CASTRO'S CUBA

Cuba is an island, but, notes historian Hugh Thomas, it was never isolated.

Since the 18th century, when the Cubans began producing sugar in quantity for sale abroad, their history "has been like the history of the world seen through the eyes of a child: an invention in Silesia [involving *beet* sugar], a plague in Africa, a war or a prosperous time in England or France—these apparently unconnected events beyond Cuba's control have determined the lives of Cubans who, despite their tropical innocence, were the only links between them."

In his long (1,696 pages), vivid chronicle, **Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom** (Harper, 1971), Thomas argues that Fidel Castro was no more able to "escape the bondage of geographical as well as economic circumstances" than any other Cuban. He sought independence, but wound up in the Soviet embrace.

In 1762, when Thomas's narrative begins, an English force under Lord Albemarle seized Havana. It was then a metropolis of perhaps 40,000 people—larger than Boston or New York, and indeed all cities in the New World except Lima and Mexico City. The Spanish had found little gold and few Indians in Cuba, but Havana was the rendezvous for the treasure fleets sailing home from Central and South America. Spanish troops soon retook the island—but only after the British had opened it to foreign trade and began importing African slaves, permitting the rise of a plantation economy.

During Cuba's 19th-century Golden Age, it produced as much as a fourth of the world's sugar. Then came a series of local rebellions over several years that ended in 1898 when a much-weakened Spain was defeated in the brief Spanish-American War.

A long period as a virtual U.S. protectorate ensued under the Platt Amendment—the 1901 U.S.-Cuban agreement, in force until 1934, recognizing a U.S. "right to intervene" to maintain Cuba's independence and ensure a government "adequate for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty."

In **Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution** (Oxford, 1988), Louis A. Pérez, Jr., notes that Castro's revolution inspired a vast literature that soon "became possessed of one of its most enduring qualities—engagement."

Among early paeans to Castro were C. Wright Mills' **Listen, Yankee: The Revolution in Cuba** (McGraw-Hill, 1960), Leo Huberman and Paul M. Sweezy's **Cuba: Anatomy of a Revolution** (Monthly Review, 1961), and Herbert L. Matthews' **Fidel Castro** (Simon & Schuster, 1969). Matthews saw him as "the romantic revolutionary who keeps cropping up in history, like Cromwell in England or John Brown in the United States."

The early anti-Castro literature included books by exiles—e.g., Fulgencio Batista's **Growth & Decline of the Cuban Republic** (Devin-Adair, 1964)—and such works as Nathaniel Weyl's **Red Star Over Cuba: The Russian Assault on the Western Hemisphere** (Devin-Adair, 1960).

Rare was the cool objectivity of Theodore Draper's **Castro's Revolution: Myths and Realities** (Praeger, 1962) and **Castroism in Theory and Practice** (Praeger, 1965). (Draper found a "red thread or threads" in early Castroism; Matthews countered that Castro's was "a coat of many colours.")

More recent analyses maintain a salutary distance from the subject.

In **Cuba: Order and Revolution** (Harvard, 1978), historian Jorge I. Domínguez, an exile who claims allegiance only to "scholarly discipline," finds that Castro succeeded Batista "through a mixture of competence,

shrewdness, and luck." His luck included the removal—by death or other circumstances—of alternative rebel leaders, e.g., the dissident Colonel Rámon Barquín and Castro's 26th of July Movement comrade Frank País.

The rebels alone did not topple Batista. Eventually, even sugar-mill owners, cane growers, cattlemen, and bankers turned against the general and financed various rebel groups. Castro, leader of the longest-surviving group, simply allowed no coalition to form that failed to "recognize his supremacy."

Castro's chief bit of luck was made in America, argues Wayne Smith in **The Closest of Enemies: A Personal & Diplomatic History of the Castro Years** (Norton, 1987). Smith, once head of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana, maintains that Castro came to power because Dwight D. Eisenhower's noncareer envoy to Havana during the late 1950s, Earl E. T. Smith, was stubbornly pro-Batista and sabotaged efforts by State Department officials to remove the general while there was still time to install some other successor.

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What made Fidel run? Scholar Maurice Halperin, in **The Taming of Fidel Castro** (Univ. of Calif., 1981), accepts Castro's claim that he was "born with a calling for politics and revolution." In **Diary of the Cuban Revolution** (Viking, 1980), Carlos Franquí, a former comrade-in-arms who left Cuba in disillusionment in 1968, recounts Fidel's story of how he became his "own master" as a sixth-grade day student at a Jesuit school. Tired of the people with whom he was living, he one day "told them all to go to the devil, and entered school as a boarder that very afternoon."

The full profile of the Maximum Leader is Tad Szulc's **Fidel: A Critical Portrait** (Morrow, 1986). Castro's model was always José Martí, "the island's greatest thinker and patriotic hero."

Castro sought total "identification with Martí's martyrdom." After his 1959 victory, Castro visited Oriente, where Martí arrived by boat in 1895 (after exile in New York) to fight Spanish rule. Castro did a beach tour, filmed for TV and movie audiences, because he was "fulfilling the Martían code." Martí had been killed by Spanish troops only 25 miles from where Castro was born.

Castro is always discovering "enemies." As a boy, he battled his father, Angel, who built the family *finca* into a spread of 26,000 acres (mostly rented from U.S. owners) and fought for the Spaniards against Martí and other rebels. At age 18, the son accused the father of being "one of those who abuse the powers they wrench from the people with deceitful promises."

Fidel's style as Maximum Leader has not changed. In 1968, Szulc relates, Castro nationalized all remaining private retail business—58,000 auto repair shops, hot dog stands, etc.—as part of a Mao-style "Great Revolutionary Offensive." In a fiery speech, he scourged the proprietors as "counterrevolutionaries," emphasized that "this is a Revolution of Communists," and asserted that "nobody shed his blood" to "establish the right for somebody to make 200 pesos selling rum, or 50 pesos selling fried eggs or omelets."

Portraits of *typical* Cubans include the "Oral History of Contemporary Cuba" undertaken by the late anthropologist Oscar Lewis. In three volumes—**Four Men, Four Women,** and **Neighbors** (Univ. of Illinois, 1977)—Lewis's widow, Ruth M. Lewis, and Susan M. Rigdon published the stories of 28 Cubans who variously praise the Revolution, worry about it, or condemn it. One early Castro backer tells how he came to resent rising prices, rationing, and the loss of U.S. investment, dashing his hopes that Cuba might industrialize à la Yugoslavia: "Tito knew how to do things; he wasn't rash."

In **Family Portrait with Fidel: A Memoir** (Random, 1984), Carlos Franquí relates how, after the Revolution, Castro outlawed gambling, launched public works projects, and halved the costs of rent, medicine, telephone service, and food: "This was Fidel's utopian side.... No one gave a thought to increasing production, or to... the fact that we were living on what the old society had left, not on what we ourselves had made."

Carmela Mesa-Lago's **The Economy of Socialist Cuba: A Two-Decade Appraisal** (Univ. of New Mexico, 1981) traces Castro's policy-making from the early attempt at Soviet-style central control and the arrival of rationing (1962) and Soviet-style wage scales (1963–65).

The latter did reduce Cuba's wide gaps in income: The ratio of the lowest wage (for an agricultural peon) to the highest (for a cabinet minister) fell to about 1 to 10. Yet all boats have not risen equally under Marxism-Leninism. During the 1970s, farm hands remained at the bottom of the wage ranks. Service workers moved up; Cuba's "best paid group" was its armed forces.

Cuba's all-but-forgotten men have been its political prisoners. Armando Valladares's **Against All Hope** (Knopf, 1986), his story of 22 years in a Cuban jail, focused belated foreign attention on Castro's human rights record.

In **Cuban Communism** (Transaction, 1981), editor Irving Louis Horowitz suggested that the Castro regime must somehow return to its "egalitarian inspiration" if it is not to become a "sad and not so special chapter of a nation that has seen numerous tyrants ruling in the name of the people."

The world has changed since Castro's guerrilla days in the Sierra Maestra. In **Semper Fidel: America & Cuba, 1776–1988** (Nautical & Aviation, 1988), Michael J. Mazarr suggests that the shift from the bipolarity of the postwar world to a "less ideological, more economic and political multipolarity" will allow the U.S.-Cuban relationship to be viewed in a fresh light on both sides.

In time, says Mazarr, Castroism may be seen to have been not much more than a belated "experiment" in nationalism in a land whose experience with independence, after all, went back less than 60 years when Fidel took power.

The idea of revolution has lost much of its appeal since the 1960s, both in the Third World and among Western intellectuals. Few U.S. college youths today would be spellbound by a Che Guevara—or a Frantz Fanon, the West Indian firebrand who went about urging Algerians to "shoot down a European" during the 1960s, and, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, hailed violence as a "cleansing force."

Castro launched his new regime in what seemed to some intellectuals an ideal setting. In **Fire in the Minds of Men** (Basic, 1980), a study of the origins of the idea of revolution in 18th-century France and Germany, James H. Billington observed that "when a Cuban national revolution came into conflict with the imperial power of the first nation to be born in revolution, the United States, it attracted considerable sympathy—but more among the well-fed young students in the overdeveloped West than among the hungry in the underdeveloped world.

"Utopia for many intellectuals had simply returned to a tropical island in the New World—which is where the intellectuals of early modern Europe had always imagined it might be."

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Related titles are cited in* WQ*'s Background Books essays on "Cuba" (Winter 1978) and "The Cuban Missile Crisis: Legacies and Lessons" (Autumn 1982).*