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## Cuban Revolution: Fidel Castro

The aftermath following the death of former Cuban President Fidel Castro in 2016 was met with mixed reactions. While President-elect Donald Trump celebrated Castro's death, calling him "a brutal dictator who oppressed his own people for nearly six decades," Justin Trudeau, the Prime Minister of Canada, had a drastically different opinion. He wrote that "while a controversial figure, both Castro's supporters and detractors recognised his tremendous dedication and love for the Cuban people." Meanwhile, some, like the former American President Barack Obama, stayed neutral, only shedding light on Castro's "enormous impact." So, without doubt, Fidel Castro was an influential historical figure, who will be remembered as an iconic, yet deeply-polarising, figure of the 20th Century. While he is admired for his revolutionary social and economic agenda, his dictatorial actions seem to counteract the positive progress he has made. But to what extent? Was Fidel Castro's legacy more representative of a tyrant, portraying the worst of the worst of Latin America's centralizing tradition? Or was he truly a man of the people, solely dedicating his life towards the betterment of the country. In the end, however, Castro's legacy, along with his achievements, is best described as mixed, akin to Obama's stance on the situation.

Born on August 13, 1926 into a bourgeois family, Fidel Castro spent his childhood alongside the laborers on his father's ranch, developing an empathy for the country's browbeaten poor. Increasingly passionate about social justice, Castro propelled himself into a revolutionary career. In March 1952 a coup led by former president and political strongman Fulgencio Batista successfully overthrew the government and canceled the upcoming election, leaving Castro without a legitimate political platform and barely any income with which to support his family. After it became clear that peaceful tactics could not dislodge Batista, Castro and his younger brother, Raúl Castro, organized an armed conspiracy. Castro's Rebel Armed Forces, numbering fewer than one thousand, assumed the offensive in the summer of 1958, and the dictatorship collapsed as Batista fled Cuba on New Year's Day of 1959, completing the Cuban Revolution. Now the most popular figure in Cuba and in control of the armed forces, Castro gradually pushed aside his moderate middle-class allies in the new government, who objected to his sweeping agrarian reform proposal and the growing influence of the Communists in the revolutionary process. Castro established a one-party state, amalgamating his movement and its political allies into a Marxist-Leninist party. US-Soviet Cold War tension came to the brink of an unthinkable nuclear confrontation in late 1962, as the United States discovered Russian missiles in Cuba. The Cuban Missile Crisis, as it came to be called, was averted by a last-minute Soviet retreat as well as secret compromises and pledges by both parties. Castro displayed a flamboyant, personal style of leadership. The Cuban head of state, simply referred to as Fidel by most Cubans, showed charisma and machismo, which was valued in Latin American political culture. He also wore a military uniform in public to reinforce his revolutionary image. He was charming in his personal contacts with Cubans, mass audiences, and foreign visitors to Cuba.

In 1959 Fidel Castro established Cuba as the Western Hemisphere's first communist country, after overthrowing the US-backed military dictator Fulgencio Batista. Castro was a self-declared Marxist-Leninist, and upon taking power, he abolished all private enterprises, strictly limited the amount of land Cubans could own, and gave the state sweeping control over housing and

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consumer goods. Many rival powers called Castro a “tyrant” and a “dictator,” as he shut down opposition newspapers, jailed those who were critical of him and barred elections. Castro’s firm grip on the economy left most Cubans trapped in poverty, and during his nearly 50 years in power, thousands fled to the US. Cuba under Castro was unique in a lot of ways, politically and economically but also socially. In some aspects, Cuba under Castro was able to achieve remarkable progress in areas like education and healthcare, and to this day the nation has what is undoubtedly the best healthcare system in Central America in spite of having below-average GDP per capita. It is also important to examine the extent of political repression under Castro, and to put that in the context of the political and social situation in pre-revolution Cuba. But to many who stayed in Cuba, Castro was actually quite popular. Pro-Castro street art was erected in Havana, and large crowds gathered for his long, unscripted speeches. Castro was celebrated for reducing illiteracy, bringing electricity to rural communities, abolishing legal discrimination and building schools and medical facilities.

Let's look at healthcare more specifically, since that is often lauded of communist Cuba's greatest achievements. Just prior to the revolution, Cuba had an infant mortality rate of 60 per 1000 lives, a maternal mortality rate of 125 per 1000 births and a life expectancy of about 65 years. The linked source mentions that by 1988, infant mortality had fallen to 15 per 1000 (compared to the contemporary 9 in the OECD and 22 in the Soviet bloc, and 54 in the rest of the Caribbean), while maternal mortality fell to 77 per 1000 births. Today, Cuban life expectancy is among the highest in the world at around 79.5 years, compared to the UK's 81.2 years and America's 79.3. Furthermore, Cuba has played a big role in medical development, exporting some \$120 million worth of drugs in 1995 and being praised even by such conservative sources as The Economist for its medical establishments which 'have made breakthroughs in vaccines, immunology and biotechnology'. Additionally, Cuba has made outstanding educational progress under Castro. Pre-revolution, it is estimated that a quarter of the nation was illiterate, yet by 1961, only a few years after the revolution, UNESCO had confirmed that basic illiteracy was essentially eradicated from the nation thanks to an intensive educational campaign. Today, the average Cuban citizen can expect to spend 10 years in schooling, compared to roughly 13 for the US and less than 8 in the average Caribbean nation. So, Cuba achieved significant social gains in the decades since the revolution, and significantly, achieved much greater gains in social welfare than other Caribbean nations aligned with the US. But at what cost? Was the political repression worth it?

Castro’s reputation was also complicated abroad. He was a friend to leftist movements in Africa, the Middle East and other parts of Latin America as he supported them during the Cold War. For instance in the 1970’s and 80’s, Castro deployed tens of thousands of troops to Angola to fight South African Apartheid-era forces there. Upon hearing of Cuba’s intervention, Nelson Mandela issued a statement from jail, praising Castro for being leader from another continent to help Africans achieve their own freedom, rather than try to take it away. Mandela and Castro remained friends until Mandela’s death in 2013. Castro supported similar movements in Mozambique, Ethiopia, Algeria, Yemen and Libya. But Castro was a bitter rival to many Western Powers, predominantly the United States. After embracing communism and aligning Cuba with the Soviet Union, US leaders labeled him a tyrant and set out to remove him from power through the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, a trade embargo, and allegedly as many as 600 assassination attempts, according to one Cuban counterintelligence officer.

There are two factors to look at here: what was the political situation like before Castro, and how bad repression under Castro actually was. From 1952 until 1959, the year of the revolution,

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Cuba was ruled by a military dictatorship under one Fulgencio Batista, who staged a military coup when it was clear he was about to lose the election in 1952. Under his rule, somewhere around 20,000 people were killed by the state, while presiding under an economy that was an increasingly unequal and impoverished nation. The most critical thing to understand here was that at this time, the Batista regime was supported both by the official US government and by private American interests, which according to President Kennedy, came to 'dominate the Cuban economy'. All this together paints a portrait of pre-revolutionary Cuba at least as repressive as Castro's regime, and more importantly of a repression sponsored by American public and private interests, especially private firms that saw Cuba as a source of cheap profit. Given this situation, the violence and repression of Castro's regime becomes more understandable, if not justifiable (especially in more recent times). Especially early on, repression could be understandable if neighboring superpowers are actively attempting to overthrow your government and assassinate your leaders.

During much of Castro's reign subsidies from the Soviet Union kept Cuba's economy afloat. So when the block collapsed in 1991, Cuba's economy crumbled, and the flaws in Castro's soviet ideology became increasingly apparent. In the last decade of his presidency, Castro stubbornly remained in power, even while his reputation diminished both at home and abroad. Finally in 2008, he stepped down, appointing his brother, Raul to lead the country. He was a skilled politician, admired for uplifting Cuba's poor and supporting leftist movements abroad. But at the same time, Castro was obsessed with holding on to his power, costing him diplomatic ties with the United and in many cases, damaging the welfare of the Cuban people. However, Castro has still led a nasty regime at times, albeit nowhere near the scale of someone like Stalin or Hitler. Under Castro, Cuba has seen impressive accomplishments in social measures of education and healthcare, but its citizens still see a relatively low standard of living and constant political repression. Beginning in 1958 Castro and his forces began a campaign of guerrilla warfare which led to the overthrow of Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista. Under Castro, improvements were made to healthcare and education, while he maintained a dictatorial control over the country and brutally persecuted or imprisoned anyone thought to be enemies of the regime.

"The Twenty-sixth of July Movement is a party of radical ideas, but it is not a Communist movement and it differs from communism in several respects. In a series of essential respects."