FIVE

TRANSFORMING CUBA, 1959–60

Batista had fled, but for the moment General Cantillo held power. To stop him from setting up a military junta, Fidel called a general strike, which the people enthusiastically turned into a three-day holiday. The army actually posed no problem; Camilo and Che easily took over its bases in Havana. 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 make

sure his men were in control of local barracks and administrations. 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. His first stop was at Echeverría's house, to show his appreciation for the urban rebels, and the first people he met were Naty and his son, Fidelito, who moved him to tears. 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 had occupied the university. 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, 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 Havana Libre, and in a beach house where the secret Office of Revolutionary Plans and Co-ordination met. Marxists were prominent among his advisers. With them, he worked out the agenda that he presented in mass meetings, on television and in interviews. The president and cabinet could only approve without discussion. 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.

Cuba was still full of Batista's henchmen, many of them real criminals. Fidel sent them before special revolutionary tribunals. Although this was never a bloodthirsty regime, the executions (which eventually reached 500) 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 forty-four 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. 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 towns and villages.

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. 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 National Institute for Agrarian Reform (INRA). This 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.

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 no longer 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. He 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 constant 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, Major

Díaz Lanz, commander of the air force. He had left in June, and denounced the growing communist influence before the US Senate. More seriously, in October, the devoted revolutionary Huber Matos resigned as governor of Camaguey province because of the communists 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.

Disloyalty was rare, though, for revolutionary enthusiasm still burned, guided by Fidel who rejected any public cult of personality (though he constantly appeared in the media). Raúl and Che were his closest collaborators. By now, Raúl commanded the armed forces where communists were gaining control, 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 Camaguey 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 unanimity 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.

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 Minister 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 co-ordinate 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 build-up as Fidel determined to protect himself from enemies at home and abroad. The army was doubled and augmented by a vast popular militia. Since Eisenhower's arms embargo was still in force, Fidel had to turn elsewhere. On 4 March 1960 a French freighter filled with Belgian ammunition exploded in Havana harbour, killing eighty-one people. Fidel rushed to the scene and accused the US of sabotage. In his speech honouring 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.

Fidel had told the American newspapermen 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. After the first wave of executions, dissidents were free to leave. 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. Eventually, over a million people – 10 per cent of the population – left. Fidel often used this safety valve to defuse discontent.

Revolutionary changes turned American suspicion into hostility, especially as Castro drew closer to the Soviets. Soviet interest in Cuba grew as their own relations with the US deteriorated. A shipload of Russian oil brought the first crisis in June 1960. Che 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 cancelled 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.

On the day of his return Fidel announced the creation of his most potent organization, the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDRs). These watchdog groups eventually embraced 80 per cent 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. Security, though, was necessary, for opposition was still active, especially in the Escambray mountains. Fidel personally led the first attack against the guerrillas after returning from New York. He sent in 100,000 of his new militia and followed Batista's detested policy of forcibly evacuating peasants, many of them to abandoned houses in Havana. The campaign gave the militia training that would soon be put to use.

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, beginning with the big hotels, with their Mafia-run casinos, then sugar mills, refineries and public utilities. The nationalizations were intended to benefit the population by eliminating profits and lowering the cost of living, while eliminating US control of the economy. Eisenhower, involved in a presidential campaign, had to act tough: on 13 October he banned all US exports to Cuba except medicine. The blockade had begun. Castro reacted immediately: on the 14th the INRA expropriated banks and 382 companies belonging to the Cuban bourgeoisie. The same day, the Urban Reform Law drastically reduced rents and allowed tenants to buy their apartments. American interests were badly hurt. Finally, on 29 October, the American ambassador was recalled, never to return. Cuba was free from US domination.

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.