

Review - Cuba and Revolutionary Latin America: An Oral History

Written by Steve Cushion

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STEVE CUSHION, MAR 25 2017

Cuba and Revolutionary Latin America: An Oral History
by Dirk Kruijt
London: Zed Books, 2017

Many historians have wondered why Che Guevara's intervention in Bolivia was such a disaster when the Cuban Revolution, which he was trying to repeat, had removed the Batista dictatorship so successfully. Dirk Kruijt's extensive interviews with the senior officers involved in the Cuban interventions in guerrilla activities in Latin America go some way to giving us an insight into the thinking behind the practice.

In the revolutionary war in Cuba, there appears to have been a division of labour between the Rebel Army in the hills and the underground forces supporting them. It is probably inevitable that soldiers are mainly preoccupied with the immediate fighting, while not concerning themselves with where their supplies are coming from. This will be particularly true if the supply chain is efficient and, being a clandestine organisation, operates on a "need to know" basis. The Cuban revolutionary underground during 1957 and 1958 was remarkably efficient, keeping the front line guerrillas well supplied, while the rebel fighters did not see the effort required. Kruijt's interviews with "insurgent women" are particularly interesting, for example María Antonia Figueroa Araujo, a teacher whose involvement began by hiding the wounded after the failed Moncada attack, who went on to be July 26 Movement's treasurer in Santiago. She was OK dealing with small donations, but did not feel confident to deal with the large sums of money which were later raised through "Revolutionary Taxation", so she passed the job on and changed her contribution to going up to the mountains at weekends to give medical aid to the wounded. Gladys "Marel" García Pérez, who many know of as a historian, was the youthful leader of an urban sabotage group who went on to become a diplomat despite her stating that she could "only make and detonate bombs". This is typical of the quick promotion that many of the underground militants experienced when they replaced the functionaries of the old regime who had fled or were purged; María Antonia Figueroa was made Superintendent of Education in Havana immediately following the Rebel victory. As a result, when it came to organising revolutionary interventions in the rest of Latin America, the people who knew the need for a revolutionary infrastructure had moved on and were now occupied full time building the new society.

This was a time of military dictatorships in the region, who were well aware of the US government's paranoia about the Cuban example spreading and who knew how to gain US material support by blaming Cuba for all left-wing opposition. Of course the example of the Cuban Revolution did spur the emergence of guerrilla movements, but actual Cuban involvement was undercover with not many actual Cubans involved. Manuel Piñero was the head of the Cuban programme of aid for the guerrilla movements in other countries, which was known by a number of different names, but with fairly consistent personnel. He had organised revolutionary intelligence in the Sierra and was made head of the international branch of Cuban intelligence in 1959. He was central to Cuban attempts to export revolution throughout the 1960s and early 70s, reporting directly to Fidel Castro after his January 1959 call for rebellions against the "old dictatorships".

There followed a series of tragic disasters starting with the June 1959 invasion of the Dominican Republic, followed

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in short order by failures in Panama, Haiti, Paraguay, Guatemala and Venezuela. The attempt in Brazil in 1966 resulted in 11 guerrillas facing an army mobilisation of 10,000 soldiers. One of the Brazilian guerrilla leaders interviewed in the book recalls:

That was one of the problems of the 'foco', it provided you with technical knowledge, but it neglected the fundamental political options. Without the political issue we turned into para-troopers

The organisational efficiency of the Cubans did not compensate for the lack of revolutionary infrastructure and mass popular support. The local political situation does not seem to have been taken into account.

The crucial moment in the triumph of the Cuban revolution was the 1st of January 1959 when Batista fled and Fidel Castro called a general strike over *Radio Rebelde*. This was an immediate and total success, stopping in its tracks the coup attempt by some army officers, egged on by the US Embassy. It must have seemed easy, but one wonders if Fidel was aware of the immense preparation that had gone into making this strike, the two clandestine workers congresses attracting over 800 revolutionary shop stewards, the underground networks and local revolutionary committees painstakingly built up over the previous year, the unity talks with the communists and much more beside. None of this preparation had been done in the later guerrilla campaigns. The two members of the Cuban leadership who had been involved in these preparations were Camilo Cienfuegos, who died in October 1959 and Raul Castro, who was completely tied up with his position as commander of the Army. One can read the memoirs of both Che and Fidel without finding any real reference to the importance of the *llano*. The final disaster, of course, occurred in Bolivia when *el Che* himself died trying to implement his own policy. His famous "*One, Two, Three, many Vietnams*" neglects the real experience of the Vietnamese fight, over 20 years, against the French, the Japanese and then the USA, in what was radically different from the political situation anywhere in the Americas.

At the start of the 1970s, the evident failure of the 'foco' strategy, combined with increased reliance on the USSR following the failure of the 10 Million Ton sugar harvest, caused a rethink. This combined with the changing political situation as left-wing, nationalist/reformist governments started to replace the old dictatorships in Peru, Panama and Chile. Meanwhile the successful Cuban intervention in Angola resulted in improved relations with Brazil as it helped Brazilian oil interests — the Law of Unintended Consequences. Peronism's hostility to the USA also gave Cuba an unexpected ally, "My Enemy's Enemy". Meanwhile, "Dependency Theory" and "Liberation Theology" produced new political friends. In the immediate neighbourhood, new relationships were forged with Jagan and Burnham in Guyana, Manley in Jamaica and, most importantly the New Jewel Movement in Grenada. At this point Cuban foreign policy becomes more open, less cloak and dagger, and therefore more common knowledge and, frankly, less exciting. It is still valuable to hear the testimony of the participants, but one is left with a slight sense of anti-climax.

The book's strength is the interviews which provide a real feel for an important period in Latin American history, its weakness is some of the explanatory text. For example I showed the description of the relationship with the 'Revo' in Grenada to some friends who had been closely involved in the New Jewel Movement; they recalled things differently. But that is not important compared to the contribution this book makes to the source material available to students of revolution in the Americas. Kruijt is clearly a marvellous interviewer who has given us an entry into the thinking behind important events. For those who read Castellano, his earlier *La Revolución Cubana En Nuestra America: El Internacionalismo Anónimo* (Ruth Casa Editorial, 2015) jointly authored with Cuban historian Luis Suárez Salazar, provides a real treasure trove.

There is a tendency amongst some historians to give oral history a lower value than written documents in terms of "historical truth", but Kruijt has provided us here with a valuable source of material to supplement the available texts and, more importantly, to get some idea of the motivations of the participants. Given that the interviewees were acting clandestinely, there is unlikely to be much in the written record and these interviews are probably our only source.

About the author:

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Steve Cushion is a retired university lecturer with a PhD in Caribbean Labour History who lives in the East End of London. For twenty years, he worked as a bus driver in London, and has been an active socialist and trade unionist all his adult life. Steve's recent publications include *A Hidden History of the Cuban Revolution: How the Working Class Shaped the Guerrillas' Victory* (2016, Monthly Review Press) and *Killing Communists in Havana: The Start of the Cold War in Latin America* (2016, Socialist History Society).