

The San Juan Hill Massacre ordered by Raúl Castro

71 men were executed in Santiago de Cuba on January 12, 1959

Updated November 17, 2022. As soon as the revolutionary government rose to power on January 1st 1959 after General Fulgencio Batista, Cuba's dictator, fled the country, scores of his supporters and members of the armed forces and police were detained all over Cuba and accused of "war crimes" and other abuses. Raúl Castro, a Commander of the Rebel Army, was put in command of Oriente province. On January 11th, a "revolutionary tribunal" in Santiago de Cuba sentenced four men to death after a 4-hour proceeding held in a circus-like atmosphere. Raúl immediately ordered the death sentence for 68 more men, declaring: "If these four were found guilty, they're all guilty."



Two of the victims: Army Sergeant Victor Castro Lora, and Bonifacio Hazza Grasso, chief of police of Santiago de Cuba.

At Boniato prison, six priests heard the last confessions. The men were then tied with rope in pairs and taken by truck to a military shooting range at San Juan Hill. *Time* magazine reported: "Before dawn buses rolled out to the range and the condemned men dismounted, their hands tied, their faces drawn. Some pleaded that they had been rebel sympathizers all along; some wept; most stood silent. On a hill overlooking the range, a crowd gathered and cheered as each volley rang out. "Kill them, kill them," the spectators bellowed." The killing started around 2 in the morning of

January 12th as the men were lined up, one at a time, and shot by a firing squad in front of a 40-meter ditch dug up earlier that day. The Catholic priest Father Jorge Bez Chabebe accompanied all 71 victims to their execution and reported that the killings lasted until 10AM. A bulldozer was standing by and filled the mass grave with dirt; at least one man was buried alive, his hand holding a rock surfaced from the mound. The list ordering the execution had 72 names but one had avoided the firing squad, presumably thanks to personal connections.

On January 15th, UPI published an article from Santiago de Cuba citing Raúl Castro, who said that 106 "war criminals" had already been executed in Oriente province and promised more executions. Raúl also declared that the Batista regime had killed 10,000 including 6,000 in Oriente province.

The revolutionary government encouraged media coverage of the "revolutionary justice" being carried out all across the country—the goal was to create terror, stifle opposition, and consolidate power quickly. All the victims, most of whom had committed no crimes, were subjected to summary kangaroo trials and deprived of basic due process of law.

In 1963, when torrential rains from Hurricane Flora unearthed the bodies from their shallow grave at San Juan Hill, they were placed in cement casings, taken by boat out to the ocean, and thrown into the Bartlett trench located off the coast of Oriente province.

The Cuban government has never published an official list of Batista's victims. An exhaustive investigation by Cuba Archive has to date uncovered a far lower number of extrajudicial executions by the Batista regime than publicly claimed by revolutionary leaders: 869 documented in all of Cuba for the entire duration of the Batista dictatorship (March 10, 1952 to December 31, 1958); many were committed by the same perpetrators: paramilitary thugs or members of the police and armed forces. Meanwhile, Cuba Archive has to date documented 800 executions by the Cuban revolutionary government in 1959 alone; the list includes same-day massacres in several provinces including at San Juan Hill. Totals for 1959 follow, by province: Oriente: 347; Las Villas: 127; La Habana: 88; Pinar del Río: 86; Matanzas: 42; and Camaguey: 64 (46 case records lack the location of death and cannot be classified by province). These numbers are not conclusive but are believed to be fairly comprehensive.

See all case records of victims of this massacre at <https://cubaarchive.org/database/> (Advanced Search for "1959 San Juan Hill massacre.") Cuba Archive's database of deaths and disappearance is a work in progress, thus, findings change over time. If you have first-hand information of victims of political violence in Cuba, please contact info@CubaArchive.org.

Sources

Jorge Bez Chabebe, *Dios me hizo cura*, Miami: Editorial Silueta, 2014; "Pedro Corzo entrevista al Padre Jorge Bez Chabebe sobre los cubanos fusilados por Raúl Castro," Cuba: Encuentros con la Memoria, Jun. 17, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KC6XUiuIPc>; U.S. Department of State Foreign Service Dispatch No. 82, Feb. 19, 1959, p. 1; U.S. Department of State, Foreign Service Dispatch No. 751, Jan. 20, 1959, p. 4, "Ejecutados en Santiago de Cuba 68 militares y masferreristas," *Revolución*, La Habana, Jan. 14, 1959; "Justicia revolucionaria - Cuatro Fusilamientos en Santiago de Cuba," *Revolución*, Jan. 13, 1959; Luis González-Lalondry, "Masacre en Santiago," Jan. 12, 2014; "Cuba, The vengeful visionary," *Time* magazine, Jan. 26, 1959; "Masacre de la Loma de San Juan, Jan. 12, 2014, <https://todoporcuba.wordpress.com>. (Some case records have primary testimonies and additional sources.)

Following is the list of victims of the San Juan Hill massacre, reconciled to date but not necessarily 100% accurate. At least one individual on the list whose name is unknown was not executed due to a last-minute change.

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| 1. Eladio Abreu Pedroso | 17. Benito Cortés Maldonado |
| 2. Antonio Álvarez | 18. Juan Daubinot Bell |
| 3. Fernando Álvarez Díaz | 19. Arístides de la O |
| 4. Fidel Aragón | 20. Evelio de la Rosa Beltrán |
| 5. Israel Arencibia | 21. Enrique Despaigne Noret |
| 6. Ángel Balboa López | 22. Fernando Díaz Rodríguez |
| 7. Antonio Borrero | 23. Raúl Diez Zamora |
| 8. José Bravo Montalvo | 24. Raúl Duarte Anaya |
| 9. Leonel Calás de la Rosa | 25. Facundo Durán Matos |
| 10. Pedro Calás de la Rosa | 26. Arturo Estrich Clavijo |
| 11. René Caso Pérez | 27. Ernesto Fernández Valverde |
| 12. Pedro Castillo Ramírez | 28. Luis Gamboa Alarcón |
| 13. Victor Castro Lora | 29. Ángel Garay González |
| 14. Francisco Caveda Polanco | 30. Alfredo Raimundo Gil |
| 15. Emerico Chacón Santa Cruz | 31. Manuel González Guillot |
| 16. Armando Chaviano Reyes | 32. Juan Gutiérrez García |

33. Antonio Gutiérrez Valdés
34. Bonifacio Haza Grasso
35. Ramón Heredia
36. José Hernández Morales
37. Heliodoro Herrera Duque
38. Alfredo Jim Jaume
39. Ángel Leiva
40. Aristonico López Despaigne
41. Arístides López Toledano
42. Pedro Martí Morales
43. Alberto Martín Cespedes
44. Armando Martín Montero
45. Eleidoro Montes de Oca Mayeta
46. Antonio Morales Carrillo
47. José Morffi Castillo
48. Nicolás Novas Fernández
49. Rafael Ocaño Collado
50. Eraclio Oduardo
51. Domingo Olea Gross
52. Federico Oliu Cordero
53. Pedro Olivera Azains
54. Miguel Ignacio Orea Gross
55. Orlando Ortiz Verdecia
56. Gaspar Palencia
57. Manuel Piña Martínez
58. Armando Plutín
59. Luis Portuondo Rodríguez
60. Manuel Prats Cervantes
61. Antonio Ramírez Caballero
62. Antonio Reytor
63. Juan Rivera Nordet
64. Pedro Rodríguez Pérez
65. Juan Romero Ramírez
66. Celso Saavedra Pineda
67. Francisco Saavedra Romero
68. Alcides Soler Fuste
69. Benigno Torres del Toro
70. Filiberto Torres López
71. Juan Torres Martínez
72. Juan Urula Cossio



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