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Cuban Revolutionaries and the Caribbean Basin: An Introduction

It is hard to overstate the impact of Fidel Castro's 26th of July Movement's triumphant march into Havana in January 1959. The Cuban Revolution – launched less than three years earlier by a small group of young social activists with virtually no military experience – created a sense of optimism and possibility throughout the world. The exhilaration and hope that emanated from this military victory had an impact everywhere, but the way this Revolution would dramatically alter the course of history in its own neighborhood is the subject here. Within a few years there were armed revolutionary movements in virtually every country in Latin America and the Caribbean (and also in many other countries and regions, including the United States) that were modeling their attempts at radical societal transformation on Che Guevara's *foquismo*.

Foquismo or "foco theory" is the name given to the revolutionary strategy of Ernesto "Che" Guevara, who proposed that revolutionary activists should move to immediately launch a guerrilla war on regular armies in countries with high levels of rural poverty and repressive states. The foco theory makes the claim that revolutionary guerrillas could successfully leverage their strategic advantages by appealing to oppressed *campesinos*,[1] and carrying out acts of sabotage on regular armies in remote regions of poor countries where regular armies would be unfamiliar with the terrain. These foquista movements – with their multitude of

[1] Campesinos are poor people who are engaged in agricultural work. This Spanish term literally means "rural dweller," but it only applies to men and women who are poor, and of low social status.

origins – evolved over decades in much of the Caribbean. This challenge to traditional elites and US hegemony eventually led to state terrorism in much of the region, and outright civil war in a few cases. These conflicts – especially the Caribbean revolutions – to a large extent defined the Cold War in this hemisphere. Without understanding these diverse armed revolutionary movements, we cannot fully understand social movements or even national politics in Latin America today. The generation that took up arms to challenge social injustice in the decades after the Cuban Revolution is *the* generation that is most represented in the political power structure today. New Social Movements have embraced the iconic representations of their revolutionary predecessors and have defined new militancies in relation to their parents' generation. We are now at the stage of history when it is important to revisit the history of armed struggle in the Caribbean Basin during the Cold War. Many of the social problems and inequalities that inspired these movements have persisted into the present. Guerrilla movements have made or are making the transition to democratic political parties, and many former revolutionaries now carry significant influence in the region. To understand and evaluate the "Left" in Latin America today, we must understand its origins and early experiences.

THE CARIBBEAN BASIN

Defining the "Caribbean" as a bounded geopolitical region can be a complicated and fraught endeavor. Typically the Caribbean is described in terms of geographical, historical, and cultural patterns, but the contours of these boundaries are fluid. For the purposes of this book we are looking at the islands of the Caribbean, along with Central America and the South American countries with Caribbean coastlines that share a common Spanish colonial past, as well as a defined Hispano-Caribbean culture. The case studies included in this volume are Cuba, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Colombia, and Puerto Rico. This does not include every country that had an armed revolutionary insurgency in the region. Most notably we have excluded Mexico and Venezuela. These are two of the largest countries in the region, but they both had relatively minor armed revolutionary movements during this time.

One of the reasons why Mexico had relatively less significant Cold War–era armed movements is that the Mexican Revolution predates the Cold War by one generation. The Mexican Revolution, which began as

a popular armed uprising in 1910 was fought for more than a decade and was one of the bloodiest civil conflicts in the region's history. More than 1 million people died during the armed phase of the Mexican Revolution, and many more were forcibly displaced by the conflict. The Mexican Revolution eventually resulted in a very progressive constitution (1917), and some redistribution of wealth and power. So by the mid-1950s, Mexicans already had some of the concessions that Cold War revolutionaries were fighting for elsewhere, and there was also a level of "war fatigue" that still impacted Mexican politics. Despite this, several less impactful armed movements occurred in Mexico during the Cold War, and the Mexican ("revolutionary") government violently repressed social justice activists on several occasions.[2] Nevertheless, the Mexican case is still quite distinct from the other cases here.

This region has historically been a crossroads of international geopolitical competition. It became a focal point of the "hot" manifestations of the Cold War after the Cuban Revolution of 1959.

Spanish Colonialism in the Caribbean

The Caribbean Basin was the center point for European competition and war for the better part of the Spanish colonial era. Because it was the central gateway to all of the Americas, control over this region was strategically and economically key. This set up the Caribbean as the physical space for intense military and economic competition among the European powers between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Consequently Spain was forced to cede control of several possessions in the region, and the enduring influence of British, Dutch, and French colonialism can still be felt today, primarily in the legacy of African slavery.

The Caribbean Basin held comparatively less mineral wealth, and its strategic and military importance made it economically distinct from the rest of Spanish America. African slaves were used to build an agricultural

[2] The most notable example of this was the massacre at the Tlatelolco "Plaza de las Tres Culturas." On October 2, 1968, thousands of high school and college students converged on the plaza in Mexico City to protest. While they were peacefully assembled listening to a series of political speeches by activists, the Mexican armed forces opened fire on the protesters. Between 300 and 400 people were shot, and more than 1,000 were arrested. The massacre occurred just ten days before the opening of the Olympics, and it is believed that the Mexican government feared embarrassment by social mobilization and protest in front of the international press corps.

basis for colonization in the region, and Caribbean ports became the hub of the Atlantic slave trade.

The complex legacy of the Caribbean as a military outpost and a central nucleus of the slave trade ensured that the region had more geopolitical significance than one might expect, and it also established a precedent for brutality and exploitation that is not insignificant.

Independence and the Modern Era in the Caribbean

The Caribbean Basin was the first part of the Americas to be colonized by Spain, and Spanish colonization lasted until almost the end of the nineteenth century for most of the region as well (and other European colonies endured well into the middle of the twentieth century). This meant that most of this region was colonized for at least 100 years longer than anywhere else in the Americas. When independence did finally come to the Spanish Caribbean islands, it was only after the United States entered the Spanish-American War. Consequently one form of colonization was essentially replaced with another. Although the mainland Caribbean countries of Central and South America did not endure the humiliation of official US protectionism, they were subject to a similar US worldview, which resulted in frequent US intervention, including direct military intervention and occupation in some cases.

The United States acknowledged the geopolitical unity of the Caribbean Basin in the context of the Cold War with Ronald Reagan's Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI) in the 1980s. The CBI was designed to give preferential tariffs and terms of trade to Caribbean countries (including Central and South American countries with Caribbean coastlines) that were openly anti-communist and explicitly aligned with US interests in the Cold War. To further these aims, Ronald Reagan signed into law the Caribbean Basin Economic Recovery Act in August 1983. The CBI defined the region being examined here in geopolitical terms, and it was an acknowledgment of the US perspective on the primacy of the region's strategic importance in the Cold War.

THE CUBAN REVOLUTION

Why Cuba?

Cuba's history is in many ways unique in Latin America. It was among the first places in the New World to be colonized by the Spanish. The first

permanent Spanish settlement was established in what is today Havana by 1514. The island served as a laboratory for colonization in the Americas, often experiencing the worst of Spanish conquest and governance before these strategies and policies were abandoned for more reasonable and less destructive tactics elsewhere. There was little mineral wealth but the large island colony was always of primary strategic and military importance in the contested terrain of the Caribbean. Cuba was large enough to make both agriculture and African slavery profitable. In many ways it was the front door to the New World, and it was protected with a ferocity that was unparalleled in the Spanish Empire.

The Haitian slave rebellion and Revolution (1791–1804) provided an impetus for a rapid expansion of the slave trade in Cuba, as the plantation economy (and the slave trade) collapsed in neighboring Hispaniola (today Haiti and the Dominican Republic). The Cuban colony experienced a large influx of slaves, which accompanied the increased profitability of slave trading and sugar production that resulted from the decline in regional competition. It is notable that Cuba experienced growth in slave trading and an increase in the Afro-descendant population at precisely the same time that the slave trade was in decline elsewhere. In addition the Haitian Revolution, and the slave uprising that it evoked, made independence from Spain unattractive to Spanish Creole elites in the early nineteenth century. Consequently Cuba's independence from Spain was delayed for almost a full century after the rest of the empire had collapsed. Cuba, therefore, had a much longer period of direct colonial rule than anywhere else in the Americas.

José Martí – an important contributor to the intellectual canon of Latin America – promulgated a revolutionary independence movement in 1895 (which was ironically planned and funded from Martí's exile in the United States), but he was martyred in the early days of fighting. The first Cuban Revolution was then effectively hijacked by the United States in 1898. After three years of heavy fighting, the United States declared war on Spain and entered Cuba with a fair amount of Cuban support. The alliance between Cuban and American forces meant quick victory over the Spanish after only ten weeks. Subsequently the United States negotiated a peace with Spain (the Treaty of Paris) that did not include Cuban negotiators and did not consider Cuban nationalist interests. The United States took several Spanish colonies (e.g., Puerto Rico and Guam) and established Cuba as a "protectorate." Hopes for Cuban independence dimmed after the United States included the Platt Amendment in the new Cuban Constitution in 1902, giving the United

States the right to intervene militarily in the island nation whenever US interests were deemed to be at stake. The US military occupied Cuba between 1898 and 1902, and again between 1906 and 1908. Marines landed again in 1912 and in 1917 to protect US property and interests. Cuban independence was extraordinarily compromised by US economic and political domination of the island. Cuban reliance on sugar (which was refined and sold almost exclusively by American companies) increased dramatically in the first half of the twentieth century. And sugar had (and has) a powerful historical association with colonialism and slavery. By the time of the Cold War, *anti-yanqui* sentiment was peaking in Cuba.

Why Fidel?

Fidel Castro was undoubtedly one of the most influential men of the twentieth century. He was born into an elite land-owning family as the illegitimate child of a wealthy Spanish sugar planter and his household servant. His parents eventually married, and Fidel Castro was baptized and formally recognized by his father when he was eight years old. Castro attended the University of Havana where he studied law and became a student leader, which thrust him onto the national political stage. He was active in the Cuban *Ortodoxo* party and present when the leader of the party, Eddie Chibas, committed suicide in 1951. This dramatic event combined with increasing and overt government corruption created a legitimacy crisis. Political morale was already compromised when Fulgencio Batista staged a military coup in 1952 and canceled scheduled elections. Castro initially tried to use his legal training to force Batista to step down. When these attempts proved unsuccessful, Castro conspired with other disaffected political allies to launch an armed insurrection.

Castro formed a group that attacked the Moncada military barracks on July 26, 1953. The attack was a failure and Castro was arrested soon after and put on trial, where he famously declared to a national audience that "history would absolve [him]." He, along with several other comrades from his movement, now called the "26th of July Movement," were held for almost two years. In 1955 Batista came to believe that an amnesty for the popular political prisoners would bolster his own failing legitimacy. Castro, along with his brother Raul and several other members of the 26th of July Movement were released from prison and left Cuba for Mexico later that year. In Mexico they met other Cuban and Latin American dissidents including Ernesto Che Guevara, an Argentine doctor

and political activist. The 26th of July Movement continued to organize and gain followers inside of Cuba, and Castro and the other revolutionaries in Mexico gained some (minimal) training in guerrilla warfare, raised funds, and worked on building connections with other dissident groups inside Cuba.

In December 1956 Castro and his guerrilla foco crash-landed their yacht, *The Granma*, in a mangrove swamp. Batista's troops were waiting for them, and only nineteen of the original eighty-two guerrilla fighters survived the ambush by the Cuban National Guard. From the nearby Sierra Maestra, this small guerrilla foco launched its guerrilla offensive by recruiting new members within the poorest and most remote regions of the country.

Guerrilla Warfare

The strategy of the guerrilla foco was both pragmatic and novel. Although Guevara was well versed in Marxist/Leninist/Maoist theory and strategy, the Cuban revolutionaries forged their own path and never sought direction from the Cuban Communist Party or the Soviet Union. Guevara was both the intellectual and the scribe for the Revolution, but most historians believe that the strategy of guerrilla warfare (or foquismo) was developed in concert between Fidel and Che, as he became known.[3] According to Guevara in the widely published revolutionary manual *Guerrilla Warfare*, the "fundamental lessons" of the Cuban military-revolutionary experience were

(1) Popular forces can win a war against the army.
(2) It is not necessary to wait until all conditions for making revolution exist; the insurrection can create them.
(3) In underdeveloped America, the countryside is the ideal theater for armed insurrection.[4]

Guevara believed and promoted the idea that there was only one necessary objective precondition for revolution, and this was absolute poverty (*miseria*). And there was one necessary subjective precondition – that

[3] "Che" is a common term of endearment or familiarity used between Argentines, particularly boys and men – it is akin to "buddy" or "man." Because Guevara used this term (which is not commonly used outside of Argentina), he became known among his Cuban comrades as "Che" or "El Che."
[4] Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 47.

was, absolute faith in the first lesson of the Cuban Revolution – victory (of the "popular forces" over the conventional army) is possible or even inevitable. Guevara also promoted the idea of a continental revolution in Latin America. He believed that pervasive poverty and injustice combined with US imperialism provided the perfect conditions for a revolution in all of Latin America.

The most important element of foquismo was the idea that the popular will for revolution could be created *by* a popular insurrection. This eliminated the need for potential revolutionaries to organize a revolutionary vanguard, or even to do massive peasant or worker organization and education campaigns. Guevara believed that a small guerrilla foco (nineteen combatants in the case of Cuba) would be sufficient to ignite a widespread insurrection through acts of sabotage and provocation. This foco would eventually (and inevitably) grow into a regular army capable of defeating the forces of oppression.

What this meant for social activists in other poor and less developed countries, particularly and explicitly the other countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, was that revolutionary armed struggle could be initiated immediately. And indeed especially after the publication of *Guerrilla Warfare* in 1960, this is what happened.

Unfortunately for the cause of social revolution, counterrevolutionary forces (including the US military) also read *Guerrilla Warfare* and the Cuban experience was never repeated. Moreover a certain mythology behind the idea of foquismo belied the reality of Cuba in the 1950s. In addition to Castro's foco, an organized resistance was already formed within the urban areas of Cuba before the landing of the *Granma*. The 26th of July Movement *did* have a well-organized base of support before it initiated its guerrilla strategy. And this organized popular opposition was able to support the guerrilla movement through real material contributions and substantial logistical assistance. Because the myth of the bearded men in the Sierra Maestra was crucial to the legitimacy of the new revolution, the contributions of an already organized resistance and urban insurrectionists were downplayed in the official propaganda of the Cuban Revolution.

The armed revolutionary movements that were inspired by the mythology of the Cuban Revolution, especially those in the Caribbean Basin, were of extraordinary importance in shaping Cold War politics in the region and in the world. Their stories are full of pathos and their experiences have shaped contemporary politics and provide an important context for understanding New Social Movements and the transitions to democracy that followed the Cold War in Latin America.

THE COLD WAR CONTEXT

Not only did the Cuban Revolution radicalize and inspire the Left, it also radicalized the anti-communist Right, both in Latin America and the United States. The timing was ripe then for this grand social rift, both within Cuban society and within the geopolitical dynamics of the region that became so quickly and neatly a major front of the Cold War.

Castro's ideological convictions in 1959 will perhaps forever be unclear. He (unlike Raul Castro and Che Guevara) had no prior affiliations with the Communist Party or other explicitly Marxist or pro-Soviet groups. He had an established history with liberal democratic politics. But he was certainly not unfamiliar with the whole range of Leftist ideology, and his commitment to social justice based on redistributive policies was also clear.

Castro was careful to be muted in his anti-Yankee sentiment before the 1959 victory, but as soon as he took power he unleashed his brand of extremely anti-American ideological rhetoric. Because of Cuba's neocolonial experience with the United States in the twentieth century, Castro's anti-Americanism was not only sincere but also popular (and pragmatic). His commitment to social justice and redistribution was resonant with a broad base of poor peasants and workers as well as with the middle class. Cuba's reliance on sugar exports and tourism (both controlled by US interests) produced fairly severe economic dislocations, especially among the rural poor and the seasonally unemployed sugar plantation workers. This meant that Castro's (and the Revolution's) anti-imperialist, anti-American sentiment was widely shared, and that redistributive policies were strongly supported by a large cross section of Cuban society. The leaders of Castro's revolutionary government also consolidated their power by arresting and executing opponents who were connected to the Batista regime, the police, and the National Guard, and by targeted repression of opposition elements within Cuban society. He encouraged the mass exodus of "counterrevolutionary" Cubans to Miami.[5]

Fidel very quickly embarked on a massive redistribution campaign, expropriating American-held property as well as the rural landholdings of Cuba's traditional landed elites, including his own properties and those of his family. He also launched a nationwide literacy campaign and reformed the Cuban educational system in a way that was explicitly

[5] Castro called the political and class enemies of the Revolution *gusanos* or "worms." He argued that they would have to leave to avoid the contamination of the Revolution.

designed to propagandize his own revolutionary message. All of this created a strong populist base of support for the Revolution, and it also alienated many in Cuba as well as in the United States. The United States broke off diplomatic relations in January 1961.

Between April 17 and April 19, 1961, the CIA trained and funded an army of Cuban exiles who invaded Cuba (at the Bay of Pigs) and unsuccessfully attempted to overthrow the popular Revolutionary government. The invading force surrendered on April 20. Most of the troops were tried in Cuba and then sent back to the United States.

In October 1962, a thirteen-day standoff between the Soviet Union and President John F. Kennedy's White House resulted in the Soviet Union's promise to withdraw its planned nuclear missile arsenal for Cuba, and in return the United States pledged not to launch another military invasion of Cuba (to refrain from attempting to militarily overthrow the Revolution). These tense negotiations between Russian prime minister Nikita Khrushchev and Kennedy placed Cuba, for a time at least, in the center of the Cold War and sealed the fate of the Cuban Revolution as a catalyst. On December 2, 1962, almost two years after the Revolution, Fidel Castro declared that he was a Marxist-Leninist, and that he would be one for the rest of his life.[6]

The explosion of optimism and expanded possibilities after 1959, and especially after the publication of *Guerrilla Warfare* meant that a broad range of populist political coalitions as well as traditional socialist and communist parties were inspired to take up arms in support of Guevara's revolutionary project. This in turn inspired economic elites, militaries, traditional dictators, and the United States to respond to the threat posed by Cuba, especially after the end of the second year.

The United States set out to prevent another Soviet beachhead in its "backyard," by channeling economic and military assistance to US-friendly anti-communist regimes. To some degree the establishment of

[6] When Castro made his famous speech in December 1961 declaring himself a Marxist-Leninist, this sparked a largely rhetorical debate among analysts and scholars about Castro's earlier intentions – had he been intentionally obscuring his commitment to communism? Or was he moved toward Marxism (pushed into the arms of the Soviet Union) by his experiences, particularly with regard to the United States, in the two years after the Revolution? While this debate can never be resolved, it does make sense to examine exactly what he said on December 2, 1961. In 1962 a pro-Cuba organization called "Fair Play for Cuba" examined the speech in an eighty-three-page pamphlet (published by Walter Lippmann) to contextualize Castro's bold admission. The pamphlet was scanned and placed on the web. The scanned pamphlet is available at www.walterlippmann.com/fc-12–02-1961.html.