

Chinese Support for Revolutionary Movements in Latin America and Cuba's Enlistment into the Soviet Imperialist Bloc, 1956-1975

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In a discussion of the international situation in December 1947, Mao stated that “The peoples of Latin America are not slaves obedient to U.S. imperialism.”¹ The CCP leadership viewed the Latin American countries as being ruled by reactionary and mainly feudal regimes which were controlled by the neo-colonialist United States. The Chinese observed that there were blocs of oppressed people in most of these countries consisting of poor peasants, indigenous peoples and descendants of African slaves, and that there were rich traditions of revolutionary armed struggle in many Latin American countries.²

In the Sierra Maestre Mountains of eastern Cuba, the July 26nd Movement led by Fidel Castro had waged armed struggle against the pro-U.S. Batista dictatorship from 1956 to 1959. The revolution had its greatest support in Oriente Province, which contained Cuba's largest sugar cane plantations. There had been over 20 large peasant uprisings there between 1902-1958.³ In January 1959, a few hundred rebels marched into Havana and took power.

The CCP leadership understood the historic importance of the first revolutionary breakthrough in U.S. imperialism's “backyard.” The People's Republic of China immediately announced “the heartfelt solidarity of China's population with the heroic struggle of the Cuban people.” In April 1959, the New China News Agency established its first office in Latin America. That same month, Premier Zhou Enlai told the Second National People's Congress that China was “ready to give support and assistance to the fullest extent of [its] capabilities to all national independence movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America.”

The People's Republic stated that the Cuban revolution was going through a national democratic stage. Its main features were armed struggle based on the peasantry; the nationalization of foreign capitalist properties; and breaking off diplomatic relations with the U.S. government. Che Guevara stated in June 1959 that “We studied Mao's theory on guerilla war while we were fighting it. The mimeographed copies of Mao's works spread widely among commanders at the front, and were called ‘the food from China.’ “ On a trip to China in November 1960, Guevara added that the experience of the Chinese Revolution was of great value to revolutionaries in Latin America, since both had lived for many years under imperialism and feudalism.⁴

The U.S. government was late to understand the political implications of the Cuban Revolution. When it did, the U.S. imposed an economic blockade of the island.

¹ “The Present Situation and Our Tasks,” *Selected Works, Volume IV* 173.

² “China's Foreign Relations with Latin America” by Robert Worden in *Dimensions of China's Foreign Relations* (1977) 192.

³ *Cuba: Order and Revolution* by Jorge Domínguez (1978) 436-437. “Guevara, Debray and Armed Revisionism,” *Revolution magazine* 1985 (p. 92) See www.bannedthought.net

⁴ In November 1964, as Cuba moved into the Soviet camp, Guevara denied that Cuba's rebels were influenced by Mao and the CCP. *Communist China and Latin America, 1959-1967* by Cecil Johnson (1970) 136.

In 1961, the CIA attempted to set off an uprising led by right-wing exiles at the Bay of Pigs. This invasion was decisively crushed by the Cuban military before it could move off the beaches.

When Fidel Castro made his Second Havana Declaration in February 1962—a call for a continental fight against U.S. imperialism-- *Peking Review* announced that there were “two roads” for the peoples of Latin America to follow: “One is the road taken by Cuba. . . the other is to bow to U.S. rule and remain forever its vassals.” The CCP had high hopes for the example provided by the Cuban revolution. Speaking in Algiers in December 1963, Zhou stated that “the Cuban people. . . have pointed out for the peoples of other Latin American countries the path for armed struggle to break away from imperialist control and attain national liberation. With the emergence of revolutionary Cuba, there will appear in Latin America a second and third Cuba.”⁵

In the early 1960s, political relations between Cuba and China were close. One example was the founding of the Huang Tao-pi School for Revolutionary Instruction in Havana in February 1962 by the Cuba-China Friendship Association. Huang Tao-pi was a Chinese-Cuban revolutionary who died in 1930 fighting against the U.S.-backed Machado dictatorship.⁶

In the course of the guerilla struggle, Castro and Che Guevara set up solely military encampments in the Sierra that lacked revolutionary political tasks. This meant that the Cuban people were not prepared to wield anti-imperialist political power when the rebels marched into Havana in early 1959. Most importantly, they had not developed a revolutionary understanding of the nature of the Soviet revisionists and their plans to use the Cuban revolution to make headway into U.S. control into Latin America and the rest of the Third World.

A key turning point in relations between the Chinese and Cuban governments was the Havana Conference of Latin American Communist Parties in November 1964. This conference was made up of pro-Soviet reformist parties and somewhat more militant pro-Cuban parties. The communiqué from this conference demanded an end to the anti-revisionist polemics against the CPSU that the CCP had launched in 1963. The communiqué also condemned “factionalism,” referring to the growing ideological struggle within their parties, and the formation of new Maoist and pro-China parties and organizations in many countries.⁷

At the same time, revisionism was openly proclaimed in Castro’s July 26th Revolutionary Movement. In 1965 it merged with the pro-Soviet and reformist Popular Socialist Party (PSP) to form the revisionist Communist Party of Cuba.

After two trips to the Soviet Union in 1963-1964, Castro returned with a new economic plan. Instead of diversifying agriculture, Cuba would produce millions of tons more sugar for sale to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Instead of producing more food staples and beginning to industrialize the country, Cuba would import machinery, oil and food crops. These neo-colonial economic relations between Cuba and the Soviet state capitalists were essentially the same as the

⁵ Ibid. 195-196.

⁶ Ibid. 221 from the article “Sino-Cuban Ties” in *Peking Review*, February 23, 1962.

⁷ Ibid. 160-163.

relations between the U.S. imperialists and Cuba.⁸

The Soviet imperialists tied Cuba into their economic orbit, and subsidized the Cuban economy, to enable Cuba to function as a political and military weapon for the Soviets' global contention with the U.S. In August 1968, Castro supported the Soviet Union's military invasion of Czechoslovakia to crush a reformist government in Prague. Also in 1968, Castro was silent during the Mexican government's massacre of several hundred students in Mexico City before the Summer Olympics. At a World Congress of Communist Parties held in Moscow in June 1969, Soviet officials sounded out the delegates about a possible pre-emptive strike against China's nuclear installations in the Sinjiang; Cuba's delegate expressed "unflinching solidarity" with any Soviet military action against socialist China.⁹

When the Cuban economy was under siege from the U.S. imperialists in the early 1960s, and China was facing shortages in agricultural production from its Great Leap Forward, socialist China doubled its shipment of rice to Cuba. At the same time, China stated that it could not continue to supply Cuba with rice at that level.¹⁰ China needed rice to feed its own people, and it was supplying large amounts of rice to North Vietnam to support its revolutionary struggle against U.S. imperialism.

At the first Tricontinental conference in January 1966, Castro defended replacing rice with sugar production. He renounced a Chinese aid agreement meant to help Cuba become self-sufficient in rice. Instead Castro lashed out at China's internationalist aid as "economic aggression."

In 1966, Castro publically called China an "absolute monarchy," and demanded the removal of Mao from the leadership of the CCP. Maoism, explained Castro, was but "fascism flying under the banner of Marxism-Leninism."¹¹ In the years that followed, Castro became the principal political voice in the Third World for the Soviet imperialists' international campaign against socialist China.

⁸ Based on the Soviet Union's "socialist" international division of labor, Cuba formally joined COMECON, the Soviet vehicle for the economic domination of Eastern Europe, in 1972.

⁹ "The Reckoning: Cuba and the USSR" by K.S. Karol in *Cuban Communism* edited by Irving Horowitz (1977) 531. From 1975-1991, the Cuban government sent 55,000 troops to Angola that were supplied with Soviet heavy weapons in order to install a government in Luanda that had weak popular support. In 1977, more than 20,000 Cuban troops were dispatched to Ethiopia to support a pro-Soviet military dictatorship and to fight against the anti-imperialist Eritrean independence movement. In just one year, 1977, the Soviet Union subsidized the Cuban economy at a rate of \$3 million per day. See "Paying for the Cuban Connection" in *Soviet Analyst*, April 21, 1977.

¹⁰ Peking Review, January 14, 1966.

¹¹ Granma, March 15, 1966; *Castro, the Blacks and Africa* by Carlos Moore (1988) 264. Moore was born and raised in Cuba by Jamaican-Barbadian immigrant parents, and left Cuba in 1963 for exile in Africa and France.

¹² Moore 264-265.

In 1966, the Cuban government shut down Cuba's Chinese-language newspapers. It was particularly concerned with the close ties between Cuba's African and Chinese communities dating back to the days of slavery.¹²

In the 1960s and 1970s, the U.S.-sugar latifundia of the 1940s and 1950s were replaced by state-owned sugar farms, creating a form of state capitalism administered by 20 or 30 government bureaucrats for each "nationalized" state farm. According to the Cuban government, these state-owned farms producing sugar for the Soviet bloc enabled the Cuban economy to jump over the stages of agricultural collectivization and proceed directly to "socialism." According to the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization, Cuba's agricultural performance was tied for last place in Latin America from 1962-1976 due to the dominance of sugar cane planted in large state farms to the exclusion of the production of food staples.¹³

Beginning in the mid-1960s, the Cuban CP adopted the Soviet Union's use of material incentives as a leading principle in the Cuban economy. Workers were paid according to the profitability of their work as measured by their managers. There was extensive resistance to this system among Cuban workers. According to the Minister of Labor, Jorge Risquet, absenteeism from work was 20 percent on an average day in 1970. He described this as "widespread passive resistance." In 1971, the French economist Charles Bettelheim, an expert on the Cuban economy, observed that a "new class of privileged rulers" had emerged in Havana.¹⁴

Castro's demand that Cuban macheteros, most of whom were Black, double sugar production in 1969 was followed by a "Law Against Laziness," which provided that able-bodied men between the ages of 17 and 60 who were discovered without a job could be sentenced to perform forced labor for up to two years.¹⁵

In 1959, Blacks and mixed-race "mulattos" made up at least 60 percent of Cuba's population.¹⁶ Due to its position that the Revolution had eliminated all forms of racism on the island, the Cuban government blocked the passage of a law barring discrimination against Afro-Cubans. Castro insisted that the Revolution had "given" freedom to Black Cubans by means of desegregation, which did not include the cultural arena and the crucial organs of political power. Cuba's political leadership was nearly all-white. The sole exception of Major Juan Almeida Bosque, who often appeared with Castro in public and accompanied Castro on trips to sub-Saharan Africa.

In 1959, the new government closed down 526 all-Black *Sociedades de Color* in order to block this avenue for independent Black political action. Cuban proponents of Black Power, who were seen by the government as "divisive elements" that were undermining "national unity," faced persecution and prison

¹³ *The Economy of Socialist Cuba* by Carmelo Mesa-Lago (1981) 38.

¹⁴ Granma, September 1970 in *Cuba from Columbus to Castro* by Jaime Suchlicki (1974); Moore 317-318.

¹⁵ Moore 317-319.

¹⁶ Moore, Appendix 2: Is Cuba a Black or White Country? As more than half a million white Cubans fled between 1960 and 1970, the island became more heavily Afro-Cuban.

sentences.¹⁷ Beginning in the late 1960s, the Cuban government employed its secret police to break up the loosely organized Movimiento Black Power, Afro-Cuban Study Groups and the networks of Yoruban and other African religions that had survived centuries of slavery.¹⁸

This same opposition to Black nationalism applied to U.S. revolutionary nationalists who sought political asylum in Cuba in the early 1960s. Robert Williams, who had advocated armed self-defense in North Carolina in the late 1950s, initially supported the Cuban revolution.¹⁹ However, he began to criticize the Cuban government for opposing the efforts of Black Cubans to develop independent political organizations. According to Williams, the Cuban government's verbal support for the African-American struggle masked its opposition to political organizing by Afro-Cubans against deeply entrenched racial discrimination.

In July 1966, Williams left Cuba and took up residence in socialist China. In Beijing, Williams could speak freely about the status of Afro-Cubans, who were again becoming "victims of race prejudice and discrimination . . . while the face of the Cuban government was becoming whiter and whiter." The PRC aided Williams in publishing his monthly newsletter, *The Crusader*, and helped distribute it in Africa and elsewhere in the world.²⁰

Stung by his exposure of continuing racial discrimination in Cuba, the Cuban government charged that Williams had become a "CIA agent." In May 1967, thousands of forged copies of *The Crusader* were mailed from Havana, denouncing Mao and his allies in the CCP leadership as "arrogant, power-mad underlings" who had "betrayed the Cuban revolution." In order to clear up the confusion that this created, Williams issued press releases from Beijing that identified Cuban counter-intelligence and a high official of the Cuban-led Tricontinental Organization as the sources of the forged issue of *The Crusader*.²¹

After a trip to Cuba in the summer of 1967, another leading U.S. Black revolutionary nationalist, Stokely Carmichael, observed that Cuba's leaders were all-white. When Carmichael developed doubts about the existence of a "racial democracy" in Cuba, and dismissed as a "pack of lies" Cuba's assertion that Robert Williams was a CIA agent, Carmichael joined Williams as *persona non grata* in Cuba.²²

¹⁷ *Cuba Since the Revolution of 1959: A Critical Assessment* by Samuel Farber (2011) 169-175.

¹⁸ Moore 48, 304-316.

¹⁹ After the unsuccessful CIA-backed invasion of mainly white Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961, Williams called on African-Americans to join rallies in major cities to defend the Cuban Revolution. Moore 113.

²⁰ Moore 213, 254-265. Hundreds of African students in Cuba, like their compatriots in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, faced overt racism at the hands of white Cubans. In 1966, ninety Congolese students demanded to be sent back home after a series of clashes with Cuban soldiers. Ibid. 253-254.

²¹ Ibid. 265-266.

²² Ibid. 260-261.

In April 1965, Che Guevara left for the Congo along with two battalions of Black Cuban troops. Che told the Congolese groups that they could win liberation only under his leadership and by employing Cuban armed forces. China opposed the presence of Cuban troops in the Congo, as did the guerilla army in western Congo led by Pierre Mulele and other Congolese liberation forces that had been fighting with little external help.²³

After Che's forces lost their supply lines through Tanzania, Che and Castro moved them to Congo-Brazzaville on the Atlantic Coast. The Cuban military kept a friendly regime in Brazzaville in power and began a long-term effort to train and mold the politics of the pro-Soviet MPLA in nearby Angola. Guevara's Eurocentric conclusion from his expedition to the Congo was that African emancipation would take "a very, very long time" and required "a new kind of African" to emerge.²⁴

In 1967, Che and Castro switched their focus to Latin America. In January 1967, Cuba issued an initial printing of 200,000 copies of *Revolution in the Revolution* by the French intellectual Regis Debray and with Che while he was still in Cuba. This book was an official defense of focoism. It rejected the Maoist line that the creation of a mass base through the arousal and political mobilization of the peasantry was necessary before the initiation of guerilla warfare. Debray proudly claimed that "During two years of warfare, Fidel did not hold a single political rally in his zone of operations." Debray denied that stable base areas had to be built in order to support guerilla warfare, and that a Marxist-Leninist party was needed to command a guerilla army.

Debray argued that revolutionary warfare in China and Vietnam required "a high density of rural population" in order for the guerilla fish to swim in the peasant water. He concluded that the Cuban Revolution was a "creative application of Marxism-Leninism," while the people's wars in China and Vietnam were irrelevant to Latin America because conditions in Asia were so different from those in Latin America.²⁵

The Quechuan language that the guerillas had studied was useless since a distinct non-Quechuan language was spoken by the Indians in the area of their foco. Without a secure political base among the peasantry in this area, Che wrote in his diary that "the peasants do not give us any help, and they are turning into informers."²⁶

Due its practice of focoism in 1967, Guevara's band of guerillas was defeated after six months in the field. Che was captured and executed in October by a force of 1800 Bolivian Rangers under the direction of the CIA and U.S. Army Special Forces.

Both before and after the political rupture between socialist China and the pro-Soviet Cuban CP in the mid-1960s, China supported national liberation movements throughout Latin America. The PRC gave political support and disseminated anti-revisionist literature to people's movements and insurgencies in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela, most of which had broken away from pro-Soviet parties.²⁷ Beginning in

²³ Ibid. 218, 221-222, 226-233.

²⁴ Ibid. 244-248, 317-320.

²⁵ Johnson 107, 113-114, 119, 128.

²⁶ *The Fall of Che Guevara* by Henry Ryan (1998) 82-102.

²⁷ Worden 197, 207; *Communist China and Latin America, 1959-1967* by Cecil Johnson

March 1963, a Spanish-language edition of *Peking Review*, *Pekin Informa*, was distributed throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. Logistical problems limited Chinese military and other material aid to revolutionary movements in Latin America during the 1960s.

On April 1, 1964, the U.S.-backed Brazilian military overthrew the government of Joao Goulart, who had taken an independent foreign policy and allowed *Hsinhua* news agency to establish an office in Rio de Janeiro. China's evaluation of the coup focused on the driving role of U.S. imperialism and pro-U.S. comprador forces in Brazil; that the national democratic forces, as in other countries, had to answer armed suppression by U.S. imperialism with revolutionary armed force; and that work among the peasantry in Brazil had the greatest potential for revolution. The Chinese press also reported on the work of, and reprinted documents from, the newly formed Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB) and the Poor Peasants' League in Brazil's mainly Black Northeast.²⁸

In April 1965, 30,000 U.S. marines invaded the Dominican Republic to support pro-American forces in a civil war. Mao issued a statement on May 12 pledging the firm support of the Chinese people to the struggle of the Dominican people, which he compared to the peoples' struggles in Vietnam and the Congo. Parades and rallies that totaled one million people in Beijing, Shanghai, Canton and Shenyang demanded that "U.S. imperialism get out of the Dominican Republic!" and "People of all the world unite to defeat U.S. imperialism!"

In June 1965, a prominent Chinese journal explained why the People's Republic gave such importance to the Dominican uprising: "The significance of the Dominican people's struggle far exceeds the border of Dominica. . . Any people's struggle in one Latin American country will light the fire of anti-American struggle in all of Latin America."²⁹

In 1967, the PRC extended public support to revolutionaries who had broken away from the pro-Soviet Mexican Communist Party. Anti-revisionist Chinese literature, including Mao's writings on guerilla warfare, was distributed through El Primer Paso (The First Step) bookstore in Mexico City and the branch of *Hsinhua* in Mexico. The Mexican government alleged that *Hsinhua* was providing financing for the purchase of weapons by Mexican Maoists.³⁰

On October 2, 1968, on the eve of the Summer Olympics in Mexico City, hundreds of student protestors were massacred by 5,000 soldiers, supported by tanks and helicopters. China denounced the Mexican army's occupation of many universities and the suppression of the student movement by the Echeverria government. *Peking Review* reported on support for the students in Mexico City by students and workers throughout Mexico, and in Chile, Colombia and Nicaragua. In Paris, several thousand students carried banners with the slogan, "Paris-Mexico, the Same Fight!"³¹

(1970) 181-285.

²⁸ Johnson 184-206.

²⁹ Ibid. 257-259

³⁰ Ibid. 274-280.

³¹ "Storm in Yankee Imperialists' 'Backyard': Mexican Students Fight Persecution," *Peking Review*, October 11, 1968. www.massline.org/PekingReview.

