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CHAPTER 1

Revolution Retold

What a Gender Lens Tells Us about the Cuban Insurrection

A photo by Spanish photojournalist Enrique Meneses portrays Fidel Castro reclining in a guerrilla camp at night, reading by candlelight. With the caption "Fidel Castro in the Sierra Maestra," he is framed as the subject of this photo. But what caught my eye and my imagination is the woman to his right, who sits beside him, head bowed, holding the candle for Fidel to read by. Who is she? Meneses does not tell us. In all likelihood, she is a bit actor who played a minor role in the insurrection. But without her and many more like her, Fidel would never have succeeded.

This book is, in part, a people's history of the Cuban insurrection.[1] The focus is principally but not exclusively upon women, whose history of activism has been acknowledged but remains largely unexplored.[2] Given the spotlight trained upon Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, and to a lesser extent other rebel leaders, a focus that includes rank and file women forces one off the literature's center stage to inquire about those who held the candle for Fidel to read by, smuggled messages down the mountain, planted bombs in theaters, or hid rebels in their home.[3] These are decidedly not the bearded rebels romanticized (or vilified) in the literature. Indeed, some guerrilla combatants were women. Such women combatants inform the post-1958 Cuban official historical narrative, the Cuban War Story central to the construction of the New Woman in the new revolutionary society.[4] But the attention to armed combatants – men and women alike – obscures two essential elements of the insurrection. First, as this study makes clear, insurrections are not only won or lost through bullets and battlefield heroics but through the more mundane tasks that women and lower-status men perform. Second, the Cuban War Story featuring guerrilla warfare obscures the battle for hearts and minds. The Castro-led July

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26 Movement (M-26-7) put considerable effort into this latter battle, and women were central as both strategists and gendered subjects. This foray into a women's history of the Cuban insurrection aims not only to right the past wrongs of women's exclusion, important as that is. Collecting and analyzing details on women rebels – leaders and rank and file alike – reveals new insights into how this insurrection was waged and won.

Along these lines, I consider gender to be a tactic of war, the effectiveness of which depends upon the successful exploitation of dominant notions of femininity and masculinity.[5] Femininity was deployed when women, less likely to arouse military suspicions, transported weapons under their skirts or in false pregnant bellies.[6] Gender was also deployed when rebels mobilized mothers of youths killed by the dictatorship to plead with the US ambassador. Castro likewise armed a women's platoon to signal rebel commitment to equality as well as women's contributions to the future revolutionary society. As gender is a key means through which power, and thus politics and conflict, is understood, gender furthermore structured hierarchies in Cuban politics. In this way, rebels used gender to represent President Fulgencio Batista as an abusive, predatory, and corrupt masculine figure, in sharp contrast to rebel idealized masculinity. Government soldiers, upon capture, suffered injuries to their masculine status, even if physically unharmed. Bearded rebels were such "real" men that their victory took on an air of inevitability.

Accordingly, this book is not only a *her* story of the Cuban insurrection. By focusing on previously unexamined narratives of women rebels and using gender as a category of analysis, I return to a well-researched war story and come away with new perspectives.[7] Following rebel histories, priorities, and tactics, I examine not only the war of bullets, but also the war of ideas. This gendered approach to the Cuban insurrection, then, attends to two interrelated theaters of war: the war of flesh and blood and the war for hearts and minds.[8] Wars are fought in a material sense on physical terrain – the war of "flesh and blood" – but also through symbols and ideas – the war for "hearts and minds." In the former, people fight and are wounded, kill and die, and militaries make tactical plans to maximize enemy losses. Wars are also fought on cultural terrain, and states and rebel armies often commit significant resources to win hearts and minds and construct consent.[9] In both theaters of war, gender differences are magnified, minimized, or otherwise reshaped to best address the perceived needs of militarization. Gender is thus part of war's arsenal, waged at the level of ideas in the struggle to attach meaning to actions, processes, and relations.[10]

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Much of what we know about the Cuban insurrection has been gleaned from what I refer to as the Cuban War Story – the dominant state-constructed narrative of how the Cuban insurrection was waged and won. As Sjoberg and Gentry note, "The best war story not only wins the war, it *is* the war."[11] Even beyond Cuba, too often the Cuban War Story *is* the war, as this particular narrative has been adopted with little critical reflection on the politics underpinning the repetitions and silences. This book engages the Cuban War Story, viewing it as one story among many.[12] This critical inquiry not only reveals new facets of the insurrection, but also of the post-1958 Cuban revolutionary state. In many ways, Cuba *is* its war story, and we learn much about Cuba through scrutinizing its war stories told and untold.

My agenda, then, is twofold: empirical and analytical. First, I document *what* women did and *how* they were (and were not) integrated into insurrection and militarism. Second, I analyze how gender was deployed tactically as well as how it operated as an organizing principle of the cultural constructs of war. This second approach is crucial in making sense of empirical findings. But a major impediment in the Latin American cases has been the relative lack of comprehensive information on how women contributed to and experienced political violence in the region. Despite some key works, we still know relatively little about how women engaged in, resisted, and were affected by the wars of flesh and blood in Latin America.[13] We know even less about gender and the wars for hearts and minds in the region. This book, then, provides a detailed account of women's contributions to the Cuban insurrection, an examination of how these new details challenge or build upon previous theories and narratives of war and Cuban politics, and a gendered analysis of war.

The empirical details of women and insurrection in twentieth-century Cuba are still relatively unexplored, with women rebels at once both present and absent in the literature.[14] That women participated in the insurrection is well known. The Cuban state has consistently celebrated those women among the rebel elite closest to Fidel. Thus, the Cuban War Story has hailed the four Heroines of the Revolution – Celia Sánchez, Vilma Espín, Haydée Santamaría, and Melba Hernández – along with the Marianas women's platoon. The literature has generally followed this narrative focus. In contrast, this book explores the diversity of women's activism against Batista's regime. In addition to introducing new information on well-known rebel women, I examine women's organizations that developed independently of Fidel's efforts and some women rebels who later fell out with the Castro government and were subsequently erased

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from the official war story. I also incorporate rebel women who were left out of the established Cuban War Story in a more benign fashion. Archives, memoirs, and Cuban print media spanning half a century contain a wealth of interviews with rank and file rebels and civilian supporters. Yet these have trickled out incrementally such that they have not significantly affected the dominant narrative focused on the bearded rebels engaging the enemy in the *Sierra*.[15] I collected Cuban women's rebel narratives from five decades of Cuban media, US declassified documents, archived interviews, memoirs, primary documents, and other material obtained during fieldwork, which cumulatively indicated that a diverse array of women were much more central to the effort than previously understood, particularly in the underground movement in the *llano* (plains, especially urban areas – as distinct from the *Sierra* or mountains).[16]

This retelling builds upon an important corrective to Cuba's political history concerning the *llano* underground, which was far more significant in the insurrection than previously recognized on or off the island.[17] Most scholarly accounts follow the dominant war story of Cuba's revolutionary government, which attributes rebel success to guerrilla warfare in the Sierra.[18] Julia Sweig aptly summarizes the revolution's "founding fathers' myth" that Che Guevara helped construct: "a handful of bearded rebels with a rural peasant base single-handedly took on and defeated a standing army, thereby overthrowing the dictator and bringing the revolutionaries to power."[19] After 1958, Castro discouraged "publicity concerning the underground exploits," the speculation for this being that it would "diminish the exclusive role he wished to attribute to his guerrilla troops, and to their inspired leader."[20]

Yet as Sweig documents, until the last eight months of the insurrection, the guerrillas had been "a virtual appendage of the July 26 Movement," rather than its vanguard, and most M-26-7 decisions regarding tactics, strategy, resource allocation, and political relations were made by "lesser known individuals from the urban underground" and not the guerrilla leaders in the Sierra.[21] Without the work of the *llano*, the rebel victory "would simply not have been possible."[22]

Fidel and the Sierra guerrillas ultimately led the insurrection and post-insurrection government partially by default, as *llano* leaders and competitors were killed off by Batista forces.[23] Thus, although Castro is typically cast as the undisputed leader of the anti-Batista movement, he did not emerge as such until the last eight months of the insurrection.[24] This guerrilla-centric focus of the official war story has also eclipsed the role of women, who were more active and prominent in the *llano*.

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A second corrective is also possible through the work of historians such as Lynn Stoner and Teresa Prados-Torreira, who establish that the 1950s insurrection and women's place in it relied upon experiences and popular narratives of Cuba's previous wars and rebellions.[25] In part, this occurred symbolically, as rebels used previous women's contributions, especially as memorialized by Independence leader, journalist, and poet José Martí, to legitimize women's activism and inspire Cubans to rebellion. But as I show, women also drew upon their own experiences from previous insurrectionary moments to build the 1950s movement. Thus, tactics developed earlier were applied to the 1950s insurrection, and some women active in Cuba's 1930s rebellion transferred their political expertise to the 1950s struggle, lending a sense of continuity as well as efficacy.

Another element of this book's retelling of the Cuban insurrection involves denaturalizing familiar war stories to reveal how accepted truths depend upon gender narratives going unnoticed.[26] This latter approach begins with the notion established particularly within the feminist international relations (IR) literature that war stories do political work. "Gendered ideologies (masculinization and feminization) that are naturalized," Spike Peterson explains, "camouflage interests, agendas, and politics" to legitimize and gain support for war and nation-building efforts.[27] This dynamic can be seen in the valorization of armed insurrection over political negotiations, and the sharp distinctions between the idealized masculinity attached to rebels and the femininity or debased masculinity attached to Batista armed forces. Gender analysis, then, reveals how interests and agendas are depoliticized "even as the identities and practices they mobilize profoundly affect politics."[28] I also chart how behaviors and characteristics considered masculine or feminine structure sociopolitical opportunities. Modern militaries are often "a focus for national bonding and patriotism, which cuts across differences."[29] In such cases, according to Nira Yuval-Davis, nations signify modernity by including women as equal members of the nation and incorporating "*all* members of the national collectivity ... at least symbolically, into the military."[30] This helps explain the rebel leadership's receptivity to women rebels, despite the strong 1950s gender norms that militated against them. Rebel leaders further legitimized and appealed to women through the retelling of popular narratives of Cuba's previous rebellions. But Mary Hawkesworth cautions that when such historical narratives "are institutionalized within founding myths, notions of the 'national family' reinscribe fathers' rule and mothers' obedience as natural, even as they create and legitimate new race and gender hierarchies," alerting us to the subtle processes through which male dominance was naturalized in post-1958

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Cuba.[31] This book, then, includes a gendered analysis of the founding myths of Revolutionary Cuba – the Cuban War Story – with a historical focus that incorporates prior foundational narratives.

Compared to gender, the manner in which ideologies of race structured hierarchies of power and naturalized inequalities in Cuba is more difficult to trace. This difficulty derives largely from the lack of references in primary sources regarding the race of most rank and file rebels (whereas their gender is virtually always noted), the nuanced spectrum of race and color terms in Cuba that complicate simplistic distinctions between Black and white, and a general silence concerning race in both rebel and Batista state narratives.[32] The Cuban revolutionary state, committed to social justice and inspired by independence hero Martí's call for a race-less Cuban identity, eliminated institutional forms of racial discrimination upon taking power.[33] But it dealt with ideological forms of racism largely by imposing an "official silence on race."[34] Given the Cuban state's control over media and scholarship on the island, little information on race and the insurrection remains, including the racial identities of rank and file rebels.

Building upon the above correctives, three main arguments and approaches are woven throughout this book. First, excavating women's multiple forms of participation is an effective means of capturing the more prosaic aspects of insurrection, including smaller-scale but multiple acts of rebellion and support upon which insurrections rely. Second, Castro and the rebel leadership placed greater emphasis on the war of ideas than is suggested in the literature and by the *foco* theory of guerrilla warfare associated with Che Guevara. Indeed, I argue that rebel success cannot be understood without attention to this war of ideas. Third, the rebels included gender as part of their arsenal, tactically deployed in the war of bullets and war of ideas. The M-26-7 rebels relied upon certain gendered logics that organized the way armed insurrection was interpreted, creating an alternative privileged masculinity. Although the revolution was officially committed to the liberation of women, gender continued to mark hierarchy during and after the insurrection. In the following pages, I examine each of these arguments in greater detail.

WOMEN REBELS: WHO WERE THEY AND WHAT DID THEY DO?

Stathis Kalyvas points to two gaps in the study of war. Social science research tends to ignore warfare itself, privileging instead "the study of social and political factors that are thought to affect the onset or

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termination of civil wars and revolutions."[35] Yet when warfare is examined closely, it is often reduced "to the exhaustive treatment of their military details – their tactics, techniques and firepower, while their political and social content is ignored."[36] This narrow focus extends to studies of the Cuban insurrection.[37] Post-1958 Cuba has produced reams of play-by-play accounts of the conflict, oriented toward guerrilla battles in the last two years of the anti-Batista movement. I move beyond the battlefields to incorporate a more holistic understanding of the day-to-day construction of the insurrection. A micro-level analysis with a gender lens, I propose, is key to better understanding armed insurrection, as it draws our attention to the more traditionally feminized, largely ignored, but still essential support tasks performed.[38]

In analyzing women's diverse contributions, I make several arguments. First, from 1952 to 1958, women participated primarily in the clandestine forces concentrated in the cities or *llano*, yet their contributions were later overshadowed by the intense focus on women guerrillas in the Sierra. Second, despite the Cuban representation of rebels as youths, many women were middle-aged and older, and often drew from experiences and skills honed from their activism in the 1930s. Third, though most women rebels were not armed, their work was at least as important to the actual war effort as women combatants' accomplishments in battle, despite the greater attention to the latter in the literature. Finally, rebel work was dangerous regardless of whether or not one carried a gun – a point that was instrumental in the eventual arming of women guerrillas.[39]

Certain Cuban women rebels hold a prominent place in the official Cuban War Story as well as independent research. Of the six founding members of what became M-26-7, two were women: Melba Hernández and Haydée Santamaría.[40] Two additional women, Celia Sánchez and Vilma Espín, became celebrated *llano* leaders who transferred to the Sierra. There are other rebel women who are well known in Cuba but less so elsewhere – including Teté Puebla, Pastorita Núñez, María Antonia Figueroa, Gloria Cuadras, Lidia Doce, and Clodomira Acosta. Furthermore, *Las Marianas*, the women's platoon, is notable not only for women's inclusion in combat but also for the attention they received in rebel and post-1958 state propaganda. Yet women clustered in the *llano* and in support roles barely register in the literature, which reflects the Cuban revolutionary equation that women's participation with gun in hand earned them their place as New Women in the New Society. [41]

Although I examine women combatants, it is a mistake to let guerrilla combat take analytical precedence over other forms of insurrectionary

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action. Not only does this misrepresent the insurrection, but it also ignores important rebel activity in which women played key parts. Here, I follow Cuban scholar Gladys Marel García-Pérez, who shifts attention from "the heroic and highly visible guerrilla *comandantes* to the many men and women who participated, typically in anonymity."[42] As rebel success did not depend exclusively on guns and combat, the *llano* underground and the active appeal for mass support are crucial aspects of the insurrectionary effort. In terms of danger, by which courage and thus masculine status are often measured, in both the *llano* and Sierra much of the effort spent by and danger posed to rebels occurred when evading the armed forces versus engaging in combat. *Llano* rebels and civilians often bore the brunt of the repression, compared to the less accessible guerrillas. Examination of the gendered distribution of danger has the effect of destabilizing old war stories.

A closer look at these women rebels has a similar destabilizing effect. A University of Havana study found nearly 30 percent were over 30 years old in 1952, indicating that by the insurrection's final year a significant proportion of women rebels were middle-aged and older.[43] This contrasts with the dominant representation of Cuban rebels as youths.[44] My own findings confirm this assessment, and the following chapters document the many contributions of middle-aged and older women to the insurrection.

Turning to women in guerrilla camps, a consensus in the literature places the Cuban guerrilla in the Sierra at roughly 5 percent women, most of whom formed the rearguard.[45] These numbers are low compared to estimates of women guerrillas in later Latin American conflicts, which range from 25 to 50 percent.[46] Barriers to women in the guerrilla include, "the structural constraint of women's roles in reproductive activities and traditional ideological constraints … that define women's roles."[47] Mady Segal's comparative study includes the threat level and the lack of alternatives to explain the proportion of women in combat – that is, greater threat to the general population and fewer options for civilians to escape violence are theorized to produce more women in combat.[48] Indeed, personal safety is an underappreciated factor in theorizing guerrilla growth, as the guerrilla can offer relative protection from government forces. In Cuba, many tried to join the guerrillas to escape persecution in cities and towns. Yet as Cuban rebel men were more likely to be suspected, harassed, and pursued by Batista's forces, evidence suggests they were more likely to escape to the Sierra. Unlike the later Nicaraguan and Salvadoran cases, women with young children did not flee to the guerrilla and featured

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rarely as Cuban rebels in the *llano*.[49] Most Cuban guerrilla women were single and childless or, less commonly, mothers of adult children.

Ideology is also a consideration in rebel men's openness to women's participation. Though not explicitly feminist, a basic normative commitment to women's equality complemented the M-26-7 effort to build a movement. Fidel Castro stressed social justice and inclusion of the formerly marginalized, and male leaders did not bar skilled and trustworthy women, though they routinely assigned women "safer" duties of lesser status and authority. Unusually, women were prominent in the inner circle of the Cuban insurgency, and Fidel placed considerable trust in certain women.[50]

Susan Eckstein argues that Castro's policies were ideologically consistent when they suited his pragmatic goals.[51] Indeed, there were pragmatic reasons to include women in the rebel underground and guerrilla.[52] First, repressive forces were less likely to suspect women, detain them for interrogation, or attack them with lethal force. Taking advantage of this gender dynamic, leaders valued women rebels for their ability to feign pregnancy, flirt with authorities, or distract guards in idle chitchat or maternal concerns.

Second, Cuban women rebels had better survival rates and received shorter prison sentences than men and so, alive and free, assumed greater responsibility and sometimes moved into positions vacated by men who were killed, imprisoned, or exiled. It was a significant advantage to M-26-7 to have skilled and trustworthy women ready to step in.[53] Women were excluded as armed combatants in the two most suicidal confrontations – the attack on the Moncada garrison and the Granma expedition. Women had volunteered and trained for these battles, but rebel gender discrimination benefitted M-26-7, in effect if not by design. Because the very high mortality rates of both actions took out male leaders and potential leaders, women rebels were key to the survival and regeneration of the movement. A similar impulse kept women out of many smaller-scale violent encounters with authorities. *Llano* recollections, for example, include instances in which rebel men, sensing impending violence, ordered rebel women to leave. More generally, women were less prone to confrontational behavior with authorities, preferring escape over heroic but deadly firefights.[54]

CUBAN HEARTS AND MINDS

From published accounts both on and off the island, we know much more about specific physical battles – ambush sites, mines laid, location of trenches, and other step-by-step details of how a battle unfolded – than

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we do about rebel efforts to appeal to and engage with the Cuban public. Walter Laqueur, historian of guerrilla warfare, glosses over all but the military phase of the Cuban insurrection, arguing there was no "incubation" period in which "the emphasis was on organization, propaganda and conspiracy," and that "not that much preparatory work [was] needed for launching an insurgency."[55] Hugh Thomas, in contrast, more accurately maintains that Castro saw Cuba's insurrection as "really a political campaign" and worked as hard at "seeking to influence opinion as he did as a guerrilla seeking territory."[56]

Recent military theories of counterinsurgency strategy have endeavored to redirect the single-minded focus on kill or capture techniques toward a focus on "the country's people and their belief in and support of their government," making the winning of hearts and minds the primary objective.[57] A similar analytical focus should extend to the study of insurgency. The rebels' success in winning popular support comprises a driving puzzle of the book. In addressing such gaps in the study and practice of rebellion and war, I attend closely to the battle of hearts and minds (also termed the war of ideas). I propose that gender analysis that is also alert to race, sexuality, class, and other means by which power is structured and given meaning confirms the importance of this aspect of successful revolutionary insurgency and provides key insights into how it is achieved. Such a focus is all the more important as revolutionary movements tend to concern themselves not only with military victory, but with cultural and ideological transformation as well.

Che Guevara's accounts of guerrilla warfare inspired thousands of future revolutionaries in Latin America and beyond.[58] But the *foco* theory developed from Che's approach downplayed symbolism, propaganda, and the long, arduous process of winning a war of ideas.[59] Instead, a small, dedicated band of guerrillas would challenge the state's legitimacy and monopoly on violence through its military exploits, generating its own publicity from which popular support would follow. Che famously described "the perennial example of the guerrilla, carrying out armed propaganda (… that is, the bullets of propaganda, of the battles won or lost – but fought – against the enemy). The great lesson of the invincibility of the guerrillas taking root in the dispossessed masses."[60] These battles, in theory, pressured the regime to increase repressive measures, radicalizing the masses and generating popular support for the guerrilla.[61]

Bolivian *campesinos*, however, did not welcome Che and his largely foreign army in 1967, as he "hurried to fight battles against the ruling oligarchy's army instead of patiently educating, wooing and organizing

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