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# THE **REVOLUTION**

# **ON BALANCE**

by Hugh Thomas

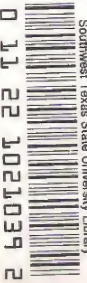
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# THE REVOLUTION ON BALANCE

by Hugh Thomas

The Cuban American National Foundation, Inc.  
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## THE REVOLUTION ON BALANCE

Cuba in the 1950s was a nation in limbo, halfway between being a rich country and a poor one. It was rich in the sense that its sugar had made a major contribution to the world's commerce, and to its stomach, for over a hundred years. Cuba had the technology and the sophistication needed to market an internationally sought after crop, namely sugar. Those skills had enabled Cuba to enjoy a good rail and road network and excellent international communications.

Cuba was, of course, also known for her cigars, made from a crop in a tiny stretch of Western Cuba which produces tobacco as much respected internationally as the wine grown on the Cote d'Or in Burgundy. There were also numerous cattle ranches and small farms producing winter vegetables for sale to the U.S. Eastern seaboard. The Cuban middle class was larger than that in most Latin American countries. Many of its members had been educated in the U.S. The Cuban peso was a strong currency and was interchangeable with the U.S. dollar. Relations with the U.S. were close and of long standing. There were still people alive who remembered how the U.S. had assisted Cuba's independence from Spain in the late 19th century.

The natural consequence was that the Cuban standard of living, measured by all the normal indices (doctors, cars, refrigerators, income per head) was among the highest in Latin America. In some department of life, such as, for example, numbers of televisions *per capita* the Cubans were in advance of some European countries. A lovely climate, attractive islands off-shore (so finely described in Hemingway's last novel, *Islands in the Stream*), a divinely beautiful sea, great forests, cities with colonial architecture fairly well preserved, charming and attractive easy-going people who appeared to have almost solved the problem of living in a multi-racial state, caused Cuba to seem in the 1950s a "paradise," as a doctor once put it to me nostalgically in Havana in 1962.

A "paradise"? Surely that cannot be true, I hear it being said. I put it like that since, though there were many serpents in this garden, the many charms really should not be forgotten. The inextinguishable appeal of Cubans and of the Cuban countryside still, also, exercise a spell upon visitors who take for a revolutionary achievement an indigenous part of the Cuban scene. I recall passing in 1969 an avenue of royal palms leading to a coffee farm in the company of a famous U.S. "liberal" editor,

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Hugh Thomas (Lord Thomas of Swynnerton), the noted historian, is currently chairman of the Center for Policy Studies in London. He served in the British Foreign Office from 1954-1957, taught at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, and was Professor of History at the University of Reading. Some of his books include: *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom* (1971) and *A History of the World* (1979).



who specially admired the achievement of the regime in planting such a successful row of trees. But those palms had been there for at least a hundred years.

The serpens in the garden were these: the Cuban sugar industry was quota-controlled, and so organized that the nominally independent sugar companies, U.S. or Cuban or Spanish as they might be, had virtually ceased to compete. The sugar business seemed already indeed like a bureaucratic department of state, rather than a part of the capitalist world. The Sugar Acts which called on the President formally to 'open' the year's harvest were, as it were, a prophecy of nationalization. Partly this bureaucratization was the fault of the restrictive and somewhat corrupt trade union organization which had climbed (not unlike Argentina's in Perón's days or even England's a little later) into a position of considerable power during the aftermath of the world depression of the nineteen thirties. The unions were powerful enough both to keep wages for those with regular work relatively high, even with unemployment, and to prevent cane-cutting machinery from being used on the island. Nor was Cuban sugar competitive enough to preserve its overwhelmingly important place in world markets, though the demand for that commodity was still greatly increasing (this failure was partly due to the capacity of all manner of new countries to produce their own sugar rather than to import it). The consequence was that, while (as the World Bank's perceptive report on Cuba in 1950 pointed out) the whole economy revolved around the price of sugar on the international exchange, the amount of sugar being produced in the 1950s was much the same as it was in the 1920s.

Some encouragement of a diversified agriculture had been given but the monoculture seemed likely to last a long time, with all the limitations imposed on commercial and foreign policy. True, the actual level of U.S. industrial investment in 1957 was smaller than it had been in the 1920s. The action of unions had made the country less appetizing for 'risk' capital, while a conscious policy of 'Cubanisation' by some proprietors had increased Cuba's own holdings. But the memory of the far greater U.S. political and economic dominance during the early part of the century (when Cuba was almost a U.S. dependency, more than an independent state) caused Cuban nationalism to be articulated in the shape of anti-Americanism held the more deeply among frustrated intellectuals because it was directed against so close a neighbour — country which had the insolence, as many Cuban intellectuals who were far from communist believed in their hearts to be the case, to consider itself a close friend too.

Further, though Cuba was well off statistically, the eye of the causal visitor suggested that the riches of the island were specially ill-divided. There was, for example, indisputedly a contrast between the arrangements for health and education in the cities and in the country. Corruption, strong for several hundred years under Spain, affected most political and commercial enterprises. In that respect Cuba's democratic politicians such as Dr. Grau San Martín or Dr. Carlos Prío behaved as discreditably as dictators such as Generals Machado or Batista. The judiciary, although some judges maintained independence, was also both politicized and corrupt. Though there was no landed nobility (as in some ways there still was in other countries of South America), the political life during independence since 1898 had never properly worked. Some fatal weakness affected everybody. In 1952 Batista's dictatorship, for instance, had been re-established with nobody willing enough, or determined enough, to fight for a democracy which was debilitated as well as corrupt. That old political life had also been dogged by a kind of gangsterism which, if it now seems mild in comparison with (and different in kind to) that of Italy or Guatemala today, nevertheless was enough, combined with the corruption, to render the body politic more like a victim of alcoholic overindulgence than a working enterprise. Little help to anyone was afforded by the Church of Rome, whose prestige was modest and seemed a largely foreign — if Spanish — institution, mostly staffed by Spanish priests.

In the late 1940s and 1950s there was widespread demand for an end to all these indignities. The socially responsible section within the middle class was growing, though the first two leaders of this movement (Drs. Grau San Martín and Prío) were failures when they became president, and the third (Eduardo Chibás) shot himself in a flamboyant manner. Under Batista's dictatorship in the 1950s, hope began to be concentrated around a new figure — that of the romantic-looking young lawyer, Fidel Castro.

When Castro first took up arms to fight against Batista, the few who knew him regarded him as a somewhat suspect survivor from the generation of political gangsters who had dominated the University of Havana in the late 1940s. But Castro soon established a rough suzerainty over a large alliance of people who hoped for a change in Cuba to a more decent country. There was a good deal of violence in the cities and some sporadic fighting of a low level in the country, particularly in East Cuba. Eventually Castro and his friends overthrew Batista in a minor guerrilla war, assisted powerfully by a successful campaign of public relations waged in both the U.S. and Cuba itself. Castro reached Havana with a



loyal army, but without an organized party, and without a well defined program. He soon made himself prime minister, at the head of a nationalist government which became weekly more anti-American. In May 1959, after four months as prime minister, Castro was still talking about the necessity for a 'humanistic revolution' and criticizing the communists. But by July, anti-communism had become virtually a crime of state, and in January 1960 the Soviet deputy foreign minister Mikoyan paid his first visit to Havana. A full-fledged communist state was soon set up, largely it would seem, on the initiative of Castro himself rather than (as is still sometimes alleged or, anyway, believed) because of the U.S.'s ineptitude, and perhaps against the initial inclinations of the Russians. Castro was interested in permanent power, in a radical challenge to the United States which would echo throughout Latin America, and in securing adequate arms. To obtain those things he established a working alliance with the communists, accepted them as bureaucrats, declared himself to believe their ideology and became a satellite of the U.S.S.R.

Between 1960 and 1968, meanwhile, governments of the U.S. apparently sought, by a variety of rather inept means, to murder or to overthrow Castro. The most sensational attempt was that of the Bay of Pigs in 1961 — an unfortunate and badly organized support of Cubans in the opposition.

From the beginning, too, Castro was obviously hoping to extend his Revolution into other countries of Latin America. He always felt Cuba too small for his own ambitions. That goal was temporarily abandoned in the late 1960s. The Soviet attempt to gain some benefits from their new client state meantime resulted in what is still the world's most dangerous crisis over the U.S. demand for the withdrawal of Russian missiles put into Cuba in 1962.

## II

Since Castro still seems now anxious again to carry the message of his achievements across the seas, it is interesting to ask what Cuba's revolutionary achievements actually now are. The first question which must occur to the serious inquirer is how far are they really revolutionary at all?

This is not a deliberate echo of Alexis de Tocqueville's famous rejection, in his *L'Ancien Régime*, of the received view of the importance of the French Revolution, but a simple recognition of the fact that the pattern of the Cuban economy has not changed since the 1950s quite so

much as it is often assumed. Of course, as in all communist states, the state plays the determining role in the economy. But that economy is itself dominated by — in 1982 as it was in 1957 — sugar. If anything, the monoculture has been increased.

For example, in 1957, Cuba exported a total of \$18 million dollars' worth of goods, of which 654 million dollars out of the total (79.95%) was accounted for by sugar. In 1977, the last year for which I have been able to find satisfactory figures, total exports were \$3,030 million, or 83.90%. (The percentage has been as high as 90%, in 1975). In 1957 the U.S. took 58% of Cuban exports; in 1979, as was usual in the 1970s, the Soviet Union or East Europe took 76%. Then, clearly on in the regime's history there was talk about 'diversification of agriculture', but since about 1968 (presumably on Russian insistence), sugar has received the bulk both of investment and attention. Nor has there been any increase in the amount of sugar produced in terms of population per head. Total sugar production in the last few years had hovered around the 7-8 million ton mark, which is a slight aggregate increase on the average of the late 1950s. But Cuba produced 7 million tons of sugar in 1952 and 5 million as long ago as 1925. Modern agricultural technology has certainly increased the yield of sugar on the 1.3 million or so hectares which are now a modest increase of the 1950s, sown to cane. The revolution has also managed to introduce cane cutters into the harvesting, for the unions can now be must more easily bullied than they could when they resisted innovations in the past. After all, they are part of the state bureaucracy. But the 'Revolution' has preserved, even heightened, the extent to which the country depends on one crop.

For that reason, if for no other, Cuba's foreign policy is as dependent on the Russians as it used to be on the U.S. Most of Russo-Cuban commerce concerns sugar which Russia buys at a price formally about three times higher than present world market prices — an arrangement which reads like a weird parody of those which Cuban used to have with the U.S. and which Guevara attacked in 1960 as constituting such an outrageous subservience. Cuban nickel exports are subject to the same arrangements. It is from Russian or other COMECON countries that the Cubans now gain, of course, their fertilizers, their wheat, their oil, and their other essential imports. Cuba has been a part of COMECON since 1972. One must assume, therefore, that the thrust of her economy is dictated by what the organization wants from her and not what she (or her farmers) would like to produce in different circumstances. In addition, the striking rise of world sugar prices to 66 cents a pound in 1974, led to a



plan based on hope of new growth to be modified sharply, when the price of sugar fell to 7 or 8 cents. This is another reflection of what happened during the old bad days of 'capitalistic' difficulties which dogged Cuba in the 1920s.

Some further indication of the failure of the Revolution can be gathered from looking at a number of other figures for food products. The following table makes the point reasonably clearly:

TABLE (1000 METRIC TONS UNLESS STATED)\*

PRODUCT	1957 per capita	1979 per capita
Rice	260	390
Beans	36	2
Potatoes	94	172
Sweet Potatoes & Yams	184	79
Yuca	186	72
Malanga**	41	N.A.
Tomatoes	44	143
Pineapples	102	14
Citrus Fruit	150	186
Plantains bananas	360	222
Livestock — beef & veal for slaughter (weight)	187	280 (1978)
Milk	?	611
Eggs (million dozen)	23	153
Pork (weight)	42	56
Poultry (weight)	47	64
Tobacco	42	33
Coffee	44	13 (1978)
Fish, other seafood	14	111

\*This and other figures derive from *The Cuban Economy: a statistical review*, published by the National Foreign Assessment Centre in Washington, March 1981.

\*\*Malanga: in the old root vegetable, very popular in the country in the past, but a symbol of backwardness.

Now assuming that, between 1957 and 1979, the Cuban population increased from 6.6 million to 9.7 million (despite the emigration or flight of about 500,000 people between 1959 and 1966), or 48%, the only items of Cuban agriculture which have really increased over the pre-revolutionary figures in relation to population are: potatoes, tomatoes, beef and veal, poultry and eggs, and fish. Most other items have declined — a clear picture of what the regime would like the population to eat or produce for sale abroad. The decline in production of coffee and tobacco, the traditional produces, is striking.

The most notable of the few changes for better is obviously fish, where the fine new Cuban fleet (well fitted out in Spain) now plays a major part in Atlantic fishing, alongside the Russian fleets which are also there, with which the Cuban activity there is closely coordinated. I suspect, however, that part of the benefit of this greater investment in fish is to those who buy tinned fish in East Europe or elsewhere, and another part to Soviet espionage on the oceans. Whoever fish feeds, it does not prevent food from being Cuba's largest import, outstripping petroleum, although most of the imported food could easily be produced in Cuba.

It is undoubtedly true that industrial activities make up a little for this far from impressive picture: notably steel, cement, and sulphuric acid. But even New Man cannot live on steel alone, and the modest rations with which the ordinary Cuban has now to put up — the 2 pounds of meat a month, the 1½ pounds of chicken the same period, the 2 ounces of coffee every fortnight — must seem a come-down to many who, in the past, could certainly aspire to, and in many cases actually enjoyed, a greater variety of food than is ever now available — a point made by the most outspoken of the contributors to Oscar and Ruth Lewis' very interesting collection of Cuban testimonies in *Four Men — Living the Revolution*.

This rationing puts the standard of living in Cuba far behind the communist countries of Eastern Europe, some of which appear indeed a cornucopia in comparison, as Eastern Europeans are the first to agree.

### III

Turning from the economy and standard of living to the political structure, it should not be forgotten that Cuban democracy, always halting and infirm, fell in 1952 and not 1959. The dictatorship of Batista was really the forerunner, as it were, of that of Castro, not its obverse. The chief difference between Batista and Castro was not that the first was



ruthless and the second just, on the contrary. Batista's tyranny seems, from the angle of the present, a mild and indolent undertaking, only casually and intermittently brutal, an insult to a philanthropist; no doubt, but far removed from the iron certainties deriving from Marxist-Leninist ideology which has been imposed by Castro and put over to the people by propaganda. Castro's regime paints Batista as a tyrant, for whom the historian Gibbon would have exhausted his famous vocabulary of denigration. But really he presided negligently, till the end, over a feckless, spendthrift but prosperous country, where (rather like Jamaica in the 1970s) a great many minor crimes and acts of violence occurred without political significance.

Batista paved the way for Castro in two ways: first, he established the rule that (to recall the thesis of the French historian Elie Halévy) if a gang of armed men can find a common cause they can easily enough 'proclaim themselves the state', once they have captured the public buildings. Secondly, he continued (or completed) the destruction of what institutions there were in the country. This applied particularly to the civil service and to the trade unions who, well organized as they had been, put up no effective fight against Castro in 1959-60, since many of the leaders were compromised with the old regime. Batista also divided the Army, fatally for himself.

In place of that old regime, Castro established a state with himself as 'maximum leader', presumably for life. The Cuban Communist Party which sustains him does not much differ in its organization from such parties in other communist states and, with the important exception of Castro himself, the leaders of the Party are mainly men who were communists before 1959.

The Cuban Communist Party is still a little smaller per head of the population than is normal in other communist states, and there are some other unusual institutions: for example, the 'Committees for the Defense of the Revolution', an undertaking which began as a kind of neighborhood snooping organization (to see that those who had decided to leave the country did not illegally dispose of their furniture to friends instead of the state as they were supposed to) have ended up as a galvanizer of civic action in support of the Communist Party proper. The Cuban government's control over culture and art seems to be as bad as it has even been in a communist state. There is no *samizdat*. In 1971 at the first 'Congress on Education and Culture' Castro stated "we a revolutionary people in a revolutionary process value cultural and literary creations with only one criteria: their utility to the people. Our evalua-

tion is a political evaluation". That view has been carried into practice since. Castro's own leadership is more flamboyantly presented than other leaders of communist states. He still has too a gathering of old-time faithful, largely non-ideological, veterans from the days of the guerrilla war against Batista, as confidantes and bodyguards. They would be helpful if a day ever came when Castro sought to break with Moscow.

It seems improbable that these men now guarantee any real independence of Castro from the Russians. On balance, the bureaucratic and — even after the death of Mr. Brezhnev — aging Soviet leadership must look on Castro as an asset, a focus for attracting people in the propaganda-dominated Third World (and even in Europe), and a source of original and daring ideas. Castro's part in persuading the Russians to interfere in Africa may yet be revealed. (This is, of course, a different matter from suggesting that Castro acts on his own in Africa as optimistically, or pessimistically, believed by some, and as argued by Castro himself and by Gabriel Garcia Márquez. In a conversation with the American journalist Barbara Walters in 1978, Castro said: "If you know the Soviets . . . well you wouldn't think that the Soviets were capable of asking Cuba to send a single man to Angola" to which, the answer must presumably be that it is the word 'asking' to which one should pay attention).

The full details of Cuban involvement in Africa may take many years to come out. But it is worth while recalling now, though, that Cuban interest in Africa dates from the early 1960s. Cuban troops were sent to Algeria as early as 1964 and soon after Cuban military missions were established in Guinea and in many capitals. Augusto Neto, the leader of the Angolan MPLA, visited Cuba in 1966 for the first time, and his followers began to be trained there after that.

It seems obvious that the Soviet Union supported the dispatch of Cuban troops to Africa to assist the global expansion of Russian interest. They made use of Cubans to give a favourable coloring to those actions which would not have happened had those troops been Russians. Obviously Cuba is already carrying out other activities on behalf of its Soviet ally. The events in Nicaragua and Grenada have led to a return of a Cuban interest in Latin America — particularly El Salvador and Colombia, and also the Caribbean.

Meanwhile as the U.S. writer Eldridge Cleaver has put it, in sending troops to Africa, Castro gets rid of an explosive element capable of causing trouble at home; and impresses black Cubans, who he adds — and Cleaver was once the leader of the Black Panthers — are "still at the bottom of the Cuban pecking order."



#### IV

It does look as if the Soviet Union has been content to leave Cuba to make the running in the Caribbean with the sophisticated pattern of subversive activity. Nevertheless Cuban activities have been a help to the Soviet Union's strategic considerations: first, the development of the Backfire bomber has meant that the allied shipping route planned for resupply of Europe in the early days of a major war has to skirt the Leeward and Windward Islands before going to the Azores. The Soviet base at Cienfuegos, and the construction by Cubans of a large military airfield at Grenada affects this. The airfield at Grenada, of course, will also give transport facilities for Cuban aircraft on their way to Africa, and so assist other Soviet designs. The Cubans are also well placed to exploit any new explosion among the microstates of the Caribbean.

The Cuban onslaught on Jamaica's freedom in particular is an interesting case-history. Castro successfully played on Michael Manley's personality at Algiers in 1973, the 'vulgar Marxism' of many Jamaican intellectuals preoccupied by a slave past, and the international depression, to put over to the Jamaicans a vision of the Third World which for the first time led close political contacts between Cuba's subversion section, the 'Departamento de las Americas' and the anglophone Caribbean. The Cuban target was Manley's People's National Party (PNP), all of whose leaders were feasted in Cuba and given ritualistic audiences with the 'maximum leader'. Cuban and Jamaica construction workers were exchanged and both the ministry of information and security began to be penetrated, particularly the first: old British links in the police on the whole held the security apparatus firm. The Cubans mounted a prolonged attack against the CIA and caused Michael Manley to develop a phobia about plots. It is possible that Maurice Bishop's successful coup in Grenada (March 1979) was planned in Kingston.

The reason why the Cuban onslaught against Jamaica failed when Michael Manley was soundly defeated was probably that there remains an unbridgeable culture gap between the English speaking from the Spanish speaking Caribbean. The average Jamaican over forty remains a church going Christian particularly in the country. The Cubans perhaps underestimated the British tradition of parliamentary life even in Manley's own party.

Nevertheless, the Cubans were able quite successfully to put over the view that their government is merely making use of the U.S.S.R. for the time being. The vitality of Cuban export Marxists contrasts with Soviet counterparts. The high proportion of blacks and mulatto Cubans

among these also helped. Meantime in the Caribbean it would be foolish to dismiss Marxism-Leninism as discredited. Arguments about Soviet excuses are inadequate.

But though Cuba's interest in Jamaica failed it led to the consolidation of a new communist regime, Nicaragua and Grenada both are now very close to that, and no doubt may be looked on as primarily puppets of the Cubans, just as the Cubans are of the Russians. El Salvador seemed at the end of 1981 to promise to be another victory for Cuba and her well trained guerrillas. But that danger seems to have passed with the success of the elections held in March 1982.

It has sometimes seemed possible that one of the recent motives of the Cuban regime has been to establish a chain of revolutionary communist regimes in the Caribbean for possible use should Soviet interest in Cuba ever flag. This may account for the special attention paid, via terrorism and propaganda, to Guatemala, which has oil of its own, and whose capture by 'revolutionary armies' could, of course, threaten Mexico.

For Russia, Castro's involvement as a 'surrogate' has had many benefits. Castro is able to exert a considerable degree of charm and diplomatic skill on innocent people as shown by the fact that he has been for some time permitted to lead the 'non-aligned' nations, even though Cuba also belongs to COMECON. If this skill failed, it does not take too much imagination to realize that the Russians would ensure his eclipse. Since 1970, when Castro's failures in Latin America were followed by the failure of the 10 million ton sugar harvest, Cuba has obviously come under Russian direction more and more. Both the personnel and the organizational changes previously noted bear witness to that, and in 1971, the Cuban political police, the DGI, was apparently purged, to the Russian's benefit, by the KGB.

The Cuban state has begun to be managed much as if it were an outlying part of the Soviet Union rather than a distant Caribbean island. Thus the economy is now run on the basis of material incentives with no attention to the Utopian or Maoist dreams of Guevara. Economic management is in the Russian style. Professionally educated specialists now run the different spheres of the economy on the basis of courses taken in Russia. The state planning board, JUCEPLAN, has apparently about 3,000 Russian economic advisers. Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, vice prime minister of Cuba, was quoted by *Pravda* on March 11, 1972, as saying that there was no single sector of the economy which was to any extent important in which co-operation with Russia was not planned —



and it certainly seems as if that co-operation has now been, as it were, built into the entire society. The Cuban economy has thereby been as it were mortgaged to the Russian one indefinitely. 75 per cent of Cuban trade was with Russia in 1980. Russia's aid to Cuba's domestic economy is believed to stand at \$3 million a year, Cuba's total debt to Russia is believed to stand at \$7 billion — it may even be \$8 billion if all subsidies are included.

In addition to economic failures based on failure of production, there have been disasters concerning the government's management of money. One of the revelations of the 1970s was the enthusiasm for Western banks to lend cheaply to Communist regimes and the willingness of Communist regimes to mortgage themselves to capitalist banks provided, of course, that they were abroad. Cuba has been no exception. Indeed, Cuba's debt to the West is estimated at over two and a half billion dollars (in addition to what is roughly estimated as a debt of seven billion dollars to the Soviet Union)\*. Over a billion dollars are due to be paid back in the next twelve months 1982-83.

The Cuban National Bank is finding it difficult to raise this. The U.S. Administration has discreetly prevented international banks from being helpful, and anyway Cuba does not seem a very attractive risk for a serious banker in the middle of a depression. The consequence has been an attempt to renegotiate that part of the foreign debt due between now and the end of 1985.

The purpose of Soviet assistance to Cuba has been to set up a state as powerful as any in the Soviet world and one probably more faithful to Russia than is any other ally. The Cuban constitution now reflects the Soviet one too. That constitution was presented to the first conference of the Cuban Communist Party in December 1975 and submitted to a referendum in February 1976 in addition.

## V

This powerful state has been used, as it were, to whip up the nation into one large, military camp. The military element in the regime's propaganda, in which its leaders probably believe, is far more striking than in other communist states. Castro surely believes it when he announces: "As long as there is a revolutionary with a gun, no cause will ever be lost".

This military aspect of the regime has increased rather than slackened, as the years have gone by, even though the threat from the United States is \$2.6 billion, of which \$1.456 billion is owing to commercial banks and \$1.1 billion is due in the next 12 months.

States is plainly a matter of history, and though no North or South American state other than the U.S. could begin to attempt to unseat the Cuban regime by force of arms. The economics of the Cuban, like Soviet "defense" budget, are difficult to disentangle and even the highest Western estimates err on the side of underestimation. There are, it seems, no longer any armed enemies of the regime within the country. Yet Castro appears in the press no longer as "Major Fidel Castro", "Doctor Fidel Castro", or the Maximum Leader of the Revolution, Fidel Castro, but as "Commander-in-Chief Fidel Castro". Reports of military maneuvers or preparations are continuously emphasized in the slender press. The public has been endlessly fed with tales of the old guerrilla war against Batista and, when a rest is needed from that epic, there is always the story of the battle of Cubans against Spain in the 19th century to fall back upon. (In this respect, as in some others, the Revolution is presented to the Cuban people as the continuation of an apparently never ending nationalist conflict). In the last few years, for example, the role of the 'apostle of liberty', José Martí, has been downplayed to the benefit of the titan of bronze Antonio Maceo, rebel general and veteran of both Wars of Independence, "whose life was an everlasting dialogue with duty", a man whose black blood, would, we are led to suppose, have caused him to sympathize with (or perhaps even lead) the "struggle against imperialism in Angola or Ethiopia, or Zaire." "To honor him today is a battle cry" Castro told us, "a call to revolutionary action: to take a stand; and appeal to the energy of man; and an invitation to victory. . . ."

Thus the first and most striking achievement of Castro's state has been the creation of a nation in arms.

## VI

The mere size of the Cuban armed forces, probably 150,000, (plus 90,000 army reserves, 10,000 'state security troops', 3,000 border guards and 100,000 militia) makes them far and away the largest military force in the Caribbean region except for the United States. Of Russia's Eastern European satellites, only Poland has larger forces (and Poland has a population four times that of Cuba). Military dictatorships like Chile or Argentina have far fewer men under arms than Cuba has. This large force is also the most important institution in the nation, and has plainly played a large part in the economy in supplying extra hands for cane cutting for example. René Dumont\* pointed out the beginning of this 'militarization' of the Cuban Revolution over ten years ago and Castro

\* René Dumont, *Is Cuba Socialist?* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1974). Originally published in French under the title *Cuba est-il Socialiste?*



called him an agent of the CIA for his pains; but if a small Caribbean island which proclaims itself the 'Friend of Humanity' also creates an armed service as large as that of Peter the Great, it is ridiculous not to notice it.

The financial relations between Russia and Cuba on military matters are secret, as one would imagine. But basically the Cuban armed forces (like the police) are armed, clothed, and trained by Russia — Cuba has probably made only a very modest contribution to the cost. "The more we go into these matters", said Castro on 1 December 1976, "the more grateful we feel to the Soviet Union which provided us with these magnificent weapons and taught us how to use them . . . thanks to the extraordinary efforts of Soviet scientists, technicians and workers our weapons are also constantly being revolutionized, and improved on".

There are, of course, benefits to be gained from living in a regiment; and the regime's achievements in health, social services, and education must be viewed in this respect. In these spheres, the Cuban regime has managed to achieve some things which no other Latin American government has done. Cuba is now, it is said, a country with nearly universal literacy and access to education (whereas, in the 1950s, a third of the population could not read and write, and only about half those of school age went school). Most people are now within reach of clinics and doctors, whereas, at least in the country, that was quite out of the question in the 1950s.

What however, are these activities for? Slaveowners in the past looked after their stock of labor as well as landlords looked after their property, and for a very obvious reason. In Cuba today, people are kept in reasonable health, and are educated, specifically to serve the cause of the Revolution, to enable them to take part in heroic caravanseraí or to bear the flaming torch of revolution and carry the gun wherever the 'Maximum Gunsmith' determined. Travellers to Cuba are sometimes impressed by the morale of the doctors and educators whom they meet. But this is the morale of a nation whose leaders have been able to simulate a permanent war through an aspiration to permanent revolution.

## VII

One achievement of the Revolution in Cuba however, can scarcely be gainsaid: that is, that propaganda successes among all those in Europe or elsewhere, who, for a variety of reasons, desire some flag to wave against the United States whenever they can find such a banner. The causes of the unpopularity of the U.S. even before the tragedy of Viet-

nam were diverse: jealousy played a large part; so did anger that the U.S. should have superseded the Europeans as the great power; fear of U.S. technology; fear of the world state that the U.S. for so long half promised till the 1970s led to a quite extravagant indulgence being afforded to Castro in his early days, and it continues. We do not need to travel far to find good examples of this extraordinary tolerance: the British trade union leader Clive Jenkins visited Cuba in 1961 and asked a militia soldier if he wanted elections. "He looked at me and shook his machine gun: 'We've got these', he said." "At this point in time", said Jenkins, "I found this a convincing reply".

## VIII

Within the regiments of modern Cuba there are of course, many guard-rooms. In camps or jails, there now linger opponents of the regime from more or less every epoch, including some who opposed Castro's revolution by siding with Batista and somehow managed to escape being shot 'against the wall' in 1959. Most of the more permanent prisoners, however, are men of the failed 'humanistic revolution' of 1959. They were people who constituted the earliest supporters of Castro before he gained power and in his first months in Havana. They separated themselves from the regime in 1959-1960, perhaps sided with the exiles operating from Miami, or perhaps not; but at all events, they hoped (and often did little more) for a liberal outcome of the Cuban Revolution. This generation was symbolized by the heroic Major Huber Matos, arrested in October 1959 when he was Castro's governor of Camaguey province. Subsequently he served 20 years to the day. Then there was the poet Armando Valladares recently freed after 22 years in prison. There are, of course, many others, driftwood they must now seem from one or other of the waves of the Cuban revolution. Yet, are they driftwood? Are they not perhaps the real victors of the Cuban revolution, the men whose names will be remembered in the history of freedom as the heroes when those of Castro's generals are forgotten. These names include Gustavo Arcos, an old comrade of Castro's, ex-ambassador, in and out of prison since 1964, now in prison again for trying to leave the country to visit his wife; or Amaro Gómez Boix, imprisoned for 'possessing propaganda' against the state — poems and a novel he had written and had not thought of publishing; another poet Ernesto Díaz Rodríguez, serving a 60 year term; Angel Cuadra; as well as some others who are now out. What a country to have produced such men! Surely streets will be called after them one day when the storm has passed!



It is of course easy enough to visit Cuba and draw the conclusion that the regime is popular. But that impression has been gained by travellers in innumerable dictatorships in the 20th century. How easy it was to be cheered by the sight of nazidom's laughing gymnasts or the fit hikers of the Hitler Youth! Will we never learn that those whom travellers may meet probably would not speak critically of the system to those who might betray them by negligence or even by design?

The pretence of enthusiasm in a crowd is also fairly easily simulated. In crowds, too, and again we should have learned that by now, people can be carried away. The number of independent-minded Cubans who established their position in life before 1959 and, therefore, might (if they could be reached) count on some international connections to assist them, even if only morally, grows daily less and less. As for the rank-and-file Cubans, doubtless the two short, sharp and successful wars in Angola and Ethiopia against feeble enemies may have made the regime seem suddenly for a time successful.

To find a hint of criticism from within of the Cubans for their actions in Africa requires investigation which resembles cryptography more than reading. Many warm-hearted Cubans no doubt have the same sort of half-moral, half-religious enthusiasm for the regime which Germans used to have for the Nazis, being dazzled by Castro's oratory, bewitched by his cleverness and capacity for survival, proud of his machismo on the international stage, pleased to think that the Cubans have ceased to charm the world with their cigars and their music but are terrifying it with their guns — as some Italians did under Mussolini. A good indication of this atmosphere, half ritualistic, half intimidatory, was the greeting in Havana to Colonel Mengistu on April 26, 1978 by a huge crowd of Cubans whose presence there was surely no more accidental than those Germans who went to Hitler's speeches. Colonel Mengistu began by shouting

Death to Imperialists! (Shouts of 'Death')

Death to Capitalism! (Shouts of 'Death')

Death to Feudalism! (Shouts of 'Death')

Long live Socialism! (Shouts of 'Viva')

This technique of exciting a response from a crowd in the form of a chorus was, of course, intensely practised in all fascist and nazi rallies. More and more when thinking of Cuba, indeed, parallels with fascism come to mind. The attention paid to propaganda, the cult of leadership, the doctrine of endless struggle, the exaltation of nationalism and violence, the emphasis on carefully staged oratory, the deliberate exacer-

bation of tension before the leader speaks, the rhythmic responses from the crowd, the banners and the ferocious 'opinions' in arms supported by mob intimidation, the mass rallies and the outrageous prisons — all those characteristic Castroist methods particularly of the early days recall fascism achieved via Peron no doubt; and many of those techniques have continued.

This regime thus seems indeed to have been more than anything the first fascist left regime — by which I mean it is a regime with totalitarian letting goals established and sustained by methods of fascism. This phraseology has been used before about many terrorist organizations but it fits the Cuban government best of all. Perhaps we should have realized as much when people who knew Castro in his days as a student recalled that he took a marked copy of *Mein Kampf* about with him, and others remembered that he had José Antonio Primo de Rivera's works in the Sierra Maestra. Hitler, at his trial in 1923 after the Munich Putsch, said: "You may pronounce us guilty a thousand times over, but the goddess of the eternal court of history will smile and tear to tatters the brief of the State prosecutor and the sentence of this court. For she acquits us. . . ." Castro ended his first famous speech at his trial in 1953 with almost identical words: "Condemn me: history will absolve me".

HUGH THOMAS



## CUBAN AMERICAN NATIONAL FOUNDATION

The Cuban American National Foundation is an independent, non-profit institution devoted to the gathering and dissemination of data about economic, political and social issues of the Cuban people, both on the island and in exile. The Foundation supports the concepts of an independent and democratic Cuba.

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