Operation Pedro Pan

1960 to 1962

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OPERATION PEDRO PAN - 1960 to 1962
The Largest Children Exodus in the Western Hemisphere

1958- Havana was considered the “Paris of the Caribbean”

1959 was declared “The year of Liberation”

On January 1, with the Triumph of the Revolution, Castro assumes power and promises the Cuban people liberty; the people were ecstatic.

Instead of liberty and elections, the Revolutionary Government proceeded rapidly to transform Cuban life.

- The Death penalty was instituted and summary trials were established, resulting in death sentences that had been predetermined by government functionaries.
- The constitution was replaced and mob rule provided an outlet for hate. People took pleasure in shouting “paredon” thus demanding the execution, by firing squad, of their fellow countrymen. The executions were turned into public spectacles by the revolutionary government who broadcasted on television the images of the bullet ridden bodies, for the entertainment of the masses in a manner reminiscent of a Roman circus.
- In January of 1959, Youth Patrols were organized under the supervision of the National Police. Guided by the slogan “In Front of the Future”, they would spend hours marching and on guard duty.
- By year’s end, 1000 decrees had been issued arbitrarily by Castro’s unelected government.

Horrified Cubans began to flee their homeland.

1960 was declared “The Year of the Agrarian Reform”

- On May 17, the Agrarian Reform Law went into effect, expropriating a large number of private landholdings.
- June 29, foreign owned oil refineries were confiscated
- August 6, US Sugar mills were seized.
- On September 28, Committees for the Defense of the Revolution were established on each block as the eyes and ears of the government. These watchdog groups made it their business to find out: Who lives on every block? What does each person do? What relations does each person have with non Revolutionaries? To what is each person dedicated? With whom does each person meet?
• On October 14, The Urban Reform Law was established to give the Cuban state the exclusive right to lease residential property in Cuba. Consequently, all residential rental property in private hands was forcibly transferred to the state.

• Also in October:
  Law 890 expropriated a large number of Cuban-owned industries and businesses.
  Law 891, Declared banking a public function and nationalized all privately owned Cuban banks; they would now come under the control of the Banco Nacional.

Hate and envy were the law of the land, class warfare was encouraged by the government and these events triggered many Cubans to decide to fight again, either from within the Island or from outside and they began to flee in even bigger numbers, so much so, that authorities in Miami noticed; in September, meetings were held at the Centro Hispano Catolico to discuss ways of helping them.

• In Miami in October there were a series of community meetings to alert government officials of the need of the Cuban refugees.

• By November so many Cubans were finding their way to Miami that President Eisenhower sent Tracy Voorhees to look at the Miami situation and one million dollars in Mutual Security Funds were allocated for emergency aid.

• In November, the first Cuban refugee child, a 15 year old boy named Pedro, in need of foster care, was brought to the Catholic Welfare Bureau.

• November 22, the Welfare Planning Council of Dade County adopts a resolution calling for the federal government to establish a federally funded program for Cuban refugees.

• December 2, The Cuban Refugee Center in Miami was opened by the US government.

• December 12, Mr. Baker traveled to Miami searching for ways to obtain entry into the US for a number of Cuban students, many of whom were the children of anti-Castro activists on the island.

• He met with Father Bryan Walsh, a young Irish priest who was the Director of the Catholic Welfare Bureau in Miami, and Operation Pedro Pan was born. Mr. Baker would arrange for the children to get out of Cuba and Father Walsh would provide for their care in Miami.

• December 15, First list of unaccompanied children is received in Miami from Mr. Baker.

• On December 26, 1960, the first children arrived under the “Unaccompanied Cuban Children’s Program,” marking the beginning of Operation Pedro Pan.

• On December 29, the first shelter for unaccompanied Cuban refugee children was opened in Miami.

• On the same day, the Welfare Planning Council requested funds from the Federal Government for the care of the Cuban children.

1961 was declared “the Year of Education”

• January 3, The United States breaks diplomatic relations with Cuba before the visas for Mr. Baker’s list of children could be obtained.
• Also in January, the Brigadas Conrado Benitez were established in Cuba. Children in these brigades would go to remote areas of the countryside to teach the peasants.

• The youth would receive Marxist indoctrination in preparation for the alphabetization of the rural populace that would in turn receive Marxist indoctrination from the youth while learning how to read and write.

• January 9, The Visa Waver program was approved by the State Department in order to overcome the unanticipated problem that the break in relationship of the two governments had caused. In an unprecedented step the State Department authorized Father Walsh to issue “visa waivers” at his discretion and at the request of parents in Cuba. Thousands more permits were obtained by the children’s relatives in Miami and delivered by mail or other means, along with money orders needed for purchasing airfare, which had to be paid for in US dollars.

• February 3, US Department of Health Education and Welfare was assigned responsibility, by President Kennedy, for all Cuban refugee programs.

• April 17, The Bay of Pigs Invasion.

• “Los Niños Heroes de Playa Giron” or Los Artilleros de Cuatro Bocas, were children, as young as 14 years old, that fought with the Cuban army against the invasion at the Bay of Pigs.

From December 26, 1960 to April 17, 1961, between 500 and 700 children had taken part in the exodus that was later to be known as Operation Pedro Pan.

• May 1, Fidel Castro declares that Cuba is a socialist nation.

• Also in May - The Confiscation of the vast private school system. Private schools were nationalized and all schools were closed for eight months so that the new educational objectives of the revolution could be structured and implemented.

• June 6, Educational Reform Law enacted in Cuba.

“La Ley de Nacionalización General y Gratuita de la Enseñanza” stated that “education is the responsibility of the Revolutionary Government; a responsibility it must not delegate nor transfer.” Under the terms of the new law, from then on, education would be compulsory and to be entrusted only to individuals who professed the Marxist ideology of the revolutionary leadership. Consequently, educators who did not agree with the indoctrination goals of the Ministry of Education would be purged from the ranks of the profession.

What Parents had feared began to materialize:

• June 11, a batch of 1,000 students left from Cuba to the USSR.

• Youth Organizations were established by the revolutionary government like:

  • Circulos Infantiles for children up to 5 years old
  • Union de Pioneros Rebeldes for ages 5-13
  • Asociacion de Jovenes Rebeldes for ages 14-21

• After turning 12, children had to go to the mountains to alphabetize the peasants. The children from the former youth patrols were integrated into these organizations and pressure to belong to them and to participate in other Revolutionary activities was overwhelming, as non-participation
was considered counter revolutionary and subjected the students, and their families, to public ridicule and abuse.

- On August 4, 1961, the government cancelled the existing Cuban Currency, until then printed in the US, and issued a new currency printed in the Republic of Czechoslovakia. Each citizen was allowed to exchange up to 200 pesos, and those who brought a sum in excess of that amount would have the remainder, up to 10,000 pesos, deposited in an account in the already nationalized banks from which they could only withdraw up to 100 pesos per month. Existing bank accounts were treated in the same manner, any amount over 10,000 pesos was nationalized and withdrawals would be limited to a maximum of 100 pesos per month. The new currency was no longer made to the same standards as the UD Dollar; the value of the new pesos given to the Cuban people were worth only one tenth of what the pesos that they were made to turn in had been worth.

- In September the religious procession to celebrate the day of Our Lady of Charity was violently interrupted by the government and as a result, 17 year old Arnaldo Socorro was murdered during the procession due to his religious beliefs.

- 131 clergy were expelled from Cuba aboard the Spanish ship Covadonga. Public religious services were banned, from this point on, religious services were restricted to inside churches. Public acts of repudiation and intimidation against religious participation increased in number and severity of violence.

- On December 2, 1961, Castro declared that he was a Marxist-Leninist and had been from the beginning of the Revolution.

- On December 5, 1961, a new law requires Cuban nationals to obtain exit permits to leave their national territory and entry permits to return.

After the failure of the Bay of Pigs Invasion, the nationalization of the private schools where most of the Pedro Pan children had been previously educated and the expulsion of the clergy that were in charge of their education, the parents elected to exercise the fundamental right to choose their children’s education. Parents were compelled to decide between the Marxist indoctrination that the government was imposing on the country or sending the children, by themselves, to the United States. The exodus of the children between the ages of 5 and 18 became of massive proportions and the first major challenge faced by father Walsh was finding accommodations to shelter so many children.

The Catholic Welfare Bureau sought to overcome this problem by opening a number of homes and camps in different locales throughout Dade County but soon they were facing chronic overcrowding at these facilities and Catholic Archdioceses from around the United States stepped up to assist Father Walsh. Cuban children were sent to licensed care providers in over 100 cities in over 40 states.

The children would remain in these shelters until their return to Cuba, which at the time was considered imminent, or until they could reunite with their parents in US soil. Sometimes the duration of the separation was brief while for other families it lasted longer.
The duration of the separation was dependant on the particular set of circumstances facing each family in Cuba. Measures adopted by the Cuban Government hampered and postponed the departure of parents for long periods of time.

Frequently parents were denied exit visas under the rationale that their professions, training and expertise were critical to the fulfillment of national goals set by the revolutionary government. In other cases, the political incarceration of one parent or child, forced the other parent to remain in Cuba in order to safeguard the necessities of the political prisoner.

It was never the case that the US government denied entry permits to parents. On the contrary, the US government sought to shorten the separation by enabling the children to request entry permits for their parents and siblings, granting them visas by written request.

1962 The Missile Crisis

October 22, the Cuban Missile Crisis

As a result of the Cuban Missile Crisis, commercial flights between the United States and Cuba ceased, bringing an end to Operation Pedro Pan and the beginning of a period where parents had no avenue for reunification with their children, other than emigrating to third countries like Mexico, Spain and Panama. It was a slow and very difficult process.

1965 The Freedom Flights and Reunification

December 1, the Freedom Flights between Varadero and Miami resumed with first priority for parents of unaccompanied Cuban children already in the United States. As result, 90% of the children who were in the custody of the Catholic Welfare Bureau were reunited with their parents by June, 1966.

Considered a major event in the respective histories of the United States and Cuba, Operation Pedro Pan remains the largest exodus of unaccompanied children in the Western Hemisphere.

From its inception on December 26, 1960, until it came to an end on October 22, 1962, more than 14,000 children became part of the exodus.

The children were between the ages of 5 and 18 years old and representative of all regions of Cuba. They comprised every racial and social class, although the majority was of middle class background. Ninety-three percent of the children were Catholics, but there were also 396 Jews and over 700 Protestants.

Upon landing at Miami’s Airport, 50% of the children were met by relatives or family friends who had already made the journey to the United States. The other 50% came under the care of the Archdiocese of Miami’s Catholic Welfare Bureau. George Guarch was the person that met the children at the airport.
Many persons participated in the exodus program inside and outside the Island at tremendous personal risk.

During the first phase of Operation Pedro Pan, the first five months, less than 1,000 children came under the program. During the second phase, after the Bay of Pigs fiasco and the nationalization of the private school system, over 13,000 children came under the program in an 18 month period.

**Operation Pedro Pan Group, Inc.** is a nonprofit organization created in 1991 by former children of Operation Pedro Pan. The organization was founded to fulfill a pledge of Thanksgiving done in 1990. The pledge was done to “**Honor the parents, the American nation and Monsignor Bryan O. Walsh**”. The pledge includes the promise to give back to the community and help other kids in need.

**OPPG’s Mission Statement:**

- To sponsor, aid, assist and promote programs that benefit children in need. This includes children without parents (unaccompanied minors) and the needy, regardless of race, creed, color and religion.
- To document our history for future generations and to spread the knowledge of our exodus, as an important chapter of the history of Cuba and of the United States.
- To locate, reunite and bring together those individuals who were part of Operation Pedro Pan and the Unaccompanied Cuban Children’s Program and to share our experiences.

**OPPG has a Historic Committee** responsible for gathering documents appertaining to past and present activities and events relating to the Unaccompanied Cuban Children’s Program and this Organization. The committee has the task of overseeing the true and correct history of Operation Pedro Pan.

**Pedro Pan Information Resources:**

- [www.Pedropan.org](http://www.Pedropan.org)
- [www.facebook.com/OPPGI](http://www.facebook.com/OPPGI)
- [www.miamiherald.com/pedropan](http://www.miamiherald.com/pedropan)

**Barry University Library Archives**

**University of Miami Cuban Heritage Collection**

**Florida International University, Cuban Living History Project**

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