

Collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuban Revolution Survives Despite Widely Held Predictions

The Soviet Union was hampered by a variety of serious issues.

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Global Research, February 23, 2019

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Following the USSR's official collapse over Christmas 1991, the CIA expected that within two years Cuba's Revolution would follow suit. A generation later socialism endures in Cuba while the Soviet Union, a state larger in size than America and Canada combined, is becoming a distant memory.

It stands out as remarkable that a great power such as the USSR evaporated without a single shot being discharged. Rubbing of salt into open wounds followed as Russia, under US supported Boris Yeltsin, made its transition to [destructive](#) state capitalism without serious protest; widespread privatization was ushered in along with trade and market "liberalism".

Those westerners who gleefully celebrated Soviet disintegration in the early 1990s, would have been wise to remember that it was the USSR which - less than 50 years before - had lifted itself up from the Wehrmacht's staggering blows, before overcoming a Third Reich that had been marching eastwards to conquer the vast open steppes of Eurasia.

By the mid-1970s, meanwhile, the Soviet Union was gradually eroding from within. This was partly due to their increasingly ill and frail president Leonid Brezhnev, who replaced Nikita Khrushchev in 1964, remaining in office until the day he died, 10 November 1982.

Brezhnev had developed an appetite for luxury that was out of step for a communist leader, as revealed by his owning dozens of immaculate, Western-built automobiles. No such opulence was enjoyed by the average Soviet citizen. Brezhnev was fond too of fur coats, expensive liquor and prestigious medals, while he was a heavy smoker until the early 1970s.

In December 1979, Brezhnev authorized what would prove a calamitous intervention in neighbouring Afghanistan. By this point Brezhnev's bodily decline was in its final stages when, influenced by some voices in his ear, he said of the impending military advance, "we will end this war in three or four weeks". The fighting in Afghanistan continued for nine years, much of it against American and Saudi-backed Jihadis including Osama bin Laden, which was another factor in the USSR's demise.

During the mid-1980s, Soviet causes were hampered further by the swift death in office of two of Brezhnev's immediate successors: Yuri Andropov, who governed for a year before succumbing to kidney disease aged 69 in February 1984 - and then Konstantin Chernenko, always a heavy smoker and in later life plagued with emphysema. Chernenko, in his early 70s, died just over 12 months after succeeding Andropov and by the end suffered from a string of debilitating ailments.

The decisions in electing both men to power were indeed questionable ones, as Andropov and Chernenko had been in poor health for years, while they lacked the vitality to overcome monumental problems that lay ahead. Their advanced years was not the issue, as countless people beyond so-called retirement age can retain their exuberance for life.

Andropov and Chernenko may have been seen as steady, dependable figures and, significantly, both had a history of activism dating to Nazi Germany's 1941 invasion. The Soviets had never fully recovered from Hitler's assault, either psychologically or emotionally, and all their postwar leaders except Mikhail Gorbachev had performed a role in the Great Patriotic War.

As the Soviet system fell a generation ago, America's intelligence centres anticipated a quick and ignominious end too for the Cuban Revolution. Yet while the trappings of grandeur and cult of personality had hindered the USSR, similar weaknesses were not evident in Cuba.

Fidel Castro, the Caribbean island's long-time leader, had resisted the temptations of materialism and corruption, which has further bedevilled left governments in South and Central America.

During his decades in power, Castro led an austere existence, working long hours and shunning the desire to indulge in ostentatious luxury or consumerism. He lived in a modest house consisting of two floors and four bedrooms, a comfortable if functional residence.

One need but examine a person's clothing to gain something of an idea into their habits and mode of living. For many years, Castro donned olive green military attire which stood out for its absence of medals and trinkets, unlike his Soviet counterpart Brezhnev, who had an array of decorations dangling from his lapels. Castro's army fatigues constituted simple, loose clothing, ascetic and lacking in pretension.

Castro himself [outlined](#) just over a decade ago that,

“The most difficult, most important fight that anyone with power faces is the fight against himself, the struggle for self-control. That may be one of the toughest ones. Against corruption and even against the abuse of one's own prerogatives, one has to have a very well-trained, strong conscience, a great deal of awareness”.

As the years progressed it became clear, even to some of his foes, that Castro was not the typical state leader, but someone in possession of a formidable intellect, who read for many hours each day and could instantly recall events from bygone years. He was particularly influenced by the writings of José Martí, a famed 19th century revolutionary philosopher, essayist and “Apostle of Cuban independence”.

In 1985, aged 59, Castro ceased his smoking of Cohiba cigars with the future in mind. This lifestyle change played an important role in allowing him to enjoy a long existence.

Leaving ideology aside, the Cuban government has – perhaps most importantly – remained separate from the insidious effects of private power, which across the world has become embedded in states resulting in ongoing compromised policies, followed by the predictable

avarice and short-sightedness. In turn, this increasing need for collection of wealth and profits has resulted in planetary ecosystems being wiped out, heralding our world's sixth mass extinction.

A government can only stay independent should the head of state and all of its sitting members, without exception, have no links to vested interest groups, business board rooms, private ventures, and so on. Should a state be engineered by corporate dictates, it surely becomes an elitist one, pursuing strategies to benefit the rich and powerful.

One can see this conflict of interest in various market economies, from America and Australia to Ireland. Major business influences, once implanted in state policy and promoted by willing politicians, seeks to serve the top bracket of society most of all - leaving general populations, broadly speaking, cast adrift.

With Cuba's disdain for private business, the Castro government sought programs such as instituting first class education and health systems, dispatching thousands of medical personnel to regions most in need of them. In the early 1990s, Cuba led the way [in tackling](#) climate change, which is little known or spoken of.

Previously, in the 1970s and 1980s, Castro instigated foreign initiatives like the Cuban-inspired liberation of southern Africa from apartheid, a contribution which African leaders are not likely to forget.

South Africa's anti-apartheid revolutionary, Nelson Mandela, [highlighted](#) in July 1991,

"What other country can point to a record of greater selflessness than Cuba has displayed in its relations to Africa?... It is unparalleled in African history to have another people rise in defence of one of us".

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