

FIVE

Transforming Cuba

1959–1960

Batista had fled, but for the moment the army still held power. To keep it from setting up a military junta, Fidel called a general strike, which the people enthusiastically turned into a three-day holiday. As it turned out, the army actually posed no problem; Camilo and Che easily took over its bases in Havana. The capital fell to the rebels peacefully, without destruction, looting or bloodshed. The delirious population of Santiago received Fidel on 2 January 1959. In the first of the mass assemblies that became his hallmark, he told them that the Revolution, now only beginning, would make Cuba totally free – not like 1898 when the Americans took control. The next day he began his slow triumphal procession across the island.

Fidel and his warriors, with their beards, cigars and army fatigues, rode jeeps and tanks for five days past wildly adoring crowds. The liberator of Cuba stopped to greet his admirers, address the people and to make sure his men were in control of local barracks and administrations. He detoured to Cárdenas to lay a wreath on the tomb of Echeverría, to show his appreciation for the urban rebels. Outside Havana, he met his son Fidelito, who moved him to tears. There was no resistance; in fact, people flocked to join the rebel army, and thousands appeared in an olive drab they had never worn.

On 8 January, Fidel arrived in Havana. The crowd magically opened for him as he entered the packed streets of the capital. That evening, at Camp Columbia, he addressed them. A flock of white doves was released to symbolize peace; when one of them miraculously perched on his shoulder, many believed that he was more than human. His extemporaneous speech (with his prodigious memory he often spoke for hours without notes) turned into a dialogue with the crowd, a technique he called direct democracy. The subject was the Revolutionary Directorate, which was extremely disgruntled. The students had played a major role in the urban violence that helped destroy Batista, and had participated in the fighting in central Cuba. They thought they deserved a share of the glory of the Revolution and a place in the new regime. When it became obvious that the 26 July movement was taking complete control they rebelled; armed students took control of the presidential palace and the University. Che had talked them out of the Palace; Fidel did the rest. In a series of rhetorical questions, Fidel asked the crowds if the students needed weapons (No! No!) and whether he should agree to become commander in chief (Yes! Yes!). The Directorate surrendered its weapons that night; the last rival had succumbed.

President Urrutia put together a respectable cabinet, with José Miró Cardona, head of the Cuban Bar Association and one of Fidel's old professors, as Prime Minister; the 26 July Movement held only four out of fifteen ministries; the Communists and the rival opposition groups had none. Urrutia restored the constitution of 1940, and promised elections within eighteen months. The United States quickly recognized the new regime. Officially, Fidel was only commander of the army, which left him free to develop his own plans. In fact, he ran the whole show from his suite in the penthouse of the Hilton hotel, renamed the Habana Libre, and in a suburban beach house where the secret Office of Revolutionary Plans and Coordination met. This was a small circle of his closest advisers. Prominent among them were Che, Raúl, Camilo and Ramiro Valdés (who had been Raúl's right-hand man in the Sierra); they were all Marxists.

Within a few weeks of entering Havana, Fidel had begun discussions with the Cuban communist leadership, but these were kept secret, for fear of antagonizing many supporters and, more dangerously, the United States. In fact, an alliance with the communists made great sense. Fidel's own guerrilla commanders lacked the education and political or organisational skills to run a government; he couldn't trust the urban revolutionaries, the politicians or the liberal establishment, who might not be sufficiently loyal or revolutionary. Only the communists had a widespread, disciplined network, and were dedicated to dramatic change; they had an important following among workers and intellectuals; Raúl had already integrated them into the army. The communists agreed to support Fidel, but it was not

at all obvious that he would ever be a disciplined follower of the Party, or even a communist at all. When he actually did become a communist has been the subject of endless inconclusive discussion. There is no doubt that Marxism was a major influence on his thinking and that he was an admirer of Lenin (a real leader of a revolution) since the early 1950s. His estranged sister Juana later claimed that Fidel was already a communist by 1955 in Mexico, but he never proclaimed his adherence to Marxism until the end of 1961. In a sense (as the Soviets soon discovered) his style of intensely personal leadership was incompatible with the rigid demands of an established party, but at this stage he and the communists converged in their need for each other. For the Reds, Fidel could be a route to power; for him, the Party could provide an organisational base. Each may have been using the other.

In any case, Fidel and the secret Office – the parallel government – worked out the agenda that he presented in mass meetings, on television and in interviews. Its decisions sometimes seemed capricious: Fidel suddenly appointed as his Minister of Communications Enrique Otulski who had directed the Movement in central Cuba. He didn't even know where the Ministry was, let alone what it did. He learned fast and staffed his office with the faithful from his own province. Most of the government was being run by loyal amateurs, who had to learn on the job. In any case, the president and cabinet could only accept what was presented them and approve it without discussion. Decisions ultimately had to be made by Fidel, but no one knew where he might be or when he might act. He and his entourage maintained the impetuous and irregular life style of the guerrillas, to the intense frustration of the regular government.

Fidel soon assumed a more formal power, as the result of a curious dispute. The government wanted to close down some immoral holdovers from Batista: the national lottery, casinos and whorehouses. Their employees protested to Fidel who backed them, saying that alternative employment had to be found first. Miró Cardona, the prime minister, resigned in protest. On 13 February, Fidel became prime minister and had the constitution (which had only been approved a week before) changed to allow him to direct policy. Urrutia, who was never consulted on anything important, became a mere figurehead. Radicals increasingly replaced moderates in the government.

Castro kept erratic hours and moved around constantly. His private life was kept private, but was very active. As the young and dynamic leader of a revolution, Castro was immensely attractive to women. He often returned their attention but had no desire or time for commitment. Naty, the mother of Fidel's daughter Alina and now divorced, was very much in evidence for a while, hoping to renew their relationship, even possibly marry him. She still loved him, but his affection had completely cooled. Early in 1959, it turned to a stunning 19 year old, Marita Lorenz, daughter of a German ship captain. Fidel persuaded her to move into the Habana Libre. The affair ended later in the year when she was forced to have an abortion. By then, an Argentine psychiatrist, Lidia Vexel-Robertson, who had followed him from New York to Havana in hope of marriage, had her moment of success. But no woman ever overcame the barrier that Celia Sánchez erected around Fidel. She ran his household, guarded his privacy, and made sure that the women who go in, soon got out.

Cuba was still full of Batista's henchmen, many of them real criminals. Fidel sent them before special revolutionary tribunals staffed by military officers, not lawyers or judges and capable of dispensing the kind of swift justice that the population expected and approved. Raúl himself had dispensed with trials when he executed some 70 prisoners at Santiago early in January, and the tribunals had set to work in the provinces even as Fidel was en route to Havana. But the government at least kept capital punishment in its own hands: there was no lynching or mob violence. Although this was never a bloodthirsty regime, the executions (which eventually reached 500, sparing women and children) stirred denunciation in the American Senate. Fidel responded furiously that any US intervention would cost the lives of 200,000 gringos. These remarks marked the beginning of the end for friendly relations with the American government. In February, he consulted his massed supporters. When he asked the crowd what to do with war criminals, they enthusiastically answered 'to the wall'. The same month saw a vast public trial in Havana's main stadium of three especially brutal Batista commanders. Although they were plainly guilty, the atmosphere brought down an American jeer about a 'Roman circus' instead of justice. In fact, justice soon took a real beating. In March, a tribunal in

Santiago acquitted 44 of Batista's aviators. A disgusted Fidel demanded a new trial on the grounds that 'revolutionary justice is based not on legal principles but on moral conviction'.¹ When the aviators were sentenced, the rule of law came to an end.

The American public, still wild for the revolutionary hero, did not share its government's suspicions. On 15 April, Fidel left for Washington at the invitation of the Society of Newspaper Reporters. The students at Princeton and Harvard loved him, and he made a great hit in New York where he announced new slogans of 'bread without terror' and 'revolutionary humanism'. Only Vice-President Nixon, who met him in place of a conveniently absent Eisenhower, was not impressed. He concluded that Fidel knew nothing about economics and was very naïve about Communism: he was right on the first point only. By this time, the National Security Council was already talking about replacing Fidel, but few shared their fear that communism loomed in the Caribbean. They did not know that Raúl and his allies were firmly entrenched in the army and were taking over the vast popular militia, or that communist organizers were active in town and village.

Fidel had long demanded land reform. In power, he carried it out: 200,000 sharecroppers, squatters and tenants received deeds to the land they worked, confiscated from Cuban and American holdings. Maximum limits were placed on large landholdings, with everything in excess confiscated, then turned over to farmers or cooperatives. Fidel's passion for this reform made him choke with emotion at the mass rally on 8 May where he announced it, and Raúl had to continue. For a time, every phone operator in the country answered with 'agrarian reform works'. The peasants were overjoyed, even though they could not sell the land and had to grow the crops ordained by the new National Institute for Agrarian Reform (INRA). This all-powerful organization extended its control over the whole economy, financing construction, confiscating land and building up its own army. Fidel used it as another means of bypassing the regular government. In fact, the whole land reform had been worked out by the Office of Revolutionary Plans and Coordination under the supervision of Che; Sorí-Marín, the minister of agriculture, knew nothing about it. He resigned, to become a bitter enemy of the regime.

The Revolution was changing the whole society. An Urban Reform Law drastically reduced rents; utility charges were cut; and property illegally acquired during Batista's time was confiscated. Private beaches were opened to the public, racial discrimination was ended, and free education and medical care were instituted. Workers got large raises, while the rich began to feel the pinch. By the end of the year, some 1,500 laws had been passed.

On 16 July 1959, huge headlines, FIDEL RESIGNS! greeted the astonished public: Fidel was no longer prime minister (though he kept the army command). The next day, he explained on TV that he could not work with Urrutia who was conspiring against the Revolution. Vast crowds denounced the horrified president who resigned as he watched Fidel's speech. No evidence against him was ever produced; his real offense had been his outspoken hostility to communism. Urrutia fled to the Venezuelan embassy and on the 26th, the anniversary of Moncada, Fidel agreed to return to office, with the radical Osvaldo Dorticós as president. He had carried out a coup by television. His regime was taking firmer shape as revolutionaries replaced civil servants, and nationalizations and confiscations weakened the old power structure. Since the Revolution was in charge and approved by frequent mass meetings, there was no need for elections. They could be held, Fidel announced, only under suitable conditions, perhaps after four years. The crowds chanted 'Revolution First, Elections After'. The elections have never been held.

Urrutia was accused of participating in the conspiracy of Cuba's first serious defector, Maj. Díaz Lanz, commander of the air force, the ace pilot who had flown supplies into the Sierra from Latin America. He had left for Miami in June, and denounced the growing communist influence before the US Senate. More seriously, in October, the devoted revolutionary Húber Matos resigned as governor of Camagüey province because of the spread of communism in the army. Fidel flew into a rage and sent the reluctant Camilo to arrest him. In a passionate speech before a million spectators the Maximum Leader accused Matos of conspiring with Urrutia, Díaz Lanz and the United States to depose him. When he asked the crowd what he should do with Matos, they shouted back, 'To the wall'. Fidel restored the revolutionary courts and Raúl's men moved into the key ministries. At Matos' trial in

December, Fidel was the chief accuser, speaking for seven hours. There was no need for evidence; Matos got twenty years. Anyone who opposed communism was considered an enemy of the Revolution.

Disloyalty was rare, though, for revolutionary enthusiasm still burned, guided by Fidel who rejected any public cult of personality. Eventually, statues of living leaders were forbidden, nor could streets, public places or towns be named for them. Of course, everyone knew who was in charge, since Fidel's own image was constantly in the press or on TV. Raúl and Che were his closest collaborators. Together with Camilo, they were moving communists into key positions in the army, the security services, the INRA and the unions. By now, Raúl commanded the armed forces, while Che was minister of industry and head of the national bank (he characteristically signed only 'Che' on the banknotes). Camilo, though, had disappeared: on 28 October, the plane bringing him back from Camagüey mysteriously crashed and was never recovered.

The traditionally turbulent University soon fell into line. Unsympathetic professors lost their jobs and the student elections in October took a new shape. Fidel appeared in person, demanding unity and ensuring that his man was elected head of the student union. Since then – for the first time in Cuba's history – there has been no opposition from the universities. Labour was next. When the unions held democratic elections in November, Fidel again demanded unity, with only one candidate for each office. Within a year, most unions were run by communists or their allies. They, too, caused no further trouble. Nor did the youth, as the 26 July movement absorbed their organizations.

The Catholic Church did not succumb so easily. In November 1959 a million people gathered in the Plaza to greet the sacred image of Cobre, brought from Santiago to the National Catholic Congress. They shouted 'Cuba sí, comunismo no'. Next May, the archbishop of Havana denounced relations with the godless Soviet Union, and in September the bishops rather tactlessly announced that if there were a war between the US and the USSR, they would support the Americans. This was real bravado, for the Church was much weaker than it looked. There were very few churches or priests in the countryside, where the Revolution easily took root. Religious education was in private fee-paying schools (such as Fidel had attended), barely accessible by the poor. Even worse for the Church's reputation, many priests had opposed the Revolution and sided with Batista. Within a few years, the Church would go the way of other organizations.

So far, the Revolution was not communist. The vast majority of the population had no desire for a communist society, and Castro knew that he had to tread carefully to avoid intervention from the United States. As late as July 1961, the credulous Herbert Matthews could write that Fidel was actually anti-communist. In fact, Cuba was drawing closer to the Soviet Union. Camilo and Fidel had already received a high-ranking Soviet 'journalist' (KGB agent) in October 1959 and laid the groundwork for friendly relations. The following February, deputy prime Anastas Mikoyan arrived in Havana to open a trade fair. It was an enormous success, with a million Cuban visitors. Through Mikoyan, the Soviets agreed to buy a million tons of sugar and to establish diplomatic and cultural relations. Soon after, Cuba established the JUCEPLAN (state planning) organization to coordinate all economic activity. Soviet-style central planning was beginning to take over. Not long after, the last moderate in the cabinet resigned, leaving the field free for the radicals.

The first two years were a time of tremendous military buildup as Fidel determined to protect himself from enemies at home and abroad. A new army, the Revolutionary Armed Forces, had 100,000 men by early 1960 and 300,000 a year later. A lightly armed popular militia of some 100,000 provided a valuable reserve. So did the secret service, reorganised as the General Directorate of Intelligence under Ramiro Valdés, minister of the interior. Expert advice from the KGB forged it into a formidable apparatus. Since Eisenhower's arms embargo was still in force, Fidel had to turn elsewhere to supply his vast military. Europe was an obvious source. On 4 March 1960, a French freighter filled with Belgian ammunition exploded in Havana harbor, killing 81 people. Fidel rushed to the scene and accused the US of sabotage. In his speech honoring the dead, he created the revolution's most popular slogan: 'patria o muerte, venceremos!' 'fatherland or death; we will win!' He may have been wrong about the ship, but by now the CIA was drawing up detailed plans to remove him.

May Day set the tone for the future. A huge day-long parade of soldiers and civilians filed past the Leader and the Soviet, Chinese and East European delegates. Workers joined in large numbers because

they had been warned that absence would be considered counterrevolutionary. Fidel's long speech included an ominous announcement that old-style elections were no longer necessary. Since the Revolution had come to power by the will of the people, there was no need for formality: 'direct democracy' would replace the vote. The people responded 'Revolution yes! Elections no!' and joined in a new chant that was to become immensely popular: 'Cuba sí, Yanquis no'.

Fidel had told the American newspaper men that 'the first thing dictators do is to finish the free press and establish censorship. There is no doubt that the free press is the first enemy of dictatorship'.² Since Cuba still had a free press, the regime was subject to widespread criticism. The first step against it, in December 1959, involved inserting a postscript by pro-Castro journalists and printers at the end of each critical article. When the newspaper *Avance* refused to print them, it was closed, as were several other publications that could be linked with Batista. Havana's oldest and most respected paper, the conservative *Diario de la Marina*, succumbed in May 1960 when an armed mob invaded its premises. The police refused to act and 128 years of publication came to an abrupt end. The last independent paper closed two weeks later, and *Bohemia*, the immensely popular magazine that had given Fidel his best publicity, was taken over in July. The government also seized the radio and television stations. By the end of the year, when US papers were forbidden to circulate, the free press had come to a dead end, never to be restored. Dictatorship was looming in Cuba.

Dictators often slaughter their opponents. Fidel followed a much cleverer policy, using the safety valve of emigration to defuse discontent. After the first wave of executions, dissidents were free to leave (though without their valuables). The first years of the revolution saw an unparalleled exodus of the upper and middle classes. Faced with nationalization, confiscation, ever more severe restrictions and growing economic problems, businessmen, doctors, lawyers and potential opponents poured out of the country. Most of them brought their bitter resentment to Miami. They were joined by children whose parents feared that the state was about to take complete control of their offspring. In the autumn of 1960 Operation Peter Pan came into being to smuggle out children whose parents could not leave. Cuban activists, the churches and the international airlines cooperated in a two-year effort that brought some 14,000 children to the United States, many of them not to be reunited with their parents for decades. Eventually, over a million people – 10% of the population – left. This was a dramatic change, for Cuba had traditionally been a country of immigration, with people wanting to move in even under Batista. No longer.

Revolutionary changes turned American suspicion into hostility, especially as Castro drew closer to the Soviets whose interest in Cuba grew as their own relations with the US deteriorated. A shipload of Russian oil brought the first crisis in June 1960. He ordered the American companies to refine it. When they refused, they were nationalized, and Cuba turned to the USSR for its fuel supplies. Soon after, Eisenhower canceled the Cuban sugar quota. Khrushchev responded by increasing his purchases and rhetorically promised to stretch out a hand to the Cuban people and protect their revolution with rockets, if necessary. For the moment, nobody imagined that would ever happen.

Fidel returned to New York in September for one of his greatest theatrical triumphs. Before addressing the UN, he walked out of his hotel in a dispute about payment. His ostentatious move to the Theresa Hotel in Harlem, the famous black section of the city, gained phenomenal publicity. He took all his meals in his room, allowing the New York tabloids a field day reporting on the Cubans plucking chickens in the hotel, which also had other functions. The scantily-clad ladies who worked there shocked the more puritanical of Fidel's entourage, but delighted others. They were no obstacle to a stream of radical world leaders who visited the hotel. Nasser and Tito, though, paled before Khrushchev himself who received a great bear hug. He told the massed reporters that he didn't know whether Fidel was a communist, but he was a *Fidelista*. The love feast with the Soviets had begun. The UN meeting, where Fidel gave the longest speech in its history was almost an anticlimax, but it gave him the new role of international statesman.

The day of his return, Fidel announced the creation of his most potent organization, the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs). These watchdog groups eventually embraced 80% of the population, with headquarters on every street and in every settlement. Their job was ostensibly to maintain local security, but they reported all suspicious activities and people, as well as dissidence and complaints, to the growing secret police. It was soon impossible to advance in any way without

attending meetings and getting a certificate from a Committee; the CDRs became the regime's best means for controlling the population. They were needed, because opposition to communism was turning into armed resistance, at its most active and organized in the mountains of central Cuba.

Fidel naturally (and correctly) accused the United States of supporting the rebels, one more element in the increasing hostility. Since June, the government had been nationalizing American properties at an alarming rate. First came the big hotels, with their Mafia-run casinos, then sugar mills, refineries and public utilities. Eisenhower, involved in a presidential campaign, had to act tough. On 13 October, he banned all US exports except medicine. The blockade had begun. Castro reacted immediately: on the 14th, the INRA expropriated banks and 382 companies belonging to foreigners and to the Cuban bourgeoisie. The same day, a second urban reform law prohibited people from owning more than one house (the state confiscated and distributed the rest), and allowed tenants to buy their apartments. American interests were badly hurt, but Fidel could proclaim that the program he had announced in 'History Will Absolve Me' was accomplished. Capitalism was disappearing from Cuba. The project continued on the 25th when the state seized another 166 US companies, including such giants as Coca Cola, General Electric, Sears Roebuck and the nation's biggest nickel mine. The nationalisations, which eventually involved more than \$1 billion worth of property, were intended to benefit the population by abolishing profits and lowering the cost of living, while eliminating US control of the economy. The state was in charge, and most Cubans became its employees. Eisenhower had had enough. On 29 October, the American ambassador was recalled, never to return.

The Christmas of 1960 was like no other; public celebrations were banned and instead of the traditional Nativity scenes there was a huge image of Fidel, Che and Juan Almeida (the highest ranking black in the movement) as the Three Wise Men bearing gifts of Agrarian reform, Urban Reform and Education. Camilo adorned the sky as an angel; the star was José Martí.

- 1 Szulc 485.
- 2 Szulc 489.