



# MEMORIAL TO THE VICTIMS OF COMMUNISM

TRIBUTE TO LIBERTY



## Newsletter

Winter 2024

Volume 15, Issue 1

### Project Update

The process of completing the final details of the Memorial continues, with the inauguration expected to be held later in 2024. We look forward to an update from Canadian Heritage on this in the coming weeks. Stay tuned!

### *History Unhidden* The Irreducible Cardinal

*The Hungarian Cardinal Jozsef Mindszenty, who today has been declared Venerable, opposed the Nazi regime, so he was captured, stripped, and beaten. He was then liberated by insurgent soldiers in Budapest, but he had to take refuge in the American embassy because he was also hostile to communism.*

**Born in 1892, he actually had a German surname, Pehm.** The son of a direct farmer, he became a priest in 1915 and a professor at the secondary school in Zalaegerszeg. When the Habsburg Empire collapsed in 1918, he was arrested by the revolutionary government of Károlyi and then expelled by the subsequent communist government of Béla Kun. When this government fell, he was able to re-enter Hungary. From the beginning he was opposed to the alliance with Nazi Germany, to the point that he changed his surname to the place of his birth, Csehimindszent. In 1944 the Germans occupied Hungary and Mindszenty became the bishop of Veszprém; in this role he saved many Jews. At the end of 1944 the Soviets entered the country, pillaging and raping (the bishop of Győr, Apor, was assassinated while he was trying to defend the women who had taken refuge in his palace).

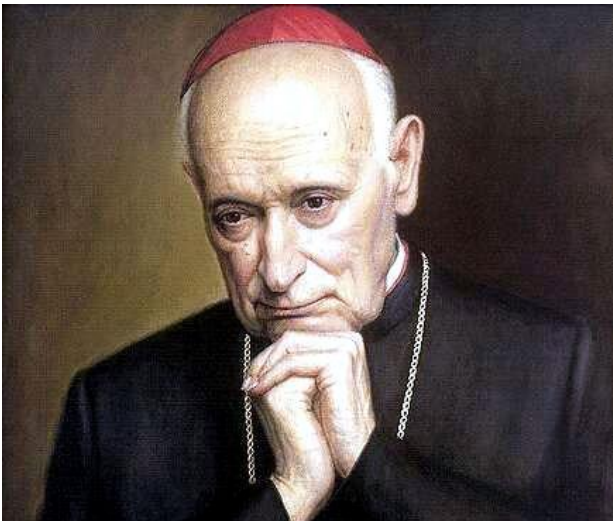
**Mindszenty protested against the governments and was imprisoned.** He was able to leave when the guards fled before the Soviets. In 1945 the communists took power and expelled the Apostolic Nuncio. In the same year, the Primate of Hungary died and Pope Pius XII appointed Mindszenty to replace him, even though he was the youngest of the Hungarian bishops. The prisons and the concentration camps were filled with dissidents, the communists blocked American aid to the starving population, the Catholic schools were nationalized, censorship muzzled the press.

**In response, the cardinal led a pilgrimage of 100,000 people** to the Shrine of Máriaremete, and in 1947 he announced a Marian Year in which five million people participated in the rites. The communists began to



Mindszenty at his show trial, standing on the left.

disturb his Masses and calumniate him in the press. In the meantime, they created a collaborationist group called "Priests for Peace." In 1948, in order to intimidate the cardinal, they arrested his secretary, Zakar, reducing him to dementia through the force of their torture. Then they also took Mindszenty and locked him up in the palace which had previously been the headquarters of the Gestapo. Here they stripped him and dressed him up as a clown, and then beat him with batons. Every night they woke him up and tried to make him sign a confession; if he refused, they beat him. This went on for a month and a half. At the end, physically and mentally destroyed, he signed a false confession (but he added next to it "*c.f.*" – *coactus feci* – I did this coerced).



Cardinal Jozsef Mindszenty

**The greatest hype was given to the show trial in 1949.** In order not to make him into a martyr they gave him a life sentence. When his old mother saw that he had lost half his weight, she protested, but this only obtained his transference to an even harsher prison. He spent eight years here until the insurrection of 1956. On that occasion the government asked him to take action

to rein in the protest but he refused. The insurgent soldiers freed him and brought him to Budapest in triumph. He found that all of the key posts among the clergy were occupied by "priests for peace." The alternate premier, Tildy, asked him to mediate and Mindszenty suggested not to trust the communists but to turn to the UN.

**On November 3, 1956, the cardinal spoke by radio to the Hungarian nation,** but at midnight the Red Army invaded the country. A fierce repression followed, killing 30,000 victims and leaving hundreds of thousands of refugees. Mindszenty sought refuge in the American embassy, where President Eisenhower offered him political asylum. He could not leave, even for his mother's funeral: the secret police stationed themselves permanently outside the embassy. In 1958 Pius XII died. The new pope, John XXIII, opened negotiations that were concluded by Paul VI. The Vatican Ostpolitik was content to fill vacant dioceses with "priests for peace".



A statue of the Cardinal alongside the Hungarian Freedom Fighter monument in Cardinal Mindszenty Plaza in Cleveland, Ohio.

**But the irreducible cardinal stood in the way of the "détente" demanding public rehabilitation.** In 1971 he was "pardoned" and able to reach Rome, where the Pope asked him to resign as Primate. It took him three years to capitulate; then he agreed to step aside and began to travel so as to assist Hungarians in exile. He died in Vienna in 1975 and was buried at the Austrian shrine of Mariazell, whose icon is also patron of Hungary. His remains were brought back to his homeland only in 1991. In 1955 Alec Guinness played Mindszenty in a film, and the experience led Guinness to convert to the Catholic faith. The film, *The Prisoner*, was rejected in Cannes and Venice.

*This article is used with permission from the Daily Compass (September 2020, by Rino Cammilleri).*



## History Unhidden

### Flight for Freedom: Unveiling the Triggers of Cuba's Recent Mass Exodus

Cuba stands as one of the last [five communist nations worldwide](#), carrying the harsh distinction of enduring one of the lengthiest dictatorships in modern history, surpassed in duration only by China and North Korea. The current regime, in power since 1959, is infamous as the [largest jailer of political prisoners in the Americas](#). A profound consequence of the socialist, dictatorial, and totalitarian system imposed on Cuba has been the massive exodus of Cubans over the past 65 years. Approximately [more than 1.3 million Cubans](#) have fled to the United States from 1959 to 2015, a figure that does not account for the exodus to Spain and other countries in Europe and around the world. This article aims to shed light on the main causes of the recent exodus from 2021 to the present. Our assertion is that the primary driver behind the massive exodus of Cubans stems from the existing political system in Cuba, which subjects individuals to a state of defenselessness, devoid of possibilities or options to alter their circumstances of misery and oppression.

The unfolding and unparalleled exodus from Cuba represents, above all, a human tragedy fueled by systematic human rights violations under the rule of an authoritarian regime. In a study on the phenomenon of rafters. It unveils the stories of individuals like Diana Meizoso, [who tragically witnessed the death of her two-year-old daughter, Elizabeth Meizoso](#), when the Cuban coastguard deliberately collided with their boat, resulting in the loss of eight lives. It echoes the experiences of [Luis Eduardo Gonzalez](#), a 21-year-old man whose body washed ashore on Varadero Beach after attempting to escape with a group from Cardenas in late January 2022. These are the visible faces of a mass migration that has exacted a human toll, with [69 Cubans losing their lives in the Florida Strait](#) and [108 at the U.S-Mexico border](#) while attempting to flee the country in 2022, as reported by the Missing Migrants Project.

At no other point in [Cuba's history](#) have so many people fled the country in such a short period of time. According to the United States Customs and Border Protection Agency, [527,405 Cubans were intercepted at the southern border](#) since October 2021, a figure larger than any other mass exodus in Cuba's history [since the start of the Wars of Independence in 1868](#).

**Cubans Lack Options and Agency to Alter Their Circumstances of Misery and Oppression.** Cubans leave the island because they have no other option. The Cuban government, acting as the primary employer within an outdated centrally planned economic system inherited from the Soviet era, tightly controls the self-employed sector through high taxes and punitive fines. Self-employed workers need government permission to start their own businesses. Various studies suggest that from the [1990s](#) to the [present](#), it

has been a systematic trend and practice of the Cuban regime to significantly restrict and reduce the issuance of licenses to self-employed workers, consequently limiting individual autonomy and leaving people in a state of powerlessness subject to the control of the state. Currently, there is [a list of 124 prohibited private operating activities, encompassing key economic sectors and skilled professions](#). Furthermore, the prohibition of non-governmental organizations that could address poverty, humanitarian crises, inequality, racism, and other social conflicts in Cuba exacerbates the average citizen's lack of agency to improve their economic circumstances.

A survey conducted by two NGOs across all provinces in Cuba from July to August 2023, based on [1,354 interviews, reveals that the country is in the midst of a complex humanitarian emergency](#), marking the most severe crisis in decades. The survey data emphasizes that approximately 88% of Cubans live below the international poverty line of \$1.90 a day. Respondents also highlight severe issues including a food crisis, inflation, low salaries, and a chronic shortage of medications.

The Cuban regime's [refusal to implement crucial economic reforms](#), such as unleashing the country's productive forces and allowing a free market with price liberalization, has further intensified the crisis. This leaves ordinary Cubans, who bear no responsibility for the crisis, in a highly vulnerable state, compelling them to seek refuge outside the country. Essentially, ordinary Cubans face significant constraints and lack the autonomy to independently alter their conditions of poverty and oppression. Faced with a lack of opportunities resulting from the economic policies of the Communist Party, many individuals, especially young professionals, have no choice but to leave the island.

While the Cuban regime attributes the humanitarian emergency and economic crisis in Cuba, prompting many to flee to the United States, to the U.S. embargo, a survey conducted in Cuba during the summer of 2022, encompassing 1,227 individuals across 14 provinces, reveals significant disparities in popular perceptions. More than 70% of those interviewed place the responsibility for the crisis on poor governance and the prevailing system, with [only 8% attributing the economic and social conflicts to the embargo](#).

Furthermore, in the [absence of free elections to choose from a plurality of candidates](#) with different political ideas, prohibited from organizing independent political parties, and faced with a [judiciary system lacking independence](#) to hold human rights abusers [accountable, along with a host of laws and practices](#) in violation of international human rights standards, Cubans lack the agency and freedom to change their own circumstances.

It is essential to pay special attention to the lack of freedoms as a fundamental trigger that forces Cubans to flee the country. This has been documented in recent years through [testimonies of Cuban refugees](#). Social workers, engineers,

sportsmen, and various Cuban professionals recount instances where even the most subtle criticism in their workplace led to harassment, dismissal, and ostracization. In a country where the state is essentially the main employer and where access to education and work is conditioned by discriminatory requirements of political support for the ruling system, expressing dissent becomes a perilous endeavor. The cumulative effects of these practices, coupled with the [absence of effective recourse to hold human rights abusers accountable](#), added a sense of hopelessness that propelled their decision to flee the country.

Politically motivated persecution and the threat of prosecution and imprisonment in the aftermath of the July 11, 2021, crackdown on pro-democratic protests were factors forcing many to leave the country. For some participants, such as [Yariel Alfonso Puerta](#), who fled to the United States in a makeshift raft before standing trial for disobedience in connection with his participation in the protests, the option was 'to go to prison or leave.' However, for many others who had taken part in the protests and had not been arrested by the police, the fear of being identified on video by the police at a later date led to their decision to flee.

Cuban migrants face a high degree of vulnerability because, perhaps except for Nicaragua and Venezuela, Cuba is the [only country in the Americas](#) that [punishes illegal departures](#) with arrest, imprisonment, and fines, in violation of [Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#). Likewise, Cuban professionals are subjected to a [series of decrees restricting their travel mobility](#). Deportation to Cuba, therefore, [entails arbitrary arrest, imprisonment](#), or at the very least, the impossibility of employment and a life of ostracism for many.

**Canada's as a beacon of hope and freedom for Cubans fleeing persecution.** According to the 2016 census, [approximately 29,065 Cubans reside in Canada](#). Historically, Canada has been a destination for many Cubans seeking refuge from political persecution, oppression, and systematic human rights abuses for decades. From the 1960s to the early 1990s, Cubans returning from missions in former communist nations in Eastern Europe sought political asylum from Canadian immigration authorities at Gander International Airport in Newfoundland. Gander became a site of mass defection, and Canada was perceived as a [beacon of hope and freedom not only for many Cubans](#) but also for athletes, ballerinas, scientists, and others [escaping persecution in communist countries during the Cold War](#).

Canada, along with other democratic governments and non-governmental organizations, considers that a host of laws and practices in Cuba [violate international human rights standards](#). In response to severe human rights violations that led to mass migration from Cuba, [Canada granted refugee status to 100% of all applications from Cuban claimants](#) referred by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada to the Refugee Protection Division in 2021, the year of the massive protests. The acceptance rate for Cubans granted

refugee status in Canada has increased exponentially in the years 2021-2023 compared to the [seven previous years since 2013](#).

**Conclusion.** The main cause of the Cuban exodus is rooted in the prevailing outdated system in Cuba. As long as systematic human rights violations, politically motivated persecution, and a humanitarian crisis persist due to ineffective and unaccountable governance, large-scale migration from Cuba will endure. The state of defenselessness imposed on individuals in Cuba by the regime is one of the primary reasons for the exodus. Unable to alter their political and economic reality, Cubans are fleeing the country in large numbers.

Cubans fleeing the island face systematic human rights violations. In no other democratic country in the Americas is there legislation that punishes with imprisonment, arrest, and fines anyone who attempts "illegally" to leave their own country. Similarly, Cubans deported to the island, particularly skilled workers and professionals, face discrimination in access to employment, as political loyalty to the Communist Party and regime are essential criteria to obtain a job in Cuba. Cubans, unlike other nations in the hemisphere, except for the dictatorships of Nicaragua and Venezuela, which follow somewhat similar practices, face violations of the right to free movement. This compels Cubans with differing ideas to leave the country and renders alternative thinkers stateless, preventing them from leaving Cuba or returning to their own country.

Canada, along with the United States and other democratic nations, can play a meaningful role in addressing the mass exodus from Cuba by tackling the root causes. This includes giving special attention to the consequences of repressive policies and human rights violations. A multilateral and coordinated approach toward Cuba should be ensured, prioritizing human rights in the country. Additionally, Canada can support human rights defenders and victims of repression on the island and impose Magnitsky sanctions on those responsible for gross human rights abuses during the crackdown on the July 11, 2021, protests, as requested by [Democratic Spaces](#) and Cubadecide promoters in a November 2022 request to Global Affairs.

From a humanitarian perspective, Canada has the capacity to establish a humanitarian visa for human rights activists, journalists, and members of civil society in Cuba fleeing political persecution on the island. This would be especially beneficial for those at risk of deportation or facing legal uncertainties, such as Cuban nationals in Mexico and those at the Guantanamo Naval Base. This initiative aligns with Canada's commitment, outlined in the "Los Angeles Declaration" of June 2022, to bring [4,000 migrants from Latin America to Canada by 2028](#).

*Submitted by: Michael Lima*