro repeatedly acknowledged "our mistake of deification of the USSR." To find the authentic foundations of the Cuban Revolution, the official discourse increasingly referred to the 1st years of post-Batista Cuba, resulting in a growing vindication of those who embodied the real roots of the revolution: José Martí and Che Guevara. Castro wanted to "re-Cubanize" his revolution (Miller 2003, 150), which led to a 1992 constitutional amendment.

By 1996, the Cuban economy began to recover as a consequence of subsequent waves of reforms. In spite of Castro's concerns regarding the psychological impact of a potential influx of foreign visitors, tourism eventually displaced sugar as the principal source of wealth (Jatar-Hausmann 1999, 83). The situation was still unstable when a favorable event offered the Cubans an unexpected opportunity to remerge within the Latin American scene: the election of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 1998. The US embargo was reinforced throughout the 1990s, increasing the international isolation of the Castro administration, but the Cuban–Venezuelan alliance under Chávez, soon followed by the Latin American "Pink Tide" – a hemispheric leftist turn allowing rapid institutional integration for Cuba – gave "oxygen to Cuba." A commercial accord was signed in 2000, in which Caracas agreed to provide Cuba with 53,000 barrels of oil a day in exchange for money, goods, and services (Jones 2008, 288). As a result, Cuban doctors, physical education teachers, agricultural experts, military advisers, and intelligence operatives flocked to Venezuela, engaging in a decisive cooperation between two countries that saw themselves as "revolutionary" and "anti-imperialist" partners.

Growing ideological convergence with sympathetic Latin American governments (Lula Da Silva in Brazil, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, among others) allowed Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez to launch an ambitious regional project designed to buttress hemispheric connections while simultaneously undermining US preeminence on the continent. The Bolivarian Alternative for the People of Our America (ALBA) was founded in 2004 with the mission of achieving economic integration while purposely excluding the White House. First planned in discussions between Venezuelan and Cuban representatives, ALBA was conceived as an alternative of the US-promoted Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (ALCA). ALBA's first declaration signed by Castro and Chávez in Havana claimed a Bolivarian "Latin Americanist vision" in opposition to "the other America, the expansionist one with imperialist appetite" (Gott 2011, 315). Emboldened by the "commodity boom," Chávez sponsored a series of initiatives meant to outweigh the US influence – the new regional currency *SUCRE*, the Bank of the South, and the television network Telesur – all of which were initiatives that Castro had been dreaming of for years. The battle against "imperialism" in the Americas, thanks to Chávez's vital commitment and financial backing, was seriously threatening the US position in the region.

But Castro could not lead this "golden age" for the Latin American Left, as, due to health issues, he was forced to temporarily delegate his presidential duties in 2006. Unable to recover from an intestinal disease, the *Comandante* finally decided to retire, passing the torch to the long-standing "number two" of the revolution, his brother Raúl Castro. Significant opportunities were enacted under the new leadership, leading to striking economic reforms, the removal of members of Fidel Castro's inner circle, and a steady normalization

of Cuba–USA relations (at least until Donald Trump took office). Although Raúl Castro repeatedly claimed to be taking his brother's advice into account, it clearly appeared that the new administration was following its own path. Fidel Castro's interaction with the Cuban people was limited to his *Reflexiones* in *Granma*, in which he continued to evince his inexhaustible obsession with American imperialism. Throughout the last 10 years of his life, it became increasingly rare to see Castro in public events. The international press was always eager to speculate about Castro's medical condition. The old revolutionary was often caught wearing an Adidas tracksuit while hosting a foreign head of the state – usually an "anti-imperialist" dignitary, such as Evo Morales, Nicolás Maduro, or Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Castro's "reflections" covered various topics ranging from environmental issues, world politics, agricultural innovations, and nuclear weapons. "Imperialism" always remained at the core of his preoccupations, as in his 2012 press article entitled "World Peace Hanging by a Thread," in which he accused Washington and "its contradictory and absurd imperial policy" of plunging the globe into chaos (Castro 2012). Regarding US authorities, Castro remained unrelenting until his final days. When, in March 2016, Barack Obama became the first American president to visit Cuba in 88 years, thereby crowning the Havana–Washington "thaw," Castro wrote: "We don't need any gifts from the empire," before recounting "nearly 60 years of ruthless blockade" (DeYoung 2016).

Weak and with a trembling voice, Castro gave a last party address in April 2016. He appeared in public once again to celebrate his 90th birthday along with his brother Raúl and the Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. On the night of November 25, 2016, President Raúl Castro suddenly appeared on television to give a brief speech and announce the death of the "Commander in Chief of the Cuban Revolution." Drinking alcohol and live concerts were forbidden during a 10-day mourning period, and a funeral procession from Havana to Santiago was organized, tracing, in reverse, Castro's triumphal march to the capital after Batista's fall in January 1959.

Fidel Castro's image proliferated in the following months, while his definition of revolution – originally a speech made in 2000 – was widely displayed in public buildings: "Revolution means to have a sense of history [. . .], it is achieving emancipation by ourselves and through our own efforts; it is challenging powerful dominant forces from within [. . .]; it is a profound conviction that there is no power in the world that can crush the power of truth and ideas" (Castro 2000). Sure enough, while the US administration under Donald Trump is imposing new restrictions affecting the Cuban economy, Castro's anti-imperialist legacy remains unlikely to disappear.

Cross-References

- ▶ Algeria: From Anti-Colonial Struggle to Complicity with Imperialism
- ▶ Anti-Apartheid, Anti-Capitalism and Anti-Imperialism: Liberation in South Africa
- ▶ Arab Socialism
- ▶ Ben Bella, Ahmed (1918–2012)
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- ▶ Guerilla Warfare and Imperialism
- ▶ Guevara, Ernesto 'Che' (1928–1967)
- ▶ Martí, José (1853–1895)
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▶ US-Latin American Relations after September 11, 2001: Between Change and Continuity
▶ Venezuela, Bolivarian Revolutionary Anti-Imperialism and Hugo Chávez (1954–2013)

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