

Activity Six: Cuba _____

BALSEROS FROM CUBA

It's a tremendous feeling to find those people, (*balseros*) but it has been depressing, too. We found raft after raft empty.

—*The Christian Science Monitor*, July 3, 1991



The migration from Cuba to the United States began in 1959 with the Cuban Revolution. From 1959 to 1980, 800,000 Cubans left the country with 85 percent of them going to the United States and Puerto Rico.¹ Though this migration has been defined by many as political (Cubans were fleeing a socialist system) there were individual economic reasons motivating the exodus. The socialist transformation of the economy in Cuba meant the loss of private lands and businesses for some. The case of Cuba illustrates the connection between economic and political reasons for migration.

The *balseros*, people who escape on small rafts, are a current example of this strong connection between political and economic reasons for migrating. A characteristic of the Cuban migration is that it is a one-way flow; at first many people thought that they would be able to return, but many have given up this possibility and settled in the United States.

The first wave of Cubans left immediately after the revolution in the years from 1959 to 1962. Most of the 215,000 people who left during those years were landowners, professionals, and managers of American companies in Cuba. Flights from Cuba to Miami were still operating. Then from 1962 to 1965, these flights were stopped, so leaving was more difficult. The 74,000 people who left the country during these years traveled to a third country, such as Spain or Mexico, before going to the United States. During the next wave, from 1965 to 1973, 340,000 people left on what were called the "Freedom Flights" from Cuba to Miami. Then in 1973 these flights were discontinued, and the numbers dropped to only 3,000 during the next seven years. Then in 1980, within a five month period, 124,769 Cubans became part of what is known as the Mariel Boat lift.² The Coast Guard has been recording increasing number of *balseros*, rafters, being rescued. Coast Guard officials say that the numbers may not even include all those that are leaving because the *balseros* that don't make it or are rescued by other organizations are not accounted for in the Coast Guard statistics.

The relationship between the United States and Cuba dates back to the Spanish-American War in 1898. The Platt Amendments passed by the United States Congress in 1901 also helped to shape the connection between these two countries. They created an American Naval Base, known as Guantanamo, on the island, and its continued existence is a

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visible example of this tie. The economic relationship between Cuba and the United States prior to 1959 is another example of Cuban-U.S. ties: the United States controlled 40 percent of the sugar industry, 50 percent of the railroads, and 90 percent of telephone and electricity in Cuba. After the revolution these political and economic ties were cut, and the United States imposed an embargo on Cuba that is still in existence.

The Cuban community in Miami is an example of the power of the social networks that facilitate and support immigration. At present, an organization called *Hermanos al Rescate* /Brothers to the Rescue, sends small planes to search the stretch of the ocean between Havana and Florida for rafts. *La Casa de los Balseiros* /The Cuban Refugee Transit Center, assists the survivors by providing food, clothing, and shelter until family members in the United States are contacted or until they are relocated by some other agency.

The immediate political future in Cuba brings up more questions than answers. Eventually, these answers will determine what further waves of migration will come to the United States or what groups of people might return to Cuba.

Outline of Activity

Students will read quotes from an interview with *balseiros* who made the trip from Cuba to Florida. In addition students will examine Coast Guard statistics showing the increasing numbers of people leaving Cuba. The students will then stage a talk show during which the *balseiros*, as the guests, will tell the class their reasons for leaving Cuba.

Extension Questions

1. How would you compare the case on Cuba migration with the other cases you have seen presented in class? What are the similarities? What are the differences?
2. How does the Cuban community help new immigrants? How would this kind of help affect migration?
3. What other "boat people" have you studied? Compare and contrast the different cases of "boat people".
4. What does risk mean to you? For what kinds of things would you be willing to take a risk?
5. Since most of the people leaving Cuba want to go to the United States, how should the United States government deal with these people?

Related Issues

- U.S. embargo on Cuba
- Relations between Cuba and the former Soviet Union
- Diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States
- Fidel Castro
- Miami, the "Immigrant City"

Reference Materials

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Endnotes

¹Portes, *Latin Journey*, 84.

²Ibid. 84.

BALSEROS FROM CUBA ACTIVITY CARD

Cuba, the largest island in the Caribbean, is approximately 90 miles southeast of Florida. In 1959, Cuba experienced a revolution that caused many changes on the island. One major effect was that the government became a socialist one. Cuba received a great deal of economic aid from the Soviet Union until 1991. The United States and Cuba have not had diplomatic relations since shortly after the revolution. Since 1959, over 800,000 Cubans have left the island for the United States and Puerto Rico. Most of these Cubans came by airplane either directly to the United States or from another country. In 1980, 125,000 Cubans were allowed to leave on boats from a port in Cuba called Mariel.

In recent years more Cubans are leaving on small rafts. These migrants are called *balseros* from the word *balsa*, which means *raft* in Spanish. The *balseros* tie together inner tubes with wooden crates to make small rafts. They carry only some water and food. Then they attempt to cross the 90-mile stretch between Cuba and Florida by catching the currents of the Gulf Stream. They hope that they will make it to Key West or that they will be seen by a boat or airplane. The Coast Guard statistics account only for the ones it rescues. Other *balseros* are rescued by ships traveling in the area, and some die when their rafts sink. Some people say that only 1 out of every 4 *balseros* that attempt to cross makes it.

Read the interview of the three men who survived the trip between Cuba and Florida. Look at the statistics from the Coast Guard on how many Cubans have been rescued. Answer the following questions with your group:

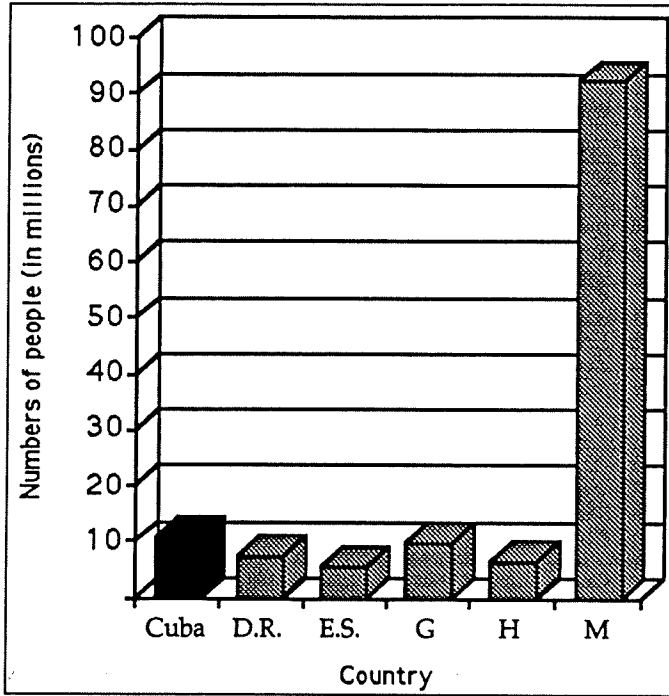
1. What are the reasons these people give for leaving Cuba?
2. Which are political reasons and which are economic?
3. What do the statistics from the Coast Guard show about the numbers of Cubans leaving?
4. What are the conditions in Cuba that motivate people like these *balseros* to leave?
5. How does migration affect a community or country?

GROUP TASK

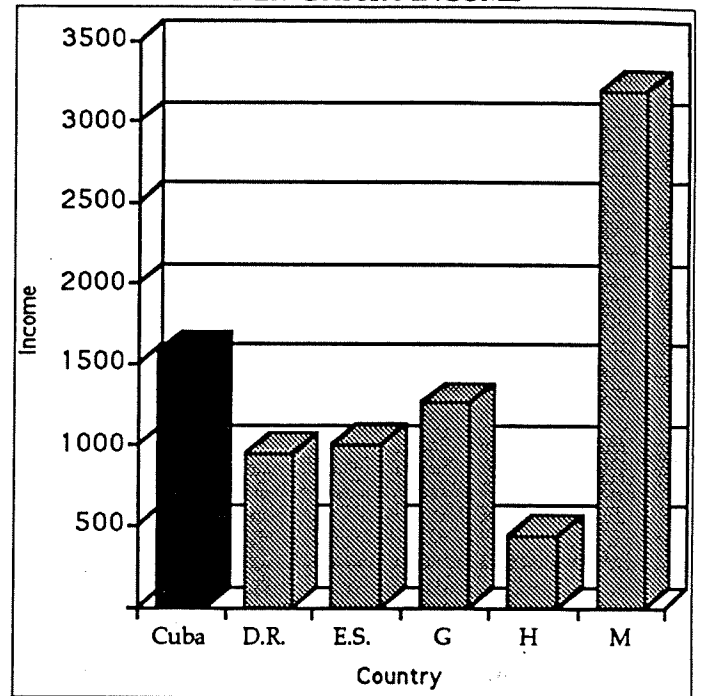
You are Cuban *balseros* who have survived the trip from Cuba to the United States. You have been asked to tell your story on a talk show in the United States. As a group, prepare a talk show with the host, the survivors, and some members of the audience. Have the host use the information about the *balseros* and the Coast Guard statistics to give the audience background. Be ready to present this to the entire class.

BALSEROS FROM CUBA
DATA AND MAP CARD

POPULATION



PER CAPITA INCOME

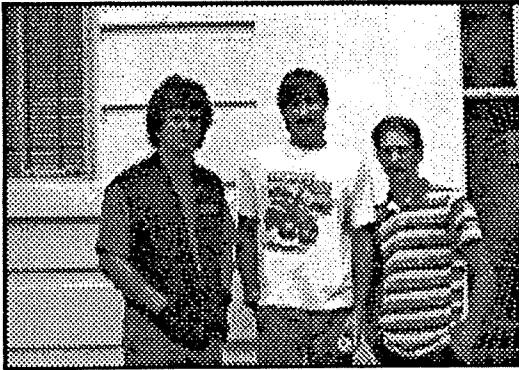


MAP OF CUBA



BALSEROS FROM CUBA RESOURCE CARD 1

The following quotes are from an interview with three men, Edel Delgado, Raul Perez, and José Luis Ascencio, who left Cuba on a small raft in April 1993.



Life in Cuba was not that bad. It started to get difficult when what Fidel Castro calls “the Special Period” began. He began to take away basic products, and to reduce quotas. You know, in Cuba you get a booklet, it isn’t like here in the United States. They began like that, taking away things. They started to eliminate the free markets, take away all those things that the people had access to. I don’t really know the motives. One started to feel hunger, I don’t know if it is because of the embargo by the United States, but, hunger, misery, there are no medicines, getting food in Cuba is very difficult.

Slowly I began to seriously think of a way to leave Cuba. When the special period came along and hunger became a way of life. Let me give you an example, in Havana, the capital, the electricity goes off 8 hours a day, they say it is because there is a lack of petroleum. But then you see that the sons and daughters of the Ministers have everything, cars to travel about. And tourists are the priority. And one begins to feel bad—like what am I, an animal, a slave?

You have to know a person really well to make a serious decision like this one. I saw that they had the same thoughts so we started to plan. They were people like me who wanted to leave. They didn’t want to continue being an subject of this government.

It was all secret. We began to plan, buy food. But no one could know, especially not family. Because first it puts them in danger. And second, like let's say you told your

mother, well, she gets all nervous and scared because she knows that many Cubans have died trying to cross to Florida and she might go and tell the police so that you won’t go.

A mother prefers that you are alive, even though in jail, then dead. You can’t tell anyone, only at the precise moment, like when you are ready to leave. Wait until the last moment.



Little by little we began to buy the things we need. First the inner tubes, you know the inside of the tires. It was hard to get these, because you can't tell people what you want them for because you could get arrested. But in Cuba since the situation is so bad, people have these to go into the ocean and go fishing. They catch fish for their family's consumption and then sell the rest. So anyway, this is the reason



you can tell someone if they ask. We also needed canvas to go over the inner tubes. This was our raft. We had to take everything to the shore to put it together. The coast is well guarded. You have to study the place, this has to be well planned. But the weather was terrible and we couldn't leave. We spent five days in a mangrove swamp so that we could hide waiting for the right moment. We had one try but that failed. The swamp was terrible, mosquitoes, mud, we spent day and night hiding in there. We had some food. We found some flour and made fritters for the trip. We had a thing for water to drink.

About two hours out we all started getting seasick, throwing up. We all started to say one thing or another, what direction do we go, let's go this way, no that way. But finally we made a decision. It was a bitter experience.

I couldn't do anything. I couldn't help row, nothing. They had to tie me down, I was vomiting blood. But even now, knowing what the experience was like, I'd do it again. Not even to see my family would I return. I'll tell you in all honesty, if they had told me that my mother was dying, I would not return.

If I had to do it again, I would leave Cuba in the same way, on a raft.

We began to lose our strength, lose hope. We started to think the worst. Everyone started to have visions, to see things. This isn't superstition, no, we were tired, hungry, the sun. I was seeing things too, but I didn't want to say anything. But then when one of the guys said, "hey let's rest over there." I knew I wasn't the only one. I would pinch my legs to see if I was awake.

I'd like to return to Cuba some day, when the situation changes.

I'd like to be closer to my country.

Photographs provided by *Hermanos al Rescate*/Brothers to the Rescue

**BALSEROS FROM CUBA
RESOURCE CARD 2**

Coast Guard Cuban Rescue Statistics

YEARLY

1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993
47	19	43	27	44	59	391	467	2,203	2,557	777

MONTH BY MONTH

1990

JAN	FEB	MAR	AP R	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
42	24	18	47	40	25	22	55	84	30	9	71

1991

JAN	FEB	MAR	AP R	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
51	13	116	272	378	390	190	204	252	175	69	91

1992

JAN	FEB	MAR	AP R	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
80	53	144	153	191	93	293	485	468	263	191	143

1993

JAN	FEB	MAR	AP R	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
158	143	153	172	151*							

*As of May 18, 1993 (Release #05-24)

BALSEROS FROM CUBA
INDIVIDUAL REPORT

NAME _____

1. What are the reasons Cubans are leaving Cuba?

2. What are the obstacles they face?