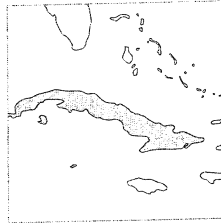
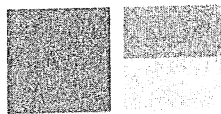


## Chapter 9



# The Cuban Revolution, 1959–62



### Chapter overview

In 2000, news reports around the world showed the dramatic events involving young Elian Gonzalez who was rescued at sea after the boat on which he and his mother were fleeing Cuba capsized, killing his mother and nine others. The bitter struggle between his father, who wanted to take his son back to Cuba, and his Cuban American relatives, who wanted him to stay, reflected the controversial nature of one of the few communist countries left standing after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Glamorised in Hollywood movies of the 1930s and 1940s as a gambling resort, the tiny island of Cuba came to international prominence in 1959 when a band of young guerrilla fighters led by Fidel Castro swept into power. Cuba came to symbolise not only the greatest fears of the **Cold War** – the Cuban Missile Crisis brought the United States and the Soviet Union to the brink of nuclear war – but also the idealised hopes of the sixties through the romanticised image of the revolutionary Che Guevara. Since the collapse of communism in Europe in 1989–90, Cuba has remained one of the few communist nations in the world. Despite a longstanding economic **blockade** from the United States, the collapse of its economic supporter the Soviet Union, and numerous assassination attempts on its leader, communist Cuba and Fidel Castro have survived.

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### Syllabus links

- New South Wales Modern History Stage 6: Preliminary Course, Part 1: Depth Studies: List B, Topic 9
- Queensland Trial-pilot Senior Syllabus: Theme 1: Studies in Conflict; Theme 3: History of Ideas; Theme 6: Studies of Power
- South Australia Senior Modern History: Section A, Topic 3: Revolutions and Turmoil
- Victoria Certificate of Education 20th Century History: Unit 2: 20th Century Since 1945
- Western Australia (Year 12) History: International Relations 1945–90: Europe

## Background

Cuba was discovered by Europeans during Christopher Columbus' voyage of 1492. From 1511, Cuba became a colony of Spain and the first Cuban city (Baracoa) was founded by Don Diego de Velazquez. Cuba became a base from which Spanish exploration and colonisation of the rest of Central and South Americas took place. As a result of its rich soil, ideal for large scale agriculture, Cuba also became a producer of tobacco and sugar. The numbers of indigenous Cubans (called Indians by the Spanish as Columbus originally thought that he had reached India when he discovered the Americas) dropped dramatically as a result of European diseases and harsh Spanish rule. When de Valazquez tried to take a census of the island the number of indigenous people was based on the numbers of dead bodies of indigenous

people. Those who remained were converted to Catholicism by the missionaries who came to the island. The low numbers of indigenous Cubans caused problems for the Spanish, who needed large numbers of cheap workers. This led to the importation of African slaves to work on the sugar and tobacco plantations. Today, the population of Cuba is mainly of Spanish descent with a large minority of African heritage or mixed race.

Although Cuba was a tiny island, its location meant that it was seen as strategically important by the empires that colonised the Americas – the British and Spanish. The Spanish built forts all over the island and maintained an army of mercenaries to control the population and defend its colony. In fact, Britain did make a failed attempt to seize control of Cuba in 1763.



Fidel Castro talking to a crowd of supporters in 1959.

## Concepts overview

### Imperialism

- The United States controlled the Cuban economy through its domination of the Cuban sugar industry. The Cuban economy was dependent upon the United States buying their sugar.
- The Platt Amendment meant that the United States also had control of Cuban politics.
- After 1962 Cuba became dependent on the Soviet Union to buy their sugar.
- The Soviet Union planned to use Cuba as a strategic base for missiles and had influence over the Cuban government.

### Communism

- When Castro came to power in 1959, he did not declare that he was a communist. He promised to instigate land reform and a democratic constitution.
- Castro may have adopted communism as a result of the United States embargo on Cuban sugar, which forced Cuba to rely on Soviet support.
- Castro's declaration that he was a communist, and his acceptance of Soviet aid, plunged Cuba into the Cold War.
- The transition to a communist state in 1961 led to large numbers of Cubans – many of whom had supported Castro – fleeing to the United States.

## The Cuban revolution

### Revolution

- The events in Cuba between 1959 and 1962 make up a revolution:
  - there was an economic crisis and widespread poverty
  - there was a growing backlash against rich Americans using Cuba for gambling and prostitution
  - Castro took over as head of government and instituted reforms.
- Cuba – in defiance of United States influence – became a communist country.

## Key people

### Fidel Castro (1926–)

Fidel Castro was a student leader and young lawyer who opposed the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. On 26 July 1953, he led an unsuccessful attack on an army post, the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba, and was imprisoned. Released in a general amnesty in 1955, he went to Mexico where he organised the July 26 Movement.

In December 1956 he returned to Cuba, landing in Oriente province with a small group of rebels. Castro and eleven others, including his brother Raúl and Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, survived an initial attack and hid in the mountains of the Sierra Maestra where they organised a guerrilla campaign that eventually toppled the Batista regime on 1 January 1959. Castro proved to be a charismatic, though sometimes ruthless and pragmatic leader. He remains leader of Cuba.



### Che Guevara (1928–67)

Che Guevara was born in Argentina and qualified as a doctor. He became a professional revolutionary in the 1950s after he took part in riots against the Argentinian dictator, Juan Peron. Convinced that revolution was the only way to change social inequality, he went to Guatemala in 1953 and joined the pro-communist regime of Jacobo Arbenz. When Arbenz was overthrown in 1954, Guevara fled to Mexico, where he met Fidel Castro and other Cuban rebels in 1956. Guevara became a key member of the **July 26 Movement**, particularly as a planner of guerrilla attacks. He was Cuba's minister of industry from 1961–65. A strong opponent of American influence in the Third World, he strongly influenced Castro towards a pro-communist path. Guevara believed in peasant-based revolutionary movements in developing countries and that Cuba should encourage other revolutionary movements. He disappeared from Cuba in 1965 and became a guerrilla fighter in 1965 in the Congo and then Bolivia. He was captured by the Bolivian army and shot near Vallegrande on 9 October 1967.



### Fulgencio Batista (1902–75)

Fulgencio Batista was the son of sugar plantation workers. He joined the army in 1921 and in 1932 became a sergeant. He took over the Cuban government on 4 September 1933 during the 'Sergeants' Revolt', which overthrew the liberal government of Gerardo Machado. This marked the beginning of the army's, and particularly Batista's, influence in Cuba's government. Batista was not only chief of the armed forces; he ran the country from behind the scenes, appointing Cuba's presidents. The United States saw him as a stabilising force with respect for their interests.

Between 1940 and 1944 Batista was president of Cuba. During his presidency, trade relations with the United States increased. In 1952, Batista took over the government once more in a military coup. The coup took place three months before the upcoming elections that he was sure to lose. His government was officially recognised by the United States government. Shortly after this, Batista declared that the Cuban constitution would have to be temporarily suspended, as well as the right to strike. On 1 January 1959, after the United States withdrew support for his government, Batista fled to the Dominican Republic where he died in 1975.

