

It takes twenty elaborate truths to refute one sleek lie

“The Smile of Lenin”: Inside Cuba’s Revolution

BY LORRIN PHILIPSON

The recent frantic scramble for freedom by thousands of Cubans via the Peruvian embassy and in chaotically dispatched boats is an eruption of long-simmering anguish, not a sudden, new development. But the island might just as well be in the China Sea as ninety miles from the U.S., considering how little is known or acknowledged about life under the Revolution. There are several reasons for the misconceptions that have prevailed these twenty years. Castro’s brilliantly orchestrated propaganda managed to conceal the darker realities, while in the U.S. the shrillness of right-wing attacks detracted from their credibility. Then there were the leftists, most of whom regarded Cuba as sacred territory: One did not dare criticize Castro’s regime for fear of dooming revolution elsewhere.

Four years ago, while working for the International Rescue Committee, I came upon many accounts of Cubans who’d resorted to the most daring measures to escape their homeland. Some hijacked fishing vessels, stowed away on commercial ships, or traveled a hazardous route to Guantanamo Naval Base. Many who put out to sea in waters that came to be called the “Corridor of Death” were caught and imprisoned or gunned down by Cuban patrols. Some were attacked by sharks, others drowned or died from hunger or dehydration. Still, from the beginning of the Revolution to the end of 1979 more than sixteen thousand have fled Cuba.

Later I discovered Cubans who had chosen a different sort of freedom. These were men and women, estimated at twenty to fifty thousand, who had resisted the regime and were now in prison. Some had engaged in armed opposition or had aided anti-Castro guerrillas, others had insisted that the government grant basic freedoms of the press, speech, and religion and that it follow democratic procedures in political organizations, trials, and elections. Many had fought against Batista’s rule but maintained that a new tyranny had betrayed their efforts for a libertarian revolution.

The novelty of the Cuban Revolution is that it had vast support among people of all social classes. The Civic Resistance Movement, centered in Santiago and

with groups throughout the island, openly opposed Batista. Its members, largely of the middle class, raised money for food, medicine, and arms for the rebels. It is often overlooked that those in the cities suffered greater casualties than did the rebel army.

Castro and his followers declared that they were improvising a unique revolution, indigenously Cuban. There was no official program setting forth the plans of the revolutionary government, but Cubans seemed as one in their desire for honest government, free elections, an end to police crime, distribution of the large estates, and the guarantee of steady jobs for the many victims of seasonal unemployment. Most important, as Castro himself asserted, the new order would bring “freedom with bread without terror.”

A REVOLUTION GONE WRONG

The first years of the Revolution brought hope on a number of fronts. New public works programs helped to combat unemployment, the racketeering of Batista’s era came to an end, and private beaches were opened to the public. Cuba had never suffered the crushing, widespread poverty of other Latin American countries, but the fact that those in the cities enjoyed a much higher standard of living than did the *campesinos* (farmers) led to one of the Revolution’s first major programs, the much-heralded Literacy Campaign. In 1961 young, energetic, self-sacrificing *brigadistas* traveled deep into the countryside to teach peasants to read and write, eradicating illiteracy almost completely in one year. Another major benefit for farmers in remote rural areas was medical care. By constructing hospitals, schools, state farms, cattle-breeding centers, and expanded recreational facilities, the government seemed to be steadily improving the life of the average citizen. And with these practical achievements came a sense of a people shaping its own destiny. Why, then, do so many oppose and abandon the system?

The one factor Cuban escapees decry above all else is the government’s overwhelming control of their lives. They cite organizations and institutions inaugurated in the 1960s that are part of an apparatus of terror that intrudes on privacy and suppresses dissent of any kind. Among such mechanisms are the vigilance groups, the Committees to Defend the Revolution, composed of citizens from every block, whose duty it is to inform

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against possible enemies of the Revolution.

Cubans are a demonstrative, effusive people who value close family ties, and they feel that the fabric of their society has been sundered by the government's methods, which alienate parents from children and undermine friendships—all for political reasons. Escapees describe the Seguridad del Estado (G-2, or State Security) as a brutal agency that hunts down alleged opponents of the regime. Once apprehended, Cubans find themselves at the mercy of the government's whims rather than subject to lawful procedures. (See Theodore Jacqueney's interview in the April, 1980, *Worldview* with political prisoner Huber Matos following his release.)

Cubans regard the abolition of a free press in May, 1960, as another of the steps by which the government sought to control the minds of the people. Escapees object to the continuous propaganda and the censorship of books, films, and art. They speak of being constantly lied to and kept in ignorance about their own country and the rest of the world. While in Santiago a year ago I came upon a store with an array of inexpensive, brightly colored books. Many were in Russian, and others by Dostoevski, Twain, and Hemingway were in Spanish. A closer look revealed peculiarly truncated volumes consisting of only a few chapters followed by questions on the ideologies of the authors. One was called *The Smile of Lenin*. Delicately drawn pictures showing Lenin as a handsome, gray-haired, avuncular man were accompanied by captions, one of which explained that Lenin was "a man who loved children." I was reminded then of a remark made to me by Elena Mederos, ex-cabinet minister of social welfare. She was recalling a discussion of an architect's proposal for schools, services, homes, and training centers, at which Castro had commented: "I don't want that; I want just the children alone." Dr. Mederos then explained that a necessary part of a child's education comes from living at home with family, to which Castro replied: "We don't need that kind of people. We need people who obey."

Cubans describe education as Marxist indoctrination, a means to insure compliance with the government. They say that the notion of free education is deceptive because the students are required to labor in the fields. Children above the sixth grade work in agriculture, and the secondary school system is being transferred to the countryside, where the pupils work in the fields for half a day. The reaction of Carlos, an engineering student I met in Cuba, was typical: "The quality of education is low because the teachers are often so busy with political activities. Secondary school teachers earn only about 130 pesos a month and students often bribe them for copies of exams. Life in the province where I am is stupid and boring. Everywhere it's the same faces and the same things—propaganda about the rebels in the mountain, which is history to us, promises that haven't been fulfilled. For entertainment we get a few movies, usually in Russian or some American ones from which they censor certain parts." Cubans find this monotony and regimentation intolerable.

Criticism of higher education is that it is reserved for those of unquestioned loyalty to the regime. Anyone who is not "integrated into the Revolution" by



THE FACE THAT LAUNCHED A THOUSAND SHIPS

belonging to mass organizations finds a university education denied. A cause of great dissatisfaction at present is the fact that after several years of training for a particular occupation a student frequently finds there are no jobs available in his field. Frustration is acute when one has little to say about job assignments or location. The result is economic inefficiency.

Religious affiliation reduces one's chances of attending universities or advancing in a career. At the start of the Revolution the Church protested the adoption of a Communist system. Castro then disbanded the Catholic and Protestant schools, expelled several hundred priests, and forbade church services. Later a number of clergymen, together with homosexuals and others labeled as social parasites, were sent to concentration camps. Eventually, these measures ceased and churches were permitted to hold services. But in the 1970s there was a major confrontation with the Jehovah's Witnesses. The sect was banned and its churches closed on July 1, 1974. Hundreds of young men have since been jailed for refusing to serve in the military or to salute the flag. A thousand have been imprisoned.

The Cubans attribute this inexorable control over their lives to the one person who directs the entire machinery of government—Fidel Castro. To them the revolution they desired—and still hope for—has been co-opted by a single man's mania for power. Cubans see Fidel as a *caudillo*, the traditional Latin American boss who holds the country in his hands. They refer to him as *el tirano*, the tyrant, and *el titere de Rusia*, the puppet of Russia, and feel disenfranchised because of the innumerable offices he holds. They claim that the existence of an oligarchy consisting of the Castro brothers and a group of loyal Fidelistas belies the Revolution's claims of egalitarianism and democracy. At present the Communist party numbers 200,000, only 2 per cent of the population.

The galloping socialism under Castro has long had more panache than practical result. Many Cubans are

incensed at the style of his leadership and lament the fact that they are not consulted about decisions. The question they ask is, What higher social good are we upholding by having to forgo individual autonomy? The concomitant problem is increasing economic deprivation. Cubans point out that the country is regressing instead of advancing, that there are greater shortages of all kinds. Escapees do not attribute the island's economic backwardness to the U.S. embargo but to government mismanagement and corruption and to the lack of incentives for work. The picture that emerges is of the system defeating itself. The use of force and terror and the subjection of people to daily indignities and scarcities produce apathy, negligence, and sabotage. These retard production further, and dissatisfaction grows and repression increases in turn.

Older escapees explain that the government itself hindered Cuba's progress from the start. Harassment of the middle class, whose members had actually helped bring about the success of the Revolution, led to the exodus of many professional and skilled workers. Professionals are fleeing still.

Rationing is described as one of the several symptoms of the worsening economy. Begun in May, 1962, it has since grown more stringent. The hardships are twofold: meager quantities coupled with lack of diversity and long waits in line to purchase necessities. Consequently, a black market has developed. In discussing it, escapees express feelings of debasement at having to resort to illegal means to obtain sufficient food for their families. Forced to become criminals and subject to stiff penalties, they are driven not by venality but by desperation. One of the gravest consequences of the prevailing economic chaos is increasing theft and prostitution just to provide food or clothing.

AN OCCUPIED COUNTRY

After centuries of colonialism, national sovereignty was the overriding hope of Cubans. Hence the alliance with the Soviet Union is regarded as anathema. Cuban antipathy to the USSR has roots in the early days of the Revolution. The Cuban Communist party, the Popular Socialists, has a long and dubious history. Its members cooperated with Batista and, until the rebels' success was nearly certain, condemned the revolutionaries as "putschists." Thus, some Cubans who turned away from the Revolution explain that they did so because they had fought for a democracy and were unwilling to accept a Communist system. Although they were the ones who had brought about the triumph of the Revolution, they soon found themselves shunted aside while the Communists, who had contributed least to the struggle, were being rewarded with appointments to important government posts. Without public agreement, the formation of the Communist party of Cuba was announced in August, 1961, and the rebel army, the 26th of July Movement, and the trade unions were dismantled. When Batista took power in 1952, Communists controlled only 20 of the 3,000 unions and had only 11 delegates among 4,500.

Cubans condemn their country's status as a Russian satellite. With their institutions, economy, and military forces modeled according to Soviet plans, and with

the presence of Russian troops and personnel, Cubans feel they are living in an occupied country and are in the humiliating predicament of dependency. Cuba now receives \$10 million a day in economic assistance from Moscow. Its accumulated trade deficit with the USSR exceeds \$3 billion, and total Cuban indebtedness has been calculated at \$5 billion.

Cubans refer bitterly not only to the depletion of material resources—items shipped elsewhere and denied or severely limited at home—but to the loss of Cuban lives in the fight for Soviet hegemony in Africa. Russian military equipment and weapons, valued at \$2-3 billion, make the Cuban armed forces among the strongest in Latin America and more powerful than those of the East European satellites, except for Poland. Cuba has 190,000 regular troops, 90,000 army reserves, 10,000 state security troops, 3,000 border guards, and 100,000 in the militia. Many young men do all they can to avoid the service, and others desert rather than fight in Africa.

Castro will proceed with his usual political maneuvering in the face of this latest upheaval—disparaging dissenters as traitors and delinquents and stage-managing attacks against them by other Cubans. He has succeeded in causing further turmoil for Cubans and has created a furor in the U.S. by thwarting efforts for a more orderly exodus, while hampering emigration to Latin America, where he continues to foment his own brand of revolution. Although this time it will be harder for him to camouflage popular opposition, there will nevertheless be spectators who will go on believing that one million or more Cubans are expendable and that the Revolution has remained true to its original aims. They will overlook the fact that while Castro offers Cuba as a mecca for revolutionaries, in twenty-one years immigration to the island has been negligible. Instead, the youth of Africa and Latin America are being sacrificed to Castro's ambitions and those of his Soviet mentors. More than a thousand young Angolans have been sent for indoctrination and work in the sugar cane fields, and other African and Nicaraguan young people have been brought to study on the Isle of Youth. One would like to believe that, in the light of Cuba's ordeal, leaders in Africa, Latin America, and the rest of the Caribbean will choose a humane path to liberation instead of the one Castro charts for them. [WV]

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