

Halperin, Maurice
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Decline of Fidel Castro

Fortuity, Fidelity, Fallibility

THE RISE AND DECLINE OF FIDEL CASTRO

An Essay in Contemporary History

By Maurice Halperin

University of California.

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By LEE LOCKWOOD

MAURICE HALPERIN has had an unusually checkered career. According to the dust jacket of his book, he was "twice forced out of teaching positions at American universities on account of his political beliefs." He then spent three years on the faculty of the USSR Academy of Sciences and nearly six years (1962-68) at the University of Havana, recruited by no less a personage than Che Guevara. He is much-traveled not only geographically (he now teaches at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia) but also academically: having begun with a doctorate in comparative literature (Sorbonne), he has been, at various times, a developmental econo-

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mist, a political scientist, and now, in this book, a historian.

This strangely unsettled biography is interesting more for the questions it raises than for those it answers. For example, considering his background, there is a curious absence of Marxist analysis in Halperin's history. Rather than viewing Cuba's revolution as a dialectical process, he sees its rise, first to power and then to international prominence, as a "great anomaly," the result of a series of "fortuitous accidents," a kind of by-product of the Cold War that could not have occurred had Washington been wiser and had not the Soviet Union been at odds with the United States and

feuding with Peking.

Thus, says Halperin, when Fidel Castro attacked the Moncada barracks in 1953 it was a "great stroke of luck to have failed" because the time wasn't ripe for his revolution. When Castro came to Washington in 1959 "waving an olive branch," only to be given the cold shoulder by Eisenhower, "it was another one of those providential mishaps, like the Moncada defeat, that paved the way for his meteoric rise to fame." Likewise, it was a "most extraordinary chronological coincidence" that Fidel came to power "at almost the precise moment when the Soviet Union acquired both the capability and willingness to underwrite the survival of a revolution 6000 miles from its border and 90 miles from the United States"; and "a fortuitous development of decisive importance for the Cuban revolution" that Russian oil production had reached an exportable surplus by July 1960, when Cuba nationalized all foreign refineries. Since virtually all of Cuban power is derived from oil, Halperin states, the revolution would have been "throttled in its infancy" but for this lucky coincidence. Etc., etc. This is history?

Even more glaring is the complete absence of the Cuban people from this book, while Castro himself is seen almost exclusively from the perspective of international relations. To be sure, the author

provides a useful, if not original, analysis of the significant events in Cuban-American, Cuban-Russian and Cuban-Chinese relations, together with enormously detailed exegesis of some of Castro's speeches (to one 1963 speech alone he devotes three full chapters). Khrushchev and Kennedy are described as "two highly capable and essentially sober leaders" who, "by sheer good luck" were in the drivers' seats when the missile crisis took place—an evaluation to which other historians may take exception, to put it mildly. Castro, on the other hand, while given his due as a shrewd politician, is depicted as a verbose and often irrational megalomaniac who put's power above

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principle (though he usually doesn't lie unless he has to), and whose undisciplined enthusiasms would drive him to ruin if he weren't so damned charismatic.

Castro is also a crypto-royalist, according to Halperin:

In his chance meeting with peasants or factory workers during his constant comings and goings, he would always treat them with a great deal of consideration. . . . This manner of quickly putting "little people" at ease and hearing them out has been mistaken by some as a manifestation of Fidel's egalitarian spirit, but it is . . . the benevolence of the truly noble ruler toward his most humble subjects.

Halperin's book is riddled with this sort of petulant and completely undocumented

assertion. If he is right, one would think that the Cubans would have caught on after 14 years.

His answer—consistently implied but never stated outright—is that the Cuban masses are gullible, happy-go-lucky semi-savages of the tropics who are so enthralled by Fidel's oratory and so proud of the national identity and international prominence to which he has led them that they are content to follow him anywhere—like lemmings to the sea, if need be.

Finally, one wonders how Halperin passed his time during his six long years in Cuba, a rich and exciting period for any foreigner to have been lucky enough to witness. From the evidence in his book, he seems to have seen nothing of the fascinating and volatile social forces at work on the island. Indeed, he seems scarcely to have ventured out of Havana. Though the book is scholarly and detailed, there is practically nothing in it that could not have been researched and written in a good American library, without his ever having visited Cuba. The Cuban revolution, whatever its fluctuations, its difficulties and its shortcomings, has been from the beginning an intensely dynamic and—yes—even dialectical process in which the Cuban people—peasants, workers, politicians, intellectuals—have played a protagonist role along with their leaders. In Halperin's book they are relegated to the status of a Greek chorus (lacking, in fact, even that much enlightenment), mostly off-stage, while out on the proscenium Fidel rides rampant; shrewd, messianic, deluded, slugging it out with the world.

Halperin's study covers only the period 1959-64; the years, he asserts, of Castro's "rise" but also the period when the "seeds" of his decline were sown. Presumably they will sprout in volume two (1964-69), on which the author is currently at work. He had better hurry. Given the "accidental" ways of history, Fidel Castro may well be on the rise again by the time the "decline" is published.