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Fatherland or Death!

Setting the Revolution's Foundations, 1959–1962

1959—Year of Liberation

1960—Year of the Agrarian Reform

1961—Year of Education

1962—Year of Planning

I fixed the errors of your government,
I distributed the bread and befriended the poor.
Yes, it is true: in the process, I raided our house.
There is nothing left in it. I gave away
our goods, distributed our inheritance,
to the last items, the amphorae,
the textiles, the skins, the wheat, the spoons.
Our house stands empty, and still
there was not enough for everyone.

Antón Arrufat, *Los siete contra Tebas*

When the rebels ousted Batista, very few—if any—observers could have imagined that Castro's rise to power signaled the beginning of a prolonged new era of increasingly radical political and social transformations that would soon culminate with the establishment of a Marxist-Leninist regime. Even less imaginable was the scenario that in a matter of months and in the context of the Cold War, the Soviet Union would displace the United States as Cuba's main political ally and trading partner. Those who fled Cuba during the first four years of the revolution believed that their exile would be temporary; they rationalized that the United States would never allow the new order of things to go on much longer and would soon intervene to oust Castro.

This chapter looks at the decisive first four years of the Cuban Revolution, tracing and analyzing the manifold challenges it faced domestically



Figure 2.1. Directorio Revolucionario *guerrillas* wearing assorted headgear. Source: *Bohemia*, January 11, 1959.

and in the international arena, as well as its accomplishments and shortcomings. By 1963, almost every aspect of Cuba—including its political system, social structure, foreign relations, trading partners, and cultural production—had been transformed profoundly. This was a period of heroic idealism, of grand social and economic programs, of feverish adventures.

It was a time of young bearded guerrillas in power, a photogenic moment that produced iconic black-and-white images of a baseball-caped Castro pitching a ball, of Guevara under his trademark black beret, of the ever-smiling Cienfuegos wearing a broad-brimmed cowboy hat. Photographers feasted on the profusion of photogenic moments. One captured an image of Camilo Cienfuegos on the day he assumed control of the Presidential Palace; it shows him standing defiantly on top of a ripped oil painting of Batista's wife. Another photograph immortalized a DR rebel soldier of humble background crowned with a lustrous top hat, most certainly looted from the closet of some wealthy partisan of Batista's (figure 2.1). The image captured the very essence of revolution: a poor man wearing a rich man's hat. Like Napoleon a century and a half before, this anonymous rebel had crowned himself in defiance of the old order.¹

Guerrillas in Power

After Batista's unceremonious resignation and departure in the early hours of January 1, 1959, General Cantillo assumed control of the military. Colonel Barquín, who had been in the Isle of Pines penitentiary since the failed Los Puros conspiracy of 1956, and M-26-7 *llano* leader Armando Hart, who was also incarcerated there, were released and immediately flew to Camp Columbia. Arriving on New Year's Day still dressed in prison garb, Barquín assumed temporary charge over the camp, only to release it the following day to *comandante* Cienfuegos. Guevara and his troops also reached Havana on the 2nd with orders to capture La Cabaña fortress.² DR forces led by *comandante* Rolando Cubela, meanwhile, had already occupied the Presidential Palace and the University of Havana. To the east, Gutiérrez Menoyo's guerrillas had taken the city of Cienfuegos, Chomón's men occupied the picturesque city of Trinidad, and Víctor Mora's troops assumed control over the city of Camagüey.³

On January 1, Castro called for a general strike, which was widely observed throughout the island. As the day drew to an end, Castro, Matos, and a large group of rebels marched triumphantly into Santiago, where a festive multitude greeted them in euphoric jubilation. Streams of people flooded country roads and city streets, celebrating Batista's fall, the end of civil war, and the advent of a new political era. Dozens of businesses and organizations purchased large ad spaces in newspapers to congratulate the triumphant guerrillas. Among them was one ad in *Revolución* by Bacardí Corporation that read: "Because of your sacrifices and efforts we can once again say in Cuba how lucky we Cubans are."⁴ Unbeknown to both victors and the vanquished, warriors and spectators, the rich, the poor, and those in between, this was the beginning of a profound, prolonged, contentious, and distinctively Cuban socialist revolutionary process.

Leaving Raúl Castro in command of rebel forces in Oriente, Castro began his triumphal caravan to Havana. Clad in olive-green fatigues and sporting beards of varying lengths, the guerrillas rode across the island with Castro leading the way in. Cheering masses lined the Central Highway as the undulating Jeep convoy roared its way toward the capital. On the night of the caravan's triumphant arrival in Havana—it was January 8—Castro addressed a crowd of 10,000 gathered inside Camp Columbia. His message was simple and his style conversational, often resembling the call-and-response pattern so characteristic of much of Cuba's popular music. He engaged the festive audience in a dialogue. "What are the



Figure 2.2. Rebels and patricians share a banquet in celebration of Batista's fall. Photograph by Carlos Núñez. Courtesy of Gustavo Arvelo.

people interested in?" Castro asked. In unison, the crowd chanted back, "*¡Libertad! ¡Libertad!*" Castro spoke about the need for the new government to monopolize all weapons and denounced "elements within a certain organization"—an obvious allusion to the DR, which had amassed an arsenal of its own. Then he asked the audience: "Weapons for what? To fight whom? Against the Revolutionary Government, which has the support of the entire people?" "*¡No!*" retorted the multitude as a single voice. White doves appeared on the scene. Two of them landed on the podium, and one perched on Castro's left shoulder (figure 2.3). The throng cheered in amazement; some saw it as supernatural sign of divine approval, perhaps from an afro-Cuban deity. Close, slow-motion examination of the film footage that captured the moment reveals a more earthly explanation: a man standing a few feet from the podium pushed the doves directly toward Castro.⁵

The new government's first order of business was the elimination of all remnants of the defunct regime. Many of Batista's collaborators fled; those who did not were eventually captured and imprisoned. Some endured the spontaneous wrath of looting mobs, and their properties became targets

of sacking. Scores of Batista soldiers and policemen were charged with war crimes. Some did not have the chance of a trial; those who did, became part of Roman circus-like spectacles in crowded stadiums. One of the most notorious public trials was that of Colonel Jesús Sosa Blanco, a 51-year-old Batista henchman. Hundreds of thousands watched from their TV sets as the manacled Sosa Blanco clad in denim prison clothes trembled as his victims' relatives showered him with vociferous accusations. The grimace on his face was undecipherable, a strange combination of terror and mocking defiance. A military tribunal found Sosa Blanco guilty of 108 murders and sentenced him to death.⁶

A disturbing development in the administration of justice was Castro's personal intervention in judicial matters. In March, a revolutionary military tribunal had absolved nineteen air force pilots along with ten gunners and sixteen plane mechanics charged with dropping bombs on rebel forces and civilian populations. Disappointed with the outcome, Castro ordered a retrial and the new tribunal found the defendants guilty, sentencing the nineteen pilots to thirty years and the gunners to shorter sentences. Historian Lilian Guerra and others have underscored the fact that while

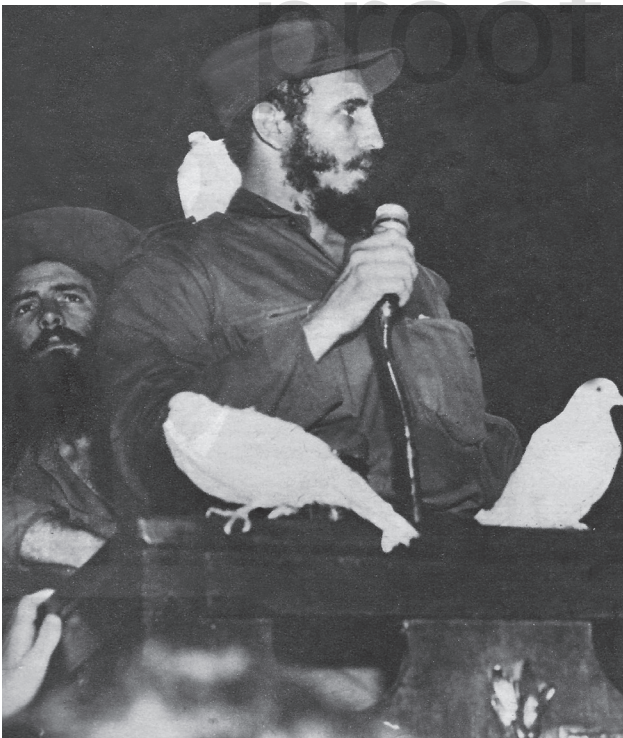


Figure 2.3. Castro's first victory speech in Havana, Camp Columbia, January 8, 1959. Camilo Cienfuegos stands to his right. *Source: Bohemia*, January 11, 1959.

troubling, the execution of “revolutionary justice” had an enormous galvanizing effect, given the virtually universal hatred that Cubans had toward Batista’s military and police forces.⁷

The elimination of the remnants of the Batista regime proceeded swiftly. Laws passed in January established the death penalty and expanded the list of capital crimes to include murder, rape, espionage, and treason. Strident crowds demanded executions to the rhythmic chant of “¡Paredón! ¡Paredón! (To the wall!). Estimates of executions in the first couple of months ranged between 200 and 700, most of them carried out under direct orders from *comandante* Guevara. A privately conducted survey indicated that 93 percent of the population favored the executions.⁸

Upon assuming power, the revolution’s leaders filled the political vacuum. Castro was by far the most popular and powerful of the revolutionary leaders, his stature reaching near-messianic proportions. A culture that venerated strong military caudillos allowed him to assume the new era’s highest political standing. He retained his positions as head of the M-26-7 and commander-in-chief of the Rebel Army. The mild-mannered and politically naive President Urrutia posed no threat or challenge to Castro’s authority. The revolution’s first cabinet, ostensibly selected by Urrutia but with strong input from Castro and Carlos Franqui, was a showcase of some of the nation’s most talented and respected professionals. Among them were Prime Minister José Miró Cardona, former president of the Havana Bar Association; Minister of Public Works Manuel Ray Rivero, a distinguished civil engineer; Minister of State Roberto Agramonte; and Minister of Social Welfare Elena Mederos. The cabinet also included five rebel army *comandantes* and several members of the underground movement.⁹ Visibly missing from cabinet-level positions were individuals associated with rival armed organizations such as Prío’s OA, the DR, and the Second National Front of El Escambray. Also absent were representatives of the PSP and, for that matter, individuals with communist leanings, with the exception of the aristocratic Minister of Revolutionary Laws Osvaldo Dorticós Torrado, whose communist credentials were tenuous at best.¹⁰

The original cabinet was socially homogeneous, composed of middle- and upper-middle-class professionals. It had no working-class representation, nor did it include one single black or mulatto. Despite the fact that several women had played key roles in the struggle against Batista, only one woman, Mederos, held a ministerial post. The cabinet projected an image of moderation—that of a team of able, politically moderate individuals acceptable to the Cuban middle class and the watchful eyes of

the United States. Notably, it did not include anyone from Castro's inner circle, which mostly consisted of survivors of the Moncada attack and *Granma* landing. The absence of Castro's most trusted men from the cabinet foreshadowed the marginal and short-lived role he had in store for the body.¹¹

At the same time, Castro formed a shadow government consisting of far more radical individuals, among them Guevara, Raúl Castro, Antonio Núñez Jiménez, Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, Vilma Espín, and Oscar Pino Santos. In contrast to the *de jure* cabinet members, these individuals were all either communists or communist sympathizers. This shadow government gathered quietly in Cojímar, east of Havana, the fishing village made famous by Ernest Hemingway in *The Old Man and the Sea*. Other PSP leaders often participated in these meetings. Meanwhile, Raúl Castro loyalists of communist proclivities gradually assumed important positions in the military.¹²

On February 7, the cabinet replaced the 1940 Constitution with the new Fundamental Law of the Revolution. This body of legislation gave all legislative power to the cabinet and executive power to Urrutia. By mid-February, however, it had become obvious that Urrutia had been reduced to a figurehead, while Castro governed informally from his Havana Hilton penthouse suite. Protesting the diminishing authority of the Council of Ministers, Prime Minister Miró Cardona resigned on February 13, striking an unexpected blow to the image of revolutionary unity that Castro sought to cultivate. Castro assumed the vacant premiership, further reducing Urrutia's power. Displeased with Castro's mounting authoritarianism, Urrutia tendered his resignation on February 17. Castro refused to accept it, avoiding further impressions of a government in disarray. Minister of Agriculture Humberto Sorí Marín resigned in May when the government unveiled an Agrarian Reform Law, which he had not been even allowed to contribute to. Most the cabinet's moderate voices were dismissed or resigned that year.¹³

The first few months of the revolution were characterized by the absence of a coherent guiding ideology. In April 1959, Castro vaguely defined the nature of the revolution as "Bread without terror, freedom with bread, neither leftist nor rightist dictatorships: Humanism."¹⁴ The primary force sustaining the new government was, in fact, Fidelismo, the adoration of Castro by the masses. Most Cubans saw Castro as a larger-than-life, charismatic hero who listened to the people and seemed genuinely interested in the improvement of their lot. A February poll by the popular weekly