



## CUBA AND THE SOVIET UNION

*by Richard R. Fagen*

One day last spring, while walking along the breakwater in the once fashionable western section of Havana, I spotted a pair of massive high-rise buildings facing the ocean on an isolated promontory. "What are they?" I asked my Cuban companion. "Those are the living quarters of Soviet and East European technicians and their families," he said.

What did he think, I asked, of Soviet "influence" on Cubans and the Cuban Revolution? "It doesn't exist," he replied. "We simply owe them our lives."

Given my friend's poetic bent, he can be forgiven a bit of hyperbole. But there is an essential truth, both in what he said and in the symbolism of the massive, isolated buildings overlooking the sea. In one sense, the Cuban Revolution does owe its "life" to Soviet support, and certainly the Soviet presence in Cuba is both substantial and special. But equally noteworthy is how Cuban, how un-Soviet, how independent Fidel Castro's regime has remained throughout this long and tangled relationship.

Cuban history offers some insights into this paradox. When Fulgencio Batista fled Cuba in the early hours of the morning on January 1, 1959, eight days before Castro's forces marched into Havana, few persons in the world—possibly including Fidel Castro and most of his followers—could have predicted that such a close relationship with the Soviet Union lay ahead. On the contrary, to Castro's 26th of July Movement and its supporters, victory essentially meant the defeat of a brutal dictatorship and the chance to complete the long process of national liberation and development that had begun in 1868 with the first major revolt against Spanish rule in Cuba.

National liberation, however, did mean basically changing Cuba's 20th-century relationship with the United States, a relationship firmly rooted in U.S. entry into the struggle in the closing days of the Cuban Wars of Independence, reaffirmed through multiple political and military interventions, and symbolized

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by the massive and humiliating (for nationalistic Cubans) U.S. economic presence on the island.

Although misperceived by most North Americans at the time, the fall of Batista and the public commitment of the new Cuban government to a program of profound economic and political changes necessarily implied direct conflict with U.S. economic, political, and strategic interests. Less fully understood—even by some early leaders of the Revolution—was that actually carrying out this program, especially those aspects that promised the eradication of poverty and the construction of a society in which all could realistically aspire to a decent life, implied the socialist transformation of Cuba's dependent capitalist system.

### Caribbean Cold War

The first crude and imperfect expressions of these historical realities were not long in coming. During 1959, as the revolutionary government moved toward urban and agrarian reform, the nationalization of some foreign properties, and the freeing of Cuba from U.S. control, cries of "betrayal," "subversion," and "communism" were heard both in Cuba and abroad.

Although causality should not be assumed, it is not entirely coincidental that in March 1960, one month after Cuba signed a \$100 million loan and a sugar and trade agreement with the Soviet Union, President Eisenhower directed the CIA to begin organizing, training, and equipping the Cuban exiles who 13 months later came ashore at the Bay of Pigs.

In May 1960, Cuba and the Soviet Union formally established diplomatic relations, and Cuba informed the managers of U.S.-owned oil refineries that they would have to process Russian oil purchased under the recently signed Cuban-Soviet trade agreement. The refineries, acting under U.S. government directives, refused to receive the Soviet oil. A month later, they were seized by the Cuban government, and the Cold War was in full swing in the Caribbean. On July 9, three days after the United States reduced the Cuban sugar quota, Khrushchev

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promised to "defend Cuba with rockets" if the United States were to attack—a pledge that he subsequently said was only "symbolic."\*

As 1961 dawned, the United States severed diplomatic relations with Cuba, claiming intolerable provocations. Little more than a hundred days later, on April 15, came the aerial bombardment that preceded the invasion of the Bay of Pigs. In his funeral oration for those killed in these first attacks, Castro declared that the Cuban Revolution was socialist. All remaining doubts as to the totality of the rupture between the United States and Cuba were swept away as the U.S.-trained and supported exile invasion force landed at *Playa Girón* and *Playa Larga*. Also swept away in the crushing and inevitable defeat of the 1,500 invaders by the Cuban militia and Castro's still poorly equipped rebel army were various North American illusions about the unpopularity and incompetence of Fidel Castro and other leaders—although such illusions linger in some circles even to this day.

In the context of the Cold War, there was logic if not good sense in the installation of intermediate-range Soviet missiles in Cuba in the summer and autumn of 1962. Whoever actually initiated the process leading to their installation (historians still argue over the exact mix of Soviet and Cuban motives and initiatives), it seems clear that the decision was linked to the Bay of Pigs and the threat from the North.

The 1962 missile crisis was spawned in the Cold War and made specific by U.S. antagonisms toward the Cuban Revolution. It was resolved over the heads of the Cubans through direct U.S.-Soviet negotiations and ultimately resulted in important changes in the bilateral relations between all three primary actors. A U.S. pledge not to invade Cuba was formalized—and honored in the letter, if not the spirit, of the agreement. Cuban beliefs in the Soviet commitment to socialism in the Hemisphere were shaken when Moscow backed down and the United States and the Soviet Union—both sobered by the confrontation—began a slow reappraisal of some aspects of Cold War strategy and tactics.

The Soviet-Cuban relationship was conceived at the height

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\* The sugar quota stemmed from an agreement under which the United States agreed to buy a fixed quantity of sugar each year at predetermined prices from Cuba (and other countries). The 1960 quota for Cuba was roughly 3.1 million tons at 5 cents a pound, or about 2 cents above the world market price. The reduction in the sugar quota meant that Cuba had to seek guaranteed markets elsewhere—in this case, the Soviet Union, although Russia was self-sufficient in sugar. Precise causes and effects are impossible to identify, but it is clear that from 1960 on, Cuba sought closer relationships with the Soviet Union both as a substitute for lost U.S. markets, goods, and technology and as a shield against U.S. hostility.

of the Cold War and gestated in an atmosphere of U.S.-Cuban hostility. It also, however, had a life of its own. Its most essential component has, from the outset, been economic. From 1960, when the first agreements were negotiated, to the present, the Soviet Union has been the primary foreign backer of Cuban development.\* In the light of inherited underdevelopment and deformations of the economy going back to colonial times, of prior dependence on the United States, of embargo, sabotage, and the threat of invasion, and of Cuban inexperience and errors and the comparatively modest resource base of the island, it is difficult to predict what would have happened had the Soviet Union not been so supportive. It is in this sense, even more perhaps than in the military sense, that my friend's comment that "we simply owe them our lives" partakes of the truth.

The continuity of Soviet economic support is particularly impressive when the ups and downs of political relations between Havana and Moscow during the 1960s are taken into account. Haltingly after the missile crisis, but at a quicker pace after the January 1966 Tricontinental Congress in Havana, Cuba supported armed liberation movements around the world—particularly in Latin America—and thus came in conflict with Soviet policy.†

### **Soviet-Cuban Disagreements**

By the beginning of 1967, the conflict was quite open, with Cuba supporting Latin American guerrilla groups, who in turn were under fire from Moscow-oriented communist parties in their own countries—parties that sought legitimacy and participation through electoral and other more conventional political tactics. The Cuban call to "take up arms against imperialism and its lackeys" was never more clearly voiced than by Ché Guevara and his small band of guerrillas in Bolivia. Operating without the backing of the relatively small but important Bolivian Communist Party, Guevara and his followers were finally hunted down and killed in October 1967 by a mixed team of U.S.-trained Bolivian rangers and CIA agents.

\*The most frequently cited figure on Soviet aid to Cuba during the first decade of the relationship is "more than \$1 million a day" (approximately half a billion dollars a year). Precise figures are very hard to arrive at. Neither Cuba nor the Soviet Union has ever published comprehensive data. Levels of military grant aid are difficult to estimate, and Soviet purchases of Cuban goods, often under barter arrangements, sometimes involve price artificialities or subsidies.

†Throughout this period, the conditioning of the Cuban-Soviet relationship by the United States was always present, if only indirectly. In Cuban eyes, for example, Soviet failure to respond to U.S. intervention in Vietnam as forcefully as the Cubans thought Moscow should, reinforced and legitimized the policy positions that Cuba took in opposition to the U.S.S.R. elsewhere.

## CUBA'S FOREIGN RELATIONS

- 1958** *March* U.S. bans all arms shipments to Fulgencio Batista's Cuba.
- 1959** *April* A victorious Fidel Castro visits Washington; sees Vice President Nixon but not President Eisenhower.
- 1960** *February* Cuba and U.S.S.R. sign sugar agreement. *May* U.S. ends all economic aid to Cuba. *June* U.S. and Britain reject Cuban demand that their oil companies refine Soviet crude oil; U.S. cuts Cuban sugar quota by 95 percent; Havana authorizes expropriation of all U.S. property. *July* Khrushchev threatens retaliation with rockets if U.S. intervenes militarily in Cuba. *September* U.S.S.R. grants first military aid to Cuba.
- 1961** *January* U.S. severs diplomatic relations with Cuba. *April* Bay of Pigs invasion. *August* U.S. and all Latin American countries except Cuba sign Alliance for Progress.
- 1962** *January* U.S.S.R. and Cuba sign trade agreement. *October* U.S. aircraft report presence of Soviet ballistic missiles in Cuba; President Kennedy imposes selective naval blockade; U.S.S.R. begins to dismantle missiles.
- 1964** *July* Organization of American States condemns Cuban "aggression and intervention" in Venezuela and votes to end all diplomatic and economic links with Cuba.
- 1966** *September* Ghana breaks diplomatic ties with Cuba, accusing it of interference in Ghana's internal affairs.
- 1967** *March* Castro attacks Soviet contacts with "oligarchy" governments in Latin America. *October* Ernesto Ché Guevara slain in Bolivia.
- 1968** *July* Castro supports Soviet military intervention in Czechoslovakia.
- 1972** *July* Cuba admitted to membership in Comecon, the Soviet trade bloc.
- 1973** *February* Cuba and U.S. sign antihijacking agreement.
- 1975** *July* OAS ends embargo against Cuba with U.S. support. *October* Castro sends troops to aid Soviet-backed Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola.
- 1977** *March* Castro tours black Africa and visits Moscow; U.S. lifts ban on travel to Cuba. *September* U.S. and Cuba begin to normalize relations by reopening "diplomatic missions." *November* U.S. expresses concern over 27,000 Cuban troops and advisers in Africa.

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To some extent, the death of Guevara marked the end of the most acerbic period of Soviet-Cuban disagreements on how to bring socialism into existence on a world scale. This was not fully apparent for more than a year—until Castro, with evident ambivalence, publicly supported the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in August of 1968. Describing the Warsaw Pact invasion as a “drastic and painful measure . . . a bitter necessity,” he aligned Cuba with the Soviets at a particularly dark and difficult moment in Moscow’s relationship with both European and non-European communist parties.

Since 1968, Cuban and Soviet political positions have drawn closer together. In 1972, after an agonizing reappraisal of Cuban economic policies in the wake of the failed sugar harvest of 1970, Soviet-Cuban economic agreements were revised on terms very favorable to the Cubans. All payments on credits previously granted to Cuba were deferred until 1986, at which time both principal and interest payments will be stretched out over 25 years. New credits to cover anticipated balance-of-payments deficits were received. The Soviet Union almost doubled the price it was then paying for Cuba’s sugar, increased the price it was paying for Cuban nickel, and signed a new agreement on technical and economic collaboration.\*

By the early 1970s, the Cubans had also clearly taken the Soviet side in the Sino-Soviet split, and Cuban officials increasingly endorsed Soviet positions in international forums. In Algeria in 1973, when some Third World nations at the Fourth Summit Conference of the Non-Aligned Nations were vociferous in calling the U.S.S.R. (as well as the United States) imperialist, Castro responded:

How can the Soviet Union be labeled imperialist? Where are its monopoly corporations? Where is its participation in the multinational companies? What factories, what mines, what oil fields does it own in the underdeveloped world? What worker is exploited in any country of Asia, Africa, or Latin America by Soviet capital?

When a new Cuban Constitution was drafted in 1975, its preamble spoke of “Basing ourselves on proletarian internationalism,

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\* Estimates of total Cuban indebtedness to the Soviets at the time the new agreements were signed vary from \$3 billion to \$4 billion. For comparative purposes, it should be noted that in 1976 Mexico’s total public and private sector debt topped \$25 billion, with at least half of the total owed to U.S. banks. Because Mexico’s total population is more than six times that of Cuba, the per capita indebtedness statistics are not too dissimilar for the two countries. Cuba, however, has much more favorable repayment terms.

on the fraternal friendship, help and cooperation of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, and on the solidarity of the workers and the peoples of Latin America and of the world." It would be hard to imagine a closer identification of two nations than such constitutional enshrinement.

What else has the Soviet Union received in return for its aid to Cuba? In the early 1960s, opportunities to beard the U.S. lion in its den must have seemed immensely attractive in Moscow, and the strategic value of access to Cuba was certainly a large plus, as viewed through Soviet eyes. Equally, if not more, attractive was the opportunity to be in on the ground floor of Latin America's most radical social revolution. But just as the Cubans in the first days of the Revolution could not possibly have foreseen the problems they would eventually encounter in their relationships with the U.S.S.R., Soviet leaders could not have imagined how trying their Cuban ally would become a few short years after the first trade agreements were signed. Soviet leaders must have breathed a collective sigh of relief after Castro supported the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia; certainly since the early 1970s Cuba has been the most positive of allies, al-

**CUBAN FOREIGN TRADE** (in millions of U.S. dollars)

	1957	1968	1970	1972	1974	1975*
Total exports	818	652	1,050	840	2,689	3,415
Communist countries	42	480	778	451	1,536	2,415
Non-Communist	776	172	272	389	1,153	1,000
Total imports	895	1,103	1,311	1,297	2,693	3,805
Communist countries	2	875	905	997	1,629	2,105
Non-Communist	893	228	406	300	1,064	1,700

\* Preliminary.

Source: "United States-Cuba Trade Promotion." Hearing before the Subcommittee on International Trade and Commerce of the House Committee on International Relations, July 22, 1976, Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1976, p. 37.

*Cuban exports of sugar, nickel, tobacco, and fish rose steadily between 1970 and 1975, with sugar remaining the primary commodity. Trade with the communist world, especially the Soviet Union, has grown continuously since 1968. In 1974, however, there was a sharp increase in Cuba's trade with the noncommunist world, particularly Canada, Japan, Spain, and the United Kingdom.*

though a somewhat costly one. Strategic factors are still important, at least marginally. But, perhaps most important of all from the Soviet perspective, is the fact that Cuba today is a basically successful and functioning example of socialism in the Western Hemisphere. The economy is much improved since the darkest days of the 1960s, the revolutionary government is stronger than ever, and even the archenemy to the North is now negotiating with it.

In the light of the economic bonds and close political ties between Cuba and the Soviet Union, what is to be made of my friend's claim that Soviet "influence" on Cubans and the Cuban Revolution doesn't exist? Viewed conventionally in an international relations context, the statement is false. To choose the most difficult, perhaps, and certainly the most controversial recent case, it is clear that the Soviet-Cuban relationship influenced the timing, manner, and scope of the Cuban presence in Angola since 1975. This is not to say that the Soviets "told" the Cubans what to do, or that the Cuban actions were some kind of crude repayment for past and present Soviet support. Rather, the way in which Cuba entered into the Angola equation would have been different without Soviet political and military support of the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) and without U.S., Chinese, and West European support of other factions—not to mention the South African invasion. But almost certainly, given the Cuban leadership's policy commitments, values, and past actions, the Cubans would have been on the scene, with or without the Soviets.\*

### **The Minimal Soviet Presence**

From a domestic standpoint, the Soviet influence is much less clear (and in all fairness to my Cuban friend, we were not talking about international politics when he made his statement). More superficially—although not unimportantly—he was referring to the fact that Cuban daily life and culture have been only minimally touched by the Soviet presence. Baseball and boxing are still the favorite sports in Cuba; English is still the preferred second language; and Cuban music, art, literature,

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\* In assessing the Cuban role in Angola, it should be recalled that Fidel Castro had offered to send troops to North Vietnam during the early 1960s—an offer that was refused by the North Vietnamese and that the Soviets probably opposed when it was made. Furthermore, the Cuban commitment to the MPLA was long-standing, dating from the mid-'60s (actually predating the Soviet commitment), and the major costs of the Cuban presence in Angola, in both human and material terms, were borne by Cuba and its citizens, not by the Soviet Union. From personal contacts and other sources, it is my impression that, however costly, the Angola expedition, involving some 12,000 Cuban troops, was strongly supported by an overwhelming majority of Cubans.

### CUBA'S ARMED FORCES

Total Population: 9,290,000  
 Military Service: 3 years  
 Total Armed Forces: 189,000  
 Estimated GNP 1970: \$4.5 billion  
 Estimated defense expenditure, 1971: 290 million pesos  
 (\$290 million)  
 Cuban Army: 160,000 personnel  
 90,000 reserves, over 600 tanks  
 Cuban Navy: 9,000 personnel  
 1 escort patrol vessel, 18 submarine chasers, 5 *Osa*- and 18  
*Komar*-class patrol boats with Styx surface to surface missiles,  
 24 motor torpedo boats, 29 armed patrol boats, 15 Mi-5  
 helicopters  
 Cuban Air Force: 20,000 personnel  
 210 combat aircraft, including 75 MiG-17s, 50 MiG-21s, 30  
 MiG-21MFs, 40 MiG-19s, 30 Mi-1 and 24 Mi-4 helicopters  
 Para-Military Forces: 10,000 State Security troops; 3,000 border  
 guards; 100,000 People's Militia

Source: *The Military Balance*, 1977-78 edition, Institute for Strategic Studies.

Deployment in Africa: Cuba's military involvement in Africa has grown steadily since November, 1975, when Havana dispatched 3,000 troops to Angola. Two years later, Cuba had some 27,000 military personnel in 11 African countries (U.S. estimates).

and conversation, in general, show few if any traces of having been in contact with Eastern Europe. Soviet technicians and advisers are housed apart, and the Western visitor to Cuba is reminded of their presence only when he or she is addressed as "tovarisch" by kids in the street or when an Eastern European delegation puts in an appearance at one of the hotels or restaurants.\* In fact, in contradistinction to the cultural and physical impact that the United States has had in most of Latin America and much of East Asia, the "tracelessness" of the Soviet relationship with Cuba is astounding.

There is also a deeper level at which my friend's comment has meaning. At that level, the key question involves the *autonomy* and *appropriateness* of Cuban development and the extent to which the special relationship with the Soviet Union has

\*Estimates of the number of Soviet technicians and advisers in Cuba at any given time in the early 1970s range from 1,000 to about 3,000. The number of Cubans (mostly engineers and technicians) studying in the Soviet Union at any given moment during this same period probably did not exceed 1,500.

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furthered, rather than distorted or restrained, needed economic and social change. The question is tricky, for no national development effort can be hermetically sealed against outside influences, and developmental goals can and do change.

The Cuban case, however, has been strikingly consistent. From 1953, when Castro made the famous speech in his own defense after the attack on the Moncada army barracks, to the present, the primary developmental goals and energies of the Revolution have consistently focused on improving the "quality of life" of the island's citizens. Although halting and uneven at times, overall achievements have been impressive and, as North Americans should understand by now, the incentive and commitment necessary for transformations of this magnitude do not come from without.

Thus, what ultimately gives substance to the claim that Soviet influence on the Cuban Revolution is of secondary importance is that Cuba's proudest achievements are rooted in the earliest moments of the revolutionary movement and have been fashioned from the sweat, creativity, and sacrifice of millions of Cubans. Of course, Soviet economic and technical support has been important in many ways, but the human resources, the key decisions, the style, the outcomes—and the errors—have been predominantly Cuban.

There is thus more than a kernel of truth in the claim that Cuban development has been—and continues to be—"uninfluenced" by the Soviets. It is something that visitors to the island sense, even those who are not particularly well disposed toward the Revolution. And it is this that continues to give hope to many who see in the Cuban experience much that is relevant to the future of the poorer countries—countries that in the main cannot expect and do not seek special relationships with the rich and powerful nations of the world, East or West.

