

EXPERIMENTS IN REVOLUTION, 1961-70

The revolution named its years: 1961 was the Year of Education, as Fidel determined to eradicate illiteracy. Ten thousand classrooms sprouted while an enthusiastic army of students flocked to the country, to instruct the peasants. They used the manual *Venceremos* which taught people to spell words like Cuba, Fidel, Camilo and Raúl; the first phrase was 'La Reforma Agraria' and the first sentence 'the peasants work in the cooperative'. The campaign worked, but it had unexpected consequences. Many of the girl instructors, released from traditional restraints, came back pregnant. Breaking traditions included teaching children to obey the party more than their parents, and sending many of them to work in the fields.

The year began with a huge parade full of Soviet equipment and Fidel's speech denouncing 'worms' who had abandoned the revolution. He ordered the US to reduce its Havana staff drastically ('Throw them out!', clamoured the crowd). On 3 January Eisenhower broke diplomatic relations. That same month, the new president J.F. Kennedy inherited the plans to invade Cuba or, with the help of the Mafia, to assassinate Castro. As a preliminary, the CIA launched sabotage that consumed sugar fields, factories and stores, and attacked transport and military bases.

Preparations for the invasion were too poorly disguised to escape Fidel's efficient intelligence. He warned massed rallies of an impending attack and put the militia on alert. The original plan called for a force to be landed near Trinidad on the south coast, where they could make contact with the rebels in the Escambray. At the last minute, though, the landing was moved to the less populated Bay of Pigs, at the edge of a vast swamp which, as it happened, Fidel knew extremely well. At dawn on 15 April 1961, B26 bombers painted in Cuban colours attacked Cuba's airfields, but Fidel had hidden his best aircraft. The next day his funeral speech for those killed

forthcoming elections, announced to a tense public that he was sending the fleet to blockade Cuba. Many thought that nuclear war was at hand. Two days later, to the world's relief, Soviet ships heading for Cuba turned back. The immediate crisis was over, but the missiles remained. When Kennedy threatened to invade by the 30th, Khrushchev capitulated. In exchange for the withdrawal of American missiles from Turkey, he agreed to dismantle the Soviet missiles in Cuba. He also secured an informal promise that the Americans would not invade. In a sense, Khrushchev's bluff succeeded, for he guaranteed security for the Cuban revolution at no cost to the Soviet Union.

Kennedy, however, had no intention of leaving Cuba alone. In 1963, the CIA continued to support sabotage and even open attacks. The popular *Life* magazine happily reported one of them in an adventure story entitled 'A Wild Fighting Ride on the Old Spanish Main'.¹ They coincided with advanced and sometimes fantastic plans against the Maximum Leader himself. Agents devised schemes to make Fidel's beard fall out, kill him with a poisoned cigar or diving suit, blow him up with an exploding seashell as he swam or, more practically, suborn a

waiter to drop cyanide in his milkshake. In all this, the CIA had the co-operation of the Mafia, still smarting from the loss of their lucrative casinos. Castro, who knew exactly what was happening, issued a warning in September: 'US leaders should think that if they assist in terrorist plots to eliminate Cuban leaders, they themselves will not be safe.'² In November, Kennedy was assassinated. Among the innumerable explanations are those that name Cuba: that Castro turned a group sent to kill him against Kennedy, or that Lee Harvey Oswald, a great admirer of Cuba, acted in what he thought were Castro's interests. Nothing can ever be proved, but the suspicion lingers.

When Fidel learned that Khrushchev was withdrawing the missiles, he flew into a rage, kicking the walls and breaking a mirror. Relations with his Russian friends and the local communists remained difficult for a decade as he tried to bring the communists under his own control and to create an independent foreign policy. Ideology was not a problem: already on 1 December 1961 he announced: 'I am a Marxist-Leninist and shall remain so until the last days of my life,'³ a statement that got him thrown out of the Organization of American

States. By then, he had created a monolithic party, the Integrated Revolutionary Organizations that the communists, with their superior organization, dominated. It became the Cuban Communist Party in October 1965, with Fidel as first secretary. By 1968, when he removed his last potential (and openly pro-Soviet) rivals, his personal dominance of State and Party was assured.

In the 1960s Fidel needed peace at home so he could deal with the Russians, whom he never forgave for their betrayal in the Missile Crisis. Relations took a turn for the better in April 1963 when he flew off for a grand tour of the Soviet Union. During his forty-day stay, he upset his hosts by insisting on walking unannounced through Red Square, but received a warmer reception than any foreigner since the Second World War. He reviewed the May Day parade at the Kremlin, toured the whole country and was lavishly entertained. He returned the following January for meetings where the Soviets guaranteed a high price for sugar and promised cheap oil in exchange. This helped Cuba's economy but increased dependence on Russia which expected a recalcitrant Castro to follow its policies. Despite an unprecedented visit by the new Russian leader Alexei

Kosygin in 1967, Fidel refused to attend the celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of the Russian Revolution that November. Relations reached a new low.

Problems revolved around Fidel's determination to support revolutionary movements in Latin America and Africa, while the Russians insisted on working through local communist parties. Successful revolutions would give Fidel allies, weaken American global dominance, and allow him greater independence. His agent was Che Guevara, whose hopes of industrializing Cuba and replacing material with moral incentives were rapidly fading. Already in 1963 Che had been sent to Africa to establish guerrilla bases. But he became so disillusioned with tribal infighting that he gave up, and disappeared. After Fidel read Che's letter renouncing Cuban citizenship in October 1965, nothing was seen or heard of him. In fact, he had left secretly to stir revolution in Bolivia. His long campaign there, doomed by the opposition of Moscow and the local communists, and the lack of indigenous support, culminated in his death on 9 October 1967. The next week, Fidel mentioned him for the first time in two years. He instantly became a legend, the hero whose

portraits soon decorated the rooms of radical western students and still adorn all Cuba. Che's death left Fidel as the only figure who commanded widespread affection.

When Fidel continued to preach revolution in Latin America, the Russians decided to teach him a lesson. Havana's traditional military parade of New Year 1968 had to be cancelled because of lack of fuel. The Russians were holding back deliveries at a time when Fidel had ambitious economic plans. With no alternative source of aid, he could not resist for long. Consequently, when the Russians invaded Czechoslovakia in August 1968, Castro was one of the few world leaders to support them. At the end of the year, he agreed to abandon revolution in Latin America. Oil deliveries increased and Cuba returned to the Soviet embrace.

Castro showed in 1968 that he was not about to allow a 'Prague Spring' in Cuba. In fact, he had been bringing his own people under ever tighter control for years. Repression began with the mass arrests during the Bay of Pigs, soon followed by 'Operation P' against pimps, prostitutes and pederasts. In both cases, information from the CDRs led the security forces into private homes. Intimidation grew as the

economic situation declined. The US blockade, incompetent central planning, huge military expenses and the exodus of the professionals produced constant shortages and deteriorating conditions, especially in Havana. Fidel had no love for the bourgeois capital but directed resources to the countryside, where roads, water supply and housing brought real improvements. Nevertheless, in April 1962, a huge crowd of housewives in the town of Cardenas, most of them poor and black, marched for food and against communism. Fidel sent in the tanks, crushing the last public demonstration against the revolution. He had also attacked the church after the US invasion, closing religious schools and expelling dozens of priests. Catholics were forbidden to join the Party. Jehovah's Witnesses and other sects followed. In 1965 came the turn of rebellious teenagers and homosexuals, who were sent off to re-education camps where they received extremely rough treatment.

Cultural dissent also suffered. In 1961 the most popular literary review in Latin America, *Lunes de Revolución*, was closed. Fidel, his pistol on the table, presided over the trial of the editors and writers accused of being counter-revolutionary. From now

on, his principle of 'within the revolution everything, against the revolution nothing' prevailed. Yet at the same time, the government produced huge quantities of books: people could read all the approved literature they wanted. Cuba was still remarkable in the Soviet bloc for the freedom of expression its experimental artists and poets enjoyed, a feature that attracted sympathetic European intellectuals. That, too, ended in 1968 when the internationally famed poet Heberto Padilla, whose poems of disillusion had won a major Cuban prize, was denounced and forbidden to publish. By then, though, Fidel had opened the safety valve again. In September 1965 he told the CDRs that anyone who wanted to leave was free to go. Thousands suddenly appeared at the small port of Camarioca; President Johnson promised to receive them. Although they had surrendered all valuables and lost their jobs and ration cards while waiting for transport, they left. Two of Fidel's sisters went with them.

Fidel kept his personal life strictly private, even maintaining, as he wrote to Naty in 1954, 'you know that personal matters are the least important to me'.⁴ His family was last publicly mentioned when his mother died in August 1963. Although Raúl wept,

Fidel showed no outward emotion; the old lady had never forgiven him for burning her cane fields during the revolution. Other ties were also broken. Soon after the revolution, Mirta emigrated to Spain, reluctantly leaving Fidelito in his father's charge. Naty was doomed to disappointment. For a couple of years, Fidel continued to see her, but soon ended the relationship, though he did occasionally visit their daughter Alina. Like Teresa Casuso, Naty ran up against the wall that Celia built around Fidel. Celia no longer had a romantic relation with Fidel, but she kept out other women who might have a claim, while admitting casual one-night stands. There were plenty of them. Although flattered by the leader's attentions, some complained that he didn't remove his cigar or boots during their encounters, or even worse, wanted only to talk politics. Celia saw to it that they received presents on their birthdays. By 1962 or '63, Fidel had started another family, with a dark-eyed beauty, Delia Soto, by whom he eventually had five sons. But the public knew nothing of that.

Nor did they know where he lived. During the early years of the revolution, he moved between the Havana Libre, Celia's and other apartments in Havana and his beach house. Later, he was reputed to have a

couple of mansions, a hunting estate and an entire luxurious island where he received foreign visitors and conducted financial affairs. In all this, he maintained the restless habits of the guerrilla, while protecting himself from the very real threat of assassination.

Fidel wanted to diversify the economy by ending Cuba's dependence on sugar, but attempts to substitute industry failed from lack of funds and the need to produce sugar to pay for Russian oil. In his effort to gain economic independence, he launched the country on a series of wild experiments, often the result of reading that made him believe he had discovered novel solutions. His ideal was a rural society with organized communes where the state, rather than the family, would raise the children. The family, like private property, would become superfluous. Private enterprise, in any case, was doomed. In March 1968 Fidel launched an offensive against the last vestiges of capitalism. After denouncing people who hung around bars and fried food stalls, he shut down private shops, bars, garages and every other place where people gathered. This supposedly freed workers for agriculture and industry, but actually caused massive disruption and

high prices. Sullen resignation set in as the vibrant street life of Havana and other cities came to an end.

Raising agricultural production was Fidel's special dream. Reforms in 1963 restricted private farms to 67 acres; their owners were tightly controlled. The rest were organized into huge state farms on the Soviet model. They became the subject of Fidel's enthusiasm, which began with the cows. Fidel decided that imported Holstein cattle could be crossbred with the local beasts to produce the new F1 ('F' for 'Fidel') breed ideally suited to local conditions and capable of producing great quantities of milk. The whole country was awash with propaganda; prize bulls got air-conditioned stalls and every cow that died had to be reported to the police. By the end of the decade, though, the project had flopped, along with an attempt to grow a new feed that the cattle refused to eat. So did the massive effort to plant a green belt of coffee and fruit trees around Havana. In 1968 thousands of conscripts and volunteers joined the effort whose failure the farmers, quite rightly, had foretold.

Fidel's most grandiose campaign involved sugar, where he wanted to increase production from 1963's feeble 3.5 million tons. He decided that Cuba could

produce 10 million tons in 1970 by mobilizing the population. The million faithful who flocked to Revolution Plaza on 2 January 1969 learned that the next harvest would extend for twelve months instead of the usual three, and that they would have no holidays until it was over. Even Christmas was postponed, not to be celebrated again for thirty years. Workers, students, the young and the old, and foreign volunteers went off to cut cane amid tremendous enthusiasm. Here was the answer to Cuba's problem. Fidel himself took up the machete; so did 700 Russian sailors and the whole staff of the Soviet embassy. Virtually all other activities stopped; the population worked under military discipline while Fidel pored over maps and reports. By January 1970 500,000 volunteers had brought in the first million tons; the government announced that saboteurs would be shot. The traditional January celebrations were cancelled, and the working day extended to ten hours, but the harvest fell inexorably behind. Bad weather, faulty equipment, fire and blight conspired to keep the yield to a rational 8.5 million tons. There were no celebrations. Instead, Fidel denounced lazy workers and announced new rationing, but when he offered to resign, the crowd shouted 'No! No!'

A decade of revolution had produced a new Cuba. Private enterprise was gone, public services and transport were erratic if they existed at all, Havana and other cities were increasingly dirty and shabby. Consumer goods and even many basic foods were impossible to find. Yet the country was dotted with new hospitals, schools and roads. Slums disappeared as functional new housing sprouted around towns and villages. People might not be able to express themselves freely, but they had access to free education and medical care. Unemployment had virtually disappeared. For every malcontent, there were hundreds still enthusiastic for the revolution, despite the disappointments of the age of experiment.