

Biography of Fidel Castro, President of Cuba for 50 Years

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Fidel Castro (August 13, 1926–November 25, 2016) took control of Cuba by force in 1959 and remained its dictatorial leader for nearly five decades. As the leader of the only [communist](#) country in the Western Hemisphere, Castro was long the focus of international controversy.

Fast Facts: Fidel Castro

- **Known For:** President of Cuba, 1959–2008
- **Born:** August 13, 1926 in the province of Orient, Cuba
- **Parents:** Ángel Maria Bautista Castro y Argiz and Lina Ruz González
- **Died:** November 25, 2016 in Havana, Cuba
- **Education:** Colegio de Dolores in Santiago de Cuba, Colegio de Belén, University of Havana
- **Spouse(s):** Mirta Diaz-Balart (m. 1948–1955), Dalia Soto del Valle (1980–2016); Partners: Naty Revuelta (1955–1956), Celia Sánchez, others.
- **Children:** One son Fidel Castro Diaz-Balart (known as Fidelito, 1949–2018) with Diaz-Balart; five sons (Alexis, Alexander, Alejandro, Antonio, and Ángel) with Soto del Valle; one daughter (Alina Fernandez) with Naty Revuelta

Early Life

Fidel Castro was born Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz on August 13, 1926 (some sources say 1927) near his father's farm, Birán, in southeast Cuba in what was then the Oriente Province. Castro's father Ángel Maria Bautista Castro y Argiz came to Cuba from Spain to fight in the Spanish American War and stayed. Ángel Castro prospered as a sugarcane farmer, eventually owning 26,000 acres. Fidel was the third of seven children born to Lina Ruz González, who worked for Ángel Castro as a maid and cook. At the time, the elder Castro was married to Maria Luisa Argota, but that marriage eventually ended and then Ángel and Lina married. Fidel's full siblings were Ramon, Raúl, Angela, Juanita, Emma, and Agustina.

Fidel spent his youngest years on his father's farm, and at the age of 6 he began school at Colegio de Dolores in Santiago de Cuba, transferring to the Colegio de Belén, an exclusive Jesuit high school in Havana.

Becoming a Revolutionary

In 1945, Fidel Castro started work on a law degree at the University of Havana, where he excelled at oratory and quickly became involved in politics.

In 1947, Castro joined the Caribbean Legion, a group of political exiles from Caribbean countries who planned to rid the Caribbean of dictator-led governments.

When Castro joined, the Legion was planning to overthrow Generalissimo Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic, but the plan was later canceled because of international pressure.

In 1948, Castro traveled to Bogotá, Colombia with plans to disrupt the Pan-American Union Conference, when country-wide riots broke out in response to the assassination of Jorge Eliecer Gaitán. Castro grabbed a rifle and joined the rioters. While handing out anti-U.S. pamphlets to the crowds, Castro gained first-hand experience of popular uprisings.

After returning to Cuba, Castro married fellow student Mirta Diaz-Balart in October 1948. Castro and Mirta had one child together, Fidel Castro Diaz-Balart (known as Fidelito, 1949–2018).

Castro vs. Batista

In 1950, Castro graduated from law school and began practicing law. Retaining a strong interest in politics, Castro became a candidate for a seat in Cuba's House of Representatives during the election of June 1952. However, before the elections could be held, a successful coup led by [General Fulgencio Batista](#) toppled the previous Cuban government, canceling the elections.

From the beginning of Batista's rule, Castro fought against him. At first, Castro took to the courts to try legal means to oust Batista. However, when that failed, Castro began to organize an underground group of rebels.

Castro Attacks the Moncada Barracks

On the morning of July 26, 1953, Castro, his brother Raúl, and a group of about 160 armed men attacked the second-largest military base in Cuba—the [Moncada Barracks](#) in Santiago de Cuba. Confronted with hundreds of trained soldiers at the base, there was little chance that the attack could have succeeded. Sixty of Castro's rebels were killed; Castro and Raúl were captured and then given a trial.

After delivering a speech at his trial which ended with, "Condemn me. It does not matter. History will absolve me," Castro was sentenced to 15 years in prison. He was released two years later, in May 1955.

The 26th of July Movement

Upon his release, Castro went to Mexico where he spent the next year organizing the "26th of July Movement" (based on the date of the failed Moncada Barracks attack). There he became involved with Naty Revuelta, a Cuban fellow fighter against Batista. Although the affair did not last, Naty and Fidel had a daughter, Alina Fernandez. The affair also ended Fidel's first marriage: Mirta and Fidel were divorced in 1955.

On December 2, 1956, Castro and the rest of the 26th of July Movement rebels landed on Cuban soil with the intention of starting a revolution. Met by heavy Batista defenses, nearly everyone in the Movement was killed, with merely a handful escaping, including Castro, Raúl, and [Che Guevara](#).

For the next two years, Castro continued guerrilla attacks and succeeded in gaining large numbers of volunteers. Using guerrilla warfare tactics, Castro and his supporters attacked Batista's forces, overtaking town after town. Batista quickly lost popular support and suffered numerous defeats. On January 1, 1959, Batista fled Cuba.

Castro Becomes Cuba's Leader

In January, Manuel Urrutia was selected as president of the new government and Castro was placed in charge of the military. However, by July 1959, Castro had effectively taken over as leader of Cuba, which he remained for the next five decades.

During 1959 and 1960, Castro made radical changes in Cuba, including nationalizing industry, collectivizing agriculture, and seizing American-owned businesses and farms. Also during these two years, Castro alienated the United States and established strong ties with the Soviet Union. Castro transformed Cuba into a [communist country](#).

The United States wanted Castro out of power. In one attempt to overthrow Castro, the U.S. sponsored the failed incursion of Cuban-exiles into Cuba in April 1961 (the [Bay of Pigs Invasion](#)). Over the years, the U.S. has made hundreds of attempts to assassinate Castro, all with no success.

Fidel was rumored to have had many partners and illegitimate children over his lifetime. In the 1950s, Fidel began a relationship with the Cuban revolutionary Celia Sánchez Manduley (1920–1980) which lasted until her death. In 1961, Castro met Cuban teacher Dalia Soto del Valle. Castro and Dalia had five children together (Alexis, Alexander, Alejandro, Antonio, and Ángel) and married in 1980, after Sánchez's death. During his presidency, Vilma Espín de Castro, a fellow revolutionary and the wife of Raúl Castro, acted as First Lady.

Cuban Missile Crisis

In 1962, Cuba was the center of world focus when the U.S. discovered the construction sites of Soviet nuclear missiles. The struggle that ensued between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, the [Cuban Missile Crisis](#), brought the world the closest it has ever come to nuclear war.

Over the next four decades, Castro ruled Cuba as a dictator. While some Cubans benefited from Castro's educational and land reforms, others suffered from the food

shortages and lack of personal freedoms. Hundreds of thousands of Cubans fled Cuba to live in the United States.

Having relied heavily on Soviet aid and trade, Castro found himself suddenly alone after the downfall of the Soviet Union in 1991; many speculated that Castro would fall as well. Even though the U.S. embargo against Cuba was still in effect and damaging Cuba's economic situation throughout the 1990s, Castro remained in power.

Retirement

In July 2006, Castro announced that he was temporarily handing over power to his brother Raúl while he underwent gastrointestinal surgery. Complications with the surgery caused infections for which Castro underwent several additional surgeries. Rumors of his death appeared frequently in news reports for the next decade, but they were all proven false until 2016.

Still in ill health, Castro announced on February 19, 2008, that he would not seek nor accept another term as president of Cuba, effectively resigning as its leader. The handover of power to Raúl raised more anger among United States officials, who characterized the transfer as the prolonging of a dictatorship. In 2014, President Barack Obama used his executive powers to attempt to normalize diplomatic relations and exchange prisoners with Cuba. But after Obama's visit, Castro publicly denigrated his offer and insisted that Cuba needed nothing from the U.S.

Death and Legacy

Fidel Castro was in power through 10 U.S. presidential administrations, from Eisenhower to Obama, and he sustained personal relationships in Latin America with political leaders such as [Hugo Chavez](#) of Venezuela and literary leaders such as the Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez, whose novel "The Autumn of the Patriarch" is in part based on Fidel.

Castro made his final public appearance to a congress of the Cuban Communist Party in April 2016. He died of undisclosed causes in Havana on November 25, 2016.

Sources

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