
Geopolitical Review of Cuba

Cuba is an island brimming with bold art, dance-provoking music and cities that still possess a colonial charm. The largest island in the Caribbean makes up this country along with smaller, lesser islands that lie off the coast of the main island, such as La Isla de Juventud, that also acts as part of Cuban soil. Cuba is a long and narrow island. It stretches 750 miles (1,200 kilometers) from east to west but is only 60 miles (100 kilometers) wide in most places. Cuba's physical geography is mostly flat to rolling plains, with rugged hills and mountains ranges such as La Sierra Maestra, La Cordillera Guaniguanico, and La Sierra de Escambray.

The country in its entirety has a surface area of 44,200 miles, making it a total land area slightly smaller than Pennsylvania. Before centuries of foreign occupation occurred by colonial powers, the island was inhabited by Arawak people. The different groups of tribes that encompassed the island performed the traditional activities of fishermen and hunters in addition to introducing agriculture to the island. Their staples included peanuts, yucca, squash, maize, beans, and tobacco. Tobacco also was used for medicinal, ceremonial and leisure activities among the Guanahatabey, the Taíno, and the Ciboney. In the year 1492, Christopher Columbus landed on the island with three vessels along with a remarkable sized crew.

Columbus was on a voyage in order to discover the 'New World'. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabel, who served as the Spanish monarchy at the time had agreed to sponsor his trip. The native population was called Indians because Columbus thought he had landed in India. The native population was also regarded as savages due to their lack of clothing, hunting and gathering techniques and lack of advances that were present in the continent of Europe in that time period. As contact between the Arawak and the Europeans expounded, the propagation of ailments started to spread with a majority of the native population perishing from disease brought over from Europe. The spread of disease, however, wasn't one-sided, with many of Columbus's crew contracting diseases such as Syphilis. With the passing of time, the influence of Spanish power continued to spread throughout not only the island but throughout the Americas as well.

The conquistadores were even responsible for atrocities committed in the Mayan, Incan and Aztec civilizations. As Spanish conquering and colonization became more widespread, the Spanish imported tobacco to other lands to diversify and monetize the crop. Soon Cuba became known as the island of tobacco throughout the world because the crop had become the principal export there. Due to the fact that the overwhelming majority of the Arawak-populated natives had passed away due to the introduction of European diseases that they had little to no immunity to, this left the Spaniards with a small number of slaves to exploit labor from. As a

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result of this, the Spaniards sought free labor from Africa. Around 12.5 million slaves were crammed into slave ships over a series of years and brought into Cuba to be exploited by Spanish authority in order to continue the booming tobacco industry. Towards the end of the 18th century on the nearby island of Hispaniola, a revolution occurred amongst the slaves and their masters. In the then French colony of Saint-Domingue, the number of slaves outnumbered the number of white Frenchmen dramatically, as a result of this contrast, the slaves were able to successfully commence a revolution to free themselves from the chains of slavery along with the persistent dominance of French rule in what is now the country of Haiti.

Previously, these slaves were put to work in appalling conditions in the sugar industry. As a result of the slaves' new freedom, the sugar industry tanked leaving Cuba to take the opportunity of producing the crop in its arable, tropical land. For this reason, Cuba became the new sugar capital of the Caribbean. As other Spanish-speaking countries in the Americas began to rebel against the empirical colonization of Spain, along with the knowledge of slave revolutions that had occurred in the United States and Haiti, many slave owners feared potential slave uprising in the country. With a combination of slavery and the high taxation of sugar imposed by the Spanish, many sugar planters, especially those in eastern Cuba grew tired of Spanish occupation. One of the most prominent and opinionated planters and landowners was Carlos Manuel de Céspedes. Céspedes and his group of collaborators were determined to overthrow the corrupt and excessive Spanish legislative control of Cuba.

Upon learning that their conspiratorial activities had been discovered by the Spanish authorities, they were forced to act. On Oct. 10, 1868, Céspedes expressed the historic Grito de Yara from his plantation, La Demajagua, proclaiming the independence of Cuba. He soon freed his slaves and incorporated them into his disorganized and ill-armed force and made public a manifesto explaining the reasons for the revolt. Céspedes then continued to grow his numbers by allowing other slaves to join his movement, provided that these slaves had been granted permission to fight by their masters. This revolution headed by Céspedes was the first of three wars of independence fought by Cuba against Spain. Céspedes' actions agitated the Spanish authorities in both Cuba and Spain. In response to Céspedes' call of war, the Spanish government sent thousands of soldiers to the Caribbean island to help defeat the opposition's ill-armed movement with several of Céspedes's men only had machetes. With the arrival of more troops from the western part of Cuba and Spain, the Spanish authorities divided the island laterally while maintaining the war in the eastern half of the island, leaving the capital and financial center unscathed. While battles and bloodshed started in the eastern portion of the island, the population of the communities that were invaded often helped rebel causes for liberation. People that were accused of helping the Spanish authorities were often executed onsite immediately with no proper trial by liberation forces.

Céspedes ultimately lost his life in the bloodshed for the struggle for Cuban independence.

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Following his death, Céspedes's followers were lacking valuable leadership skills. This lack of premediated authority caused the opposition to break into several small guerrilla groups that unfortunately began to lose strongholds in the eastern Cuban rural countryside which eventually lost them the war. This loss left independence seekers crushed with the idea of Cuba as an independent identity being broken. In response to the Spanish victory of the war in Cuba, the Spanish government issued a series of reforms and peace agreements in order to quell any other potential uprising and conflicts. Many people thought these agreements and reforms were insufficient and undermined any future liberation efforts. One of these people was José Martí. Martí was a Cuban political and literary figure and became well-known for his plea for Cuban independence in the 19th century along with talent in journalism and poetry. His well-spoken nature and anti-Spanish colonization beliefs even got him sentenced to months of hard labor by the Spanish government. Martí was also a well-traveled and cultured man.

During his career, he is credited for his diplomatic work, his teaching methods as well as publishing countless pieces. During his time living in the United States, Martí accompanied by other Cuban exiles saved money in order to return to their homeland so they could fight for the removal of the Spanish occupation. Back in Cuba, Martí's physical prowess began to come into question. Martí's brilliance as planner and communicator was undeniable, however, he didn't have the physique or combative, bellicose nature of a soldier. Soon after his arrival in Cuba, he was murdered by the Spanish on the battleground without seeing his dream of a 'Patria Libre'. Following the death of Martí, the war still raged on. Spain sent Valeriano Weyler, a high-ranking Spanish general, to the island to help extinguish anti-Spanish sentiment throughout the land. In order to do so, Weyler enacted his infamous Reconcentration Policy. The goal of this policy was to herd people into cities so that they wouldn't be able to help the rebellion in rural settings clandestinely in the same way the rebel fighters were aided in The Ten Years War led by Céspedes. When the cities became overpopulated due to the great number of people that were forced to move, Weyler implemented the building of concentration camps. The conditions in these concentration camps were horrid and unsanitary. Over 400,000 people passed away due to the inhumane conditions in the camps.

Despite the fact that a myriad of people lost their lives, the atrocities General Weyler committed in Cuba were massively hyped and sensationalized in the US newspapers. This journalism practice was known as "yellow journalism". This type of journalism depicted the guerillas fighting for Cuba's independence in favor of the two involved sides. This type of journalism also got the attention of many Americans and the thought of a possible US intervention came to life. Initially, US President McKinley didn't want to be dragged into a war. He requested that Cuba is released from the binds of Spanish imperialism. McKinley also stated that if the Spanish government didn't obey his request, he would sell arms to guerilla causes. On January 1, 1898, The USS Maine arrived in Havana harbor in order to protect American assets, interests, and citizens in case of emergency. Three weeks later the boat exploded, killing more than 260 of the

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sailor and crew that were aboard. Initial reports blamed this tragedy on the Spanish while other sources placed blame on Cubans that wanted to rid Spain of the territory. It was thought that the sinking of the USS Maine would bring US intervention, which will eventually remove the effects of imperialism on the island. The loss of countless lives outraged Americans from coast to coast and soon afterward a declaration of war was declared against Spain. The declaration also stated that after the war, Cuba will not be annexed to the US but rather be recognized as its own sovereign nation.

After the US's declaration of war, Spain sent a more military force to their island territory. The US also brought in more soldiers in order to fight. The US even established a volunteer program run by Theodore Roosevelt known as the Rough Riders. Although there were many other cavalry units that fought against Spanish policies in Cuba, the Rough Riders were one of the most popular units due to its diverse membership, triumphant battle techniques and its great leader that won the presidency after McKinley. Ultimately, the US overpowered the Spanish mostly with its superior naval forces. This was especially evident in the east of Cuba where the US held a military stronghold in the city of Santiago de Cuba. Following the devastating loss of the island, Spain, once seen as one of the most empirical powerhouses in Europe began to look like a mediocre country. After the Spanish were defeated, the American flag was hoisted up in victory instead of that of Cuba. By the time the Spanish-American war had come to an end, many American businesses were already in Cuba, especially in its capital of Havana. At one point in time, the American forces were seen as Cuba's liberators, but now the American government acted as the island's occupier.

Public opinion of the American government fell dramatically with many of the Cuban people questioning the mere veracity of American intervention in the first place. The Cuban people felt misled by the promises of the American interference since Cuba still had not become a self-governing entity but rather an American protectorate. This lack of self-sufficiency was made official in the 1901 writing of the Cuban Constitution in which the Platt Amendment was added. This amendment was a bill that supplemented in the newly written Cuban Constitution that stated that Cuba would not be free of US military occupation in addition to permitting US military bases to be built on Cuban soil.

Construction of Guantanamo was started soon after. This military base was created in The Bay of Guantanamo in eastern Cuba due to geographical reasons; the bay has wide harbors ideal for docked large battleships. Despite the fact that Spain occupation had been ridden from the island, the Cubans now struggled with America's sphere of influence.

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