

# Socialism in One Image: The Backstory of Fidel Castro's Two Rolexes

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*Few historical photographs capture a visual paradox as sharply as the iconic 1963 snapshot of Cuban leader Fidel Castro inside the Kremlin. In the frame, Castro sits comfortably, puffing on a premium Cuban cigar, while two distinct Rolex watches glisten prominently from his left wrist.*

To the modern observer, this photograph is frequently shared under the satirical title "**Socialism in One Image.**" It has become a viral meme symbolizing the perceived hypocrisy of communist revolutionary elites—enjoying the finest, most exclusive commodities of Western capitalism while enforcing strict state-controlled austerity, collectivization, and egalitarian principles upon the masses they govern.

However, strip away the contemporary internet commentary, and the historical reality behind the photograph reveals a far more complex intersection of Cold War geopolitics, military pragmatism, and a surprising chapter in the history of horology.

## The Backstory: The 1963 Moscow Visit

The photograph was captured in April 1963 during Fidel Castro's first historic visit to the Soviet Union. Occurring just months after the world stood on the precipice of nuclear annihilation during the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, the trip was a monumental 40-day tour designed to solidify Soviet-Cuban solidarity and mend strained relations between Havana and Moscow.

In the full frame of this encounter, Castro is seated adjacent to Soviet General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev. They are conversing inside the heart of Soviet power, the Kremlin, right in front of a grand portrait of Karl Marx. The composition provides an extraordinary layers of non-verbal dialogue: the rugged Latin American revolutionary clad in military fatigues, the structured Soviet premier, and the ultimate symbols of Swiss luxury fastened to the revolutionary's wrist.

## The Watches: What Was El Líder Máximo Wearing?

Watch enthusiasts and historians have closely analyzed Castro's wristwear in this photo. He was simultaneously wearing a **Rolex GMT-Master (Reference 1675)** with its distinctive multi-colored bezel, and a **Rolex Submariner (or an early Datejust mounted on a President bracelet)**.

Throughout his life, Castro, along with his revolutionary compatriot Ernesto "Che" Guevara, was a known devotee of the Swiss brand. Castro entered Havana triumphantly in 1959 wearing a Rolex Submariner, and he frequently gifted Rolex watches to high-ranking members of his cabinet and military commanders.

#### HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE TOOL WATCH ERA

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, a Rolex was not yet the universal symbol of ultra-luxury wealth, status, and high fashion that it is today. Prior to the quartz revolution of the 1970s, mechanical Rolexes were highly respected, premium *tool watches*. They were engineered specifically for professional use—chosen by divers, pilots, and soldiers due to their unparalleled accuracy, robust waterproof Oyster cases, and extreme durability under battlefield conditions.

## Why Wear Two Watches at Once?

There are two primary historical explanations for why Castro opted to wear two watches simultaneously, moving past the simple accusation of conspicuous consumption:

**1. Tracking Time Zones Precisely:** The most widely accepted practical reason is timezone tracking. During his intensive diplomatic trips to Moscow, Castro needed an instant, glanceable reference for multiple strategic cities. One watch was locked to local Moscow time to manage his grueling schedule with Soviet officials, while the second was set to Havana time to remain connected with his government back home. Some historians note he even tracked Washington D.C. time (which briefly differed from Havana's timezone in the early 1960s) to keep a constant eye on the schedule of his geopolitical adversary.

**2. Military Redundancy:** When questioned later in life about his habit of wearing dual watches, Castro cited a habit born out of wartime necessity during the guerrilla campaign in the Sierra Maestra mountains. In military operations, operational punctuality is a matter of life and death. If one watch failed, stopped, or sustained damage, the second served as a crucial fail-safe. Once the revolution succeeded, the operational habit simply stuck.

## The Lasting Paradox of "Socialism in One Image"

Despite these historical explanations, the image retains its potent symbolic punch. Even if Rolexes were marketed as professional tools rather than jewelry in 1963, they were still expensive imports entirely out of reach for the average Cuban citizen, whose economy was rapidly transitioning into state rationing.

The contrast between the ideology of Karl Marx looking down from the wall, the state-mandated equality preached by the regime, and the double-layering of elite Western craftsmanship on the

leader's wrist creates an enduring visual critique. It perfectly embodies the ultimate critique of twentieth-century socialist experiments: the inevitable emergence of a "Nomenklatura"—a political elite who enjoyed access to global luxuries completely hidden from the populace they commanded.

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