
BACKGROUND BOOKS

CUBA

The story starts with Columbus. But the explorer's October 27, 1492 landing on Cuba (after he had blundered about for a couple of weeks in the Bahamas), did not cause a sudden, disrupting change of the sort that has characterized much of Cuban history.

Convinced that he had found Marco Polo's fabled Asian island kingdom of Cipango (probably Japan), Columbus sent men inland seeking gold and "the Khan." They found neither, and he sailed on, leaving no settlement behind.

Britain's Hugh Thomas gives a backward glance to the first two and a half centuries of Spanish rule as he opens his prodigious, highly readable, 1,696-page **CUBA: The Pursuit of Freedom** (Harper, 1971).

Before Lord Albemarle sailed from England in 1762 to capture Havana, Thomas writes, the Spanish colony of Cuba had developed "with majestic slowness" into a prosperous possession. The countryside still had more acres left in virgin forests (cedar, mahogany, pines, royal palms) than were devoted to tobacco farms, sugar plantations, and cattle ranches. There were no good roads. Although the Catholic Church had reared a great cathedral in Santiago, the people of Havana still worshipped in parish churches among forts, the palaces of grandees, and unpaved back streets. Cuba serviced the great fleets that carried the wealth of mainland South America home to Spain. Havana, a commercial port with a permanent garrison of Spanish soldiers, had already acquired "that unique, easy-going, brilliant but semi-criminal character that has marked it ever since."

Albemarle's victory (he proclaimed himself captain-general and governor)

brought the first significant change in the island's social organization and economy. The Spanish regained control after a year, but during that year English merchants descended upon the island to open it up to world trade, and importation of African slaves on a major scale began. According to Thomas, the English brought in some 4,000 slaves in 11 months; Spanish planters followed their lead, importing so many more that within 30 years Cuba, unlike any Spanish possession on the mainland, had a black and mulatto majority in the population. Rapid expansion of the sugar industry, made possible by cheap labor, totally changed Cuban society.

It takes Thomas roughly 1,000 vivid pages to get through the two centuries following the British conquest. He covers economic, social, and cultural trends, the Spanish-American War, U.S. military occupation, the first Republic, subsequent dictatorships, and finally, Fidel Castro's 1959 takeover. The remaining 400-odd pages provide a close analysis of developments under Castro up to 1970. No finer single source on Cuba or on Castro exists in English.

Detailed studies of modern pre-Castro Cuba include **ARMY POLITICS IN CUBA, 1898-1958** (Univ. of Pittsburgh, 1976). The author, Louis A. Perez, argues that the turn-of-the-century U.S. intervention created a Cuban military apparatus designed to serve U.S. policy, not Cuban needs. This lackluster rogue army later served Batista, but it proved no match for Castro's insurgents, despite their weaknesses as guerrilla fighters.

The title of a brief historical work by Luis E. Aguilar, **CUBA, 1933: Prologue to Revolution** (Cornell, 1972, cloth; Norton, 1974, paper), indicates its author's

focus—the “ideals and frustrations” of the students, old revolutionaries, liberal professionals, and orthodox politicians who tried in 1933 to unseat dictator Gerardo Machado.

Another brief, well-written review of the pre-Castro years is **CUBA: The Making of a Revolution** by Ramon Eduardo Ruiz (Univ. of Mass., 1968, cloth; Norton, 1970, paper). Ruiz gives a clear sense of the growing nationalism of most Cubans in the 20th century and of a conflict-ridden Latin society's receptivity to socialism.

There is no consensus on Castro's Cuba among academic authors, and their scholarship is highly uneven in quality. The regime has its critics and its apologists (especially, one suspects, among those who want to be allowed to visit the island again). Bearing all this in mind, certain books can be recommended.

Among them is **REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE IN CUBA**, edited by Carmelo Mesa-Lago (Univ. of Pittsburgh, 1971, cloth & paper). It includes essays by leading Cuban exiles and U.S. specialists. The editor, himself the most objective of the émigré critics, concludes that Cuba's radical 1959–70 transformation was accomplished without excessive bloodshed or destruction of resources.

In a more recent book of his own, **CUBA IN THE 1970s: Pragmatism and Institutionalization** (Univ. of New Mexico, 1974, cloth & paper), Mesa-Lago assesses the island's current state. He sees Castro no longer enjoying “the capacity for maneuver that he had in the 1960s.”

FIDEL CASTRO'S PERSONAL REVOLUTION IN CUBA, 1950–1973, edited by James N. Goodsell (Knopf, 1975, cloth & paper) provides a bland but balanced short course taken from 39 sources—including Castro speeches, Ernesto Ché Guevara on “The Cuban Economy,” and U.S. State Department documents.

CUBA IN REVOLUTION, edited by

Rolando E. Bonachea and Nelson P. Valdés (Doubleday/Anchor, 1972, paper) centers on internal political, economic, agricultural, labor, and cultural changes. A notable inclusion is the translation of a poem, “Out of the Game” by Heberto Padilla, written before he was imprisoned by the regime. Its message: *The poet, get rid of him! . . . He does not play the game! Lacks enthusiasm! . . . Always finding something to object to! . . . Remove the party-pooper! the summer malcontent! He sings the “Guantanamera” through clenched teeth! . . . No one can make him smile! each time the spectacle begins.*

Most telling when it takes Castro to task for repressing just such literary expression is a miscellany of largely new-left criticism edited by Ronald Radosh, **THE NEW CUBA: Paradoxes and Potentials** (Morrow, 1976, cloth & paper). Contributors include Martin Duberman, Frances Fitzgerald (“A Reporter at Large: Slightly Exaggerated Enthusiasms”), and Maurice Halperin, writing on culture and revolution. Editor Radosh concludes that “the apparent end of Cuba's isolation now makes it essential that we discard outdated arguments of opposition to Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution. . . . It is here to stay.”

Two former enthusiasts, Rene Dumont and K. S. Karol, have written more critically about the Castro regime. Dumont, a French socialist agronomist with much experience in Africa, was invited to Cuba by Castro, who later condemned the book that resulted: **IS CUBA SOCIALIST?** (Viking, 1974). Dumont looks back at Cuban predictions of economic performance and measures them against the cold facts of accomplishment. (“Revolution is not easy, you know,” he quotes Castro as saying, apologetically, in 1969.)

Karol, a Polish-born Maoist living in Paris, is another European Marxist whom Castro welcomed and then turned upon. Whereas Dumont's criticism is on economic grounds, Karol's, in **GUERRIL-**

LAS IN POWER (Hill and Wang, 1970, cloth & paper), is political. Castro responded politically. The poet Heberto Padilla (above) was jailed because he allegedly passed information to Karol, and Castro made an effort to increase public participation in the one-party government, whose elitism Karol attacked.

An early U.S. critic, Theodore Draper, put more stress on the topsy-turvy Castro movement than on the man. Draper's **CASTROISM: Theory and Practice** (Praeger, 1965) is now out of print but remains valuable for its detail on the early Castro era.

A different kind of retrospective can be found in **CUBA, CASTRO, AND THE UNITED STATES** (Univ. of Pittsburgh, 1971) by the last American Ambassador to Cuba, Philip W. Bonsal, an angry victim of Washington's early hostility to the 1959 Revolution. He argues that the close identity of interest between two major oil companies and the U.S. Treasury produced an aggressive, unannounced policy of attempting to undermine Castro—and he shows how it failed.

Last year saw the publication of two volumes in a projected three-volume series of interviews with present-day Cubans: **FOUR MEN: Living the Revolution, An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba** and **FOUR WOMEN** (with the same subtitle) by Oscar Lewis, Ruth M. Lewis, and Susan M. Rigdon (Univ. of Ill., 1977). The final volume, **NEIGHBORS**, will be published later this year.

In 1969, Oscar Lewis was professor of anthropology at the University of Illinois and widely recognized for his books, including *The Children of Sanchez*. Fidel Castro (who told him that *Sanchez* was "worth more than 50,000 political pamphlets,") invited him to interview Cubans on their views of the Revolution and other

subjects. Lewis and his associates were given unprecedented freedom to travel and work. But the Cuban government halted the study. Officials said that their action was linked to Castro's displeasure over the Dumont and Karol books and their concern that the researchers might be turning up "negative" or "conflictive" data. Lewis died soon thereafter; his wife and associate Rigdon edited the tapes.

One of the subjects in *Four Men* says, "I'm completely in love with the Revolution. In love, in love, in love! I'd do anything for it. *Viva la Revolución!*" All the men, raised in dire poverty, agree that their lives have been changed for the better economically. ("It was the Revolution that pulled me out of the swamp.") To the women interviewed—a servant, a former counterrevolutionary/former nun, a psychologist whose family were early Castro supporters, and (at Castro's suggestion) a one-time prostitute—the Revolution has brought more personal freedom.

A less upbeat sense of Castro's Cuba emerges from a small (158-page) book **BLACK MAN IN RED CUBA** by John Clytus with Jane Rieker (Univ. of Miami, 1970). Clytus, a self-described "Negro-black-Afro-American-colored-revolutionary" went to Cuba in 1964, worked as a translator for *Granma*, the official Communist Party newspaper, and ended up three years later in jail after trying to "escape" across the border to the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay. Clytus's personal, somewhat overheated account of life under Castro is a corrective footnote to more glowing portraits of the new Cuban society: "Cuba taught me that a black under communism in a white-oriented society—any society where whites hold or have held power—would find himself persecute[d] . . . for even intimating that he had a love for black."

EDITOR'S NOTE. *Lewis H. Diuguid, an assistant foreign editor and former Latin American correspondent for the Washington Post, helped to select books for this list. Fellows and research associates at the Wilson Center also made suggestions.*