

Batista's Cuba

In the 1950s, under Batista's government, large-scale gambling flourished in Havana, which became known as 'the Latin Las Vegas', and Cuba became profitable for American business as well as a centre of organised crime. Political opposition was quickly and brutally crushed. By Latin American standards, Cuba was relatively prosperous. Although some Cuban sugar workers were the highest paid in Latin America, their work was seasonal. Most sugar workers were only employed for four months per year. Cuba itself was marked by stark inequalities – in rural areas landless peasants lived in poverty and over half of all urban wage earners were paid less than one dollar per day. Although Cuba's national wealth was high, it was not equally distributed, with extremes of wealth and poverty. A large Cuban middle class was frustrated by its lack of political power and influence.

Nationalism

The Cuban economy appeared to flourish in the 1950s, but its complete dependence on exporting sugar to the United States was causing problems. Cuba had been one of the world's major exporters of sugar for over 100 years – at one stage one quarter of the world's sugar was grown in Cuba. By 1958, they produced only one tenth. Although the United States guaranteed to buy Cuban sugar, many Cubans

began to feel that the political price of this economic dependence was too high. They believed that since the end of Spanish rule, governments had served the interests of the American sugar market, not the people of Cuba. Batista was held responsible for this. The extent of American involvement in Cuba was resented, particularly by sections of the Cuban middle class and intellectuals who believed that their country had never been allowed to become independent. This upsurge of nationalism in Cuba was not shared, however. Wealthy Cubans enjoyed the benefits of the relative prosperity that the American dominance of the sugar industry provided. American-owned businesses owned 90 per cent of all mines, 40 per cent of the sugar industry, 80 per cent of public services, 50 per cent of all railways and the whole of the oil industry in Cuba.

When Batista came to power in the illegal coup in 1952, opposition began almost immediately. A student leader and member of the Orthodox Party, Fidel Castro believed that the only way to oppose Batista was through an armed uprising. On 26 July 1953 he and a group of followers decided to start a revolution against Batista's repression and launched an attack on a military barracks in Santiago. The attack failed disastrously – Castro and his followers were met by 1000 troops. Of the 150 who took part in the uprising only thirty survived and Castro was arrested and imprisoned for fifteen years.



Source 9.2

Sociologist Lowry Nelson writing in 1954

It would be impossible to give even a rough estimate of the beggar population of Cuba but it is considerable, as anyone who has visited Cuban cities can testify. Large numbers of them are women ... They are found at the gates and on the steps of the churches on a Sunday morning, begging alms of the churchgoers.

From L A Perez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, Oxford University Press, 1988.

Questions

Study Source 9.2.

- What social problem is described?
- How does it reflect the policies of the Batista government?
- In what ways is this source useful for a historian studying the economic conditions within Cuba in the 1950s?

Source 9.3

Arthur Schlesinger Jr describing a visit he made to Cuba in 1958

I was enchanted by Havana – and appalled by the way that lovely city was being debased into a great casino and brothel for American businessmen over for a big weekend from Miami. My fellow countrymen reeled through the streets, picking up fourteen-year-old Cuban girls and tossing coins to make men scramble in the gutter. One wondered how any Cuban – on the basis of this evidence – could regard the United States with anything but hatred.

From L A Perez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, Oxford University Press, 1988.

Questions

Study Source 9.3.

- What is being described in this source?
- What is the attitude of the author towards American actions in Havana?
- What other evidence corroborates the information given in this source?
- How is this source useful in helping you to understand the reasons why Batista became increasingly unpopular in Cuba?

Source 9.4

An extract from Fidel Castro's 'History will absolve me' speech that he gave at his trial for the Moncada barracks attack in 1953

The first revolutionary law would have returned power to the people and proclaimed the 1940 Constitution the Supreme Law of the State until such time as the people should decide to modify or change it ... A government acclaimed by the mass of rebel people would be vested with every power, everything necessary in order to proceed with the effective implementation of popular will and real justice ...

The second revolutionary law would give non-mortgageable and non-transferable ownership of the land to all tenant and sub-tenant farmers, lessees, share croppers and squatters who hold parcels of five caballeros of land or

less, and the state would indemnify the former owners on the basis of the rental which they would have received for these parcels over a period of ten years.

The third revolutionary law would have granted workers and employees the right to share 30 per cent of the profits of all the large industrial, mercantile and mining enterprises, including the sugar mills ...

The fifth revolutionary law would have ordered the confiscation of all holdings and ill-gotten gains of those who had committed frauds during previous regimes ... To implement this, special courts with full powers would gain