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Cuban Subversion in Latin America: A New Look

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CUBAN SUBVERSION IN LATIN AMERICA: A NEW LOOK

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During the year and a half since the death of Che Guevara, Cuba has modified its tactics and priorities for "exporting" the revolution in Latin America. Castro has withdrawn from the extreme and violent approach he pursued in 1966-67

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Since Guevara's death, Castro has not attempted to initiate new areas of insurgency, has toned down Cuban propaganda, and has allowed front groups like the Latin American Solidarity Organization to lapse into quiet dormancy. During this time, moreover, he has almost completely ignored themes of revolution in his oratory.

Castro's caution is a result of a variety of pressures and realizations. He was stunned by Guevara's rapid defeat in Bolivia, and in retrospect probably recognized the quixotic hopelessness of the campaign as it was revealed in Guevara's field diary. Castro has been repeatedly discouraged by the failures of guerrilla groups he has supported, and may realize that Cuban interference and bullying have contributed to their factionalism and impotence.

In any case, he seems to have grown more pessimistic about the prospects for revolution in Latin America and about Cuba's ability to be a decisive influence. He has probably been pressured by the USSR to pull back, and his willingness to do so has been one of the major reasons for a considerable improvement in Cuba's relations with Moscow. At the same time, without the significant influence of Guevara or of powerful advocates of his Trotskyist views in the Cuban leadership, Castro has adjusted Cuba's priorities inward. He has concentrated most of his energies during the last year or so on the expansion of Cuban agriculture—especially on the goal of producing 10 million tons of sugar in 1970. Although he has not given up the dream of seeing the Cuban experience emulated in Latin America, he now appears less inclined to impose it forcibly on his neighbors.

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CASTRO'S CHANGING TACTICS

Castro's conceit and his desire to see the Cuban revolution ratified and emulated in Latin America have been the only common ingredients behind his varied attempts to "export" revolution. Between 1959 and 1961, these factors combined with other nonideological compulsions. Among them was his genuine fear of armed intervention. Even before the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961, Castro believed that his regime would be the target of conspiracy from conservative forces abroad. To a certain extent, therefore, Cuban policy in the hemisphere was defensive as well as provocative.

During his first three years in power, Castro employed a variety of legal and clandestine means to increase Cuba's influence in Latin America. Large numbers of middle-class Latin Americans and intellectuals continued to support him during most of this period because of his simple and undidactic appeals to nationalism and because of his defiance of the US. Although he constantly reiterated his call for violent revolution against the ruling elites and conservative forces in the hemisphere, 12 Latin American countries still maintained relations with Cuba at the end of 1960.

Castro's approach was based essentially on the same kind of tactics that had propelled him to power in Cuba. He used both violent and non-violent means, and pitched his appeal to the urban working classes and large segments of the middle class, as well as to more radical elements. Although he preached to the peasants, he probably believed that they were not vital to his cause.

Castro's commitment to a uniform strategy of rural insurgency did not emerge until after he publicly espoused Marxism-Leninism in December 1961. The change in strategy resulted from developments at home and in Latin America, and

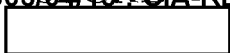
from the need to formulate a new theoretical basis for Cuban action. During the second half of 1960, Castro had lost most of his appeal to middle-class groups in Latin America as he converted his economy to radical socialism. In Cuba, meanwhile, Che Guevara became increasingly influential. The principal Trotskyist in the Cuban leadership, he believed that Cuban resources and energies should be directed abroad, that revolutionary movements should take root among the peasants in rural regions, and that support from middle-class, urban elements—including most of the Latin American Communist parties—was not desirable. Guevara's handbook on guerrilla warfare was an adaptation of Chinese Communist theory.

The infant Cuban intelligence service, created in mid-1961 with Soviet aid, undertook to coordinate Cuba's increasing commitment to Guevara's views. Havana provided guerrilla training to almost any Latin American willing to travel to Cuba, while supporting the guerrilla groups that appeared in more than a half dozen countries.

These efforts met with one failure after another. They were poorly organized and executed, and were so far-flung that Cuba was unable to provide decisive support. A spectacular setback occurred in November 1963 when a three-ton weapons cache of proven Cuban origin was found on a Venezuelan beach. This discovery resulted in the OAS resolution of July 1964 by which all members except Mexico agreed to end relations with Cuba.

By November 1964, Castro's indiscriminate subversive endeavors also brought him into conflict with Moscow and with the leaders of most Latin American Communist parties.

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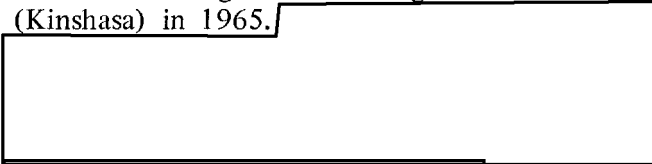
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There were probably a number of reasons for Castro's reversion to the tactics of guerrilla insurgency. After his return from Africa, Guevara apparently won Castro's confidence again. Cuban domestic programs began to reflect his views, and by 1967 the concept of moral incentives was reinstated. Castro was probably impressed with the gains made during 1965 by Venezuelan insurgents, and he may have believed that unless Cuba stepped in with significant aid, Havana's appeal to the left in Latin America would be compromised—as he probably believed it had been in 1965 when he did not actively support the “constitutionalist” rebellion in the Dominican Republic.

In addition, Castro was increasingly influenced in late 1964 by “liberals” in his entourage who opposed the dogmatic views of Guevara. At home, a number of reforms were enacted including the introduction of material incentives for work, a concept Guevara strenuously opposed.

As a result of these pressures and realizations, Castro muted his revolutionary exhortations for about a year and narrowed his focus to the three countries where viable guerrilla groups were active. He concentrated on domestic matters and seldom spoke about foreign affairs. Cuba continued to train Latin Americans in guerrilla tactics, but more selectively than before, and Havana did not support violent tactics in countries when local Communist parties did not. The undaunted Guevara, however, refused to be a part of this arrangement. He resigned his positions in Cuba and led a guerrilla contingent in the Congo (Kinshasa) in 1965.

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At the Tri-Continent Conference in Havana, he made an explicit appeal for violent revolution throughout the hemisphere. At the same time, Havana announced the formation of the Latin American Solidarity Organization as a continental front group for violent revolution. Meanwhile, Castro was assisting Guevara in laying the ground work for the Bolivian guerrilla campaign.

By early 1966, moreover, Castro probably felt more confident in his dealings with the Soviet leaders than in late 1964 when they had first come to power. In any case, he probably believed that Moscow would not retaliate against him for working at odds with the Latin American Communist parties.

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In August, the Latin American Solidarity Organization held a conference in Havana and repeated Guevara's call for “Two, Three, Many Vietnams.” Castro's vindictive denunciations of the Latin American Communist parties throughout this period were constantly reiterated by the Cuban media.

Although he did not explain it in public, Castro's rage was probably in large measure a result of the refusal of the Bolivian Communists to assist Che Guevara in his guerrilla campaign. This was Havana's greatest single engagement in guerrilla war, and was meant as the first step in a continent-wide struggle. Guevara's failure and

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death in October 1967, however, signaled the beginning of a serious reappraisal of his guerrilla tactics, which has apparently now resulted in a more moderate line.

CASTRO'S MOOD TODAY

Castro has delivered 34 speeches since Guevara's failure in Bolivia. Two of them were early eulogies to his fallen comrade, and in another last July he announced the publication of Guevara's diary. In these three addresses, Castro discussed revolution in Latin America in the specific context of Guevara's failure. Except for these cases, however, he has not discussed themes of revolution in the hemisphere in more than a year and a half.

Although there is no direct correlation in the short term between the things Castro talks about in public and their relative importance, he is a compulsive orator who is moved to speak about the problems and issues confronting him. Through the years, he has maintained his credibility with a majority of the Cuban population and with his entourage by discussing in public the decisions he makes. It would, therefore, seem unlikely for him to pursue a major course of action without ruminating about it in public. In any case, there has been a parallel in the past between Castro's frequent oratory on revolution in the hemisphere and direct Cuban involvement in it.

In addition, Castro has neglected the subject on a number of occasions when the event being celebrated directly concerned past guerrilla accomplishments. On the 15th anniversary of his 26th of July Movement last year, he did not mention revolution, even though he had discussed it at length in every previous speech on that date since 1961. On 10 October 1968, Castro celebrated the 100th anniversary of the first Cuban uprising against Spain, but did not relate it to

current events in the hemisphere. Likewise, on the tenth anniversary of the Cuban revolution last January, he did not preach revolution or boast of his own victories as a guerrilla. He has neglected numerous other occasions during the last 18 months that also would have been appropriate to discussions of Cuba's role in support of revolution in Latin America.

Although the subject of revolution has been almost completely absent from Castro's public utterances for 18 months, his desire to influence events in Latin America continues to be evident. In many of his speeches during the last year or so, he has contrasted Cuban achievements in public health, education, social welfare, and agriculture with those of other Latin American countries. He has insisted that Cuba has done more in these fields than its neighbors, and has suggested that Cuban methods and programs be imitated. This effort to cast Cuba as mentor for the hemisphere is not new, of course, but it is a quiet tactic that was largely ignored during the two periods of intensive Cuban guerrilla support activity. It probably reflects Castro's wish to stand back until Latin Americans take the initiative in bringing about revolutionary change in their own countries.

OTHER SIGNS OF MODERATION

There are a number of other indications of disinterest in renewing the old policy of supporting continent-wide guerrilla war. The Cuban press seldom mentions the issue, and Granma, the official daily of the Cuban Communist Party, has not carried a major front-page story about Latin America in many months. The Cuban armed forces' magazine and the theoretical journal of the Cuban Communist Party have similarly neglected the subject. The tone and quantity of Cuban propaganda about revolution in the hemisphere have been modified during the last year or more, and Havana has apparently cut off or

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significantly reduced its funding of certain Latin American publications which, under its sponsorship, advocated continental insurgency in 1966-67. The Mexican weekly Porque, for instance, has followed a line inconsistent with Havana's for about six months.

Little interest has been shown in the Latin American Solidarity Organization (LASO) in more than a year. There are no indications that a second conference is planned, or that the organization is active. It is seldom mentioned in the press or in radiobroadcasts, and Castro has publicly ignored it for about a year. Havana probably had mixed feelings about LASO from the outset. During the conference in August 1967, many delegates from various extremist and revolutionary groups in the hemisphere displayed a remarkable degree of independence from Cuban tutelage.

Few of them or other Latin Americans who figured prominently in Havana's plans in 1966 and 1967 have made publicized trips to Cuba since early 1968. Only a handful of Latin Americans attended the tenth anniversary celebrations last January, and there were no indications that Castro or other Cuban leaders met with any of them.

CUBA AND THE LATIN AMERICAN COMMUNIST PARTIES

There are other signs, moreover, that the Cubans are willing once more to work with the old-guard Communists, at least under certain circumstances. The recent formation of a new Haitian Communist Party is significant in what it reveals about Soviet and Cuban tactics in Latin America, even though Haitian Communist factions have long been illegal and among the least important in the hemisphere. In January 1969, the Moscow-controlled Haitian Party of Popular Accord (PEP) announced that it had joined with the pro-Castro United Haitian Democratic Party (PUDA) in the United Party of Haitian Communists (PUCH). Since the PEP and the PUDA were controlled from Moscow and Havana, respectively, the merger is the first sign of Castro's willingness to deal with old-guard parties again.

Moscow apparently was better satisfied with the merger than Havana and—perhaps uncertain how the Cubans would react in public—withheld comment until Havana's position was clear. Havana first commented on 5 February in a brief Creole radiobroadcast expressing approval of the move and of the agreement by both Haitian Communist factions that “armed force is the only possible way to capture political power.”

Subsequent radio discussions of the merger seemed to spell out Havana's approval more clearly. In one of them, the Cubans appeared to condone criticism of one of the major tenets of Che Guevara's guerrilla strategy. During a radio discussion in early March, a former PEP member stated that the creation of the PUCH eliminated in Haiti the “dogmatic trend which contends that unity is only attainable after breaking out of the guerrilla struggle.” This seemed to be a criticism of Guevara's view—frequently reiterated by Castro during 1966-67—that the guerrilla cadre

(rather than urban groups) must form the nucleus of the new political organ after the guerrilla victory.

Pravda followed on 11 March with the first Soviet comment. In a lengthy editorial, Moscow admitted that the PUCH "has made the development of the partisan movement in Haiti the central problem," but pointed out that other "organizational work" must also be performed.

The Cubans have appeared to concede some major points while Moscow has publicly stated that in at least one Latin American country, violent tactics are preferred. This concession by the Soviets will probably in no way affect their efforts to expand their influence in more important parts of Latin America, and will probably make it easier for them to deal with Castro.

Haiti may not be the only country in Latin America where Moscow and Havana could work out joint objectives and tactics. It appears possible now for their policies to be compatible in most countries as long as the use of violent tactics is not excluded. Castro has apparently taken the first step in this direction, and reconciliation may be possible with most other Latin American parties. He would probably refuse, however, to sit down with the Bolivian Communist leaders because of their refusal to assist Guevara, and there are also several other parties that he probably still prefers to shun.

In Venezuela and Colombia, reconciliation will depend on how firmly Moscow applies pressure and on how Castro appraises the prospects of guerrilla groups in the field. In both countries, the guerrillas are factionalized and weak; in any case, it is no longer clear that they still take orders from Havana. In Guatemala, where revolutionaries have drawn considerable attention to themselves through a few dramatic acts, Castro would

probably insist on a major role in determining the tactics of any coordinated effort. In general, however, it seems possible that Castro is now willing in many cases to make the same concession he made in 1964—of allowing Latin American parties to determine their own tactics.

PROSPECTS

Havana's more moderate approach since Guevara's death results from at least four factors. Without Guevara's Trotskyist influence, Castro has followed his primary inclination, that of domestic administration. Soviet pressure for moderation has probably been accompanied by threats of economic strictures for defiance and promises of economic rewards for compliance. This tactic has probably been particularly appropriate during the last year or so because of the unusually poor state of the Cuban economy. The third factor grows out of Castro's realization by the end of 1967 that his full energies and concentration would be necessary to achieve a 10-million-ton sugar harvest in 1970—his long-stated central domestic objective. Finally, Cuban policy in Latin America has been moderated by the lack of promising radical leaders or guerrilla causes to sponsor.

The moderate course followed since Guevara's death could also be reversed if a guerrilla group, responsive to Cuban direction, were to make decisive progress or if Castro thought he could successfully interfere in an uprising similar to the one in the Dominican Republic in 1965. A rapid deterioration of Cuban-Soviet relations or a sharp renewal in hostility between Cuba and the US could also result in new Cuban initiatives in Latin America.

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Although Castro seldom follows a course of action without careful deliberation, he could depart from his present line out of anger or frustration as a result of international developments that adversely affected Cuba. His handling of a recent dispute with Venezuela, however, is probably more indicative of his present mood of caution and restraint. Castro did nothing to inflame the issue last November when a Cuban fishing trawler was captured and detained by the Venezuelan Navy in an unsuccessful attempt to prove that it had been engaged in subversive activities.

Despite these possibilities, however, it seems more likely that Castro will follow his present moderate course for at least another year or so. He will be preoccupied with Cuban agricultural problems, especially sugar production. No one in his entourage is known to share Guevara's Trot-

skyist views, and the present warming trend in Cuban-Soviet relations is likely to continue. In any case, Castro is apparently disenchanted or at odds with the revolutionary groups he has supported in Guatemala, Venezuela, and Colombia, and he probably does not believe that conditions in most other countries are right for armed struggle. At least until the end of next year's sugar harvest, therefore, Castro is not likely to take a significant part in new guerrilla initiatives or to introduce any sizable escalation in Cuban support of existing groups.

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Castro will probably adhere generally to the concept of guerrilla action, but he is likely to step in only when Cuban support is desired and when he believes it could be decisive.

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