

A brief and personal history of 100 years of Cuban history

By **Carlos Eire**, on July 26, 2013, at 8:31 am



Central Train Station, Havana, 1913

Today is the 60th anniversary of one of the most unfortunate events in Cuban history. Sixty years ago today, Fidel and Raul Castro attacked some army barracks and could have been killed, had they fought as bravely as their companions. But they were cowards and survived. Dark, dark day.

Instead of dwelling on what happened that day, let's take a longer and deeper look at its historical context. And let's make it personal.

One hundred years ago Cuba was a prosperous island that attracted European immigrants at a rate much higher than that of the United States. It had problems, yes. Every country on the map had problems then. Some of those problems would soon enough be called "The Great War" or "World War I"... But Cuba was prosperous. Just look at the train station above.

Or look at the Centro Gallego, below, which was under construction in 1913 and opened in 1915. Built by immigrants. And there was fierce competition among immigrant groups: who would build the most spectacular palace for the arts? Runners up: el Centro Asturiano, and el Centro Vasco. Can't show you those images, you might disagree with my ranking. Google them, if you are curious.



Cuba was politically unstable. But that instability did little to stem the prosperity. Despite the fast revolving door at the presidential palace, the corruption, the occasional dictator, and the fallout from the Great Depression, things moved forward, and the immigrants kept pouring in. Yes, there were rabble-rousers, and some were members of a very feeble and ridiculous communist party, but no one paid much attention to them.

Hardly anyone ever left the island, except to see the world and come back full of stories and photos. Or to return to the old country, weighed down with cash, to build a grand house and prove to everyone back home that life in the New World was good indeed. And there were more Americans living in Cuba than Cubans in the United States.

Speed up the history....

Sixty years ago today the Castro brothers, illegitimate sons of a Gallego immigrant father and a Jewish immigrant mother, botched their attack the Moncada Barracks, causing the deaths of many Cubans --including nearly everyone in their raiding party-- and the two cretins ended up in prison. Because he was married to a high society girl with connections to Fulgencio Batista, the president he wanted to overthrow, Fidel and his slimy little communist-party-member brother were quickly released from their very cushy prison cells --where Fidel even managed to begin an extramarital affair with another society girl-- and the rest, as they say, is history.

Three years later, after begging for money from exiles in the United States and living off the work or the fortunes of others, Fidel, Raul, an Argentine scumbag they called "Che" and a handful of fellow "revolutionaries" landed in eastern Cuba in a boat named Granma, and, once again, Fidel and Raul managed to get nearly everyone in the expedition killed. The brothers and the Argentine survived, mostly by avoiding all

confrontations with their enemies and letting everyone else do the fighting. They headed for the mountains, met up later with a New York Times reporter named Herbert Matthews and managed to draw all attention to themselves and their 26th of July Movement, even though there were many other "revolutionaries" fighting against Batista, much more effectively, with much nobler goals.

Although they accomplished very little up in the mountains of the Sierra Maestra, other than to grow beards, kill peasants, and attract the attention of foreign journalists, Fidel and his 26th of July Movement managed to take over the nation of Cuba, eliminate all other "revolutionaries" who disagreed with them or stood in their way, and to set up a monarchy ostensibly committed to Marxist-Leninist principles, but really committed to another goal: that of enslaving every Cuban, making them all equally poor, and turning a once prosperous nation into one of the most backward and repressive hell-holes on earth.

Oh, yeah... almost forgot. They killed tens of thousands of their own countrymen, imprisoned and tortured hundreds of thousands, exiled two million, broke apart at least three out of every four families, and ruined agriculture in an island with some of the most fertile soil on earth. Well, wait a minute. The Castro brothers didn't do all this by themselves. No. There were plenty of unprincipled Cubans -- many driven by envy or the sheer love of power -- who did all the dirty work.

Personalize that history, please. Yes, please.

Here is my father's family a hundred years ago, in 1913. Immigrants, and immigrant progeny.



My grandfather (seated, left, in white suit) would die in 1927, after he got a paper cut on his tongue while licking an envelope. Infection. No antibiotics in 1927. But he died in a prosperous Cuba. All the adults in this photo died in a prosperous Cuba too, before 1959. Everyone else in this photograph died poor and in exile, save for my father, the boy seated on the floor in his sailor suit. He would die alone, in the house that was no longer his, in 1976, while waiting for his turn to leave the island, so he could join his wife and two sons in exile. The teenager in the white suit with the pince-nez glasses, my uncle Rafael, would be imprisoned and tortured by the Castro regime. His son, Fernando, who would be born twenty years after this photograph was taken, would be imprisoned for over twenty years by the Castro regime, and endure all sorts of torture.

Here is the happy dysfunctional family my father, now no longer dressed in sailor suits, ended up having in 1953, just about the same time as Fidel and Raul were attacking the Moncada Barracks.



Here are his two sons, on the fender of his car, in 1953.



Here are his two sons, arriving as orphans in Bloomington, Illinois, in 1963, where they would live with his brother, their uncle Amado, that awkward-looking teenage boy in the dark suit in the photograph from 1913. They are very happy because they have just been freed from a foster home in Miami run by abusive adults and full of equally abusive juvenile delinquents.



Here are his wife and his two sons, in Chicago, in 1967, waiting for him to leave Cuba. His wife has just found a minimum-wage job at a factory, assembling photocopy machines. She spent three and a half years trying to get out of Cuba to join the two boys in exile, was sent to Chicago by the Cuban Refugee Center in Miami, and could not find any work for a very long time. The older and now shorter son is a full-time printer who has quit high school. The geeky and now taller younger son is a full-time dishwasher who can't quit high school because he is too young to do so legally.



Flash forward to 2013. Sorry, no family pictures. There is no family. Gone. Everyone is dead or scattered all over the map. The family ceased to exist in 1960, or thereabouts. And no one has ever been able to go to anyone else's funeral.

Thank you Fidel, thank you Raul... Here is the only photo that can round out this hundred-year history. The event was carefully staged for the New York Times a few days ago, as an unintentional memorial to the great Herbert Matthews. This is Cuba in 2013. And this photograph --and its NYT caption --are the ultimate and most fitting tribute to the attack on the Moncada Barracks on the 26th of July, 1953.



A pig being slaughtered in a tourist area of old Havana is seen as a sign of a loss of civility.

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