

The Struggle for Cuban Independence

Cuban Independence was realized on May 20, 1902 following 400 years of Spanish colonial rule and a brief occupation by the United States after the Spanish-American War in 1898. Throughout the late 1800s, Cuban patriots including Félix Varela, José Antonio Saco, José de la Luz y Caballero, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, Ignacio Agramonte Loynaz, Antonio Maceo, and José Martí fought for Cuban independence from Spain's colonial rule. A brief history of the Cuban struggle for independence follows.

Early History

Following the explorations of Christopher Columbus in 1492, Spain moved quickly to claim Cuba as a colonial possession. The Spanish conquest began in 1511 under Diego de Velázquez. Cuba served as the staging area for further Spanish explorations of the Americas.

The native population was destroyed under Spanish rule and was soon replaced as laborers by African slaves, who contributed much to the cultural development of the island. The European population grew through immigration from Spain and other Latin American countries. Despite British and French pirate attacks and the Spanish government's trade restrictions, Cuba prospered.

In the 1700s, other nations, including Great Britain, wanted to seize control of Cuba from Spain. In 1762, a British force captured and briefly held Havana. Cuba was returned to Spain by the Treaty of Paris in 1763 and remained a Spanish colony even as most of Spain's other colonial possessions achieved independence. Periodic uprisings by Cubans seeking their independence were brutally put down by the Spanish who were eager to continue to hold Cuba as a possession.

Three Wars for Cuban Independence

Desires for Cuban independence increased when Cuban representation in Spain's legislative assembly, The Cortes, was withdrawn in 1810. Cuban discontent caused by high taxes and the exclusion of Cubans from government posts grew and finally erupted in the Ten Years War (1868-1878). Carlos Manuel de Céspedes and other patriots led a long revolt that ended in a truce, with Spain promising reforms and greater freedom for Cuba and its people. Spain failed to carry out most of its promises following the war. The bitter war was soon to be followed by a second war for independence (1895) and the Spanish-American War (1898).

In 1895, Cuban revolutionary leaders, many in exile in the United States, planned another revolt, and a second war of independence was launched with the brilliant

writer José Martí as its leader. Martí, the most well known voice for Cuban independence, organized the Cuban Revolutionary Party and gained support for the cause of independence both on the island and among exile communities throughout Latin America, the United States, and Europe. Martí made the ultimate sacrifice for freedom as he was killed in a skirmish with Spanish troops at Dos Ríos, Cuba on May 19, 1895.

The brutal Spanish repression of the Cuban independence movement, including reports of concentration camps, was vividly reported in the American press. Humanitarian outrage, combined with sympathy for people fighting for freedom, led many Americans to call for the United States to intervene in Cuba. The sinking of the naval vessel the *U.S.S. Maine* in Havana harbor ultimately led the United States to declare war on Spain (The Spanish-American War). The Spanish forces surrendered and a treaty, signed in 1898, established Cuba as an independent republic. However, U.S. military occupation of Cuba continued until 1902. Cuba became an independent republic in 1902 with Tomás Estrada Palma as its first president.

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