

Cuban Affairs

Quarterly Electronic Journal



Vol. 1, Issue 4

October 2006

Inside the Cuban Revolution: Fidel Castro and the Cuban Underground. Julia E. Sweig. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 2002. 286 pp.

Stop the presses! An award-winning book from Harvard University Press yields new revelations about the politico-military struggle that nearly half a century ago rid Cuba of Fulgencio Batista, only to enable Fidel Castro to impose the longest-running dictatorship in the history of the country—indeed, of all of Latin America.

Having trawled through more than a thousand pages of documents (“letters, operational plans, and internal memoranda”) of the *Movimiento 26 de Julio*—M267 for short—housed in Castro’s “presidential” library, interviewed several of the surviving principals, and done additional research in the U.S., Dr. Sweig, currently Director of the Latin America Program at the Council on Foreign Relations, reaches the startling conclusion “that the revolution was not made by guerrillas, peasants, and workers alone”!

Instead, during most of the time that Castro and his ragtag army were ensconced in the *Sierra Maestra*, as remote a hideout as one could find in the entire country, M267 urban contingents carried out acts of sabotage and assassination; procured men and material for the *Sierra*; traveled abroad to raise money, buy weapons, and negotiate hollow

“pacts” with rival opposition groups engaged in their own independent campaigns against the dictatorship; and last but not least, tried to assuage Washington’s fears about Castro.

The book consists of 16 relatively short chapters, each covering a brief period—one to three months—in the history of the insurgency, told for the most part from the perspective of Frank Pais and Rene Ramos Latour, two leaders of the underground that lost their lives in the struggle. It tracks the contest between the *llano* (the urban underground) and the *Sierra* for control over strategy. The former favored a general strike combined with an uprising by urban militias while the latter opted for growing a revolutionary army that would wage guerrilla warfare—and, not coincidentally, serve as the backbone for the new regime. After the failure of the April 1958 general strike, the *Sierra*, that is, Fidel Castro, assumed absolute control.

But in Dr. Sweig’s telling, when it came to dealing with rival anti-Batista organizations, the two factions were as one on the necessity to steer clear of entangling alliances that would impinge on their freedom of action after the revolutionary victory. They would request, demand, or extort money, weapons, and other assistance from key individuals and groups in exchange for vague promises of power-sharing at some future date, which they had no intention of keeping.

To bargain with other groups for shares of power—that would be *politiqueria*, rubbish politics. In other words, the very essence of parliamentary government, involving the dividing of government posts and influence over policy in rough proportion to each party’s support among the general public, was an object of scorn. What Fidel Castro wanted above all was monopoly power, the hegemonic control over the country which the regime has exercised to this day.

Curiously, in an epilogue titled “Transitions Then and Now,” Dr. Sweig claims that in preparation for a post-Castro Cuba the regime is employing some of the same tactics that M267 pursued in the period she studied. One is “cultivating the impression of desiring alliances” with “key individuals” “at home.” But who those individuals could be in a country devoid of private property or an autonomous civil society is left unsaid.

Another tactic consists in the “astute use of the press,” something that M267 engaged in whenever Batista lifted censorship temporarily. Passed over in silence, however, is the complete control over the media by the Castro regime. But then, the press she has in mind is not Cuba’s but America’s. She cites “the Elian Gonzalez episode” as “a recent example” of the “sophisticated” manner in which the regime managed to expose “a split between moderates and hard-liners in the Cuban-American community.”

As if these claims and silences were not perplexing enough, consider the following sentence: “Still, the Cuban government has been enormously effective in making its case directly and indirectly against the embargo in the halls of Congress and throughout American society, while at the same time mirroring the controls the U.S. government places on Cuban citizens by controlling contact with Cuba, not by tourists from this country, but by other Americans, whom the Bush White House, some in Congress, and the hard-line exile community now regard as potential agents of subversion.”

So, there you have it. If the Castro regime exerts draconian controls on whom Cubans can see, meet, and talk to, whom they can contact on the internet or receive into their homes, what newspapers or books they can read or radio or television programs they can watch, whom they can work for and whom they can hire, how much money they can make or what property to acquire or tourist resorts to visit, what organizations they can

establish and when or where their adherents can assemble, what labor unions or political parties they can organize or join, and so on ad infinitum, it is only “mirroring the controls the U.S. government places on Cuban citizens.”

I bet you didn't know that, any more than you knew that it wasn't only guerrillas, peasants, and workers who overthrew Batista. It is no wonder that the book won a prestigious award from the American Historical Association.

Alfred G. Cuzán
The University of West Florida

Cuban Affairs
Quarterly Electronic Journal

Editor: Jaime Suchlicki

Assistant to the Editor: Susel Pérez

Assistant Editors:

Eric Driggs

Hans de Salas del Valle

Book Review Editor: Juan del Aguila

Copy Editor: Kathy Hamman

Business Manager: Eugene Pons

The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies or the University of Miami. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's expressed written permission. However, subscribers may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

© Copyright 2006 Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies, University of Miami
1531 Brescia Avenue, Coral Gables, 33146-3010;
Tel: 305 284-CUBA (2822), Fax: 305 284-4875, Email: cubanaffairs@miami.edu