



Book My Life

Fidel Castro and Ignacio Ramonet
Allen Lane, 2007
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Recommendation

The United States has had 10 presidents since Fidel Castro became Cuba’s prime minister in 1959. From Eisenhower, who refused to meet with him, to Kennedy, whose CIA wanted to kill him, to Clinton, who tried to ignore him, Castro outlasted them all. He had amazing longevity, given what he dished out to his people and what he dealt with, from the Bay of Pigs attack to the Cuban missile crisis, a 50-year trade embargo, and hundreds of attempts on his life by the CIA, the Mafia, Cuban exiles and island dissidents. These ordeals involved all kinds of odd weapons, such as a poisoned diving suit, a seashell bomb and an exploding cigar. Cruel and charismatic, Castro exhibited remarkable staying power, having impoverished, exiled, jailed, tortured or killed most of his opponents over the decades. Finally, given serious illness, he resigned and turned the government over to his brother Raúl. Even though Fidel is frail and old, he once seemed as indestructible as the mountains of Sierra Maestra, where he began his revolutionary struggle. If you want to know what makes Fidel tick, *BooksInShort* suggests this autobiography, developed and edited by Spanish journalist Ignacio Ramonet from 100 hours of recorded interviews with Castro. This fascinating, in-depth book voices Castro’s intriguing story. However, given that it reflects Castro’s unleavened perceptions, its facts and interpretations may be open to question. Even while finding Fidel’s viewpoint compelling, many would strongly disagree with the dictator’s self-laudatory tone. Memory is longer than that.

Take-Aways

- Now old and ill, Cuban dictator Fidel Castro looks back on his revolutionary past.
- The greatest influence in his life is his hometown, Birán, home of destitute peasants.
- Castro became a Marxist-Leninist and revolutionary at the University of Havana, where he began his struggle against Cuba’s aristocracy.
- From José Martí, Castro learned about ethics; from Karl Marx, he learned about society.
- Since Castro came to power, the United States frequently has plotted often to assassinate or overthrow him.
- The US has worked against Castro to prevent a regional spread of Communism.
- After discovering a US plan to invade Cuba, Russia placed missiles in the island nation.
- During the Cuban missile crisis, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev believed that Castro wanted him to engage in a first-strike nuclear attack against the United States.
- Most Cuban citizens support the Cuban “revolución.”
- Yet major waves of Cubans have come to America, and a steady trickle continues in the face of the controversial US “wet-foot, dry-foot” policy related to Cuban immigrants.

Summary

Castro’s Childhood and Young Adulthood

Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz was born on August 13, 1926, in eastern Cuba, in Birán, a backwater village in what was known as Oriente province. His father, Angel

Castro y Argiz, was an enterprising Galician who emigrated from Spain to Cuba as a poor soldier and became a wealthy (25,000 acres) sugarcane plantation owner. His mother, Lina, was a native Cuban. Castro had two brothers and four sisters. Though Castro loved and respected his parents, he rebelled against authority from his earliest days. Son of the region's wealthiest landowner, Castro was deeply moved as a boy by the unfairness of life and the poverty around him. "I remember the illiterate, unemployed men who would stand in line near the cane fields," Castro said, "with nobody to bring them a drop of water, or breakfast or lunch, or give them shelter or transport." He viewed their treatment and neglect as "inconceivable wrongs." His parents sent young Castro to Santiago de Cuba for schooling. At 16, he went to Havana to attend the Colegio de Belén, a Jesuit school where he participated in athletics and enjoyed mountain climbing.

Becoming a Revolutionary

In 1945, Castro entered the University of Havana to study law. There he experienced a sharp political awakening. He became a devout Marxist-Leninist and a revolutionary. This was atypical on the conservative campus. Of the 15,000 students, only some 50 were hard-core anti-imperialists like Castro. He became a follower of Eduardo Chibás, leader of the Orthodox People's Party that opposed Cuba's brutal dictator, Fulgencio Batista. In 1947, Castro, 21, led a company in the unsuccessful Cayo Confites expedition to fight dictator Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic. The next year, Castro was in Bogotá during the *Bogotazo* insurrection. He graduated from law school in 1950 and ran unsuccessfully for Cuba's congress.

"My character was molded by the hard tests I had to pass, difficulties I had to overcome, conflicts I had to face, decisions I had to make."

In April 1952, Batista, no longer in power, headed a successful coup (his second) to remove Cuban President Carlos Prío Socarrás. Once restored to power, Batista quickly organized a far-right government aligned with the United States. Castro despised Batista and his repressive regime. Further, he believed that the Cuban economy's basic structure condemned its *campesinos* (peasants) to a life of poverty. Cuba's economic engine depended on rich foreign interests and the *Latifundos* – enormous plantations owned by the superwealthy (like Castro's father). Seeing no way to liberalize Cuba's economic and political system, Castro decided to blow everything up.

"If you don't eventually come to understand the history of class struggle...you're lost in a forest, not knowing anything."

A year later, he took his first big step to create something new for Cuba's downtrodden peasants. In July, he organized and led an armed assault on the Moncada barracks in Santiago de Cuba in hopes of sparking a general national uprising against Batista. Castro and his men lost the battle. Batista's forces killed five of them and wounded 56. Castro and his remaining combatants retreated into the mountains. The Batista forces quickly captured him, his brother Raúl (a member of the Young Socialists) and the other guerrillas. Batista's troops had a reputation for brutally torturing and then executing their prisoners – especially famous ones. By this time, Castro was a well-known revolutionary, but he hid his identity. A Cuban army lieutenant, Pedro Sarria, protected Castro after the soldiers learned who he was. "You can't kill ideas," Sarria told his troops. He was later jailed for preventing his troops from executing Castro and his men.

Trial, Jail, Exile and Return

Convicted and jailed, Castro went on a 75-day prison hunger strike. When he was released after two years behind bars, Castro went into exile in Mexico with Raúl. There, Castro met Argentine Marxist Ernesto "Che" Guevara, who became one of his most trusted lieutenants and a world-famous revolutionary. In Mexico, the two Castros, Guevara and a group of Cubans planned to defeat Batista's army with classic guerrilla tactics. They became weapons experts and rifle sharpshooters. In November 1956 – the month that Frank Pais and his 26th of July movement began an uprising against Batista in Santiago de Cuba – Castro sailed to Cuba on the *Granma* with 79 heavily armed men. Landing in December near Los Cayuelos in Oriente, Castro and his rebels headed for the Sierra Maestra mountains to begin their fight. The Cuban revolution was under way.

"People struggle against underdevelopment, disease, illiteracy, but what we might call the global solution to humanity's problems has not yet been found."

Batista's forces rapidly pursued Castro and his small band of men. While Castro's guerrillas were in Alegría de Pío, a long way from the mountains, Cuban army spotter planes began to circle overhead. Fighter jets soon followed. The rebels came under heavy infantry fire and immediately dispersed. Castro and a few others hid in a sugarcane field, trying to avoid being killed by repeated machine gun fire from the criss-crossing fighter jets. They were pinned down for many hours in one of the "most dramatic" episodes in Castro's life. Eventually he linked up with a handful of his men, including Raúl. They had only seven weapons, yet Castro told them, "Now we can win this war."

"I was convinced...that you could fight against a conventional modern army by using the methods of irregular warfare, guerrilla warfare."

In January 1957, the rebels began to do just that, engaging in their first successful firefight against Cuban army and navy troops. They ambushed a paratrooper platoon and inflicted five casualties. In the battle of El Uvero, the revolutionaries killed 11 of their enemies and wounded 19. They captured 45 rifles, a Browning submachine gun and 6,000 rounds of ammunition. Castro organized his troops into separate guerrilla fronts. Guevara commanded one column; Raúl led another. Castro controlled the primary front, Column 1. Around this time, an armed group of students stormed Havana's presidential palace to assassinate Batista, but Batista's troops killed the young rebels.

"There's no Adjustment Act with Mexico. If there were, 30% to 40% of the population of Mexico, and of other countries in Central America, would be emigrating to the United States."

Operating independently, the guerrilla groups routinely attacked and routed government forces. Castro and his men became known as *Los Barbados*, the "bearded ones." Having a beard became a point of honor among the rebels. Moreover, beards made it more difficult for clean-shaven spies to infiltrate the rebels' ranks. By this time, Castro had 900 heavily armed, well-seasoned guerrilla fighters. "With them, we invaded practically the whole country," Castro said. Before long, the determined rebel forces had Batista and his military forces – all 80,000 troops – on the run. In January 1959, Batista fled Cuba. Following a triumphant march into Havana, Castro and his rebels assumed power.

The US Reaction

From the first days of Castro’s takeover, the United States bitterly opposed him and was determined to reverse his takeover. In October 1959, President Dwight D. Eisenhower approved CIA covert operations against Castro, including sea and air piracy attacks (which would be termed terror attacks today), and help for anti-Castro organizations in Cuba. America developed paramilitary forces to topple Castro, an effort that culminated in the Bay of Pigs attack during President John F. Kennedy’s second year in office. In this operation, 1,500 CIA-organized Cuban counterrevolutionaries landed on Playa Larga and Playa Girón in the Bay of Pigs. Within 72 hours, Castro’s forces defeated them and took more than 1,200 prisoners.

“Our country has been the object of the most prolonged economic war in history.”

President Kennedy soon instituted a trade and economic embargo of Cuba that remains in force today, despite strong worldwide opposition. The United States banned Cuban imports. Kennedy then approved the notorious Operation Mongoose plan to disrupt Cuba’s economy. Its covert tactics included setting fire to fields of sugarcane and conducting more than 600 attempts to assassinate Castro. Between November 1961 and January 1963, the United States conducted nearly 6,000 terror attacks against Cuba, including more than 700 against its industrial facilities. “Cuba has had to face more terrorism than practically any other country on earth,” Castro insists.

“If Christopher Columbus hadn’t had a compass, he wouldn’t have got anywhere...I had a compass; it was what I’d found in Marx and in Lenin.”

The United States opposed Castro in order to block the spread of communism in its hemisphere, or as he explains, America wanted to “halt the influence of revolutionary ideas. They had done the same thing with the Mexican revolution in the days of Lázaro Cárdenas...They did it again in 1954 against the Jacobo Arbenz revolution in Guatemala...They also launched a huge campaign against Salvador Allende in Nicaragua. They’ve done it with all the revolutions, and today they’re doing it with Hugo Chávez’s Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela.”

The Cuban Missile Crisis

In early 1962, the Soviet Union learned that the United States was preparing a massive air, land and naval invasion of Cuba. The Russians quickly passed this information to the Cuban government. To protect themselves, the Cubans let the Russians install medium-range missiles in Cuba. The United States quickly learned of the missile installation, gathering photographic evidence with high-altitude U-2 spy planes. Kennedy told the Soviets to withdraw the missiles immediately or risk nuclear war. He ordered a naval blockade of Cuba. Castro and the Cubans prepared for war. “We...thought that conflict was inevitable,” Castro said. “And we were determined to take that risk.” To head off nuclear war, the Russians agreed to withdraw their missiles if the Americans would 1) withdraw their missile installations in Turkey; 2) agree not to invade Cuba; and 3) end the naval blockade. America agreed. At the height of the crisis, Castro wrote Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev that “imperialist aggressiveness has become extremely dangerous,” and that if the United States invaded Cuba, the Soviets should act quickly “to eliminate that danger forever...however hard and terrible the solution might be, there is no other.” Khrushchev replied to Castro, “You proposed that we carry out a nuclear first strike against the (US) enemy territory...This would not be a simple attack, but rather the beginning of a thermonuclear world war. Dear Comrade Fidel Castro, I believe your proposal to have been wrong...[it] would be worse than wrong, it would be immoral.”

The Immigration Problem

After the Cuban revolution, many Cubans began to flee to the United States. To facilitate this exodus, in 1965 the Cuban government opened the port of Camarioca to all Cubans who wanted to go to America. In 1966, Congress approved the Cuban Adjustment Act, which is still in force. It provides special immigration privileges to Cubans who reach US shores, so it encourages illegal immigration. In April 1980, Castro exacerbated the immigration problem when he opened Mariel Harbor and allowed Cubans to flee. This resulted in the famous “Mariel Boatlift,” bringing more than 125,000 Cubans to Miami during President Jimmy Carter’s administration.

“With the uniform, I don’t have to put on a tie every day...It avoids the problem of what suit to wear, what shirt, what socks, so everything goes together.”

In 1994, angry that the United States failed to deliver a promised increase in annual immigration visas, Castro again announced that he would not prevent Cubans from leaving. As a result, thousands floated out of Cuba on homemade rafts. Many of these *baleseros*, or rafters, perished at sea. The current US stance regarding Cuban émigrés is double-edged. This “wet-foot, dry-foot” policy – which applies to Cubans and no other refugees – lets any Cuban who sets foot on US soil stay and apply for expedited residency and, eventually, citizenship. However, any Cubans the United States interdicts at sea between Florida and Cuba are immediately returned to the island.

The Castro Regime’s Accomplishments

Fidel Castro is proud of what he and his regime have accomplished in Cuba since 1959. They turned over seized land to the *campesinos*. They put basic industries and natural resources in the hands of the Cuban people. They eliminated illiteracy. Cuba leads the Western Hemisphere in the percentage of children who stay in school through the ninth grade. Cuba’s primary grade students lead those of every other nation in math and language studies. Cuba has more doctors and teachers per capita than any other country. Education from preschool to doctoral programs is free. The infant mortality rate is the second-lowest in the hemisphere, after Canada’s. Life expectancy has increased by more than 15 years. Nearly nine out of 10 Cubans own their own homes, tax-free. Renters pay a nominal amount, not quite 10% of their salaries. “Over 50 years since Moncada...what we’ve achieved is far greater than the dreams we could conceive back then,” Castro said. “And we were pretty good dreamers from the start!”

About the Authors

Fidel Castro is the president of Cuba. **Ignacio Ramonet** is a Spanish journalist. Since 1991, he has been the editor-in-chief of a monthly magazine, *Le Monde Diplomatique*.
