

IOANNIS TEKEGLOU / PHILIPP MÜLLER
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fig. 1 - Christopher Columbus lays foot on Cuba

Cuba before the Spanish

“The name Cuba for the largest of the Antilles Islands goes back to the name Colba. It is not known whether this meant the whole island or just the land of the Taíno in the east. Colba - as Columbus understood it during the first encounters - became the more resounding Cuba.” (see Zeuske 2007, 9-12.)

The island of Cuba has been inhabited by humans for several thousand years. The first human traces that man found on the island go back to 10,000 - 8,000 years BC. However, relatively little is known of the history, traditions and culture of the people who lived in Cuba before Columbus' discovery.(see Zeuske 2007, 9-12.) When Cuba was discovered by Christopher Columbus on October 27, 1492, three different indigenous peoples were

already living on the island. A total of around 200,000 people were counted, of which the Taíno indigenous people formed the largest group. (see Zeuske 2007, 9-12.) They lived in simple circumstances and were housed in huts made of palm leaves and caves. It is particularly noteworthy that the indigenous peoples in Cuba were the first who smoked tobacco and thus recognized the potential of the plants. The majority of the aborigines died in the following years after being discovered due to wars and introduced diseases. (see solidarieat 2018, 01: 00-02)

The discovery by Christopher Columbus and the conquistadors

On October 27, 1492, Christopher Columbus discovered the island of Cuba and at times assumed that he had landed on Japan, since the actual goal of the trip was to find the western sea route to India. (see Zeuske 2007, 13) In the first few years after its discovery by the Spanish Crown, Cuba received little attention. It was not until 1510 that the island was opened up and explored by Diego Velázquez de Cuelar and declared a Spanish colonial area. During these expeditions of discovery and conquest, most of Cuba's indigenous people were killed, enslaved, or subjugated by the Spanish conquistadors. (cf. Zeuske 2007, 14-15.)

By exploring the Caribbean islands, the Spanish crown hoped above all to discover silver, which is why most of the Spanish settlements arose in the areas in which they suspected these metals and the indigenous people had already settled. (see Zeuske 2007, 16ff.) Among the first cities or places of settlement were, for example, Havana, Santiago de Cuba or Trinidad, whereby Santiago de Cuba first developed into the capital of the island and only later - for strategic and political reasons - Havana became the capital of the island. (cf. Zeuske 2007, 26.) After the search for precious metals remained unsuccessful, there was more and more interest in tobacco and so it began to be grown on a large scale in Cuba. Due to a lack of manpower for the tobacco fields, the Spaniards began in 1525 to

bring an enormous number of enslaved Africans to Cuba. A total of over 1.5 million people were deported to Cuba as enslaved people, of which hundreds of thousands died at sea. (see solidariteat 2008, 02: 40-03: 10.) As a result, over the centuries more enslaved people lived on the island than people of Spanish origin; to this day about 60% of the Cuban population descend from enslaved Africans. (see solidariteat 2008, 03: 10-03: 40.)



fig. 2 - Depiction of a Cuban indigenous person

Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, the sugar plantations and the wars of independence

At the beginning of the 19th century, the Spaniards began growing large quantities of sugar cane in Cuba in addition to tobacco. Since sugar was a valuable raw material in demand at that time, it brought most of the large landowners in Cuba an immense wealth, from which Spain also profited.

Carlos Manuel de Céspedes was such an owner of a large amount of land, but in 1868 he was on the verge of bankruptcy with his plantation. He blamed Spain's high taxes and tariffs for this situation and no longer wanted to accept it. On October 10, 1868, Céspedes declared Cuba independent and started Cuba's first struggle for freedom, of which he declared himself to be the leader. He released his enslaved people from work and hires them for his army. In 1874, Céspedes and his



fig. 3 - Portrait of Céspedes

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army - consisting of 12,000 followers and released enslaved people - faced 33,000 Spanish soldiers. Céspedes was killed in this guerrilla war, which was lost. (see solidariteat 2008, 04: 10-05: 50.) However, it was also this war that triggered the beginning of the Wars of Independence and the subsequent political unrest. (see Zeuske 2008, 1.) After this first war, Cuba remained a Spanish colony, but there were also reforms and freedom of expression and parties were allowed. However, these changes did not help most of the people in Cuba, since most of the people who were the ones to decide were still the Spanish landowners and not the enslaved people. Although peace was made between the insurgents and the Spaniards in 1878, the fighting, led by José Martí, continued underground (see Schuch 2018, 1.)

Since this was not in the spirit of the Spanish colony, the Spaniards began to destroy all villages in 1893 and forcibly forced the population to move to the cities - where they were under the control of the Spaniards - or people were placed in Spanish concentration camps or deported. In total, around 400,000 people were resettled, of which 150,000-170,000 people lost their lives. (see solidariteat 2008, 06: 00-07: 00.)

The intervention by and the loss to the US

Over the years, the sugar and tobacco industries in Cuba had also brought American companies to the island. To protect

them during the war, the USA sent a warship off the coast of Cuba in January 1898 to intervene. The aim was not to intervene in the war, only to protect American companies. On February 15, 1898, however, the US ship exploded, killing 261 US seamen. The US accused the Spanish colonial administration of the attack to keep the US out of the war. This attack on the US ship had such diplomatic effects that the US declared war on Spain on April 21, 1898. The US war goal was to make Cuba a free and independent country. (see solidariteat 2008, 06: 52-08: 50.)

After a total of one year and when the USA entered the war, the Spanish troops could no longer hold out and lost the war. However, Cuba did not become a free country, but was under the military administration of the US from 1899 to 1902. It was not until 1902 that Cuba was declared "free" and "independent", but the US secured immense rights of intervention in Cuba through the "Platt Amendment" and the unlimited security of the military base in Guantanamo Bay, which it holds to this day. (see Zeuske 2007, 154-156.)

"The US achieved through diplomatic and political maneuvers that Cuba had to cede them land for the Guantanamo military base; this is how the US established its control over Cuba." Esteban Morales, Cuban Sociologist (see Esteban Morales, solidariteat 2008, 09:20.)

On the influence of the US and the immigration of Castro

Because the US had reserved so many rights of intervention, they dominated Cuba economically and politically and had, among other things, a strong influence on the first Cuban presidential elections. (see Schuch 2018, 1.) Economically, the US was primarily interested in sugar, because its own sugar production in the country was not even sufficient for the first month of the year, which is why the USA was dependent on sugar imports from Cuba. The sugar industry in Cuba was therefore further expanded by American companies.

The sugar cane monoculture that this created continued to expand and - as

in the days of the Spaniards and their European economy - now benefited the American economy. (see solidariteat 2008, 10: 00-12: 00.) Due to this economic upswing in Cuba, however, there was again a shortage of workers, which is why Cuba began to recruit immigrants. In total, over a million people came to the island between 1902 and 1933, most of whom were Spanish. In this wave of immigrants there was also a man named Ángel Castro, who was the father of his later born son Fidel Castro. In 1914, the First World War broke out in Europe, and at the same time, sugar was in greater demand around the world than ever before. The sugar prices were rising to a high worldwide and in Cuba not only the big landowners, but also the plantation supervisors and the small



fig. 4 - Explosion of the US Maine 1898

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workers benefited from it for the first time. In 1914, the First World War broke out in Europe, and at the same time, sugar was in greater demand around the world than ever before. The sugar prices were rising to a high worldwide and in Cuba not only the big landowners, but also the plantation supervisors and the small workers benefited from it for the first time. Due to the economic upswing, the monoculture in Cuba continued to grow and the so-called "fat cows" era emerged in Cuba. Ángel Castro also benefited from this and worked his way up from economic refugee to large landowner in Cuba and owned a large sugar cane plantation. He got married and had an affair with his cook on the side. A total of four children emerged from this affair, including Fidel Castro and his brother Raúl Castro. (see solidariteit 2008, 12: 00-14: 00.)

unanswered as the United States had its own economic and political problems in the country. On September 24, 1933, Funzio Batista - a non-commissioned officer in the Cuban army - called for a renewed uprising and ordered the common soldiers to arrest their officers. (see solidariteit 2008, 14: 00-14: 50.)

On October 24, 1924, the US stock market began to crumble and the Great Depression began. Because Cuba was economically dependent on the US, the country got into a crisis - political unrest ensued. The reason for this was the dismissal of thousands of Cuban officials from their positions. The unemployed began with protest rallies, which developed into riots and found more and more supporters. The uprisings developed into events with tens of thousands of people who feared unemployment and mass poverty. The uprising continued to escalate and calls for help from the Cuban government to the United States went



fig. 05: Hotel Nacional



fig. 06: Fulgencio Batista



fig. 07: Meyer Lansky

Revolt of the sergeants: Fulgencio Batista

As a reaction to the general strike against the government of Gerardo Macchardo, an uprising of the army began on September 4, 1933, triggered by the appeal of a non-commissioned officer: Fulgencio Batista. Batista rose to become Chief of Staff of the Army and thus the most powerful man in the Cuban military. The unpopular government was ousted and replaced by a US-approved government that supported Batista. The mass protests between 1933 and 1936 were channeled into a system of government and state that was nevertheless populist through a constituent national assembly and a constitution that was subsequently passed by left-wing liberal forces. Batista, the „man of the people“ (see solidarity, 2018, 15: 00-15: 03) was elected President of Cuba on July 14, 1940. He was very popular and knew how to act politically smart and to influence state affairs significantly. He promised to advance the country through relatively democratic reforms, joined the United States on December 11, 1941 in World War II and armed the country. (see Gerd Koenen, 2008) At the same time, however, there was a development of corruption and organized crime in Cuba. Batista benefited from private commissions on weapon purchases and - together with the Mafia, represented by Mafia boss Meyer Lansky - influenced the growing gambling industry on the Caribbean island, which had become a vacation spot for rich Americans and foreigners. The profits were

shared between the state and the mafia.

Batista was not re-elected in 1944. With the millions generated by corruption, he initially retired to Florida. Organized crime, however, remained and had meanwhile found its way into the society of the country and increasingly permeated the administration of the state. Fulgencio Batista appeared again when on March 10, 1952, under his influence, the army again deposed the government, which was suffering from a loss of legitimacy and influence. (see solidaritaet, 2018, 15: 20-18: 20) Again he promised to „save Cuba“ (see solidarity, 2018, 17:41 - 17:43) and to free it from the corruption that he had introduced earlier.

The coup largely met with the approval of the population - but their hopes for a free and democratic Cuba were disappointed. Instead, in the course of his second term in office, the “man of the people“ was revealed to be a populist dictator who turned Cuba into a police state and let murder squads roam the country in search of enemies of the regime. (see solidarity, 2018, 17: 50-18: 30)

Revolution and eternal regime: Raul and Fidel Castro

If one looks at the period of time in Cuba described so far, this can be described as a periodic sequence of revolution and / or the seizing of power and a pseudo-democratic but de facto dictatorial government, which is ultimately replaced by a similar system after a crisis.

“Out of a feeling of humiliation” (see solidarity, 2018, 19: 11-19: 13) this process began again with the emergence of mainly student protests at the University of Havana and the resistance of young people against the Batista regime. Fidel and Raul Castro were their leaders. Following an unsuccessful constitutional lawsuit and an unsuccessful attack on a military base, the brothers and their revolutionary supporters were arrested and sentenced to long prison terms. In his defense speech, he coined a quote that has since been used by many politicians to justify their actions: “La Historia me absolvera. - History will acquit me.” (see Solidaritaet, 2018, 20: 36-20: 39) After a short prison sentence, the brothers went into exile in Mexico. There they get to know Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, who unceremoniously joined the revolution. In a kind of guerrilla war and under the increasing attention of the Soviet secret service, the Castro brothers and their supporters fought against the Batista regime between 1956 and 1958 with the aim of overturning it and evading the dominant influence of the USA. (see solidaritaet, 2018, 19: 27-22: 24) The

constant resistance and the final offensive on Havana in December 1958, as well as the refusal of the military to put down the uprising of hundreds of thousands of Cubans that Castro has now triggered, finally forced the dictator to flee. (see solidaritaet, 2018, 24: 00-26: 25) Castro interpreted the successful victory as a liberation blow and asserted that this new revolution will not end with dependence on the North Americans as it did in 1898. (see von Löwis, 2011)

Fidel Castro travelled to the US and asked Washington for President Eisenhower to recognize his regime and for him to be seen as an equal political partner. At first, the Americans recognized the new regime in hope for stability, especially for American companies. (see solidarity, 2018, 26: 30-27: 08)

„The Provisional Government appears to be devoid of communist tinge and there are indications that it intends to maintain friendly relations with the United States.“ John Foster Dulles, US Secretary of State, 1960 (see von Löwis, 2011)

In September 1960 Fidel Castro attended a meeting of the United Nations in New York for the first time and was celebrated by the American people as a charismatic revolutionary hero and liberator of Cuba. After a meeting between Fidel Castro and the Soviet Prime Minister Nikita Khrushchev, arms exports to Cuba begin. The radical nationalization policy - above all the nationalization of American companies - and the increasingly obvious

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fig. 08: Fidel Castro Raul Castro Ernesto, 'Che' Guevara



fig. 09: Fidel Castro speaking at the United Nations



fig. 10: Fidel Castro and Nikita Khrushchev

communist and socialist orientation of the Cuban government towards the Soviet Union through the installation of Raul and ‚Che‘ Guevara in the government culminated in an arms and trade embargo by the US and led to the final break in relations between the North Americans and Cuba and the subsequent turn to the Soviet Union. (see solidaritaet, 2018, 27: 14-29: 38) (see von Löwis, 2011)

1961: The Bay of Pigs invasion

Fearing that revolutionary ideas would spread to other Central and South American countries, the US government instructed the CIA to plan and carry out the overthrow of Fidel Castro. The US practiced a „policy of state terrorism“. (von Löwis, 2011) Sugar cane plantations were set on fire to reduce economic power, bombs detonated and factories exploded. With the intention of destabilizing social cohesion and turning the Cuban people against the Castro government, the CIA mainly used Cuban exiles to stage a popular uprising and a change of system. On April 15, 1961, Kennedy ordered „Operation Zaparta“ through the „Brigade 2506“. 1,334 Cuban exiles landed in the Bay of Pigs and began fighting against Castro’s troops. After a short time, however, they found themselves in a hopeless position and got stuck on the beach. Castro’s secret service had given the Cuban government an advance warning so that the Cuban military was prepared and could quickly stop the attack. (see von Löwis, 2011)(see solidarity, 2018, 30: 12-31: 00)

“It is not a secret to anyone that the armed gangs who have invaded the country are trained and armed by the United States of America. (...) As far as the Soviet Union is concerned, we should not be mistaken about our position: we will give the Cuban people and the government all the support they need to repel the armed attack on Cuba.” Nikita Khrushchev, April 16, 1961 , Diplomatic note to John F. Kennedy (see von Löwis, 2011)

With this news, the invasion quickly reached the highest level of world politics.

For fear of a unilateral solution to the West Berlin question by the Soviet Union in the context of the global conflict in the Cold War, Kennedy did not use US troops to provide further support. The „Brigade 2506“ received no more supplies and had to surrender in the end. 1,200 mercenaries are captured, the rest died in the fighting. (see solidaritaet, 2018, 30: 12-31: 14)

“A modern version of the biblical legend of David and Goliath is emerging. Washington’s defeat in the Bay of Pigs elevates Castro’s heroic myth into legend.” Volker Skierka, biographer of Fidel Castro (see von Löwis, 2011)

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fig. 11: Invasion at the Bay of Pigs 1961

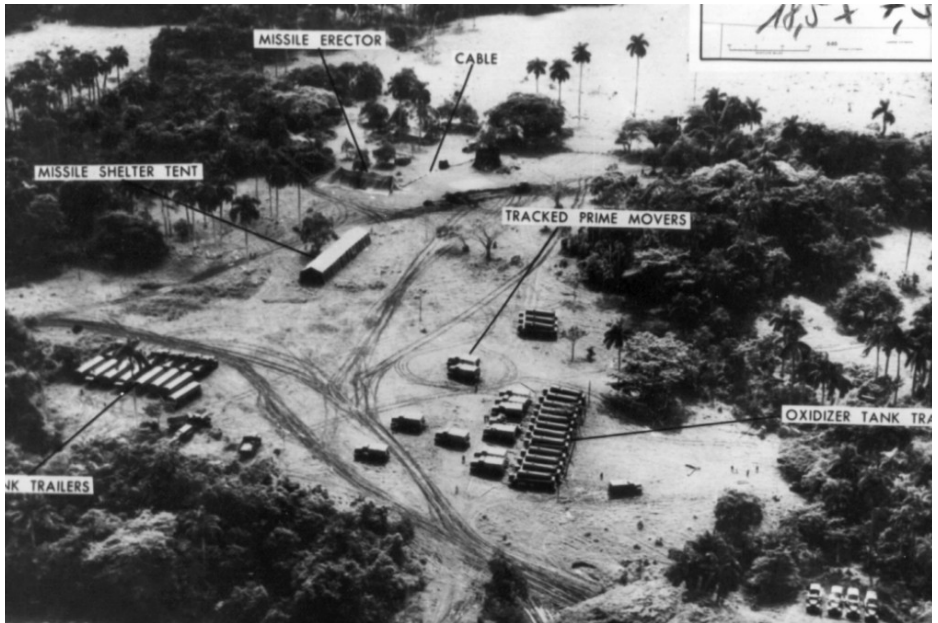


fig. 12: Aerial view of Soviet missile launchers, missile transporters and tank farms in Cuba, 1962



fig. 13: American planes threateningly approach Russian transporters

The result of the conflict in the Bay of Pigs is the consolidation of the revolutionary government, which took the victory as an opportunity to act with extreme severity against any adversary in the country and to fully enter into an alliance with the other superpower, the Soviet Union. Cuba was declared socialist and supported Moscow in the global „battle of the systems“. (see von Löwis, 2011) The reaction of the US was the expansion of the arms embargo and the complete stop of all trade between Cuba and the US. In addition, the island was from then on constantly monitored by spy planes and any developments, especially military developments, were documented. Acts of sabotage by the CIA were intended to destabilize society and dwindle support for Castro, (see solidaritaet, 2018, 31: 30-32: 05) large-scale military maneuvers in the Caribbean intimidated the Cuban military. (see von Löwis, 2011)

1962: Cuban Missile Crisis - the world on the brink of World War III

The next confrontation was not long in coming in this heated atmosphere and was going to prove to be far more significant than the Bay of Pigs invasion. In September 1962, the spy planes discovered Soviet medium-range missiles that could be equipped with nuclear warheads on the island of Cuba - within range of major American cities.(see solidaritaet, 2018, 32: 00-32: 20) Contrary to the recommendations of his military for a quick invasion, President Kennedy opts for a different strategy:

“In order to stop the rearmament, a quarantine against all military equipment for Cuba is being set up. We will search all ships, no matter where they come from, and, if they have weapons on board, send them back.” John F. Kennedy, 35th American President (see solidaritaet, 2018, 33: 07-33: 25)

Cuba was thus at the focus of world history and the confrontation between the two systems. First of all, the quarantine showed that all Russian ships needed to stop or turn back on their way to Cuba. The Soviet and American diplomats were fighting feverishly for a solution, bilaterally and in the United Nations. “The US military is trigger-happy; if only under their direction there would have been a nuclear war.” Cay Rademacher, historian (see von Löwis, 2012)

„If you analyze the behavior of the Kremlin, and here in particular Khrushchev’s, in this situation, it becomes clear that Moscow wanted to prevent a nuclear conflict at almost any price.“ Rolf Steininger, historian (see von Löwis, 2012)

In these thirteen days of sharpest confrontation between the superpowers, it was Nikita Khrushchev who finally proposed the following compromise to Kennedy: the Soviet missiles in Cuba were withdrawn. In return, the US waived an invasion of Cuba and began to withdraw nuclear missiles from Turkey. Robert Kennedy and the Soviet ambassador negotiated the agreement and thus ended the crisis on October 27, 1962. (see von Löwis, 2012)

This is how Fidel Castro described the momentous decision in his memoir, but had to accept the result. (see von Löwis, 2012). Ernesto ‚Che‘ Guevara, however, considers the agreement to be treason, leaves the revolutionary government and goes to Bolivia. (see solidarity, 2018, 34:41 - 35:20)

“Those events undoubtedly cost Nikita Khrushchev, who underestimated the opponent, ignored the opinions given to him and did not discuss the final decision with us, who were on the first line. What could have been an important moral victory turned into a momentous political setback for the USSR.”



fig. 14: US president John F. Kennedy

1967 - 2008: Consolidation of the regime and dependence on the Soviet Union

With Guevara's death in 1967, the history of Cuba ended as a place at the heart of world history. Castro concentrated on consolidating his power and further establishing a socialist state - still supported by the Soviet Union, which supplied its satellite state in the Caribbean with massive quantities of trade goods and technical products - stability and military splendor on credit. Under Gorbachev, the Soviet Union was changing with perestroika and glasnost, i.e. economic restructuring and social transparency and honesty, and was trying to stop its dwindling importance and hold the Soviet states together. (see solidaritaet, 2018, 35:38 - 37:30) Castro apparently went along and spoke of „la rectificación“, the „straightening of the revolutionary path“. In fact, hardly anything changes on the Caribbean island. When the Berlin Wall fell in November 1989 and one socialist government after another collapsed, the Soviet Union came to an end in 1991. (see solidarity, 2018, 37:30 - 38:22)

In Cuba, the Castro regime continued to adhere to a socialist course. However, they had to cope with the harsh economic realities, important goods such as electricity, coal and oil were rationed and food expenditures regulated the food supply. (see solidaritaet, 2018, 38: 47- 39:10) In the seemingly eternal game of the emergence of a crisis, the

dissolution and apparent stability up to a new turn of history, uprisings against the Castro regime began in August 1994. Again, young people who wanted to leave the country were the trigger for resistance. Many thousands fled to America and the US allowed them to immigrate. Permission to leave was in no way given out of goodwill towards the population. Rather, it was based on political calculation insofar as the US dollar was legalized and Cubans in exile could now transfer money to their relatives at home. Billions every year ensured the regime and the Cuban economy survived financially. Reforms did not play a role in Fidel Castro's mind. After falling from a grandstand in 2004, his younger brother Raul initially took over the affairs of state, then officially from 2008 on - without any significant changes in the course of policies. (see solidaritaet, 2018, 39: 10-41: 20)



fig. 15: Barack Obama and Raul Castro in Panama



fig. 16: Fidel Castro and Pope Francis

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“Not being able to rule over anyone is the worst punishment for Fidel Castro. I think he’s in a very bad mood.” Juan Antonio Rodriguez Menier, co-founder of the Cuban secret service. (see solidarity, 2018, 41: 41–41: 47)

The visit of Pope Francis in 2015 marked the beginning of the last phase in Cuba’s history. He wanted to mediate between Cuba and the US and initiated a meeting of Raul Castro with the 44th American President Barack Obama in Panama to reconcile the two states. (see SPIEGEL online, 2015) In 2016, Fidel Castro died at the age of 90 and after almost 50 years of rule in Havana. (see ZEIT online, 2016) In 2018, Raul Castro resigns. This ends the Castro era on the small but yet historically important Caribbean island of Cuba. (see Gaupp, de Costa Rica, 2018)

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