

# An Ongoing Jewish Diaspora—the Story of the Cuban Jews

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## *Introduction*

On the eve of the Cuban Revolution, the Jewish community was a prosperous, influential minority, which, in its brief history, had woven itself into the fabric of Cuban society as members of the affluent middle-class. When Castro came to power on January 1, 1959, he characterized his Revolution “by its newness, by the fact that it will do things that have never been done before.”<sup>i</sup> The 15,000 Jews living in Cuba at the time, along with the general Cuban population, were hopeful that the Castro regime would finally bring an end to years of corruption.<sup>ii</sup> However, Castro’s pre-Revolution evasive political ideology quickly became more defined after he took power. Sweeping socialist reforms changed the country’s political and economic environment and resulted in a mass population exodus. By 1965 only 2,400 Jews remained in Cuba.<sup>iii</sup>

The primary reason for the departure of the Jewish community from Cuba is highly contested. Why did the Jews, with a strong history of displacement, once again find their livelihood in danger and a need for a new home? Did the Castro regime bring about a new wave of religious intolerance, or was it because the Jewish middle-class capitalistic goals clashed with the new socialist economic policy? Some have contended that Jews are economically motivated through genetic predisposition; they possess innate qualities that enable them as a people to thrive under capitalism. Presumably, when capitalism is threatened, their tendency is to migrate elsewhere. Others have proposed that Jews have an affinity towards democracy as a means of survival. Again, when democracy is no longer present, the presumption is that they migrate elsewhere. Each of these arguments is predicated on the idea that there is a dominating Jewish dogma. The case study of the Cuban Jews during the Castro era provides insight into the larger question surrounding the alleged existence of a predisposed Jewish culture.

This paper proposes that centuries of Jewish relocation and isolation have created a community that thrives under tolerant economic and political conditions, which directly conflicted with the Revolution’s economic policies. Castro’s new Cuba undermined the goals of the bourgeoisie Jewish middle-class, and resulted in the mass emigration of Jews from Cuba. This exodus however, was not an isolated ethnic migration; rather it represented a subcomponent of the post-Revolution wider-scaled exodus of the Cuban bourgeoisie.

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<sup>i</sup> Castro Internet Archive. “The Revolution Begins Now.” (Retrieved November 6, 2006, <http://www.marxists.org/history/cuba/archive/castro/1959/01/03.htm>).

<sup>ii</sup> Jay Levinson, *Jewish Community of Cuba: The Golden Age, 1906-1958* (Nashville, T.N.: Westview Publishing Co, 2006), 191.

<sup>iii</sup> Judith Laikin Elkin, *Jews of the Latin American Republics* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 90.

In addressing the issue of the Jewish migration from Cuba, this paper will be divided into four sections. The first part puts forth a brief historiography, which will present varying assessments of the Jewish community and how defining ethnic characteristics dictate their migration behavior. In the next three sections, I will set forth my analysis of the Jewish migration from Cuba. The second part will analyze the social and economic status of Jews prior to the Revolution—which was, a newly formed, but thriving and well assimilated community. The pre-Revolutionary financial state will then be contrasted to the post-Revolution period. I also review whether there was wide-spread anti-Semitic activity in Cuba prior to the Revolution with a particular focus on the late 1930s during Hitler's rise to power when the Third Reich's anti-Semitic propaganda had great global influence. I will analyze certain acts of Cuban religious intolerance during this period to determine whether there were extenuating circumstances—other than an anti-Semitic bias—which contributed to these events. In the first half of the twentieth century, the autonomy of Jews in Europe was continuously threatened by mounting religious persecution and economic instability. As a result, many Jews relocated in search of economic opportunities and religious asylum; on the island of Cuba they found both.

In the third section, I examine the conditions that led to the Cuban Revolution and how the Revolution's reforms affected the Jewish population. I demonstrate that the Jews were supportive of Castro during his initial ascent to power and their support only wavered when his economic policies threatened their financial stability. Furthermore, I review Castro's policies towards Jews and show that his regime was not discriminatory towards them. To the contrary, the political philosophy of the Revolution was one of equality and tolerance. I conclude that socialist economic policies inhibited the independent Jewish entrepreneurs' ability to maintain their accustomed lifestyle, and it was this loss of economic autonomy to the state—and not anti-Semitism—that was the motivating factor behind the Jewish emigration.

In the fourth and final section of the paper, I examine whether or not there exists a Jewish culture predisposed to succeeding in a capitalist environment. This section will serve as a rebuttal to the theories presented in the historiography. I argue against the notion that Jews have an innate ability to excel in capitalism as suggested in Werner Sombart's *The Jews and Modern Capitalism* and contemplated in Jennifer Senior's article, "Are Jews Smarter?" Furthermore, I will examine Jewish history in other socialist cultures to deemphasize Irving Louis Horowitz's argument in his article "The Jews and Modern Communism: The Sombart Thesis Reconsidered", that the heart of the Jewish struggle lies in its quest for political freedom based on democratic principles. I conclude with my analysis that years of persecution and isolation have created an uncompromising independent Jewish resolve. Jews have been able to maintain autonomy under varying economic and political ideologies. The Jews of Cuba prospered under corruption, dictatorship, and failed revolutions. It was only when their autonomy was threatened by a dramatically different economic environment that they felt driven to relocate.

### *Historiography*

Jews have been victims of anti-Semitism for thousands of years; oftentimes these acts of discrimination have resulted in the relocation of entire Jewish communities. Dana Evan Kaplan, who has written multiple articles directed at the question, “Why did the Jews leave Cuba?” dismisses this as the motive in her article “Fleeing the Revolution: The Exodus of Cuban Jewry in the Early 1960s.” She concludes that the Cuban people and government were not anti-Semitic. Her research found that political and economic changes specific to the Castro regime prompted the Jews to leave Cuba. However, Kaplan places too much emphasis on US Cold War policy as an influential motive for emigration. Had free-market enterprise remained intact, the Jewish middle class would have entered alternative foreign markets to sustain their businesses. Since this was not the case, Jews were more affected by Castro’s attempt to redistribute wealth in Cuba through the nationalization of industry.

Some historians, to the detriment of their argument, limit their scope of study when investigating the Jewish community in Cuba. Although Margalit Bejarano’s article, “Sephardic Jews in Cuba” presents an in-depth analysis describing the Sephardic Jews immigration to Cuba from the declining Ottoman Empire, she does not attempt to explain why the Jews left--leaving the reader to wonder what the fate of this community. Similarly, Jay Levinson’s *Jewish Community of Cuba*, documents with great detail the Jewish immigration from Europe and the progression of the community, but only devotes a few pages to their departure. As a result, Levinson oversimplifies and undermines his florid description of the Cuban Jews by ignoring the complexities behind Jewish migration; plainly stating that the Jews were incompatible with the new communist regime and their economic policy. I will argue the specifics of Cuba’s socialist economic policy and how it affected the Jewish middle class, in addition to motivating factors behind the ongoing Jewish Diaspora.

Many scholars believe the Cuban case is not unique and that there exists a prevailing Jewish culture that is incompatible with socialist regimes. Henry Harpending and Gregory Cochran’s paper, *Natural History of Ashkenazi Intelligence*, proposes that lysosomal storage diseases, such as Tay-Sachs, are responsible for the enhanced intellectual achievements of Ashkenazi Jews, which explains their great success in the realm of math and science, specifically, when pursuing capitalist endeavors.<sup>iv</sup> Jennifer Senior examines this claim in her article “Are Jews Smarter?”, refuting the idea that Jews possess a greater innate intelligence and argues that Jews did not choose capitalism, it was their only option; yet, the necessary skills to succeed in capitalism—cognitive skills, literacy, and critical reasoning—became attributed to Jews as a people and contributed to the idea of Jewish cleverness.

Werner Sombart’s *The Jews and Modern Capitalism*, suggests that the Jewish brain developed a genius for numbers making them as a people predisposed to capitalism. According to his theory, the achievements of Jews are limited to this field because their brain failed to develop beyond numeracy. Thus, they did not develop an intuitive understanding and the ability to respond to feelings, rendering them incapable of embracing new and different concepts. Irving Horowitz, in his article “The Jews and Modern Communism: The Sombart Thesis

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<sup>iv</sup> Jennifer Senior, “Are Jews Smarter?” *New York Magazine*, October 24, 2005.

Reconsidered," reexamines Sombart's idea of a Jewish political economy stating that in 1904, when the book was written, Sombart could not have imagined the Jews living under a socialist economic system. In light of subsequent Jewish history under communist regimes, Horowitz attributes the Jewish struggle in political terms of a search for a democracy, as contrasted to capitalism. In this paper, I will synthesize these varying opinions to support my own thesis that the Jews as a people are not predisposed to a specific political or economic ideology; rather, their continual displacement has honed their survival instinct. Jews have a need to be autonomous, and they can prosper economically and politically in various environments. However, when their autonomy and thus their survival are threatened, they are compelled to migrate elsewhere.

### *Cuba Prior to the Revolution*

Historically, the Jews are defined as a wandering people. In the past, changing political and economic climates have coincided with the relocation of the Jewish people. At the conclusion of the Spanish-American War in 1898, Cuba was granted its independence from Spain and an open door policy was established that paved the way for future immigration.<sup>v</sup> Across the Atlantic, economic depression and political instability was taking shape in Europe. Jews looking for a way out directed their attention to this young nation. But why Cuba? What were the Jews hoping to find there that was unavailable to them in their native lands? Cuba represented a safe haven for religious tolerance and presented opportunities for economic mobility. Within a relatively short time period, Jews were able to assimilate into Cuban culture and establish themselves as an integral part of the community. I will examine the background of the Jews who immigrated to Cuba and their motivation, how they were able to overcome obstacles to obtain financial success, and why many stayed on the island instead of moving to the United States. This section serves as a building block for the subsequent analysis as to the reasons for the Jewish mass exodus from Cuba after the Revolution.

Cuban folklore places three Jews, converts to Catholicism, on Columbus' voyage to the New World.<sup>vi</sup> Whether this is true or not is inconsequential; its very existence is significant for it places Jews in the context of Cuban history. Factual evidence supports the notion that Jewish immigration to Cuba occurred in two major waves. Appendix I charts Sephardic and Ashkenazi immigration to Cuba and the growing Jewish community. The first wave of immigration occurred during the period 1902-1914 when 5,700 Jews, mostly Sephardim from Turkey and Syria, immigrated to Cuba.<sup>vii</sup> A surge in US investments had bolstered the expansion of Cuba's sugar industry and created new job opportunities for many young men.<sup>viii</sup> Immigration again spiked at the conclusion of the First World War, when many Jews decided to flee the declining Ottoman Empire. The creation of the Turkish Republic gave rights to religious minorities who had been classified, under the Empire's millet system, as protected ethnic groups.<sup>ix</sup> Becoming Turkish citizens

<sup>v</sup> Margalit Bejarano, "Sephardic Jews in Cuba," *Judaism* 51, no. 1(2002): 99.

<sup>vi</sup> Dana Evan Kaplan, "Fidel and the Jews: Anti-Israel but not anti-Semitic, the controversial dictator gives the Cuban Jewish community room to grow," *Moment* 29, no. 4 (2004): 36-45, 83-93.

<sup>vii</sup> Elkin, *Latin American Republics*, 69.

<sup>viii</sup> Bejarano, "Sepahrdic Jews," 96.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

however, did more harm than good for the Jewish community. They lost their cultural autonomy and were increasingly segregated from the rest of Turkish society due to anti-Semitism. Urgency to leave this region amidst great political change is noted by a report from Chevet Ahim, the Sephardic Congregation in Havana:

“The year 1924 was the year of Jewish Sephardic immigrants...these immigrants were no longer young adventurers in search of riches, they were families with small children fleeing the misery that was caused by the change of regime in the Balkan states, who sought refuge in the free American countries, and among them in Cuba.”<sup>x</sup>

Many Sephardic Jews also found Cuba appealing because Ladino, the language of the local Jews of the Ottoman Empire, was similar to Spanish.<sup>xi</sup>

The second wave of immigration to Cuba was heavily influenced by the United States' immigration policy. Xenophobia stemming from a sharp increase of “new” immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe created a backlash amongst Americans who wanted to maintain the ‘racial homogeneity’ of the existing United States population. Designed specifically to decrease the number of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, the Quota Act of 1921 limited each national country to three percent of “foreign born persons of such nationality resident in the United States” as recorded in the 1910 census.<sup>xii</sup> Based on the population demographic in 1910, the ratio of Europeans of northern and western origin versus southern and eastern was 5:4.<sup>xiii</sup> Thus, the Quota Act was able to curb the immigration trend to favor “old” immigrants from Northern and Western Europe. This ratio became increasingly disproportionate under the Quota Act of 1924. As a result, a bias was created to the detriment of thousands of Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe who sought immigration. Individuals who lived in the western hemisphere for a year prior to immigrating to the United States were exempt from this quota in 1921; and the provision was increased to five years in 1922. To qualify for this exemption, many Eastern European Jews immigrated to Cuba, creating a cultural phenomenon known as “akhsanie Kuba” (hotel Cuba).<sup>xiv</sup> Of the twenty-five thousand Jews who entered Cuba from 1918-1947, nearly half of them left during this same period. Those who remained found stability and made Cuba their home.

The rapid evolution of the Cuban Jewish worker laid the economic foundation for the community's establishment. Of the early Jewish immigrants who arrived in Cuba, most were poor and unskilled. Although Cuba's economy was agrarian-based, most Jews settled into factory jobs because the wages for field hands were below their accustomed European lifestyle. Employment in this sector was limiting because Cuba's industry was underdeveloped. Therefore, new Jewish immigrants redirected their search towards independent service jobs that required minimal language skills.<sup>xv</sup> In this endeavor Jews became self-employed as

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<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>xi</sup> Levinson, *Jewish Community of Cuba*, 20.

<sup>xii</sup> Edward P. Hutchinson, “Immigration Policy Since World War I,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 262 (149): 16.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>xiv</sup> Elkin, *Latin American Republics*, 87.

<sup>xv</sup> Levinson, *Jewish Community of Cuba*, 57.

peddlers. In order to reduce marginal costs and ultimately lower prices, Cuban Jews had to enhance their business operations. To accomplish this feat, the Jews began making business deals abroad to buy raw materials directly. They were able to create a cheaper finished product, and became manufacturers.<sup>xvi</sup> The transformation from peddler to manufacturer raised the status of many Jews from poor to middle-class.

Years of political and economic submission to the United States and other imperialist powers laid the foundation for xenophobia in Cuba. Because most Jews in Cuba were foreign-born, many suffered under the government's legislative effort to safeguard employment for native Cubans. The Law of 50 Percent, enacted in 1933 under Ramon Grau San Martin, required that half of those employed in manufacturing plants be Cuban citizens.<sup>xvii</sup> Again, Jews adapted and overcame this obstacle by opening up their own shops. Prior to 1933, most shoes were imported from America; shoes that were produced on the island were expensive luxury goods that were made by hand.<sup>xviii</sup> Faced with the possibility of unemployment, Jews began opening up their own shops, producing cheap and functional shoes. Within a few years, there were 150 shoe factories owned by Jews in Cuba that employed 6000 to 8000 workers. Not only were the Jews able to ensure their own job security, but they also created jobs for other Cubans while reducing dependency on foreign imports. The diamond-cutting industry was brought to Cuba in 1943 with the arrival of Polish diamond workers from Antwerp. Shortly thereafter, 24 workshops were created, employing 12000 Cubans. By 1948, most Cuban Jews were considered middle-class. In a remarkable span of less than fifty years, Jews in Cuba transformed from poor unskilled workers to professional middle-class businessmen, which fulfilled the island's need for an entrepreneurial class and created new jobs and industries that benefited Cuba as a whole.

Jose Martí, known as the liberator and founder of Cuban national identity, expressed his sentiments towards the Jewish people and their struggle with Spain: "moises no ha muerto, porque Moises es el Amor" (Moses has not died, for Moses is love).<sup>xix</sup> Cubans, like Marti, had great respect and compassion for the Jewish people. The support of the native population foreshadowed the ease at which the Jews were able to transition into Cuban society. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) and Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) provided Cuban Jews with additional assistance in the form of loans, schooling, and travel documents.<sup>xx</sup> Also, the similarities between Spanish and Ladino—native tongue of the Sephardim provided a linguistic advantage aiding assimilation.<sup>xxi</sup>

Shortly after their arrival in Cuba, Jews established their own cultural centers. In 1906, American Ashkenazi Jews founded the first Jewish synagogue, the United Hebrew Congregation.<sup>xxii</sup> As the number of Jewish immigrants rose, community centers began to emerge throughout the island including Centro Hebreo

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<sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>xvii</sup> Elkin, *Latin American Republics*, 87.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>xix</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>xx</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>xxi</sup> Bejarano, "Sephardic Jews," 100.

<sup>xxii</sup> Kaplan, "Fidel and the Jews," n.p.

Sefaradi and Patronato among others.<sup>xxiii</sup> In Cuba, Jews and the native people functioned as a single community; they were not divided by religious affiliation as was the case in Europe. Jacobo Laufer, who was interviewed for this paper, is a Cuban native whose parents immigrated to Cuba a few years prior to his birth. He recalled “as a young boy, playing ball, fighting, with the other children of the neighborhood, religion was never an issue when interacting socially.”<sup>xxiv</sup> Cuban leaders actively participated in Jewish cultural events to demonstrate their support of the Jewish community. In 1935, on the 800th anniversary of the birth of Maimonides (a famous Jewish philosopher), the mayor of Havana, Guillermo Belt, participated in the city’s celebration.<sup>xxv</sup> As a result of assimilation, Jews became woven into the fabric of Cuban society, establishing a sense of belonging and inclusion amidst fairly new surroundings.

Hitler’s rise to power in the late 1930s spread the ideals of Nazism and anti-Semitism throughout the globe. Cuba was not impervious to this ideology and there were incidents in its history where anti-Semitic activity can be found; however, it is important to note that these practices were not the norm and in many cases can be attributed to foreign influences rather than native sentiments. Notwithstanding, the Cuban government did not idly sit by; oftentimes the government intervened to put a stop to anti-Semitic activity. When Fulgencio Batista asked the United Hebrew Congregation to help raise money to build a library in honor of Jose Martí, the organization responded by raising ten thousand dollars.<sup>xxvi</sup> The Jewish community maintained a close relationship with the government and when anti-Semitic rants were heard on a Havana radio station, they brought the issue to Batista’s attention. Soon thereafter, the radio station was destroyed and broadcasts stopped.

On May 27, 1939, the *St. Louis*, one of the last civilian refugee liners to leave Germany prior to the outbreak of the war, landed in Havana’s harbor.<sup>xxvii</sup> Despite proper documentation, the 913 Jewish passengers on board were denied entry and forced to return to Germany where many met their fate in the Nazi concentration camps. Why did Cuba suddenly alter its immigration policy towards Jews? Were Cuba’s actions purely anti-Semitic or were there other extenuating circumstances that contributed to this event? The *St. Louis* incident, although often pinpointed as a significant event in Cuba’s history, in reality was consistent with the practicing immigration policies of Great Britain and the United States. From February 15, 1939 to April 15, 1939, all refugee boats trying to enter Palestine were intercepted and refused entry by the British government.<sup>xxviii</sup> Only when the Jews’ situation became severely ominous under Hitler did Britain begin to grant limited access to Palestine’s shores. Even then, those admitted were simply deducted from the existing immigration quota.<sup>xxix</sup> Furthermore, the United States Quota Acts placed increasing pressure on Cuba to accept immigrants that

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<sup>xxiii</sup> Dana Evan Kaplan, “Fleeing the Revolution: The Exodus of Cuban Jewry in the Early 1960s,” *Cuban Studies* 36 (2005): 130.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Jacobo Laufer, interviewed by telephone by Jaclyn Steinberg, Atlanta, Georgia, 5 November 2006.

<sup>xxv</sup> Ignacio Klich, “Cuba’s opposition to Jewish statehood in Palestine, 1944-49: A critical review of varying interpretations,” *The Middle East Journal* 51, no. 3 (1997): 409.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Levinson, *Jewish Community of Cuba*, 105.

<sup>xxvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>xxviii</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>xxix</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

were denied immediate access to the US. When presented with the opportunity to accept passengers from the *St. Louis*, the United States also denied their entry.

Yet, xenophobia is only a partial explanation for why the Jewish passengers were denied entry on this specific occasion. According to Gordon Thomas in his book *Voyage of the Damned*, the *St. Louis* was a well-orchestrated public relations ploy by the Nazi regime: “not only would they appear magnanimous in letting the Jews leave Germany, but they also hoped to show that no other country would accept Jews either.”<sup>xxx</sup> In the months prior to the voyage, Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels sent fourteen agents to Cuba to promote anti-Semitism. Upon their arrival, these agents set about disseminating materials that blamed the Jews for the scarcity of jobs and homes in Cuba.<sup>xxxi</sup> Thus, the arrival of the *St. Louis* was coupled with a heightened sense of anti-Semitism stemming from foreign influence. While refusing entry for refugee ships was a common global practice at the time of the *St. Louis* incident, it did not occur again in Cuba.<sup>xxxii</sup>

The dichotomy of the community of Jews living in Europe and those who immigrated to Cuba in the first half of the twentieth century can be categorized by the rise and fall of civilizations. What I mean by this is that in Europe, the Jewish community was rapidly deteriorating; Jews were ostracized for their religious beliefs and isolated from their nation’s economic and social networks. On the other side of the Atlantic, the Jewish community of Cuba was coming into its own, establishing its presence in Cuba while assimilating into its culture. Whether the Jews came to Cuba for religious or economic reasons, they unmistakably found their future. Rapidly the Jews rose from the bottom rung of the financial echelon to successful members of its middle-class, enhancing their own financial resources while creating jobs and diversifying Cuba’s economy. The success of the Jews coincided with the success of Cuba. On the eve of the Revolution, the Jews were an integral part of Cuban society whose future appeared to be promising.

### *Jews and Castro’s Revolution*

On January 3, 1959, at Cospedes Park in Santiago de Cuba, Fidel Castro spoke about the failed revolutions of Cuba’s past and boldly promised “that in the four centuries since our country was founded, this will be the first time that we are entirely free and that the work of the first settlers will have been completed.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> When the Revolution began, Castro’s political ideology was elusive. He promised unprecedented change without revealing his personal values, and because of this Castro was able to appeal to various factions of Cuban society, including the Jews. As his views became increasingly known and sweeping economic and political reforms were implemented, the Jewish migration commenced. What prompted the mass exodus of the seemingly promising and affluent Jewish community? Simply put, socialist economic reforms enacted under the Castro regime restricted the

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<sup>xxx</sup> Gary Rosenblatt, “35 years ago this week, we gave Hitler go-ahead: Roosevelt joined Cubans in refusing to save Jews,” *The New York Jewish Week*, May 18, 1974, 3.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Levinson, *Jewish Community of Cuba*, 118.

<sup>xxxii</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> <http://www.marxists.org/history/cuba/archive/castro/1959/01.03.htm>.

economic independence of the Jewish bourgeois and prompted the Jewish Diaspora out of Cuba. Preexisting political and economic conditions made the radicalism of the Cuban Revolution highly probable. The reforms enacted under Castro disrupted economic activity of the Jewish middle-class; this was the main motivating factor for the Jews subsequent departure. There is little evidence that the Castro regime was anti-Semitic—thus eliminating this factor as a basis for the migration.

Years of imperialism and foreign dependency under Spain preempted Cuba's first generation's ability to establish a diversified and independent economy. Accordingly, shortly after Cuba's independence, the "United States made Cuba into a defacto economic... colony."<sup>xxxiv</sup> Through the use of imperialist reciprocity treaties, the United States was able to integrate the two economies and "cemented Cuba's role as a sugar export economy to the U.S. market and as an importer of U.S. manufactured goods."<sup>xxxv</sup> Although advantageous to the United States, these treaties hurt the Cuban economy in the long run. In 1958 there were five key socioeconomic problems in Cuba: slow economic growth, a sugar monoculture, economic dependence on the United States, unemployment and underemployment, and inequality in the distribution of wealth and services.<sup>xxxvi</sup> These issues laid the groundwork for the socialist regime's monetary policy and the restructuring of Cuba's economy. Economic weakness was coupled with the political corruption of the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Fidel Castro was able to capitalize on the existing conditions in Cuba through "declassed political leadership, with few organizational or institutional ties either to the petty bourgeoisie or to any of the country's other major social classes."<sup>xxxviii</sup> Castro's revolution was filled with promise for Cuba's future, and actually received support from Jews who had suffered with their fellow Cubans under prior regimes.

Castro believed that the key to Cuba's future and the success of the Revolution was to reverse the socioeconomic problems by implementing new fiscal policy. Carmelo Mesa-Lago in his book *The Economy of Socialist Cuba* defines five stages that represented shifts in Cuba's economic policies; in its first stage 1959-1960 Castro's economic policy led to "the liquidation of the capitalist system and erosion of the market" and ultimately destroyed the economic enterprise of the Jewish middle-class.<sup>xxxix</sup> Simply, the regime's effort to eliminate its dependency on the United States and redistribute wealth was antithetical to a free-market enterprise, and thereby neutered the Jewish bourgeois.

Cuba's government had sound reasoning for wanting to decrease its dependency on the United States. In 1959, Americans owned 165 major companies in Cuba, which constituted 90% of the island's public services and 40% of its sugar industry.<sup>xl</sup> With limited knowledge of economic principles and years of anti-imperialist aggression, Castro began nationalizing foreign businesses. The United

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<sup>xxxiv</sup> Samuel Farber, *The Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered*, ed. Louis A. Perez Jr. (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 8.

<sup>xxxv</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Carmelo Mesa-Lago, *The Economy of Socialist Cuba* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981), 7.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Farber, *The Origins*, 168.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Mesa-Lago, *The Economy*, 12.

<sup>xl</sup> Kaplan, "Fleeing the Revolution," 134.

States and Cuba retaliated against one another. As Cuba nationalized businesses and began trading with the Soviet Union, the United States reduced its sugar quotas; this conflict reached a climax in October 1960 when Cuba nationalized all United States investments and President Dwight D. Eisenhower imposed a partial economic embargo on Cuba, banning all exports with exception of food and medicine.<sup>xli</sup> Domestic industries also fell victim to expropriation. By the end of 1960, all domestic wholesale, foreign trade, and banking had been destroyed, along with most of industry, construction, and retail trade (see Appendix II).<sup>xlii</sup> The rapid liquidation of the market suspended economic principles of supply and demand and destroyed mechanisms of the market that the state was ill-equipped to handle.<sup>xliii</sup>

How was the Jewish middle class affected by the liquidation of capitalism? Essentially, liquidating capitalism destroyed the Jewish community. The success story of the Jewish worker's rise from peddler to manufacturer and businessman was only possible in an open-market economy. By terminating foreign trade with the United States, Cuba deprived its citizens of raw materials and other imports necessary to conduct business. Furthermore, they were denied access to the United States' lucrative market, which substantially reduced revenue. Historically, Jews created their own economic opportunities in Cuba independent from the state, yet nationalization of domestic businesses shifted the state employment demographic from 9% in 1953 to 66% in 1962.<sup>xliv</sup> As described in the first section, the creation of the shoe manufacturing industry proved very profitable to Jews; however, this changed when, in an attempt to redistribute wealth, the Cuban government nationalized domestic businesses. Salomon Garazi was among those who suffered financial losses. He described his situation in August 1960:

"We had one of the largest shoe stores in Cuba; they came in, told us to give them the key to the place and not come back till they told us to. They searched our homes, they confiscated our banks accounts. That's when we decided to move to Miami."<sup>xlv</sup>

Many Jews were lower-middle-class storekeepers whose life savings were invested in their inventory. Loss of importing made running their businesses impossible.<sup>xlvi</sup> The constraints of the socialist economic system deprived Jews of the "economic latitude" necessary to execute their financial desires.<sup>xlvii</sup>

Although the mass emigration of Jews alludes to the contrary, a main tenant of Castro's Revolution was founded on equality and religious tolerance (Levinson 191). On a personal note, Fidel Castro believes he may be a descendent of Jews in Spain who were forced to convert to Catholicism.<sup>xlviii</sup> His daughter, Alina Fernandez wrote in her memoir that Fidel's maternal grandfather,

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<sup>xli</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>xlii</sup> Mesa-Lago, *The Economy*, 12.

<sup>xliii</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>xliv</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>xlv</sup> Kaplan, "Fleeing the Revolution," 139.

<sup>xlvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>xlvii</sup> Dana Evan Kaplan, "A Jewish Renaissance in Castro's Cuba," *Judaism* 49, no. 2 (2000):

n.p.

<sup>xlviii</sup> Kaplan, "Fidel and the Jews," n.p.

Francisco Ruz was a Turkish Jew from Istanbul. Because Castro had openly discussed the possibility of his Jewish heritage, it may be concluded that he did not feel the need to distance himself from the Jewish people. James Rice, executive director of HIAS 1956-66, "recalled Castro was puzzled as to why the Jews were leaving. He even asked the Israeli ambassador in Havana why Cuban Jews felt it was necessary to emigrate, since he had nothing whatsoever against them and would have been happy to use their talents to develop the new socialist regime."<sup>xlix</sup> Ironically, it was his economic vision that precluded the Jewish community's involvement. Politically, Jews did participate in Castro's Revolution, even becoming members of the first revolutionary cabinet.<sup>1</sup> The regime was also supportive of Jewish customary diet measures. Kosher butchers were among the few businesses that were not nationalized and Jews were given additional meat and poultry provisions, because they did not eat pork.<sup>li</sup> Based on the aforementioned evidence, one can deduce that anti-Semitism was not a contributing factor to the exodus of the Jewish people.

Of the thousands who left Cuba following the Revolution, a small minority remained on the island. Some of these individuals were communist and left wing sympathizers, many of whom found a role in the newly formed government. Others were sick, elderly, and those who had formed a strong attachment to Cuba and were unwilling to leave. The type of person who left was distinctive. Moses Baldas, leader of the Jewish Community after the revolution told a visiting communist in 1973: "it was the wealthy who left here. Yes that is the truth: that the rich left and the poor stayed. And of the poor-poor, one can say that all of them stayed."<sup>lii</sup> It is noteworthy that Baldas does not mention the religious affiliation of those who departed, but rather identifies an affluent economic class who found it difficult to remain on the island under economic chains. In the case of Cuba, it was not that the Jews thrived under capitalism and failed under socialism because they had suffered through years of political and economic corruption. Rather, it was that the pre-Revolutionary system provided a means for mobility. In Cuba, it was not simply a departure of the Jews; it was a departure of the middle-class whose livelihood was being depleted under new economic constraints (see Appendix III).

Ultimately, the motivating force behind Jewish migration from Cuba was their quest to maintain their autonomy, which only could be accomplished if they could survive economically. Without that, Jews felt compelled to leave. Years of oppression had made the Jews unwilling to compromise when it came to their survival.

### *The Jewish Culture Reconsidered*

Jewish oral tradition says "without bread, there is no Torah." 'Bread' can be defined in one of two ways; how one interprets this word is the heart of the Jewish question and the foundation of this paper. If one interprets bread as monetary assets then one can assert that the Jewish religion has a long history

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<sup>xlix</sup> Kaplan, "Fleeing the Revolution," 137.

<sup>1</sup> Elkin, *Latin American Republics*, 90.

<sup>li</sup> Kaplan, "Jewish Renaissance," n.p.

<sup>lii</sup> Kaplan, "Fleeing the Revolution," 135.

founded on capitalism. This is the very notion asserted by Sombart in his book *The Jews and Modern Capitalism*. Another possible interpretation is to define bread in terms of survival and the numerous methods one can undertake to preserve life. For centuries stereotypes have been perpetuated about Jews and their love for money. Oftentimes this has been used as the basis for anti-Semitic acts. The greater question is whether there exists a common link that distinguishes Jews from the rest of the population? Sombart asserts that Jews have a tendency towards capitalism, while Horowitz propagates an affiliation to democracy, and Harpending and Cochran believe Jews have an innate superior intelligence. I reject all three of these theories and propose that Jews do not have a universal ideology or belief system, but a developed personality geared towards survival that stems from years of isolation and displacement. Survival is oftentimes conducive under free-enterprise. However, that should not be construed as the sole environment for survival. The case study of Jews in Cuba is a useful illustration for this thesis.

The history of Jews and capitalism can be traced to the time of Charlemagne in the 10th century, when the French king invited the Jews from Lucca, Italy to the Rhineland with the promise of protection, travel, and participation in guilds. However, one thing was problematic, that Jews were not allowed to own land.<sup>liii</sup> It was Christian doctrine and its prohibition of usury that opened up a new financial outlet for the Jews, who took over this sector and began lending. Anti-Semites have manipulated Jewish economic history and their participation in the finance industry to support their belief that the Jews are greedy, selfish, manipulative, and evasive in their obsession to obtain money. The argument raises the question as to whether there are any universal truths about Jews' disposition.

Jews comprise merely .23% of the world's population, yet their mere presence has been a great force throughout global history.<sup>liv</sup> Milton Friedman, in his article, "Capitalism and the Jews", describes their tumultuous history: "throughout the nearly two thousand years of the Diaspora, Jews were repeatedly discriminated against, restricted in the activities they could undertake, on occasion expelled."<sup>lv</sup> How did the Jews survive? Henry Harpending and Gregory Cochran's paper, *Natural History of Ashkenazi Intelligence*, proposes that diseases common amongst Ashkenazi Jews, like Tay Sachs—have led to superior intellectual achievement.<sup>lvi</sup> To support their claim, the paper cites various 'statistics'; among them, that 27% of Nobel Prize Winners and 50% of global chess champions were Jews (individuals with at least one grandparent were considered Jewish). They credit evolution for this phenomenon because Jews "experienced unusual selective pressures that were likely to have favored increased intelligence... their jobs were cognitively demanding, since they were essentially restricted to entrepreneurial and managerial roles... these are jobs that people with an IQ below 100 essentially cannot do."<sup>lvii</sup> It is extremely dangerous and careless to use the human genome to justify qualities that extend beyond diseases or superficial traits. If Jews possess this mutation, why aren't all Jews geniuses?

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<sup>liii</sup> Senior, "Are Jews Smarter?" n.p.

<sup>liv</sup> <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/xx.html>

<sup>lv</sup> Milton Friedman, "Capitalism and the Jews," *The Freeman* 38, no. 10 (1988): n.p.

<sup>lvi</sup> Senior, "Are Jews Smarter?" n.p.

<sup>lvii</sup> Senior, "Are Jews Smarter?" n.p.

One could look to the cultural history of the Jews and its emphasis on education and work ethic as a more plausible reasoning for academic success. Maimonides supported this claim saying “it’s ‘great exertion’ that makes us who we are. To attribute it to anything in our blood would trivialize our own agency, our hard work, our humanity.”<sup>lviii</sup> Jewish prosperity in Cuba during their brief inhabitation of the island can be attributed to their hard work ethic rather than intellectual superiority.

Sombart also comes to the conclusion that Jews must possess an innate quality that enables them to succeed because of their social status in the Diaspora as strangers, and semi-citizens, “nowhere did the Jews enjoy the same advantages as their fellow citizens, and yet everywhere they achieved economically much more than the rest of the population.”<sup>lix</sup> Sombart, like Harpending and Cohran, propagates the idea that Jews have a supreme intelligence. Correctly, he establishes the great value the Jewish religion places on education for study is a fundamental part of worship. He errs in the extension of his analysis, that a Jew’s brain develops only on one-side; as a result a Jew “lacks the quality of instinctive understanding; he responds less to feeling than to intellect...he does not think of his environment as something alive, and that is why he has lost the true conception of life.”<sup>lx</sup> These qualities are necessary to function in Sombart’s skewed vision of capitalism—impersonal, calculating, money-hungry Jews. Empirical evidence cited to support his claim is exemplary of “scientific” anti-Semitism.<sup>lxi</sup> On multiple occasions, Sombart cites figures that are erroneous to bolster his argument that Jews were responsible for modern capitalism, “a system he did not like.”<sup>lxii</sup> Von M. Steckelmacher’s book critiquing Sombart uncovers one of these falsifications in Sombart’s quest to credit Jews as the first to use “‘impersonal’ acknowledgement of indebtedness”. Sombart attributes the development of the Mamram, a bill without references given from the debtor to the creditor, to the Polish Jews. In reality, this note was derived from the Polish legal system and was not native to the Jews.<sup>lxiii</sup> It may be asserted that Jews did play a role in modern capitalism, but their involvement had to do with the nature of their circumstances. One can look to the non-capitalist societies of Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt, Asia Minor, and Palestine where Jews were active in the local economies as further evidence that Jews do not have a predisposition toward capitalism.<sup>lxiv</sup> Although the Jews of Cuba did partake in capitalist enterprise, they like the Jews of the tenth century were adapting to their circumstances, creating industry where it did not otherwise exist in order to survive.

In contrast to those who examine Jewish culture from an economic standpoint, Irving Louis Horowitz reopens Sombart’s theory and examines the relationship between the political economy of Judaism and the political sociology of Judaism in his article “The Jews and Modern Communism: The Sombart Thesis Reconsidered.” Horowitz lists examples where Jews were disunited in their

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<sup>lviii</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p.

<sup>lix</sup> Werner Sombart, *The Jews and Modern Capitalism* (Glencoe, I.L.: The Free Press, 1951): 254-55.

<sup>lx</sup> *Ibid.*, 261-63.

<sup>lxi</sup> Ellis Rivkin, review of *The Jews and Modern Capitalism*, by Werner Sombart, *The Journal of Economic History* 12, no. 2 (1952): 174.

<sup>lxii</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>lxiii</sup> Joseph Jacobs, “Criticism of Sombart,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 7, no. 13 (1917): 371.

<sup>lxiv</sup> Rivkin, review, 175.

economic pursuits, Israel's jewelry exchange vs. Kibbutzim, Russia's Orthodox-Zionist Jews vs. Socialist-Bundist Jews, to debunk Sombart's perpetuated myth that the Jews are inherently capitalistic.<sup>lxv</sup> In this regard, he asserts his own thesis that the success and survival of the Jewish people, "has been less a function of the economics of the marketplace than of political emancipation."<sup>lxvi</sup> Ironically, one can apply Horowitz's methodology to refute Sombart's claim, to disprove his own contention. The struggle of the Jews, according to Horowitz, is the struggle for democracy.<sup>lxvii</sup> I agree with Horowitz that Jews do better when there is no state religion, and private culture is separated from public scrutiny. However, I disagree with his analysis that Jews can only thrive in a democratic society. If this were true, Jews would not have been able to prosper under the dictatorships of Machado and Batista. What is problematic with Horowitz's analysis is what is also problematic with Sombart's; they have isolated a factor and over-promoted it as an ideology. In Cuba, under the dictatorship of Batista and the socialist revolution of Castro, there was religious tolerance. By focusing on regimes where anti-Semitism was prominent, Nazi German, Stalinism Russia, Horowitz limits the potential depth of his analysis. Thus, the answer to the Jewish question cannot be found in ideological or economic preferences.

What constitutes a Jew? How did this ancient people transcend years of persecution and isolation and survive—what cultural values enables them to persevere and forge onward? Jews as individuals have varying ideological beliefs, economic principles, and intellectual capabilities; however, as a people, a personality has developed from thousands of years of religious tradition, culture, and history. At the heart of this question lies religion. Judaism places great emphasis on scholarship and education, the very act of worshiping requires careful study of a religious text. Education has proven an invaluable survival tool in the Jews' nomadic history because knowledge is transferable. Jews also exhibit qualities of restlessness stemming from years of slavery, persecution, relocation, and exile. Evidence of Jewish restlessness can be traced back to Talmudic times in the first century C.E., in an adage of Rabbi Tarfon: "it is not your duty to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it."<sup>lxviii</sup> Simply put, the job is never over. This is why the Jews have survived. As a people they will not give up. Their commitment to life, *l'Chiam*, is uncompromising. Like the phoenix, the Jews have a history of resurrection. Amongst the plethora of examples cited in this paper as to where the Jews have succeeded and where they failed, there is but one distinguishing factor; the preservation of autonomy is the one universal truth of the Jewish people because it is freedom that holds the key to survival.

### *Conclusion*

An 1899 article by Mark Twain describes the tormented history of the Jewish people:

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<sup>lxv</sup> Irving Louis Horowitz, "The Jews and Modern Communism: The Sombart Thesis Reconsidered," *Modern Judaism* 6, no.1 (1986): 16.

<sup>lxvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>lxvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>lxviii</sup> Sherwin B. Nuland, "My Son, the Doctor," *The New Republic*, September 5, 2005, 27.

“the Egyptian, the Babylonian, the Persian, rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away...other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now or have vanished. The Jew saw them, beat them all...all things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?”<sup>lxix</sup>

Many scholars have debated this very question over time. Some have proposed that Jews are born with an intellectual advantage, while others claim the Jews possess a vulture-like demeanor, sucking the economic prosperity from society to benefit their own well being. However, none of these explanations are compelling. The story of the Jews and Cuba illustrates a more plausible reason for the Jew’s perseverance throughout their tumultuous history.

The Jews immigrated to Cuba in search of a better life—to secure their religious freedoms and to obtain financial stability. On the island, as done before, the Jews quickly integrated themselves into the native culture and established economic independence. Castro’s rise to power symbolized the beginning of a new era in Cuba’s history—he promised to end the corruption of the previous regimes and improve the standard of living for all Cubans. His redistribution of wealth through nationalization of industry undermined the capitalistic enterprise of the bourgeoisie, which included the middle-class Jews. It was at this time that the Jewish population, with thousands of years of honed survival instincts, opted to emigrate from Cuba. Jews are not immortal in body, but in mind. They have an uncompromising zeal to preserve their freedoms—economic, political, and religious—and the ongoing Jewish Diaspora is reflective as to how they have preserved their autonomy.

#### Appendix I<sup>lxx</sup>

##### Cuban Jewish Population

Year	Place	Total	Ashkenazim	Sephardim
1898	Cuba	*		
1906	Cuba	100		
1916	Cuba	1000	10	900
1925	Cuba	8000	5200	2700
1928	Cuba	10000	6000	4000
1929	Cuba	8000		
1930s	Cuba	12000		
1935	Cuba	10000		
1939	Havana	6000-15000		
	Cuba	10000		
1941	Havana	8000		

<sup>lxix</sup> Mark Twain, “Concerning the Jews,” *Harper’s Magazine* (1898).

<sup>lxx</sup> Levinson, *Jewish Community of Cuba*, 193-194.

1942	Cuba	8000			
1943	Cuba	14000			
1944	Cuba	11000			
	Havana	8000			
1949	Cuba	10-12000			
	Havana	8-9000			
1951	Cuba	12000			
1952	Cuba				
	Havana	12000	8000	7200	
1958	Cuba	14500		10000	3500
1965	Cuba	2500			
1974	Cuba	1500			

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Appendix II<sup>lxxi</sup>

## Collectivization of Ownership of Means of Production and Services in Cuba, 1961-

Sector	1961	1968	1977
Agriculture	37	70	79
Industry	85	95	100
Construction	80	98	100
Transportation	92	95	98
Retail Trade	52	75	100
Wholesale and foreign trade	100	100	100
Banking	100	100	100
Education	100	100	100

77 (in percentages)

Figures in the table refer to property not to production.

Appendix III<sup>lxxii</sup>

## Cuban Migration

Year	Population (thousands)	Migration
1958	6824	-4449
1959	6977	-12345
1960	7077	-62379
1961	7191	-67468
1962	7318	-66264
1963	7512	-12201
1964	7713	-12791
1965	1907	-18003
1966	8064	-53409
1967	8215	-51972
1968	8353	-56755
1969	8489	-49776

<sup>lxxi</sup> Mesa-Lago, *The Economy*, 15

<sup>lxxii</sup> Mesa-Lago, *The Economy*, 41

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