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Summary Article: **Cuba** from *The Columbia Encyclopedia*



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(**kyō'bƏ, Span. kō'bä**), officially Republic of Cuba, republic (2005 est. pop. 11,347,000), 42,804 sq mi (110,860 sq km), consisting of the island of Cuba and numerous adjacent islands, in the Caribbean Sea. Havana is the capital and largest city.

Land and People

Cuba is the largest and westernmost of the islands of the West Indies and lies strategically at the entrance to the Gulf of Mexico, with the western section only 90 mi (145 km) S of Key West, Fla. The south coast is washed by the Caribbean Sea, the north coast by the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico, and in the east the Windward Passage separates Cuba from Haiti. The shores are often marshy and are fringed by coral reefs and cays. There are many fine seaports—Havana (the chief import point), Cienfuegos, Matanzas, Cárdenas, Nuevitas, Santiago de Cuba, and Guantánamo (a U.S. naval base since 1903). Of the many rivers, only the Cauto is important. The climate is semitropical and generally uniform, and like most other Caribbean nations Cuba is subject to hurricanes.

Cuba has three mountain regions: the wild and rugged Sierra Maestra in the east, rising to 6,560 ft (2,000 m) in the Pico Turquino; a lower range, the scenic Sierra de los Órganos, in the west; and the Sierra de Trinidad, a picturesque mass of hills amid the plains and rolling country of central Cuba, a region of vast sugar plantations. The rest of the island is level or rolling.

The origins of the population include Spanish (over 35%), African (over 10%), and mixed Spanish-African (over 50%). Spanish is spoken and Roman Catholicism, the dominant religion, is tolerated by the Marxist government. Santería, an African-derived faith, is also practiced, and there are a growing number of Protestant evangelical churches. The principal institutions of higher learning are the Univ. of Havana (founded 1728), in Havana; Universidad de Oriente, in Santiago de Cuba; and Central Universidad de las Villas, in Santa Clara.

Economy

Cuba's topography and climate are suitable for various crops, but sugarcane has been dominant since the early 19th cent. It remains the most prevalent crop, but in 2002 the government reduced the acreage devoted to sugarcane by 60%; prior to the cutbacks, it had been grown on about two thirds of all cropland. The abandoned cane fields were converted mainly to vegetable farms or cattle ranches. Nearly half the nation's sugar mills were also closed. Sugar and its derivatives are, nonetheless, still the most important exports. Other important exports include nickel, cigars, fish and shellfish, medical products, citrus fruits, and coffee. An excellent tobacco is grown, especially in the Vuelta Abajo region of Pinar del Río, and citrus, coffee, rice, corn, sweet potatoes, and beans are important crops.

Large-scale fishing operations have been encouraged in recent decades, and that industry is now one of the largest in Latin America; Cuban fishing fleets operate from Greenland to Argentina. Livestock raising has also been highly developed.

Manufacturing is centered chiefly in the processing of agricultural products. Sugar-milling has long been

the largest industry, and Cuba is also known for its tobacco products. There is an oil-refining industry as well. Some consumer goods are manufactured, as well as construction materials, steel, agricultural machinery, and pharmaceuticals.

Although Cuba's nickel deposits are among the largest in the world, extraction is difficult because of the presence of other metals in the nickel ore. Nonetheless, nickel is the country's second most valuable export item (after sugar). Large amounts of copper, chromium, and cobalt are also mined, as well as lesser quantities of salt, lead, zinc, gold, silver, and petroleum. There are immense iron reserves, but problems of extraction and purification are even greater than with nickel, and iron production is still slight.

Cuba has upgraded its tourist facilities since 1990, and visitors from Canada, Europe, and elsewhere have revitalized the industry. Tourism is now the economic sector that provides the largest source of foreign income for the country, but the value of remittances of cash and goods from Cubans abroad is even greater. Venezuela, China, Canada, Spain, and the United States are the country's largest trading partners.

The Cuban economy has suffered severely from the collapse in 1990 of the Soviet bloc, upon whose trade Cuba was dependent; from the continuing effects of the U.S. trade boycott; and from internal structural economic problems. The economy recovered somewhat beginning in the mid-1990s, due to better economic planning, limited private enterprise, and an increase in productivity. The Venezuelan government, which developed close relations with the island, sold petroleum to Cuba at subsidized prices and provided other aid, and Cuba reciprocated by sending medical professionals and other personnel to Venezuela. By the mid-2010s, however, economic problems in Venezuela had drastically reduced sales of subsidized petroleum, and Cuba was again suffering from weak economic growth.

Government

Cuba is a one-party Communist state; the Cuban Communist party (PCC) is the only legal political party. The country is governed under the constitution of 1976. The government is led by Fidel Castro, who was prime minister from 1959 until the post was abolished in 1976 and became president of the Council of State and president of the Council of Ministers in 1976. (The office of president is both head of state and head of government.) Legislative authority resides in the National Assembly of People's Power. The 609 assembly seats are filled by direct election from selected candidate lists; members serve for five-year terms. Administratively, Cuba is divided into 15 provinces and the special municipality of the Isle of Youth.

History

Pre-Independence History

The island was inhabited by several different indigenous groups when it was visited in 1492 by Christopher Columbus. The Spanish conquest began in 1511 under the leadership of Diego de Velázquez, who founded Baracoa and other major settlements. Cuba served as the staging area for Spanish explorations of the Americas. As an assembly point for treasure fleets, it offered a target for French and British buccaneers, who attacked the island's cities incessantly.

The native population was quickly destroyed under Spanish rule, and was soon replaced as laborers by African slaves, who contributed much to the cultural evolution of the island. The European population was continuously replenished by immigration, chiefly from Spain but also from other Latin American countries. Despite pirate attacks and the trade restrictions of Spanish mercantilist policies, Cuba, the

Pearl of the Antilles, prospered.

In the imperial wars of the 18th cent. other nations coveted the Spanish possession, and in 1762 a British force under George Pocock and the earl of Albemarle captured and briefly held Havana. Cuba was returned to Spain by the Treaty of Paris in 1763 and remained Spanish even as most of Spain's possessions became (early 19th cent.) independent republics. The slave trade expanded rapidly, reaching its peak in 1817. Sporadic uprisings were brutally suppressed by the Spaniards.

Desires for Cuban independence increased when representation at the Spanish Cortes, granted in 1810, was withdrawn, yet neither internal discontent nor filibustering expeditions (1848–51) led by Narciso López, achieved results. The desire of U.S. Southerners to acquire the island as a slave state also failed (see Ostend Manifesto). Cuban discontent grew and finally erupted (1868) in the Ten Years War, a long revolt that ended (1878) in a truce, with Spain promising reforms and greater autonomy. Spain failed to carry out most of the reforms, although slavery was abolished (1886) as promised.

Revolutionary leaders, many in exile in the United States, planned another revolt, and in 1895 a second war of independence was launched with the brilliant writer José Martí as its leader. There was strong sentiment in the United States in favor of the rebels, which after the sinking of the *Maine* in Havana harbor led the United States to declare war on Spain (see Spanish-American War). The Spanish forces capitulated, and a treaty, signed in 1898, established Cuba as an independent republic, although U.S. military occupation of the island continued until 1902. The U.S. regime, notably under Leonard Wood, helped rebuild the war-torn country, and the conquest of yellow fever by Walter Reed, Carlos J. Finlay, and others was a heroic achievement.

The New Nation

Cuba was launched as an independent republic in 1902 with Estrada Palma as its first president, although the Platt Amendment (see Platt, Orville Hitchcock), reluctantly accepted by the Cubans, kept the island under U.S. protection and gave the United States the right to intervene in Cuban affairs. U.S. investment in Cuban enterprises increased, and plantations, refineries, railroads, and factories passed to American (and thus absentee) ownership. This economic dependence led to charges of "Yankee imperialism," strengthened when a revolt headed by José Miguel Gómez led to a new U.S. military occupation (1906–9). William Howard Taft and Charles Magoon acted as provisional governors. After supervising the elections, the U.S. forces withdrew, only to return in 1912 to assist putting down black protests against discrimination.

Sugar production increased, and in World War I the near-destruction of Europe's beet-sugar industry raised sugar prices to the point where Cuba enjoyed its "dance of the millions." The boom was followed by collapse, however, and wild fluctuations in prices brought repeated hardship. Politically, the country suffered fraudulent elections and increasingly corrupt administrations. Gerardo Machado as president (1925–33) instituted vigorous measures, forwarding mining, agriculture, and public works, then abandoned his great projects in favor of suppressing opponents.

Machado was overthrown in 1933, and from then until 1959 Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar, a former army sergeant, dominated the political scene, either directly as president or indirectly as army chief of staff. With Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration a new era in U.S. relations with Cuba began: Sumner Welles was sent as ambassador, the Platt Amendment was abandoned in 1934, the sugar quota was revised, and tariff rulings were changed to favor Cuba. Economic problems continued, however, complicated by the difficulties associated with U.S. ownership of many of the sugar mills and the

continuing need for diversification.

In Mar., 1952, shortly before scheduled presidential elections, Batista seized power through a military coup. Cuban liberals soon reacted, but a revolt in 1953 by Fidel Castro was abortive. In 1956, however, Castro landed in E Cuba and took to the Sierra Maestra, where, aided by Ernesto "Che" Guevara, he reformed his ranks and waged a much-publicized guerrilla war. The United States withdrew military aid to Batista in 1958, and Batista finally fled on Jan. 1, 1959.

The Castro Regime

Castro, supported by young professionals, students, urban workers, and some farmers, was soon in control of the nation. Despite its popular support, the revolutionary government proceeded with a severe program of political purges and suppressed all remaining public opposition. The new government soon initiated a sweeping reorganization patterned after the countries of the Soviet bloc. Among its successful policy goals have been the provision of adequate medical care and education to the majority of the population. Less successful have been its attempts to diversify agricultural production and achieve a self-sufficient economy.

The expropriation of U.S. landholdings, banks, and industrial concerns led to the breaking (Jan., 1961) of diplomatic relations by the U.S. government. That same year Castro declared his allegiance with the Eastern bloc. Opposition to Cuba's Communist alignment was strong in the United States, which responded with a trade embargo and sponsorship of the Bay of Pigs Invasion. The quick collapse of the latter was especially humiliating to the United States because of its direct involvement.

Cuba's significance in the cold war was further dramatized the following year when the USSR began to buttress Cuba's military power and to build missile bases on the islands. President Kennedy demanded (Oct., 1962) the dismantling of the missiles and ordered the U.S. navy to blockade Cuba to prevent further importation of offensive weapons. After a period of great world tension, Soviet Premier Khrushchev agreed to withdraw the missiles (see Cuban Missile Crisis).

Cuba's relations with other Latin American countries deteriorated quickly during this period because of its explicit intention of spreading the revolution to those countries by guerrilla warfare. In Feb., 1962, the Organization of American States (OAS) formally excluded Cuba from its council, and by Sept., 1964, all Latin American nations except Mexico had broken diplomatic and economic ties with Cuba. After the death (1967) of Guevara while engaged in guerrilla activity in Bolivia, Cuban attempts to encourage revolution in other countries diminished somewhat, and by the early 1970s several nations resumed diplomatic relations with Cuba.

In the late 1960s and 70s Cuba's government policies went through a significant reformulation, including an increased leadership role among less developed nations and a reorganization of its domestic political and economic systems. From 1961 to the late 1980s Cuba was heavily dependent on economic and military aid from the Soviet Union. Cuban support of Soviet foreign policy (notably its invasion of Afghanistan in 1979) caused difficulties in its chosen role as a leader of less developed countries. Cuba also sent large numbers of troops to Angola, where they supported the Soviet-armed government forces in the civil war.

Contemporary Cuba

In the late 1980s Cuban-Soviet relations became distanced as the Soviets moved toward more liberal policy positions. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Cuba lost its primary source of aid, and

with the collapse of the whole Soviet bloc, Cuba largely lost its main sources of hard currency and oil and its principal markets for sugar. Castro apparently remained in firm control of the country. Most of those who had initially opposed him had fled the island (between Dec., 1965, and Apr., 1973, a Cuban government–controlled airlift carried more than 250,000 people between Havana and Miami, Fla.). Despite Cuba's severe economic problems, Castro enjoyed some popularity for his social programs. However, Cuba's decision to allow further emigration in 1980 resulted in an exodus of over 125,000 people from Mariel, Cuba, to Florida before it was halted, indicating a significant level of popular discontent.

The economic problems caused by the collapse of Soviet aid, the continuing dependence on sugar, and a long-lasting U.S. embargo led the regime to reverse some of its socialist policies. In 1992 and 1993, the government allowed the use of U.S. dollars, authorized the transformation of many state farms into semiautonomous cooperatives, and legalized individual private enterprise on a limited basis. In 1994 all farmers were allowed to sell some produce on the open market. During the same year, there was a new flood of boat refugees; it stopped only after a U.S.-Cuban agreement was reached. The accord called for Cuba to halt the exodus and for the United States to legally admit at least 20,000 Cubans per year.

U.S.-Cuba tensions increased in 1996 after Cuba shot down two civilian planes operated by Miami-based Cuban exiles. The U.S. economic embargo, which previously had to be renewed yearly, was made permanent, and Americans were allowed to sue foreign companies that profited from confiscated property in Cuba. These measures angered many of America's major trading partners, including Canada, Mexico, and the European Union (the UN General Assembly has voted annually for the embargo's end since 1992).

Following a visit by Pope John Paul II to Cuba in 1998, the United States eased restrictions on food and medicine sales to Cuba, and on the sending of money to relatives by Cuban-Americans. U.S. legislation in 2000 exempted food and medicine from the embargo but prohibited U.S. financing of any Cuban purchases. Former U.S. president Jimmy Carter visited the country in 2002. During his visit he criticized both the Cuban government and U.S. policy toward the island. President George W. Bush tightened certain aspects of the embargo, mainly affecting Cuban Americans; the regulations took effect in 2004. The same year the government began reasserting control over areas of the economy that had been liberalized in the 1990s; among the changes was a ban on transactions involving the dollar and other foreign currencies, which were required to be converted to special Cuban pesos. In 2005 two hurricanes, Dennis in July and Wilma in October, caused extensive damage in Cuba.

Fidel Castro temporarily stepped aside as Cuban president beginning in Aug., 2006, due to illness; Raúl Castro, his brother and the vice president, became interim president. Fidel retired as president in Feb., 2008, and his brother was elected to succeed him. Fidel remained head of the Communist party, however, until 2011, and continued to be influential until his death in 2016. Under Raúl Castro, the government eased its control over the economy somewhat; among the most significant moves were those designed to decentralize decision-making in agriculture and facilitate the increased production of food by private cooperatives and family farms and those intended to increase worker productivity by removing wage limits.

In Aug.–Sept., 2008, many parts of Cuba suffered devastating damage to housing and crops when Hurricanes Gustav and Ike battered the island. A third hurricane, Paloma, caused additional significant damage in November. In Mar., 2009, there was a major government shakeup that led to the removal of

the foreign minister and cabinet secretary, who subsequently resigned all their party and government posts. The restructuring also increased the role of current and former military officers in the government. Also in March and April, U.S. embargo restrictions imposed by Presidents Bush and Clinton were reversed by the U.S. Congress and President Obama. In June, after all American nations except the United States had restored diplomatic relations with Cuba, the OAS ended its 47-year suspension of Cuba, but the Cuban government said it would not rejoin the OAS.

By late 2009, the Cuban economy was suffering significantly as a result of the costs of the 2008 hurricanes, the 2008–9 world financial crisis and recession, and a drop in export and tourism revenues combined with an increase in import prices. In Sept., 2010, the government announced plans to reduce the number of persons on its payroll by up to 1 million (roughly one fifth of the official workforce), with 500,000 to be laid off by Apr., 2011. In order to enable those workers to find jobs in the small private sector, it reduced restrictions on private enterprises (and legalized small businesses in 2016), but it ultimately moved more slowly to reduce its payroll. The government also it said it would significantly reduce economic subsidies, and subsequently announced other reform plans, including authorizing (2012) the establishment of nonagricultural cooperatives and a plan (2013) for sweeping changes in food production and distribution by 2015. By 2012, more than 1 million were employed privately, and by 2013 nearly 600,000 jobs had been cut from the state payroll. Nonetheless, the pace of reform generally was slow and centralized planning and state monopolies continued to dominate the economy due to hard-line resistance and bureaucratic inertia; difficulties associated with agricultural reforms contributed to slow growth or losses in food production and increases in food prices (though the latter also was the result of reduced subsidies). In Aug., 2016, Cuba reaffirmed its modest reform plans in new guidelines but no longer called for reducing the role of the state in food distribution and pricing.

In Dec., 2014, in conjunction with a prisoner swap, the United States and Cuba agreed to restore diplomatic relations, which was accomplished in July, 2015. U.S. President Obama also eased some travel and trade restrictions over subsequent months, called for Congress to end the U.S. embargo, and visited the island in Mar., 2016. E Guantánamo prov. suffered significant damage from a hurricane in Oct, 2016.

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