



Decolonization and the Cold War through a Caribbean Lens

In this video, Sharika Crawford explains how the Cold War and decolonization affected the Caribbean. The region has a long history with formal European colonialism, some of it continuing into the late twentieth century. But informal colonialism was more common by the time the Cold War started. The United States tried hard to control the economy, politics, and culture of Caribbean nations. By the 1960s, people all over the Caribbean sought to break free of this system of informal colonialism. But as they tried, they were caught in the middle of the global conflict between the two superpowers.



00:01

*Sharika Crawford, PhD,
walks around Old San
Juan, Puerto Rico*

*Formal and Informal
Colonialism in the
Caribbean*

00:30

*Old map of the Caribbean;
artwork depicting people
meeting for the first time
in the Caribbean
Art depicts Africans
working; contrasted with
a painting of two wealthy
Europeans*

01:13

*Portraits of Toussaint
Louverture and Simón
Bolívar*

01:58

*Comic depicts an
American with a baseball
bat walking on the
Caribbean sea
Video footage of some of
the effects of the Cold War:
soldiers marching and an
anti-communist protest*

02:52

*A revolution in Cuba
Spanish-American War:
1898
Cuban Republic: 1902-
1925*

Hello, my name is Sharika Crawford, and I'm an associate professor of history at the United States Naval Academy. And I'm here in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico.

This story starts in the Caribbean. It's where people in the Americas first met people from Europe and Africa. Together, they made a new society, one with all the miseries of colonialism and enslavement, but also the benefits of people from different cultures mixing their ideas and beliefs. New governmental and labor systems were created. European countries ruled the area from afar through a colonial system. They brought enslaved Africans to work on plantations to raise crops like tobacco, cotton, and sugar. These crops made some Europeans rich. Most people living in the region, however, found it difficult to survive.

Then, when slavery finally ended in the 19th century, colonial rule continued. In some parts of the Caribbean, formal colonialism continued into the late 20th century, like in the colonies in Africa and parts of Asia. But other areas of the Caribbean were controlled through informal colonialism. In these countries—places like Haiti and Venezuela—leaders like Toussaint Louverture and Simón Bolívar had fought hard for independence from French and Spanish rulers in the 19th century. And indeed, European formal rule was ended by these revolutionaries. However, rather than becoming fully independent, many of these countries transitioned into informal rule by the United States.

The U.S. was not officially an empire, but its government and private American citizens certainly influenced Latin American politics, economy, and culture for the benefit of their own interests, often at the expense of local citizens. By the 1960s, people in various parts of the Caribbean began to demand social equality and an end to this system of informal colonialism.

To make things even more complicated, this movement occurred during the Cold War. So people in the Caribbean were not only fighting for an end to informal colonialism, but also caught in a global battle where Americans were fighting hard to stop the spread of Soviet ideas. This was especially true after Cuba—the largest Caribbean island—underwent a revolution that left it aligned with the Soviet Union.

To understand how this happened, we have to start the Cuban part of our story at the end of the 19th century. Cuba is an island just 90 miles from the Florida Keys. In 1898, the United States had supported Cuban rebels battling for independence against Spain. But although the Cubans had won their independence from Spain, their freedom was incomplete. After that war, American influence grew.

A comic depicts an American at a restaurant, where the items on the menu are: "Cuba steak", "Puerto Rico pig", or "Phillippine floating 'sandwich' islands"

03:34

Drawing of a Cuban home surrounded by lush palm trees; Fulgencio Batista, President of Cuba, 1940-1944; Dictator, 1952-1959 (image shows the former dictator smiling)

04:10

Photo of a Cuban street lined with luxurious cars and palm trees is contrasted with a photo of the makeshift homes, or shacks, that many Cubans lived in. Cuban Revolution: 1953-1959

05:18

Map shows the "surface-to-air missile activity in Cuba" on the day of the invasion

06:12

American Colonialism and Puerto Rico

Officials in the new Cuban government either actively sought American support or tolerated their meddling because they feared the threat of invasion or interference.

Cuban leaders had reason to worry. Cuba's fertile lands made it attractive to American investors in numerous industries. Some bought plantations to grow sugar and other tropical food. Others built railways to transport agricultural products to U.S. markets. For other Americans, Cuba was a safe haven. To protect American interests, the U.S. intervened in Cuba twice in the first half of the 20th century. By the 1950s, the island was being led by Fulgencio Batista, a dictator fully aligned with the interests of the United States.

Given the high level of American commercial interests on the island, Cubans who could profit from the relationship enjoyed a high quality of living. Many others did not. By the middle of the 20th century, the nation represented two distinct realities, one for the class of wealthy locals and foreigners, the other for urban and rural poor people. The country was one of the richest in the region. There were lots of doctors, people making high incomes, and enjoying technological advances. Some Cubans got to have TVs and telephones in their homes, but the new wealth was not equally shared. Most were desperately poor with few job prospects. The Cuban Revolution sought to address these inequalities. Their leader, Fidel Castro, aimed to remove Fulgencio Batista from power and to expel U.S. interests. Despite initial setbacks, Castro and the revolutionary army of landless farmers, college students, trade unions, and urban workers successfully kicked Batista out of power in 1959.

After this victory, the Cuban revolutionary government built hospitals, clinics, schools, and affordable housing. In the 1960s and 1970s, Cubans did enjoy social improvements. However, Castro did not restore democracy on the island, nor did he maintain a close relationship with the U.S.

Within days of the notorious Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, Castro declared the revolution socialist. In doing so, he made Cuba an ally to the Soviet Union and an enemy to the United States. What lessons did radicals elsewhere in the region draw from the Cuban example? How do we come to understand Cuba's adoption of socialism in the context of decolonization, finally gaining independence from colonial rule during the Cold War era?

As Cuba embarked on a path toward socialism and independence from U.S. political and economic control, Fidel Castro still held tremendous hope that the neighboring island of Puerto Rico would break free from its U.S. colonial status. Since the war of 1898, Puerto Rico has been and still remains a U.S. territory,

Puerto Rico becomes a US territory, 1898; Puerto Rican independence movement emerges, 1920s

07:01

A drawn poster of Dr. Albizu Campos states "Viva la Resistencia Puertorriqueña"

which some people say is similar to being a colony. Beginning in the 1920s, Puerto Ricans increasingly demanded that the island become an independent country. Some formed a political party, and it became the largest independence movement on the island. But not all Puerto Ricans wanted independence. Some wanted self-governance within the United States; that is, to actually be a state and not just a territory.

When elections and U.S. opposition still had not led to independence, other Puerto Rican nationalists were frustrated. Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos was one of them, and he pushed to use violence in Puerto Rico's bid for independence. During the 1950s and again in the 1970s, the more radical of the Puerto Rican nationalists carried out some horrific attacks. Their targets were U.S. and Puerto Rican officials. A failed assassination of President Harry S. Truman in 1952 was followed by a shooting at the U.S. House of Representatives in 1954, resulting in two deaths.

07:40

By the 1970s, some Puerto Rican nationalists looked to Cuba as a model. This generation of radical nationalists also wanted to bring in a socialist government. Between 1974 and 1980, they were responsible for bombings in several U.S. cities, including Chicago, Washington, DC, and New York. Those attacks resulted in four deaths and many serious injuries. Puerto Rican nationalists involved in the bombings eventually went to jail. Despite two decades of violent struggle on the island, Puerto Rico remains a U.S. territory. Still, it is neither independent nor a state, which would entitle it to more protection.

08:22

Photos of the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria in 2017

Puerto Rico's status continues to plague the island. In 2017, the world saw a glaring example of Puerto Rico's vulnerable political status after the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria. The U.S. federal response was slow and indecisive, leaving huge portions of the island without power and water for months. The aid that the U.S. government did provide was far less than what went to the victims of major hurricanes in the states of Texas and Florida only two weeks earlier.

08:54

The Cold War in Colombia and Nicaragua

Meanwhile, the Cuban Revolution inspired other radicals in Latin America. Throughout the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, rebels in Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua drew inspiration from the Cuban model. In Colombia, there were armed guerrillas. That comes from the Spanish word for war, guerra, and means a small group of fighters. Several of these groups were engaged in a long-standing conflict with the government over social changes, like making land more available to people without it since the 1940s.

In 1962, Manuel Marulanda formed the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia or the F.A.R.C.—FARC. Translated as Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces, this group waged war against the Colombian government and civilian population for the next 50 years. In 2018, FARC leaders agreed to a cease-fire and signed a peace accord with the Colombian government, ending the longest-running civil war in Latin America.

Photo of FARC soldiers

10:01

A photo of the Sandinistas in uniform and holding guns

Over in Nicaragua, in the 1970s, a similar rebellion was in motion. Armed rebels called the Sandinistas also drew inspiration from the Cuban example. The Sandinistas adopted the Cuban revolutionaries' strategy, and even gained support from the Castro government.

What is particularly important about the Sandinistas' armed rebellion is that it happened in Central America, a part of the region with a long history of U.S. influence. Fearful that the Soviet Union might gain another ally in America's backyard, the anti-communist administration of U.S. President Ronald Reagan secretly funneled money, weapons, and military equipment to the Nicaraguan government, known as the Contras, to combat the Sandinistas. All of these conflicts connect the struggles against colonialism with the Cold War.

10:50

*Video footage of
architecture and sights in
Old San Juan*

In this region, where colonialism was in many cases informal, the struggles were a bit different than in other regions, like Africa, where colonialism was formal. Nevertheless, they both form a part of a global pattern in which decolonization and the Cold War were linked together for much of the late 20th century.