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ENCYCLOPEDIA**

Volume 2

Chicano Park – Flores Salinas, Juan

Editors

RICHARD CHABRÁN AND RAFAEL CHABRÁN

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Cuban Missile Crisis (1962): From October 14 to October 28, 1962, the United States and the Soviet Union were on the brink of war because of the construction of Soviet missile sites in Cuba. This crisis put a halt to all legal transportation and immigration between the United States and Cuba.

On October 14, 1962, U.S. reconnaissance aircraft flew over Cuba, photographing the construction of Soviet medium-range missile bases near San Cristobal. This situation signaled an international crisis that affected already strained relations between Cuba and the United States. President John F. Kennedy and his top advisers decided that the missile bases should not be allowed to remain in Cuba because their proximity presented a risk to national security.

In response to the Soviet military buildup in Cuba, on October 21 the United States set up a limited naval blockade to prevent the shipment of further Soviet military equipment to Cuba. U.S. nuclear forces were placed on high alert. Thousands of militant Cuban exiles living in the United States viewed the crisis as an opportunity for the United States to launch its own missiles into Cuba, then topple Fidel Castro from power. These exiles were still reeling from the failed BAY OF PIGS INVASION, and many felt deserted by the Kennedy Administration. The administration, however, believed that an air strike was a drastic and irrevocable action and that a blockade was less likely to provoke war.

On October 24, U.S. officials learned that Soviet ships had stopped short of the blockade line. Construction of the missile sites continued nevertheless. On October 27, the United States received information that five missile sites in Cuba appeared to be fully

operational. Soviet personnel in New York prepared to destroy their diplomatic documents.

The heightened tensions gave way to an announcement on October 28 by Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev that to prevent escalation to war, work on the missile sites would stop. The missile sites would be dismantled and shipped back to the Soviet Union. The threat of nuclear warfare involving the United States, the Soviet Union, and Cuba was thereby averted.

The missile crisis had a strong impact on Cubans living in the United States and those in Cuba seeking to leave. Legal emigration was halted, forcing an estimated fifty-six thousand Cubans to emigrate illegally between 1962 and 1965. Most of these Cubans made their way to the United States via long and costly routes through Mexico and Spain. Those leaving directly from Cuba were granted immediate entry into the United States because they were considered political refugees. Approximately six thousand Cuban prisoners from the Bay of Pigs invasion and their families were allowed to emigrate legally. These Cubans were exchanged by Cuba for much-needed medical supplies.

Cuban Refugee Program (Feb. 27, 1961—Sept. 30, 1981): The federally funded relief agency, administered by the Florida State Department of Public Welfare, was established in 1961 to help Cuban refugees fleeing Fidel CASTRO's Communist regime. During two decades of operation, it provided \$1.4 billion in money, food, medical care, and social services to a total of nearly one million Cuban exiles.

President John F. Kennedy regarded the Cuban refugee plight as one of national responsibility. On January 27, 1961, three months before he sponsored the ill-fated BAY OF PIGS INVASION, Kennedy instructed Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) Abraham Ribicoff to aid the exiles until their repatriation. Ribicoff formulated a comprehensive assistance plan, financed partly from the Mutual Security Contingency Fund appropriated by Congress.

The following month, the Cuban Refugee Center was established in Miami to administer registration, resettlement, and relief activities. *El Refugio* occupied the landmark Freedom Tower from 1961 to 1974. It became Miami's version of Ellis Island, with a staff of 150 medical and administrative personnel. Voluntary agencies, such as the Catholic Relief Services, the Church World Service (Protestant), the United Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society Service, and the nonsectarian International Rescue Committee, helped resettle Cu-

ban exiles throughout the United States and distributed used clothing.

Refugee processing included registration, U.S. Employment Service interviews and classification, a medical examination, a chest X ray, inoculations, a voluntary agency interview for relocation, an American Red Cross personal kit, federal surplus food distribution, and monthly financial assistance, if necessary, of \$100 per family and \$60 per single case. American nationals repatriated from Cuba also received emergency welfare services.

Refugees with professional and technical skills were retrained for practice in the United States, and HEW provided a loan program for Cuban students in colleges and universities. Bilingual education was created for primary and secondary exile students. In 1965, the U.S. government responded to the chaotic Camarioca boat lift with the FREEDOM AIRLIFT, processing 260,561 refugees, most of them penniless and with no belongings but the clothes they wore, between 1965 and 1973.

In 1975, Ricardo Núñez became the first Cuban American director of *El Refugio*, which had suffered substantial economic and personnel reductions. Núñez presented Congress with statistics showing that since the mid-1960's, between 80 and 90 percent of the registered refugees had been self-supporting, and of the nearly 300,000 resettled, many had returned to Miami. In October, 1978, a five-year phaseout began; the 125,000 exiles of the 1980 MARIEL BOAT LIFT were an exception to the phaseout. When government budget cuts in 1981 abruptly ended the program, 1,200 refugees were left without assistance. Most were women between the ages of fifty-five and sixty-five, many former homemakers who did not speak English and were too young for Social Security benefits but too old to find work. The last *El Refugio* director, Héctor Vilar de Bo, proudly stated that the money invested by the government in the program was paid back in twenty years through taxes paid by successful Cubans.

Cuban Revolution: The Cuban Revolution was a response to sixty years of United States domination. Led by Fidel CASTRO, the revolution attempted to transform Cuba into a self-sufficient, egalitarian, and politically independent society.

The Event. On January 8, 1959, Castro led his ragtag guerrilla army into Havana. A week earlier, Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista had gone into comfortable exile in the Dominican Republic. For more than two years, Castro's forces had ambushed and harassed Ba-

tista's army into submission. The defeat of the dictatorship and Castro's bold promises of social change signaled the beginning of the Cuban Revolution.

Origins. The Cuban Revolution represented more than the collapse of the old order; it also signified an end to American economic and political domination. The United States had controlled Cuba since 1900. The PLATT AMENDMENT (1902), an American-imposed addition to the first Cuban constitution, gave the United States the right to intervene in Cuban affairs until 1933. The United States also gained perpetual use of the naval base at Guantánamo Bay.

American dominance took on an economic character between 1933 and 1959. During that time, the two nations agreed to various trade arrangements in which the United States would buy most of Cuba's sugar production. In return, Cuba opened its doors to American products. Economically dependent on the United States, Cuba was unable to develop its own industries.

Batista dominated Cuban politics after 1933. A corrupt leader with close ties to American business interests, Batista did little to develop the island. Under his rule, Cuba became a playground for rich Americans who flocked to Havana for its beaches, casinos, and nightclubs. Meanwhile, the quality of life for most Cubans stagnated or worsened. Beset by poverty and unemployment, many Cubans suffered from malnutrition and lived in inadequate housing. The country also had high rates of illiteracy and infant mortality. These conditions angered Cuban intellectuals and students, who began to challenge the old regime.

On July 26, 1953, Castro, then a young lawyer, tried to overthrow Batista by attacking a military garrison in the city of Santiago. Known as the Moncada Barracks Attack, the failed revolt landed Castro in prison. Eventually exiled to Mexico, Castro vowed to return and liberate Cuba. In November, 1956, Castro and a handful of followers sailed home aboard a rickety yacht called the *Granma*. They then began their guerrilla war against the Batista government.

Guerrilla War. Few observers, Cuban or foreign, had given Castro's insurgency any chance of success. After nearly perishing in a storm in the Gulf of Mexico, Castro and fifteen survivors took refuge in the Sierra Maestra in the eastern part of the island. There, they received support and cover among Cuba's poorest peasants. During the early stages of the war, the *fidelistas*, as they came to be known, conducted hit-and-run attacks on isolated military posts. They grew increasingly daring, engaging Batista's army in larger encounters near Cuba's main cities.