Women and the Cuban Insurrection

Using gender analysis and focusing on previously unexamined testimonies of women rebels, political scientist Lorraine Bayard de Volo shatters the prevailing masculine narrative of the Cuban Revolution. Contrary to the Cuban War Story's mythology of an insurrection single-handedly won by bearded guerrillas, Bayard de Volo shows that revolutions are not won and lost only by bullets and battlefield heroics. Focusing on women's multiple forms of participation in the insurrection, especially those that occurred off the battlefield, such as smuggling messages, hiding weapons, and distributing propaganda, Bayard de Volo explores how both masculinity and femininity were deployed as tactics in the important though largely unexamined battle for the "hearts and minds" of the Cuban people. Drawing on extensive, rarely examined archives including interviews and oral histories, this author offers an entirely new interpretation of one of the Cold War's most significant events.

Lorraine Bayard de Volo is Chair and Associate Professor of Women and Gender Studies at the University of Colorado Boulder. Previously the director of the Latin American Studies Center at her university, her fieldwork in Cuba, Colombia, Mexico, Nicaragua, and the United States centers on gender and war, revolution, political and sexual violence, and social movements. She is author of *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender Identity Politics in Nicaragua, 1979–1999* (2001).

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How Gender Shaped Castro's Victory

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To Cory Riddle and Pierre Bayard de Volo

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Preface

Having lived in Nicaragua at the end of the Contra War and immediate postwar period, I am mindful of both the trauma that war inflicts and the fact that a full reckoning with the physical and psychological trauma of the Cuban insurrection, including the collateral damage inflicted by all sides, is missing from this book. The wounds of war were terribly fresh during my Nicaragua fieldwork in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and interviewing war victims, I was immersed in the details. One day, while we walked the steep path to her house, María told me how, as a teenager, she faced a terrible choice when the Somoza regime's National Guard attacked her village: which of her two children to grab as she fled. She left her newborn infant and fled with her two-year-old. To survive, she joined the guerrilla and carried her son on her back, along with a gun, through the mountains until he too died. Wars, even those waged by leftist rebels in the name of liberation, are reliably traumatic and brutal. Armed rebellion, by definition, entails killing. Suspected traitors are executed after summary judgments. "Collateral damage" is endemic, and people are killed in crossfire, sometimes by guerrilla bullets (errant or otherwise) or botched homemade bombs. The military murders villagers suspected of sharing food with guerrillas. Guerrillas fire on teenage military conscripts.

It is difficult to reconcile the gains to gender equality implied by women engaging in one of the most masculine of pursuits – war – with feminist anti-militarism's insistence that scholarship must "recognize the sheer corporeality of the terrain" upon which attacks and ambushes are laid by rebels and regime alike.[1] Without such recognition, research is complicit in the process of rendering invisible the suffering of war victims,

leaving them as disembodied statistics if they are counted at all. The corporeality of war does not render irrelevant women rebels' achievements, but it prompts the "sturdy suspicion of war" called for by feminist antimilitarism.[2] In the literature on the Cuban insurrection, including that on women rebels, with few exceptions the bloody reality of war and its long-term psychological costs are remote if not invisible. I have struggled against the sanitizing effects of the triumphal war story by seeking out and inserting details on collateral damage, regime repression, psychological trauma, sexual assault, summary executions, and the like. While not a full accounting, I hope there is enough here to engender a sturdy suspicion of this and all wars.

My research on Cuba began as part of a comparative project on gender, war, and peace processes in Latin America, supported by funding from the National Science Foundation and United States Institute of Peace, as well as from the University of Kansas. I conducted fieldwork in Cuba, Colombia, Nicaragua, and Mexico (Chiapas), gathering interviews, conducting participant observation, and searching archives, among other methods and sources. Measured by the volume of fresh details, the fieldwork and archival work were successful, almost too successful, and as I turned to the Cuban materials, I became convinced that an in-depth case study of conflict and militarization in that country was necessary before I could develop an effective comparative analysis across cases. I put the comparative project on hold to focus on Cuban conflict and militarization 1950–2000. Soon, the chapter devoted to the 1950s insurrection stretched to 130 single-spaced pages, at which point I began this book in earnest.

I have many people to thank for help on this long and winding road that is now a book. First, I would like to thank my two kids Theo and Shayne for providing so much love and entertainment between my first book and this one. Could I have finished this book sooner if I had managed more effectively to guard my time on the weekends and evenings from their needs and their diversions? Certainly, but I wouldn't have had it any other way.

This book is dedicated to the two adult men in my life. To my father, Pierre Bayard de Volo, who asked me every time he saw me, "When are you going to finish that book?" – thank you for all the reminders and for the love that inspired them. To my husband, Cory Riddle, thank you so much for your eternal patience and encouragement.

Very importantly, I also thank the Cubans who generously shared their memories and perspectives regarding the insurrection. Given the

conditions under which they agreed to be interviewed, I do not list their names but recognize my indebtedness to their contributions.

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Notes

1. Thobani (2001, 291).
2. Ruddick (1989, 138): "Peace requires a sturdy suspicion of violence, even in the best of causes."