

The Cuban Revolution: One Man's View



In 1959, an army of rebel soldiers led by Fidel Castro overthrew the government of Fulgencio Batista. Batista was a dictator who favored the rich plantation owners. He allowed the United States to buy and control Cuba's chief industries. One of Castro's first acts when he took control of the country was to have the new government take control of the large plantations and industries. Then Castro told the world that he was going to create a communist society in Cuba. In a communist society, the government owns and runs the businesses and industries. The idea is to try to give people a more equal share of the country's goods.

Thousands of wealthy, educated Cubans feared that the new system would change their way of life too much. They fled to the United States in the early years of Castro's government. For many poor people who stayed in Cuba, Castro's revolution brought great benefits. Enrique Salazar Fernandez, a Cuban who stayed, explains his feelings about the Revolution:

The Revolution has greatly improved life for me and for my family. It saved us from the terrible poverty in which we lived before Fidel Castro came to power. If the United States invaded Cuba today, I would fight to the death to save the Revolution. I would never let them beat me up or make me work like an animal or live the way I used to.

My life is so much better than it used to be. I lived in a small run-down shack in which there was one table, one chair, and a cot. Now I live in a cement house full of furniture. I had a very hard

time making a living. The rich plantation owners just cared about making more money -- not about giving their workers a fair wage. I couldn't go to school because that cost money. Under the old government, hardly anybody got ahead. Now the government tries to improve the lives of all the Cuban people. They give every worker a home of his own. Education is free and children are encouraged to go to school.

The rich used to eat well before the Revolution. But now they say, "What good is it to have money? We can only buy the amount allowed by the government, same as everybody."

Some people complain that there is not enough food for everyone in the stores. I haven't had any trouble getting groceries lately. When the rice and beans and other things arrive on the first of the month, I go to the store and wait my turn on line. Sometimes the wait is very long, and people get into arguments. A few days ago, for example, a man left his place on the line and when he came back he didn't remember where he had been standing. Some people shouted at him to go to the end of the line. I said, "Let the man stand on the line where he thinks he was. What difference does one person more or less ahead of you make?"

There have to be waiting lines because there isn't a lot of food. Some of the food we plant must be traded to foreign countries for the farm machinery, buses, trucks, and other equipment we need.

I don't like shortages any more than the next person, but I must agree with this policy because I belong to the poor masses. When we cut sugar cane, it isn't to fill someone else's pocket but to buy tractors and machines we never had before.

Another View of the Revolution

According to international human rights organizations, thousands of opponents of the Castro government have been held in Cuban prisons since the 1959 revolution. One of these political prisoners was a teacher and poet named Jorge Valls who was sentenced to twenty years in jail for "activities against the powers of the state." The following description of Cuban prison conditions is excerpted from Valls's memoirs:

The dominant experience of prison in Cuba was defined by forced labor and irrational brutality. From the beginning, the guards had been trained to hate us. They were led to believe that any harm inflicted on us was an act of social justice. Thus a guard could beat a fifteen-year-old boy bloody, holding him to blame for the horrors of slavery that took place centuries before; or for the crimes and torture committed under the dictator Batista.

Food was very bad and very scarce. Our daily fare was corn flour or macaroni boiled with salt, and some soup that was supposed to have peas but was closer to hot water. Saturdays and Sundays we were only given vegetable broth. They gave us coffee and a piece of bread before sunrise. A piece of meat would fall into our plates every few months, or perhaps fish or eggs.

People fainted from hunger, their blood pressure dropping dangerously low. I remember one occasion when they brought a very thin soup to the field where we were working. The rule was that meals had to be tested by a convict before serving it to the rest, and it was my turn to test it. It was spoiled, bitter, and I reluctantly told the others, "I don't think it's safe."

But another convict snatched the spoon away from me, saying, "Give me that. You don't know anything." He took a spoonful of soup, tasted it quickly, and said, "It's all right. Serve it." I bowed my head sheepishly. They were hungry.

Much has been published elsewhere about forced labor. It was simply a pretext for treating us badly. We had to work in quarries and fields; sometimes we would be taken to the swamps to pull out sunken logs or roots.

I was among a group that had to work like animals in a tomato field. As hungry as we were, if we wanted to eat tomatoes we had to steal them, and we were brutally punished if we were caught in the act. On the other hand, the tomatoes had been sprayed with an insecticide that caused dysentery.

All of us were systematically beaten, some more, some less. Some were beaten because they were weak and unable to work, but the expert farmers also got their share.

One day we were hoeing furrows when the prisoner next to me fell a few steps behind. The guard stuck his leg with the point of his bayonet. The blood poured down into the soil, which became mud as I hoed. Another prisoner fastened his handkerchief around the man's thigh to serve as a tourniquet, but he lost the use of that leg for the rest of his life. Months later he was hobbling around with a crutch made out of a rough stick.

Youths, especially if they were handsome, were in the worst position. There was one, about twenty-two at the time, who was sitting on the ground bare-chested one day, picking out newborn tomato plants. I saw the corporal standing to the side, looking at him. Then he walked up to the boy and pierced his arm with his bayonet.

The Blacks were also singled out for special abuse. "You nigger," the guards would say, "how could you revolt against a revolution that is finally making human beings out of you?" They always got more than their share of the beating and bayonets.

Once, when I had just come back from the fields, I was called in for an interview. It was long after 8 p.m. and I was dirty and tired to death. They took me to an office in the main building, where other prisoners were waiting for their interviews. One by one, they led us into the office. I was the last; it was almost 1:30 a.m. by the time they got to me.

An officer told me to sit down facing him. He asked me how long I had been in prison; then he asked if I had had any "problem" working in the fields. "Me? No, not at all," I answered.

"Hasn't there been, let us say, an 'incident'?" he insisted.

I thought for a moment. Other than the regular beatings, there was nothing unusual. "No, I have no idea what you're talking about," I repeated.

"But haven't you been beaten or wounded in the field?" he pressed irritably.

"Oh, that doesn't matter," I answered.

The officer was losing his temper. "So you think that's normal, that the corporal doesn't take these actions as discipline, but to express his sadistic tendencies. Therefore, you expect to get kicked or bayoneted. Is that it?"

"Of course," I answered.

The officer leaned back in his chair, trying to control himself. He took a deep breath, and tried again, this time from a different angle. Had I fought against Batista? I said no; I didn't want to start an argument.

"And since when are you opposed to this government?" he went on.

"Since six months before it took power."

He struggled for self-control. "And why?"

"Because I knew we were not moving towards a regime that would uphold civil liberties."

Then he tried a fatherly approach. "Don't you believe in the freedom from illiteracy, and the right to practice sports, to enjoy the beaches?"

"And in freedom of speech, association, assembly, and movement," I added, completing his sentence in the same tone.

"That is what all of you want, and what we are not going to give you!" he cried angrily.

"Yes, that's what I'm interested in," I answered serenely. He banged the table with his fist. "The interview is over! Take him away!"

"Good evening," I said graciously as the guard dragged me out of the room.

Enrique Salazar Fernandez and Jorge Valls disagree about the Revolution in Cuba. Read each statement on the left. Then check (✓) the appropriate column on the right.

	Enrique Salazar	Jorge Valls
1. Which author thinks life in Cuba is better since Castro took power?		
2. Which author thinks Cubans are worse off now than before Castro's revolution?		
3. Which author thinks that freedom is more important than ending poverty?		
4. Which author would give up freedom to end poverty?		

Adapted from Jorge Valls, *Twenty Years and Forty Days: Life in a Cuban Prison, An American Watch Report* (New York: 1966), pp. 43-49. Permission pending.

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