

Cuba's Eternal
Revolution through the
Prism of Insurgency,
Socialism, and
Espionage

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By

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Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-1015-8

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-1015-9

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I wish to thank my wife Helen for assiduously helping me research, type, and edit the material contained in this monograph. I could not have done it without her advice and assistance. Nevertheless, any errors remain my own.

Second, I want to thank several authors whose books were written and published in Spanish, material that was essential to write this monograph, specifically Juan Clark, *Cuba: Mito y Realidad—Testimonios de un Pueblo* (1992); Enrique Encinosa, *Cuba en Guerra: Historia de la Oposicion Anti-Castrista 1959-1993* (1994); Dessy Mendoza and Ileana Fuentes, *¡Dengue! La Epidemia Secreta de Fidel Castro* (2001); Carlos Wotzkow, *Natumaleza Cubana* (1998); and Roberto Solera, *Cuba: Viaje al Pasado* (1994).

I'm grateful for their work and notable contributions. I hope their works are more widely recognized because of this monograph. The fact remains that because the material in those books has not been translated into English (or any other languages to my knowledge), the information has remained arcane and not widely disseminated among Anglo-Americans, Australians, and other English-speaking readers. Yet, the material is fundamental to truly understand recent Cuban history, the insurgencies, the reality of the socialized health care system, the environmental and ecological problems, and the pivotal role Cuba played in world affairs, including diplomacy, espionage, and third-world nation wars during the Cold War. Yet, we should not forget that Cuba remains the only Marxist-Leninist and communist nation in the world outside Asia. We hope that within the purview of this monograph the historic information will reach a larger academic audience.

Last but not least, I extend my appreciation to Mrs. Helen Edwards, Commissioning Editor at Cambridge Scholars Publishing (CSP) for encouraging me to write this monograph and my previous book published by CSP, *Controversies in Medicine and Neuroscience: Through the Prism of History, Neurobiology, and Bioethics*.

INTRODUCTION

Outstanding moments in the Cuban Revolution have fascinated readers for decades. But, a lesser-known insurgency also took place in Cuba in the 1960s that has not received as much attention. This is particularly true for English-speaking audiences and academicians who may not be familiar with much of the material in this monograph, which utilized as sources major tomes that have only been published in Spanish and not available to international audiences outside Spain and Latin America.

Cuba's Eternal Revolution not only relates the defining moments of the Cuban Revolution, including the Moncada Barracks attack and the assault on Batista's Presidential Palace, but also delves into the lesser-known insurgency against the communist regime of Fidel Castro when Cuban farmers and rural peasants, led by former revolutionaries who felt betrayed by the communist turn of the Revolution and Cuba's alliance with the Soviet camp, "returned to the hills" to wage war against Castro's communist regime. Fidel Castro chose to label the conflict his "War Against the Bandits" (*La Lucha Contra Bandidos*), even though the popular uprising was nothing of the sort and the Cuban people were never "bandits." The communist regime soon found itself embroiled in other crises as well, including the Bay of Pigs invasion and the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

To understand the rationale behind Fidel and Raúl Castro's communist leanings, little-known events in the lives of two brothers—from their childhood to the moment they assumed full leadership of the Cuban Revolution and how they consolidated power—will be related, postulating that those events played a role not only in the psychosocial development of their revolutionary identity but also in forging their communist ideology. Episodes in the life of Ernesto "Che" Guevara, the Argentinean communist revolutionary, and his misadventures in Cuba as well as overseas in the Congo and Bolivia, are also detailed as well as a couple of side stories relating to Ernest Hemingway, and his political affinity for two leftist regimes that should be of interest to the readers, as they are inextricably entwined with the Cuban Revolution.

Life in Cuba—namely, the standard of living and health care—was greatly different before and after the Revolution. Towards that end, a comparison between life in Cuba prior to Castro's Revolution and after the

Revolution as well as information about the realities of life on the Caribbean island that has crept into the popular consciousness of many people worldwide is documented by facts and statistics. Important aspects of socialized medicine in Cuba today will also be explored, including the rendering of health care assistance to other third-world countries, referred to as Cuba's "doctor diplomacy"; revelations about Cuba's essential and very embarrassing sex-tourism industry; and the shameful "medical apartheid" that exists within Cuba's two-tiered, socialized, health care system.

On the environmental front, Cuba has waged a "silent war against the environment" that is perhaps one of the lesser-known sordid happenings to transpire in the aftermath of the Revolution. Cuba's environmental and ecological problems have not been discussed in any great detail by the media or academia—namely, the diversion of rivers and streams; the eradication of forests in a once lush and beautiful island; the destruction of flora and fauna by mismanagement; and the lack of effective agricultural and conservation policies, which receive only lip service from government authorities but are not actually enforced.

The degradation of the environment and the devastation of Cuba's flora and fauna in the economic and political interests of the Revolution is material that will be of great interest to environmental scientists and researchers studying conservation and ecological problems in Cuba specifically and third-world countries in general as well as to readers and concerned citizens.

Many current travelers to Cuba are not aware that ecological mismanagement of this magnitude has taken (and continues to take) place in Cuba. The Potemkin villages surrounding the tourism industry ensure that tourists do not bear witness to this disagreeable feature of Revolutionary Cuba.

The final section of this monograph delves into foreign intelligence and the intriguing cloak and dagger aspects of the Cuban Revolution. With good reason, the Soviet KGB once referred to Cuba's foreign intelligence apparatus—*Dirección General de Inteligencia* (DGI)—as one of their most effective "dangerous little brothers."

Revelations concerning the frightening magnitude of the penetration of the DGI into America's government and Fidel Castro's possible prior knowledge of President John F. Kennedy's tragic assassination in 1963 is based on information provided by Cuba's most valuable defector during the Cold War. "Spies in High Places" brings us up to date on the Cuba-United States espionage saga, and the Epilogue brings us up to the present time on the state of affairs in Cuba today—especially the state of dissent in the population and the yearnings for freedom in the younger Cuban generation.

My purpose and objective in writing this monograph is to enlighten young social scientists, historians, interested readers, and political scientists about the realities of the Cuban Revolution—its purported achievements as well as its definite shortcomings; elucidate its impact on world events in the last seven decades; and correct the record where needed for historians, sociologists, and political scientists. I also provide a Selected Bibliography and a fully annotated Notes section to provide reference sources as well as to furnish explanations and additional information. I hope I have succeeded in this regard and will let the gentle reader be the judge, while enhancing his fount of knowledge about *Cuba's Eternal Revolution*.

Miguel A. Faria, Jr., M.D.
Milledgeville, Georgia
March 17, 2023

PART I

**A HISTORY OF REVOLUTION
AND INSURGENCY**

CHAPTER 1

FIDEL CASTRO AND THE 26TH OF JULY MOVEMENT

The date of the Moncada Barracks attack, July 26, 1953, would provide Fidel Castro with the name for his revolutionary organization, the 26th of July Movement, and would become the most sacred date in communist Cuba. And, speaking of sacredness, why did Fidel Castro choose the 26th of July for the commencement of his Revolution? Sources tell us he chose July 26 because the patron saint of the city of Santiago de Cuba was the Apostle James the Elder. In medieval Spanish tradition, James was resurrected as Santiago the Moorslayer, the avenging angel of the Spanish knights during the Reconquista as well as the charging fury that led the indomitable conquistadors of Hernán Cortes when battling the Aztecs of Mexico.

The saint was honored every July 25, which also coincided with the end of the sugar harvest, hence the day of the most joyous celebration in Santiago de Cuba. Fidel Castro, “the new Moorslayer, would destroy Batista.”[1] Indeed, following Batista’s bloodless March 10, 1952 coup d’état in which Batista seized control of the Cuban government, Fidel told his Orthodox friend, José Pardo Llada, “We have got to kill that Negro.”[2] To understand that remark, one must recall that Batista was of mixed ancestry (Indian or Chinese, black and Spanish) and this was resented by upper class Cubans of Spanish descent.[1]

In moments of candor, Fidel admitted that the Moncada Barracks attack was carried out for sensationalism, that is, to stir up the public and begin his Revolution with a splash. But despite the infamous Batista coup, Cuba was and remained prosperous and at peace. There was no popular protest or public outcry, except for the measured protests by the intellectuals chiefly in Havana. Fidel, then, had to do something spectacular to not only get the people’s attention but also rally them against Batista. In Fidel’s view, the Moncada Barracks attack was “a gesture that would set an example for the people of Cuba.”[3]

The Moncada Barracks Attack

On July 26, 1953, Fidel Castro, along with his brother Raúl, led an attack on a remote outpost, the Moncada Barracks in Oriente province, the easternmost province of Cuba. As discussed, the fortuitous day was chosen after a major celebration in Santiago de Cuba. Fidel expected Batista's soldiers to be drunk and stuporous when his band of revolutionaries surprised them at the crack of dawn. He had 160 men (figures vary from 126 to 167), including his brother Raúl, Abel and Haydée Santamaría, and several others like Juan Almeida, who would become better known as the Revolution unfolded. Fidel Castro and the principal group of assailants were to attack the main post in the barracks.[4]

In the meantime, the doctor in the group with Abel Santamaría and the two women, Haydée Santamaría and Melba Hernández, were to secure the infirmary. But everything went wrong. In the lead vehicle, Ramiro Valdés encountered a guard and smashed his face in with the butt of his rifle. The vanguard of the group surprised the sentries, who, nevertheless, were able to warn the garrison. They suffered eight deaths in the ensuing gunfight. Fidel Castro did not even enter the compound. In the infirmary, the small group viciously killed the sleeping soldiers, accounting for the majority of the 22 enemy casualties.

Batista forces captured Abel Santamaría and the women. After discovering the slaughter of their sick and wounded comrades in the infirmary, the soldiers retaliated. Abel was tortured and brutally killed while in police custody. He would later become an icon of the Revolution. In the chaos that followed, 56 revolutionaries were killed, the majority of them after their capture, in retaliation for the infirmary massacre.[4]

Years later, Abel's sister Haydée, a member of the ruling Cuban nomenklatura, committed suicide while working in Castro's communist government as director of the state's official publishing house, *Casa de las Américas*. She became disillusioned, it seemed, with the course of the Revolution and her equally failed marriage to playboy and *compañero* Armando Hart, Minister of Culture.

Comandantes Juan Almeida and Ramiro Valdés remained in Fidel's revolutionary hierarchy for decades (Almeida working as a communist party apparatchik, and Valdés working in the dreaded internal state security apparatus). Valdés, along with the dissolute quartet of Osmany Cienfuegos, Sergio del Valle, José Abrantes, and Manuel ("Red Beard") Piñeiro, would later put Batista police and military chiefs, such as the Salas Cañizares, the Masferrer, the Mirabales, and Estéban Ventura, to shame in using effective repressive tactics to squelch opposition and spread terror.



Figure 1: Fidel Castro after his arrest following the 26 of July 1953 attack on the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba

And yet, Batista forces in that remote outpost fought back and defeated Fidel and his ragtag band of revolutionaries. Fidel, who stayed safely behind during the attack, was also protected after his arrest and apprehension by the Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba, Mons. Enrique Pérez Serantes. Fidel and the members of his band were rounded up, tried, and convicted. Fidel's failed legal defense of himself at his trial on October 16, 1953, became a major revolutionary document, *History will absolve me*. While in prison, Fidel accused his wife Mirta Diaz-Balart, who he abandoned along with their infant son, of collaborating with the dictator's Internal Ministry. Mirta would be forced to divorce Fidel.[5]

Fidel Castro in Prison (1953-1955)

Interestingly, before the Moncada Barracks attack, Fidel visited Batista at his palatial home at least twice. On one occasion, accompanied by his brother-in-law, Rafael Diaz-Balart, Fidel promised the dictator that he would support his government. Before that, when Fidel and Mirta went on their honeymoon in 1949 to the Bronx, New York, they both received a \$500 bill from Senator Batista as a wedding present.[5]

For his part, Batista, the supposedly vengeful dictator, released Fidel Castro and his men from prison in 1955 as a gesture of national reconciliation in a general amnesty release. Fidel and his men had been treated exceptionally well. While Fidel and his conspirators were sentenced by the presiding judge specifically to be incarcerated in the dreaded old fortress prison of La Cabaña to serve his sentence of 15 years, the Cuban Minister of the Interior, Ramón Hermida, ordered them, instead, sent to the newest Modelo Prison on Isla de Pinos. There, they were classified as political prisoners, and rather than being treated harshly and inhumanely, they were treated with the same respect and special privileges that Batista gave to “political prisoners” at the time. As we shall see, when the tables were turned and Fidel was doing the incarcerating, things were totally different.

Yes, the Moncada assailants, who survived the attack and the immediate vengeful aftermath, were treated favorably with special privileges following their prosecution and conviction. In prison, Fidel and his conspirators were given books and magazines and allowed to keep subversive political literature, including books by Marx, Lenin, and other revolutionary subversives.[6]

While in the modern Modelo Prison, Fidel was influenced by works like Nikolai Ostrovski’s *How the Steel Was Tempered* and *The Secret of Soviet Strength* by Hewlett Johnson, the “Red Dean” of Canterbury, rather than by the more lengthy and soporific works of Marx and Lenin. Thus, Fidel had ample time to expand his authoritarian and collectivist sentiments and transform them into solid, communist ideology.

Populist Egalitarian or Inveterate Totalitarian?

Castro biographer, Robert E. Quirk, envisioned Fidel Castro, his writings, and speeches as being those of an idealist egalitarian who admired FDR’s New Deal and who only later, after the Revolution, pragmatically or for personal reasons, became a socialist. “Because,” wrote Quirk, “he was open to the moral, if not intellectual, appeal of Marxism.”[6]

Despite Quirk’s opinion about Fidel at this time, careful study of Fidel Castro’s pronouncements during his years in prison from 1953 to 1954 and his actions thereafter, from 1955 to 1958, reveal that the young autocratic revolutionary was scrupulously adding details to his elitist and authoritarian mentality and collectivist frame of mind. He was becoming a totalitarian, whether fascist or communist only time would tell, but by the 1950s, fascism was certainly on the decline, whereas communism was on the rise.

In addition to the works of communist authors, Fidel Castro treasured Benito Mussolini's volumes and avidly read the works of Spanish Falangist José Antonio Primo de Rivera, both of whom are said to be on the far-right side of the political spectrum. Let me explain.

Since the turbulent days of the early 1790s, when the Jacobins and Girondins held the raging debates at the National Convention during the French Revolution, the meaning of "right" and "left," dictated by the seating arrangement of the delegates, has changed considerably. At that time, it was moderate versus radical in the ideological political spectrum. Today, it supposedly separates liberal from conservative.

As Fidel's choice of political books demonstrates, collectivist writings appeal to authoritarians because birds of a feather flock together. All forms of authoritarianism and collectivism—whether national socialism (Nazism), communism, or the seemingly milder forms of corporativism and fascism—are, in reality, all nuances of the same ideology of the left side of the political spectrum, where the collective power of the state becomes all powerful and supreme over the individual.

On the other end of the spectrum, we find anarchy, the extreme condition of having no government at all, which occupies the far, extreme right. Imagine then, a horseshoe with an accentuated bend, the ends almost meeting at the extreme right and left. The gap, a narrow one, can be easily traversed from one side to the other by the extremisms of a police state on the one hand or rampant terrorism and chaos on the other hand. The end result is anarcho-tyranny. Anarchy, tyranny, or their confluence are neither conducive to economic prosperity nor political freedom.

In the stable middle of the horseshoe where the bend occurs, lay the blessings of constitutional rule like in the United States and which was the case, to some extent, in Cuba with the constitutions of 1901 and 1940. Restoration of the Constitution of 1940 was what Fidel promised the Cuban people, but never delivered, and never intended to deliver.

In the final analysis, whether Fidel's Marxism was inchoate between 1955 and 1958 or inveterate between 1959 and 1961 becomes moot. In the end, it does not matter how long he deceived the Cuban people. The reality was that he betrayed the Cuban people and did not reveal his Marxism-Leninism until he was fully entrenched in power with his state security apparatus equally and firmly in place. No matter how much the United States tried to appease him, tolerated his insults, or even forgave the nationalization of U.S. properties (that is, expropriation without compensation), in the end, Fidel turned to the Soviets. Deep inside, he had become, like Raúl and Che, a dedicated communist.[6,7]

Communism allows autocrats to maintain power over individual citizens. Fidel Castro needed communist tactics to seize and maintain power, and the communists needed a populist autocrat to accomplish their objectives. They worked hand in glove and wanted similar ends, that is, naked power in the form of totalitarianism and collectivism while crushing individual freedoms and the free enterprise system. It was a symbiotic relationship.

To camouflage his true intentions, Fidel allied himself to popular personalities and even democratic Cuban politicians as long as they were useful to him to make him more acceptable, to emanate, to effuse the aura of respectability he yearned for and desired. For example, there was Manuel Urrutia, who had been a judge voting favorably at the trial of the Granma survivors captured by Batista's soldiers, and Prime Minister José Miro Cardona, a former law professor at the University of Havana. Those two politicians were discarded once they were no longer needed. After Fidel took power, he forced Miro Cardona, who he had appointed as Prime Minister, out of office; and likewise, the good judge, Urrutia, out of the presidency. Fidel eventually assumed the duties and capacities of both of those offices. Before that, he allied with and accepted money from former foes, like Justo Carrillo and even mortal enemies like Pío Socarrás, in his quest for power. And he never kept any accounting of the monies received.[6,7]

The truth is the Cuban people did not know Fidel Castro, and what they (and the world) learned came mostly from the image Herbert Matthews created after he visited the Sierra Maestra and the articles he wrote for *The New York Times* as well as the photographs of Matthews and Castro jovially conversing in the Sierra Maestra.[8] Matthews' articles and photographs were faithfully reprinted in *Bohemia*, Cuba's popular and largest circulation weekly magazine. Until it was too late, Cuban and American major magazines and newspapers kept the Cuban people benighted about Fidel's true intentions, his past shenanigans, and authoritarian proclivities. The fact was Fidel had always been an autocrat, and he became more so as the years passed, although he was careful to conceal it from the Cuban people.[6,7]

Batista's and Castro's Prisons in Contrast

After the failure of the Moncada Barracks attack, their apprehension and imprisonment, Fidel Castro and his comrades were housed in the hospital wing of the Modelo Prison away from the common criminals. While there, Fidel was permitted to organize and conduct a school for his fellow insurgents where political economy, philosophy, and history were

taught. Not until the audacious prisoners insulted President Batista during an official state visit to the Isla de Pinos prison did the situation change, and their privileges were withdrawn. By then, Fidel and his prison conspirators had less than eight months left to spend in prison. Moreover, while incarcerated, Fidel's friends in the press and on the radio airwaves kept his name alive with the populace—friends like Luis Conte Agüero and José Pardo Llado, and in *Bohemia*, writers like Jorge Mañach and Ernesto Montaner as well as the magazine's influential chief editor, Miguel Angel Quevedo.[9]

And, of course, there was ex-communist Carlos Franqui, who helped Fidel Castro not only as a journalist but also as a radio broadcaster beginning in 1955 and later head of the clandestine *Radio Rebelde* from the Sierra Maestra. After the triumph of the Revolution, Franqui edited the official organ *Revolución*. All of these capable journalists would later see the light and be forced into exile.

In 1955, when Ramón Hermida, Batista's Minister of the Interior, found that Fidel was despondent in prison because of the breakup of his marriage to Mirta Balart, Hermida went to see young Castro to cheer him up. Fidel had learned that Mirta had a sinecure job in the Ministry, and Castro considered that not only an embarrassment but also an actual "betrayal." Hermida reassured Castro saying, "Don't be impatient. You're still a young man. Keep calm. Everything will pass." [6] What a difference from the way Castro's jails treated thousands of political prisoners! Could you imagine the sanguinary and dissolute Ramiro Valdés or José Abrantes or any of Fidel's henchmen in the Ministry of the Interior, visiting a prison cell to give hope and encouragement to a *gusano* (worm), serving time in Castro's jails after leading a counterrevolutionary insurrection?

As a contrast, let us cite two examples. Let us first mention the case of the 24-year-old, postal savings bank employee, Armando Valladares. In his prison memoirs, *Against All Hope*, Valladares described in graphic detail the brutal treatment, degradation, and suffering both he and his fellow dissidents experienced. Valladares was sentenced to twenty-two years in prison from 1959 to 1981, including a long stint in the Isle of Pines Modelo prison. His grueling account of communist inhumanity toward their fellow man is reminiscent of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's tale of survival and endurance in *The Gulag Archipelago*. Prior to his release from prison, Valladares had been confined to a wheelchair for months due to malnutrition and mistreatment in Fidel Castro's political prisons.[10]

Another example was the barbaric and ghastly treatment of Cuban physician, Oscar Elias Biscet, a prisoner of conscience who only protested human rights abuses in communist Cuba under the consolidated regime of

Fidel Castro. Biscet pleaded for Castro's communist regime to honor the United Nations Charter of Human Rights. He was thrown in jail after a sham trial in 1999. Requiring medical attention, he was denied necessary medical care, tortured, and kept in solitary confinement.[11] Dr. Biscet completed his sentence in 2002 (incarcerated from November 3, 1999 to October 31, 2002) only to be rearrested and incarcerated again on December 6, 2002, in another of Castro's waves of repression. In April 2003, Dr. Biscet was one of 75 dissidents given a 25-year prison sentence for engaging in what the regime called "an attempt to undermine the social order." [12] His brutal imprisonment continued but he remained unbroken until his release in 2011 when the Catholic Church negotiated his release along with 50 other dissidents.[13]

Fidel only served twenty months of his fifteen-year prison sentence. One of Fidel's compatriots, who served time with him and later followed him in the Granma expedition and the Sierra Maestra guerrilla war, was Mario Chanes de Armas. After assuming power, Fidel imprisoned Chanes, his former friend and comrade-in-arms, for counterrevolutionary activities. Chanes served thirty long years in prison from 1961 to 1991.[14] Following Joseph Stalin's example, in an attempt to revise history Fidel had Chanes' image erased from a photograph taken of them after their release from the Modelo Prison.

Fidel Castro Resumes the Revolution

After release, Castro and his circle of revolutionaries fled to Mexico, gathered forces, collected money and supplies, and planned the resurgent Revolution. They returned to Cuba on December 2, 1956, with an invasion force of eighty-three revolutionaries in the famous but disastrous Granma expedition that landed at Niquero in Oriente province after a seven-day journey at sea. Upon landing, they were strafed by Batista's air force, and of the original group, only twelve combatants survived in the harsh Sierra Maestra Mountains.[15]

Fidel previously rebuffed cooperation with the Revolutionary Directorate (RD). José Antonio Echeverría, RD leader and president of the Federation of University Students (FEU), even paid Fidel a visit in Mexico. But to Echeverría, it was clearly obvious that Fidel was obsessed with power and total control over the Revolution. Moreover, the RD leader noted that Castro's band was infiltrated with leftists, including the bohemian and radical Argentinean physician, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, and other known communists.[16]



Figure 2: Map of Cuba showing the location of the arrival of the rebels on the Granma expedition in late 1956 on the southern coast of Oriente province and the Sierra Maestra. The map also shows Che Guevara's and Camilo Cienfuegos' route towards Havana through Las Villas province, where the Battle of Santa Clara took place in conjunction with the Revolutionary Directorate rebels of the Escambray Mountains in December 1958



Figure 3: Fidel Castro with his 26 of July rebels in the Sierra Maestra, December 2, 1956

Fidel's followers also included many loyal women, who helped the Castro brothers in their quest for power. Vilma Espín, who became Raúl Castro's wife in 1959, remained a strong force in Cuba's communist regime as head of various women's groups, particularly the large Federation of Cuban Women. We already mentioned Melba Hernández and Haydée Santamaría, who participated in the Moncada Barracks attack. Later Melba, Haydée, and the Castro sisters, particularly Emma and Lidia, became cheerleaders for Fidel during his imprisonment, and afterwards helped him travel the long revolutionary road to power. They kept house for him, mended his clothes, sewed uniforms for Fidel and other rebels, and performed other chores women do in bourgeois homes. There was also Teresa Casuso, who helped Fidel in Mexico with the same chores and to some extent in Cuba after the Revolution.[17] Casuso assisted another woman, Celia Sánchez, who Fidel trusted completely. Celia took personal care of Fidel not only in the Sierra Maestra but also afterwards and wielded tremendous power in Cuba.[18] When she died of lung cancer on January 9, 1980, Fidel Castro received the most devastating blow of his life. He had sent her off to Switzerland and even to the mercy of his hated enemy, the United States, for medical treatment.

The only other time Fidel Castro ever looked equally defeated was after Cuba's debacle following the American invasion and liberation of Grenada in October 1983 under U.S. President Ronald Reagan. The incident deserves mention now.

In 1979, a Marxist regime led by Maurice Bishop, the New Jewel movement, came to power on the island nation of Grenada, but, under internal strife, had been overthrown by an even more radical faction led by hard-line Stalinists, Generals Bernard Coard and Hudson Austin. Those sanguinary rivals deposed Bishop and summarily executed him along with his loyal ministers.

With the Cold War still raging, the Cubans had been assisting their Marxist-Leninist brothers on Grenada with the construction of an offensive, military airport that would benefit both Havana and Moscow. Allowing the completion of that airport would not only be detrimental to the United States and her allies in the Western hemisphere but also would destabilize and threaten the security of Caribbean neighbors.[19]

Sensing an American invasion, Fidel Castro sent a small military contingent, led by Colonel Pedro Tortoló Comas, to reinforce Cuban workers stationed there. Indeed, not only did President Reagan feel that interAmerican security in the Caribbean was threatened but also the lives of American medical students studying in Grenada were endangered. So the U.S. acted, and American armed forces invaded Grenada. Fidel Castro

ordered his troops to fight to the last man. Twenty-four Cubans did, but most did not. Instead, hundreds in the Cuban military contingent surrendered, many without firing a shot. Following the successful American invasion, order and constitutional rule were restored on the island. Cuban transport aircraft carried twenty-four coffins, containing the bodies of the Cuban personnel who had resisted the invasion, back to Havana. More than seven hundred Cubans, who were supposed to have died in defense of the Revolution, were also sent back to Havana. Although they were publicly received as returning heroes, later the officers and military personnel, who had failed to resist the invasion, were punished and purged for their refusal to die for Fidel Castro. Colonel Tortoló was demoted to private and temporarily lost to history after he was sent to Angola to fight Jonas Savimbi.[20] It should be noted that thousands of Cuban troops deserted while in Angola. In fact, several Cubans joined UNITA and freedom fighter Jonas Savimbi while in Angola. Tortoló survived and eventually returned to Cuba, where he was last confirmed driving a taxi in Havana.[21]

CHAPTER 2

FAURE CHOMÓN AND THE 13TH OF MARCH REVOLUTIONARY DIRECTORATE

Sancti Spiritus (the city where I was born) and the surrounding region, principally in the Escambray Mountains, have been traditionally hot beds for revolution that rebels used effectively for guerrilla warfare.

In 1952, Fulgencio Batista carried out a successful coup d'état and became dictator. Although subsequently he was elected president, he was despised by the intelligentsia and not considered the legitimate head of the Cuban Republic because he had violated the 1940 Cuban constitution. Nevertheless, at first, the common people supported him because he had been the man, who in the late 1930s and 1940s, had brought peace, tranquility, and prosperity to the island, not to mention constitutional government.[1]

But on July 26, 1953, a day that was immortalized as the name of their rebel movement, Fidel and Raúl Castro ushered in the insurrection by attacking the military Moncada Barracks near Santiago de Cuba in Oriente province.

The Presidential Palace Attack

On March 13, 1957, a second group of rebels led a celebrated and even more intrepid (although also suicidal) attack on the Presidential Palace in Havana in an attempt to decapitate the government, “striking at the top,” by killing Batista.[2]

The Presidential Palace attack was planned by the leadership of the Revolutionary Directorate (RD; *Directorio Revolucionario*, or simply, the *Directorio*)—a fiercely anti-communist student group, nationalistic, democratic and middle class—and the Auténtico organization, one of the major political parties in Cuba prior to the 1952 Batista coup led by ex-president Carlos Prío Socarrás. The Auténticos provided money and arms for the assault. The RD provided the zeal and most of the men who carried out the operation.

The attack was planned in February, only weeks prior to the event. Eighty men were supposed to participate in the attack. By March 9, there were 50 men in an apartment house in Havana preparing and waiting for the day of the assault.

The main RD organizers included José Antonio Echeverría, the well-like, gregarious student leader and head of the RD, who was to seize a Havana radio station during the attack to broadcast the death of Batista; Fructuoso Rodríguez, secretary general of the RD; and Faure Chomón, military second in command.

The Auténtico organizers soon became de facto RD members after a falling out with Prio Socarrás. Be that as it may, they were Menelao Mora and Carlos Gutiérrez Menoyo (the older brother of Eloy Gutiérrez Menoyo, later to become RD and *Segundo Frente* [“Second Front” of the Escambray] comandante, respectively). Military command was assigned to Carlos Gutiérrez Menoyo because of his experience in the Spanish Civil War and Faure Chomón served as second in command.[2]

So it was on March 13, 1957, that the RD received immediate but fleeting notoriety when it launched the heroic and valiant attack against Batista’s ornate palatial fortress in Havana, the Presidential Palace.



Figure 4: The Presidential Palace in Habana Centro, now the site of the Museum of the Revolution, January 7, 2009

The assault included virtually the entire leadership of the Havana underground group. Their car procession stopped in front of the lavishly built but well-guarded and massive edifice. The student rebels quickly disembarked and announced their arrival with a hail of bullets against the guards posted outside the palace.



Figure 5: Presidential Palace attack in Havana by the Revolutionary Directorate, March 13, 1957

Batista's forces returned fire and a number of combatants fell in the raid. Many of the raiders who managed to enter the palace were killed or wounded as they ran amidst the hallways, salons, and meeting rooms frantically searching for Batista and his second-floor office. But the insurgents did not get beyond the second floor of the Presidential Palace because of a metallic grid impeding their advance. Yet at least one assailant made it all the way to the Cuban president's office. But from that point forward the accounts differ.

One version of events relates that as the student came face to face with the dictator, Batista stepped back from his desk and the student, now out of bullets, pulled the pin from his grenade and threw it at Batista. When the grenade failed to go off, Batista turned and escaped through an elevator behind his office.

The most accepted version relates that just moments before the student arrived on the second floor, Batista had exited his office via an elevator. Grenades were tossed into his office accompanied by gunfire. But Batista had gone up to the third floor, which housed the presidential living quarters, and escaped.

Batista's soldiers fought back with renewed and determined ferocity, liquidating many of the remaining insurgents caught in the palace.

Historian Hugh Thomas had a dramatic description, which was probably one of the most accurate:

The first car arrived just before the palace at 3:20 p.m. Carlos Gutiérrez Menoyo and three men shot the traffic policeman and, firing sub-machine guns, ran to the main entrance. About twelve surprised soldiers who were there fell dead, were wounded or fled. Though delayed by traffic, often a snag in street fighting in the twentieth century, the two other vehicles in the first wave arrived safely, but they were fired on from many quarters, including by a 0.30-calibre machine-gun on the church of San Angel. The men from the cars of the first wave ran to the palace; perhaps ten were shot down en route, but a group of nine men led by Menelao Mora reached the palace and quickly made their way up to the second floor of the palace on its left wing. Others kept on the ground floor. Carlos Gutiérrez Menoyo, with four men, was on the left wing and destroyed the telephone switchboard with a grenade. They arrived at Batista's dining-room, and shot their way into the presidential offices, throwing grenades ahead of them and killing two men by Batista's desk. Not finding Batista, they realized that he had gone up to the 'presidential suite' on the next floor. Unfortunately for them they could not find the staircase upwards, though they had got from Prio careful plans of the palace.[3]

Batista was said to have been leading the defense of the palace from the top floor where machine guns had been placed. The motorcade of the second wave of insurgents never made it to the palace. By this time, soldiers had begun to encircle the palace and army tanks had been mobilized to protect the perimeter.

A large segment of the leadership of the Revolutionary Directorate was lost that day in the ill-fated assault, including José Antonio Echeverría. At the time of the Presidential Palace attack, Echeverría seized a nearby radio station as planned. From CMQ, *Radio Reloj*, he broadcast that the revolution had begun and mistakenly announced that the *Directorio* had taken the Presidential Palace and Batista had been executed. He was, of course, in error. His radio message was abruptly cut off and little of the message had even been aired. After Echeverría left the radio station, police intercepted his vehicle at the intersection of Jovellar and L Street in the

Vedado district of Havana as he drove toward the university. In the midst of the gun battle that ensued, Echeverría stepped out of his car and was fatally shot by police. His bloodied body was dramatically photographed as it lay in the street where he fell.[4]

Several RD members ran through neighborhoods surrounding the Presidential Palace looking for a safe haven and trying to evade Batista's police who were following close behind. In the chaos and confusion that followed, Pelayo Cuervo Navarro, an ex-Senator of the Ortodoxo Party who was not associated with the RD action, was assassinated presumably by police.

Menelao Mora and military commander Carlos Gutiérrez Menoyo were among the dead. They either fell fighting on the marble staircase of the Presidential Palace or in the streets of Havana.



Figure 6: Havana police officers patrolling the street with automatic weapons after the Presidential Palace attack, March 13, 1957

Forty-two revolutionaries participated in the Presidential Palace attack and thirty-five of them perished. Five Batistiano soldiers (that is, soldiers in Batista's armed forces, *casquitos* for "little helmets") were also killed. Consequently, of the group storming the Presidential Palace, only a few of the first wave of assailants survived the attack. Faure Chomón was one of them and my family came to know him intimately because of events that were to follow.

Historian Hugh Thomas indicated that Batista had received intelligence about the impending attack and had moved troops near the Presidential Palace.[5] That explains why army tanks surrounded the palace in a matter of minutes. Batista did not know the date for the attack or that the attack would take place in daylight. Thomas surmised a bit about the intelligence given the fact that over 80 combatants and other supporters, a significant number, were involved in the operation. I now tend to agree with him, but I have no proof. To my knowledge, Estéban Ventura, renowned Havana district police chief at the time, never revealed any such source.

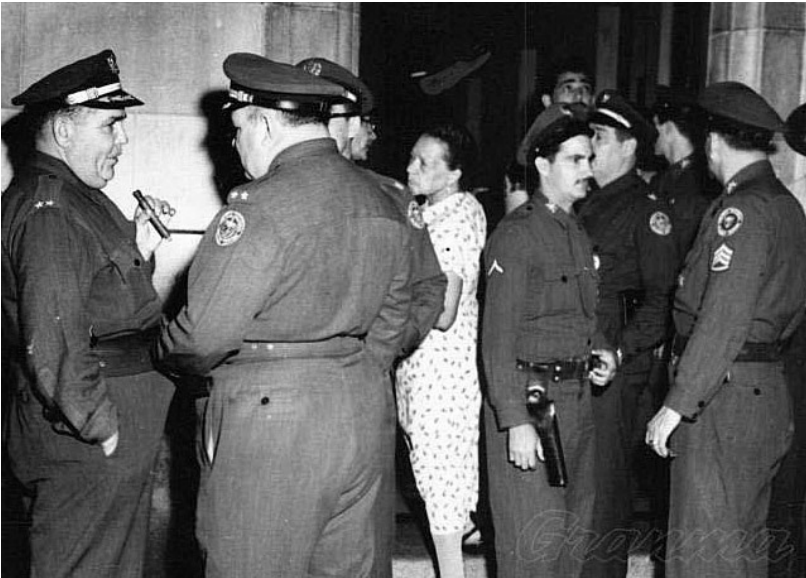


Figure 7: Cuban police at the site of the Humboldt 7 massacre, April 20, 1957. Juan Manuel Miralles

Four RD combatants who survived the attack took refuge at an address in Havana that is duly noted in the annals of Cuban history, Humboldt 7. Fructuoso Rodríguez, Juan Pedro Carbó, Joe Westbrook, and José Machado hid at that fateful address for a few weeks. On April 20, Marcos Rodríguez, a young communist informant, betrayed them by tipping off Batista's security forces.[6] The police pursued, found, and shot the four RD members as they tried to escape. Juan Pedro Carbó was shot in the apartment hallway. Joe Westbrook was shot as he fled to another apartment. José Machado and Fructuoso Rodríguez jumped from a window and were

machine-gunned on the street as they hit the ground. Later in this chapter, we will return to the perfidy of Marcos Rodríguez, the informant (*chivato*), and recount what eventually became of him.

The popular reaction to the Presidential Palace attack was generally negative from all segments of the population and condemned by most civic groups throughout Cuba. After all, the attack failed and forty people died in the streets of Havana. Batista erroneously blamed the attack on the communists, which helped him politically with the people. In fact, both the Cuban Communist Party (PSP, *Partido Socialista Popular*) and the 26th of July Movement condemned the attack. From his safe hideout in the Sierra Maestra Mountains, Fidel hypocritically denounced the attack as an act of urban terrorism that caused “a useless spilling of blood.”[7]

Fidel Castro benefited the most from the failed attack for numerous reasons. First, because the attack failed and was subsequently denounced by him, it made him look like a more reasonable and moderate leader. Second, the failed attack eliminated most of the RD leadership, including Echeverría and Fructuoso Rodríguez, the two most charismatic leaders of the RD.[5]

A Sierra Maestra veteran recalled that Fidel gloated after hearing the news of Echeverría’s death. The serious RD leader who possessed the charisma and intellect to deal with Fidel on an equal footing and who had posed a serious threat to his leadership was now dead and out of the picture. Fidel Castro’s rivals had been eliminated.[7]

Had the attack succeeded, it could possibly have prevented Fidel from reaching power and establishing the communist dictatorship that continues today—a dictatorship that has caused so much privation and suffering for the Cuban people and the death of more than 100,000 victims of Cuban communism.[8-10]

Quirk concurred that had the attack succeeded, it would have made it difficult for Fidel Castro to reach power. He wrote, “Fidel Castro must have been relieved that the plot had failed. Thereafter no new student leader appeared that could deal with him as an equal. Had the attack succeeded... there would have been no place for him or the July 26th Movement.”[7]

As a result of the failed assault on the Presidential Palace, the freedom ideology of the Revolutionary Directorate counterbalancing the lurking communism of the 26th of July Movement suffered a severe blow, and tragically determined which movement would prevail after the triumph of the Revolution.

Two Major Revolutionary Fronts Fighting Batista

After the failed assault on the Presidential Palace, the Revolution continued with two fronts waging war against Batista. Fidel Castro's group in the Sierra Maestra Mountains included communists, such as Che Guevara and Raúl Castro, and fought desultory guerrilla warfare in that very isolated, rural and mountainous area of eastern Cuba.

By contrast, the RD or 13th of March Movement was centered in the two urban cities of Havana and Sancti Spiritus and used extensive underground and urban guerrilla tactics to fight in major cities. No communists were allowed in this group. The RD also had a rural guerrilla front in the Escambray Mountains under Comandante Rolando Cubela, who came to be second in command in the entire movement.

My parents became involved in the Revolutionary Directorate through my father's connections in the Masonic Lodge in Sancti Spiritus. He was a Mason like many of his closest, professional friends; and he and my mother became RD members (*dirigentes*) in the urban underground of the 13th of March Movement in Sancti Spiritus.[11]



Figure 8: Members of the 13th of March Revolutionary Directorate (RD) in the Escambray Front against Batista (1958), including the author's uncle, Julio Martínez (center). Author's private collection

Nevertheless, *Fidelistas* (that is, supporters or followers of Fidel Castro and his 26th of July Movement) probably outnumbered the RD in our town as they did elsewhere in Cuba because of the popularity created by Fidel's favorable and glowing media coverage, which amounted to