

Why Should Fidel Castro Concern Us? (June 9, 1960)

Abstract

Animosity between Cuba and the United States ran deep during the Cold War; distrust between the two countries still marks the relationship today. Suspicion of Castro and his revolution started as soon as Castro overthrew Fulgencio Batista, the U.S.-backed Cuban dictator (though the U.S. began to slowly withdraw support from Batista as his government grew increasingly corrupt and brutal and Castro became more popular). Cuba's expansion of ties with the Soviet Union led to fear and terror in the U.S.—a Soviet ally 90 miles from U.S. shores “imperil[ed] the very survival of the United States,” according to Ambassador Spruille Braden. Congressman Mendel Rivers compared the growth of communism in Cuba to a cancer that could grow if left unchecked, while CIA director John McCone warned that if Cuba were to succeed, the rest of Latin America would fall. Clearly, the existence of a Soviet-backed communist country not 100 miles from the U.S. was a cause of deep concern to the U.S., and a continuing source of tension throughout the Cold War. The tension spilled over into the international relations of other countries, as detailed in this article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, with Eastern Bloc countries attempting to exploit the cleavage between the two countries and American allies in Europe (like West Germany) worrying that the special attention America paid to Cuba would divert attention away from them—as the article states, anything that diverted the attention of the greatest Western power away from Berlin was a source of concern.

Source

What Formosa is to Red China, Cuba could be to the United States, namely a strategic threat. The distances separating the two islands from their respective mainland are approximately the same. And, in the era of long-range missiles, both locations possess unique military significance for whoever maintains bases there capable of threatening the neighboring continent. Parallels can also be found in terms of politics. The value of Formosa for the West is based on the fact that a group of people can represent a differing political opinion right on the doorstep of Communist China. Conversely, a Cuba that planted its red flag off the shores of America could also be considered an important, politically like-minded outpost for the Communists. To continue this comparison between the islands: Just as Red China cannot militarily eliminate what it regards as the objectionable bastion of Formosa without risking a world war, American naval forces are similarly unable to prevent political developments in Cuba from steering the sugar island into the Red sphere of influence without endangering world peace.

Perilously stormy seas have been raging in the Caribbean as a result of Khrushchev's invitation to Havana, the Cuban government's stated intention to recognize Red China and efforts to strengthen political and economic ties with the Red Bloc. Cuban-American relations have been hovering at an absolute low point for quite some time now. The Cuban leader has removed the pro-Western and moderate men from his entourage. His most important advisor, aside from his brother Raul, whom no one in America trusts, is the extreme leftist Major Guevara. The Argentine has become Castro's deputy as well as governor of the Bank of Cuba. “Cuba's best friend is the Soviet Union.” This is Guevara's firm conviction, and he has recently expressed it repeatedly in one of the country's endless television broadcasts. Not only did he accompany Mikoyan on his visit, but the offer of a hundred-million-dollar loan from the Soviet Union to Cuba and the Red Chinese sugar orders are aimed directly at Guevara, with the intention of flattering his radical political stance. Politics in Cuba, therefore, cannot merely be characterized as political gambits with economic ulterior motives; Cuban politics are the expression of a particular mindset.

Nonetheless, it can be assumed that the head of government, whose beard-framed face sometimes resembles the image of a saint, is himself by no means a Communist in the classical sense. But in Cuba, logic works differently than it does elsewhere. The radical line pursued by Castro's government is nurtured by many factors. Recent history has left the Cubans with a considerable inferiority complex. First came the arduous struggle against the Spanish motherland for the most basic of civil rights. They were then crushed economically by the giant to the north, to whom they were grateful for the initial liberation, but who could not bring about a social revolution. After Castro vanquished the bloody Batista regime, which America officially supported until the bitter end, Cuba now wants to acquire everything that it was deprived of in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries at breakneck speed. This has led to the waging of a class struggle against wealth at the national level. The hitherto socially oppressed, now seen as the nation as a whole, are chafing against the power of North America. There is little room in Cuba for subtle nuance. One is either conservative, which is synonymous with colonial bondage and economic dependence, or one is progressive, like the Fidelistas. Progress here, however, is equated with Marxism. Revolutionary intellectuals in Cuba do not acknowledge that there could be a socialism in the spirit of the English Labour Party or like that found in the established non-Communist parties of Europe, let alone that of a social market economy. Castro himself is a rebellious intellectual. Ultimately, there is another explanation for Cuba's radicalism. The almost childish defiance of America must be understood in terms of the concern that every concession and every good word addressed to America might be interpreted as weakness on the part of the new Cuba.

It was to be expected that the Eastern Bloc would exploit the opportunity presented by the disaffection between the two American neighbors. Under these circumstances, Cuba's slide to the left could easily be accelerated by the actions of the Americans and the Russians alike. Since we should not expect a revolution in Cuba, world Communism will not only continue to leverage hotspots in the Middle and Far East but will also wish to keep open an opportunity for a breakthrough in the Caribbean region.

The United States thereby finds itself forced into a distressing situation. Theoretically, it cannot afford to tolerate a Red Cuba, as this could not only threaten its military security, but also become a means for the Kremlin to exert political pressure with as yet unforeseeable effects. And yet, any intervention in Cuba's internal affairs simultaneously jeopardizes relations with all the nations of Latin America. The French Marshal Lyautey said of the Arab world that it could be compared to a membrane, which if tapped at any point begins to vibrate everywhere. The same could be said of the young nations of Central and South America. If the Americans do nothing, however, and allow developments in Cuba to proceed along the lines currently feared, they are also summoning dangers for themselves. The Communists will then have a base just off the American continent from which they can prepare an offensive against Central and South America. Furthermore, Castro lives under the delusion that he can become a second Bolivar. Considering his actions to date, one might conclude that he believes he can harness the Soviets for his own interests without coming to any harm. However, this combination of Communist dynamism and an arbitrary interpretation of Latin American history can only alarm North America.

For Europe, on the other hand, Cuba is becoming interesting, yet precariously so, because it will demand America's special attention in the coming months. And anything that diverts the attention of the most powerful member of the Western alliance away from Berlin is a source of great concern here.

Source of original German text: Adelbert Weinstein, "Was geht uns Fidel Castro an?" *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 9, 1960, p. 1.

Translation: Pam Selwyn

Recommended Citation: Why Should Fidel Castro Concern Us? (June 9, 1960), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/ghdi:document-5238>> [May 03, 2024].