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Fidel Castro's Foreign Policy: Cuba Between the Soviet Union and the United States

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Introduction

This thesis aims to analyze Fidel Castro's foreign policy in the decade between 1959 and 1969: a period that proved crucial for the expression of the international identity of the Cuban revolution. The central aim of the research is to understand the geopolitical strategies adopted by Castro to preserve the island's independence in the context of the Cold War, in a hostile environment characterized by the influence of the United States and the Soviet Union. The question that runs through the entire work can be stated as follows: how did Cuba, under the leadership of Fidel Castro, seek to assert political and ideological autonomy while being involved in the bipolar dynamic between the two great superpowers?

The historical interest of this thesis lies in the relevance of the Cuban case as an unusual model of revolutionary foreign policy. Cuba also attempted to redefine global geopolitical dynamics, positioning itself as the center of the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movement in the oppressed countries of the Third World. Analyzing Castro's political strategy during those years therefore means reflecting on the tensions between ideology and realism, and between sovereignty and dependence.

The methodology used is historical-interpretative: it is based on the critical analysis of primary sources, such as Castro's official speeches, declassified documents, United Nations materials and CIA reports, together with extensive use of scientific literature, including historical and political essays and biographical accounts. The approach adopted aims to offer a detailed conceptual reading of Cuban foreign policy, highlighting its developments, contradictions and strategic choices.

The first chapter focuses on the progressive breakdown of relations between Cuba and the United States between 1959 and 1961, analyzing the causes of the conflict, starting with the nationalization of US companies, which triggered a rapid diplomatic, economic and ideological escalation. It then examines the US response, including the embargo, propaganda and support for counter-revolutionary movements, and how the Cuban government reacted by strengthening its internal political structure and promoting anti-imperialist resistance, seeking protection within the socialist bloc. The chapter concludes

with an analysis of the Bay of Pigs invasion and Fidel Castro's subsequent declaration of the socialist character of the revolution, a turning point for subsequent events on the island.

The second chapter is dedicated to the 1962 missile crisis, an event that represented the culmination of tensions between Cuba, the United States and the Soviet Union. The analysis focuses both on the strategic aspects of Operation Anadyr, i.e. the secret positioning of Soviet missiles in Cuba, and on the symbolic and diplomatic dimension of the conflict between Kennedy and Khrushchev. Of particular note is Castro's exclusion from the negotiations between the two superpowers and the consequences this had for Cuba. The chapter also explores the internal and external consequences of the crisis, highlighting the acceleration of the militarization of Cuban society and the strengthening of revolutionary ideology.

Finally, the third chapter explores the evolution of Cuban foreign policy between 1963 and 1969, following the end of the missile crisis. This section describes the change in Cuban policy, both domestically and abroad. It examines Cuba's support for revolutionary movements in Latin America and Africa, its leading role in the 1966 Tricontinental Conference, and the birth of the OSPAAAL. The chapter also analyses the growing tension with the USSR following the invasion of Czechoslovakia and the condemnation of the doctrine of "peaceful coexistence". The last part is devoted to a comparison between Che Guevara's idealistic and internationalist vision and Fidel Castro's more diplomatic and pragmatic strategy. Through this comparison, the aim is to highlight the internal contradictions of the Cuban revolution.

Together, the three chapters will attempt to outline the trajectory of Cuban foreign policy, which cannot be reduced to simple dependence on the Soviet Union or to an isolated rebellion against U.S. imperialism. The Cuban revolution occupies a strategic position between what were global aspirations and revolutionary dreams on the one hand, and the internal state structures and political constraints of the powers involved on the other.

Chapter 1

Cuba and the United States: From Revolution to Embargo (1959-1961)

1.1 The nationalization of U.S. businesses and the American response

Before the 1959 Revolution, Cuba was heavily dependent on the United States, both economically and in terms of domestic policies. The island was a strategic hub for U.S. economic system, because it was the main exporter of raw sugar, tobacco and nickel, in return, receiving most manufactured goods and capital. The trade picture was highly unbalanced, because of this Cuba became an economy subordinate to Washington's interests.

At that time U.S. corporations owned about 90 percent of the mines and refineries, 80 percent of the utilities, 50 percent of the railroads, as well as a majority of the sugar mills and banks.¹ Moreover, American foreign capital was able to exercise strong and direct power over almost every other aspect of the country. For instance, large corporations, such as the United Fruit Company and the American Sugar Company, owned millions of acres of land, as well as countless tax and trade advantages. These expanded their power so much that they also became political pressure groups, able to directly influence U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba.² Freight transportation was the responsibility of U.S. railroad and port companies, while U.S. banks, such as First National City Bank and Chase Manhattan Bank, provided money for the entire sugar supply chain cycle. The financial sector was thus embedded in a logic of vertical dependence, this did not allow the growth of an independent society and prevented Cuba from planning internal development strategies because it was in a state of “subordinate capitalism”.³

¹ Allison, R. C. *Cuba's Seizures of American Business*. American Bar Association Journal 47, no. 1 (1961): 48–51.

² Morley, M. H. *Reinterpreting the State-Class Relationship: American Corporations and U.S. Policy Toward Cuba, 1959–1960*. Comparative Politics 16, no. 1 (1983): 67–83.

³ O'Connor, J. *Agrarian Reforms in Cuba, 1959–1963*. Science & Society 32, no. 2 (1968): 169–217.

Coupled with this was the influence of U.S. companies in the domestic trade network: they held a monopoly on the distribution of consumer products such as automobiles, home appliances and fuel. By the late 1950s, approximately 70% of all consumer goods were imported from the United States to Cuba, furthermore, U.S. companies controlled 80% of public utilities, 90% of telephone and electricity services establishing undoubted economic privileges over the island.⁴ Plus, the tourism and entertainment sectors were following the same path. For example, Havana had over 270 hotels, and over 200 casinos financed by U.S. investors.⁵ Interestingly, according to U.S. Intelligence Reports organized crime groups invested over \$100 millions USD in Cuban casinos, horse races and luxury tourism in the 1950s alone.⁶

The island became one of the main business parks in the Western Hemisphere, because of its location it was a connecting point between the Gulf of Mexico⁷, the Atlantic Ocean and Latin America. From the military perspective, it guaranteed control of maritime flows and a strategic outpost against foreign threats. Notably, the “Enmienda Platt”, an amendment that went into effect in 1901, sanctioned U.S. military interference in Cuban political life, which resulted in the possibility of maintaining the Guantánamo naval base indefinitely. These measures were a further confirmation of Washington's dominance and served to solidify the idea of violated sovereignty in Cuban perceptions. According to U.S. foreign policy, Cuba was necessary, and its loss would have set a serious precedent for the entire continent.⁸

At the same time, a crisis of internal legitimacy was beginning, with social and political connotations. The country was being led by the *de facto* dictator Fulgencio Batista⁹ until

⁴ Pérez, L. A. *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, and Culture*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.

⁵ Schwartz, R. M. *Pleasure Island: Tourism and Temptation in Cuba*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.

Scott, Len, and R. Gerald Hughes. *The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Critical Reappraisal*. *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9, no. 3 (2007): 5–24.

⁶ Thomas, H. *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001.

⁷ Now, known as Gulf of America (since 2025).

⁸ Morley, M. H. *Reinterpreting the State-Class Relationship: American Corporations and U.S. Policy Toward Cuba, 1959–1960*. *Comparative Politics* 16, no. 1 (1983): 67–83.

⁹ He was the *de facto* president of the island from 1933 to 1940, then he actually was elected in office until 1944. After some difficult times for his political career, he became dictator in 1952 until 1959.

the beginning of the armed internal conflict. He enjoyed U.S. support because of his ability to maintain stability, which was not viewed well by the population, since it saw, in supporting such an authoritarian and corrupt regime, a threat to the reputation of the United States. Thus, an explosion of radical reforms was inevitable: the agrarian question became a tool for changing the social and productive order, which was at odds with the interests of foreign agricultural multinationals.¹⁰

Then, the 1959 was the year in which the revolution lighted up internal pre-existing tensions, exacerbated by external pressures on the political, economic and social sphere. The Cuban Revolution later devolved into a broader political event expanding internationally, symbolizing the opportunity to fight American hegemony in an area where government felt entitled to consider it its natural territory of influence.¹¹

In detail, on January 1st, 1959, a new political phase began: Fulgencio Batista fled the country, the Rebel Army arrived in Havana, and Fidel Castro formally assumed power. A revolutionary new military public figure enacted a coup d'état. This new period was characterized by a militant nationalism hostile to the subordination of the United States, although at first there were no Marxist connotations. The new revolutionary government claimed to be the means to revive the country, which had been corroded by decades of abuse, corruption and inequality. Its first move was to destroy the old oligarchic apparatus that controlled the economy, acting against everything linked to U.S. capital. The new government's goal was to build a more equitable and independent economy, with production more oriented to national interests, decreasing forced exports, reforming the rural credit system and redistributing land and wealth. In more detail, the subsequent Agrarian Reform Law, on May 17th, 1959, marked a turning point, because it provided for a property limit of 402 hectares, as well as a ban on foreign ownership of *latifundia* and the foundation of the National Institute for Agrarian Reform (INRA), an institute for land redistribution. This reform served to decrease inequality and dismantle the economic power of the traditional agrarian class. The expropriated properties were confiscated and transformed into collective production units, some under the management of the Rebel

¹⁰ Alexander, Robert J. *Agrarian Reform in Latin America*. Foreign Affairs 41, no. 1 (1962): 191–207.

¹¹ Gallo, P. J. (1974). *Castro and the Cuban revolution*. *Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali*, 41(1), 81–98.

Army.¹² This further enhanced the tension with the United States escalated from internal reforms to a direct confrontation during 1960.

The Cuban government forced the three American oil companies on the island, Esso Standard Oil, Texaco and Shell, to refine oil supplied by the Soviet Union. Despite the instructions from the State Department, Washington refused, and Castro considered it as an act of sabotage that started the process of nationalization of the refineries. For the first time, a Latin American government publicly challenged the multinational oil companies, rejecting U.S. conditional sovereignty. The press and the U.S. Congress denounced the action as arbitrary expropriation.¹³ From September, the offensive was no longer limited to the oil sector alone, but extended to the banking and industrial sectors as well. Major U.S. banks operating in Cuba were expropriated, such as the First National City Bank and the Chase Manhattan Bank, and placed under the control of the Banco Nacional de Cuba. At the same time 166 U.S. companies, in sectors such as electricity, telecommunications, transport, food production, retail and fuel distribution, were nationalized. This led to an economic and ideological breaking point, because the government was declaring an end to foreign dominance.¹⁴ As a response to these American deliberations, Fidel Castro declared that the revolution could no longer tolerate foreign economic authority on national territory and that the elimination of all forms of imperialist economic domination was unavoidable. To justify the expropriations in decisive tones, he defined them as acts of collective emancipation and not as violations of international law, shifting the argument from the technical to the ethical-political sphere. The U.S. legal logic was rejected by the Cuban one: Washington was based on the principle of compensation, Cuba, on the other hand, claimed the right to unilaterally fix the terms and modalities of compensation on the basis of “revolutionary justice”.¹⁵

¹² O'Connor, J. *Agrarian Reforms in Cuba, 1959–1963*. *Science & Society* 32, no. 2 (1968): 169–217.

¹³ Allison, R. C. *Cuba's Seizures of American Business*. *American Bar Association Journal* 47, no. 1 (1961): 48–51.

¹⁴ Morley, M. H. *Reinterpreting the State-Class Relationship: American Corporations and U.S. Policy Toward Cuba, 1959–1960*. *Comparative Politics* 16, no. 1 (1983): 67–83.

¹⁵ Allison, R. C. *Cuba's Seizures of American Business*. *American Bar Association Journal* 47, no. 1 (1961): 48–51.

The U.S. reaction was swift: on July 6th, 1960, President Dwight D. Eisenhower¹⁶ revoked the preferential import quota for Cuban sugar under the Sugar Act. The United States eliminated the main commercial outlet for the best seller in the Cuban economy, generating imbalance in the island's economy. Eisenhower did more than just this: he progressively tightened economic sanctions and increased CIA covert operations. This started the funding of internal counterrevolutionary groups, psychological propaganda campaigns, sabotage in factories and infiltration of ports and airports. Washington did not achieve its goal, however, because the Batista regime was not weakened but rather strengthened, which consolidated its power and justified further political hardening. The hostility between the two sides caused Cuba to move closer and closer to the Soviet Union, concluding trade and military agreements and turning the island into the main geopolitical base of the socialist bloc in the western hemisphere.¹⁷

1.2 The deterioration of relations and the imposition of the embargo (1960)

During 1960, the definitive breaking point in relations between Cuba and the United States was reached, when tensions were no longer limited to nationalization alone, but extended to become a political and diplomatic crisis in which the entire western hemisphere was involved. The U.S. economic campaign was followed by a phase of escalation that involved not only the commercial sphere, but also the multilateral one and the ideological one. Washington's objective was to isolate Cuba within the Organization of American States, but this was not possible due to the resistance of numerous Latin American countries, such as Mexico, Brazil and Argentina, which did not officially condemn the Cuban revolution on the principle of self-determination and rejecting any external interference.¹⁸ The historical legacy of North American interventionism in Latin America and the dissatisfaction with a foreign policy, that did not put the countries'

¹⁶ Elected American Republican President between 1953 and 1961.

¹⁷ Thomas, H. *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001., Hugh. 1963. "Cuba: The Revolution in Perspective." *Foreign Affairs* 41 (4): 614–629.

¹⁸ Paterson, T. G. *The United States and the Global Economic Blockade of Cuba*. Latin American Perspectives 13, no. 3 (1986): 65–88.

regional priorities first, led to a rejection and growing distrust of U.S. paternalism. As a result, the multilateral initiative promoted by the United States was not completed and the failure led to the loss of compactness of the inter-American system.¹⁹ The Cuban revolution was bringing to light tensions between the new Latin American political elites, who were increasingly interested in issues of social justice and independent development. The failure signaled the beginning of a redefinition of the diplomatic balance in Central and South America. Thus, an autonomous sentiment developed, hostile to Washington's interventionist model, but without adhering to Cuban revolutionary socialism.

In the meantime, Fidel Castro's government strengthened economic and political ties with the Soviet Union, which was the main strategic counterweight to U.S. pressure. In early 1960, the first contacts were made, the Soviet Deputy Prime Minister visited Cuba, and the first bilateral agreements of economic and symbolic significance were signed. The agreement, signed on February 13th, provided a technical and scientific cooperation between the two countries.²⁰ For the Soviet Union, this rapprochement was a unique opportunity to affirm the presence of socialism in a region that had always been under the exclusive domination of American influence. For Cuba, on the other hand, the USSR represented an alternative trading partner and a political guarantor capable of compensating for the strategic asymmetry with the United States. In the following months, cooperation also extended to the military level with the dispatch of Soviet advisers to reorganize the armed forces according to the Warsaw Pact model and the transit of the first Soviet-made light arms and military transport vehicles.²¹

At first, the Cuban government maintained a nationalist and anti-imperialist rhetoric, avoiding calling itself Marxist-Leninist, so that the transition was not immediate. This

¹⁹ By "inter-American system" we refer to the institutional and diplomatic framework that governed relations among the countries of the American continent, particularly through the Organization of American States (OAS), established in 1948. The system aimed to promote regional cooperation, democracy, and collective security. In the early 1960s, it included member states such as the United States, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Peru, Venezuela, and nearly all Latin American and Caribbean nations. The system's internal cohesion began to fracture when several of these countries, most notably Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina, which refused to support U.S. efforts to politically isolate revolutionary Cuba. This episode exposed growing ideological divisions and signaled the erosion of U.S. dominance in hemispheric diplomacy.

²⁰ The agreement provided for the annual purchase of one million tons of Cuban sugar by the USSR in exchange for Soviet oil, wheat, technical equipment, and development aid.

²¹ Ullman, Harlan K. *Cuba and the Soviet Union*. World Affairs 143, no. 1 (1980): 15–25.

progressive convergence with the socialist bloc led to a more explicit ideological shift during 1961. The USSR transformed the alliance from a commercial link to a structured relationship of dependence. Fidel Castro's speech at the UN General Assembly on September 26th, 1960, lasting over four hours, represented a political turning point in Cuba's international relations. The actions of the U.S. government against the Cuban revolution were denounced:

“The United States has promoted and continues to promote subversive activities against the revolutionary government of Cuba. It has created organizations, supplied them with arms, parachutes, explosives, and even introduced them into our territory by sea and air.”

He further explained:

“In the first place, the Government of the United States considers it has the right to promote and encourage subversion in our country. The Government of the United States is promoting the organization of subversive movements against the Revolutionary Government of Cuba, and we wish to denounce this fact in this General Assembly; we also wish to denounce specifically the fact that, for instance, a territory which belongs to Honduras, known as Islas Cisnes, the Swan Islands, has been seized *manu militari* by the Government of the United States and that American marines are there, despite the fact that this territory belongs to Honduras. Thus, violating international law and despoiling a friendly people of a part of its territory, the United States has established a powerful radio station on one of those Islands, in violation of international radio agreements, and has placed it at the disposal of the war criminals and subversive groups supported in this country; furthermore, military training is being conducted on that island, in order to promote subversion and the landing of armed forces in our country .”²²

This excerpt from Castro's speech is emblematic for the change of Cuba's position at international level. He accused the U.S. of violating international law especially through

²² Castro, Fidel. *Speech Delivered by Dr. Fidel Castro, Prime Minister of the Republic of Cuba, at the Fifteenth Session of the United Nations General Assembly*. 1960. United Nations Digital Library.

the militarization of the Swan Islands. In the piece, Castro extends the concept to a broader struggle against imperialism, instead of being only bilateral dispute.

Moreover, in a later passage, he referenced the clandestine CIA operations and the network of counter-revolutionary groups supported by the U.S. government, which showed that American hostility was part of a strategy to overthrow the revolutionary order. In light of the latter, he also added:

“For eighty years we were a colony of Spain; for the next sixty years we were a colony of the United States. What we are trying to do now is to achieve our full independence. And yet this is what the imperialists do not forgive—that we are trying to make our own way, free from their control. They do not forgive us for having carried out a socialist revolution right under the nose of the United States. They do not forgive us for having taken back the land, the factories, the mines, and the banks and given them to the people. They do not forgive the dignity, the courage, the ideological strength of the Cuban people. They do not forgive that we have shown it is possible to make a revolution in the very backyard of imperialism and survive.”

He explained that for decades Cuba had been under the control of a colonial model, despite Washington trying to pass it off as an economic alliance, and that the revolution was an act of emancipation from this.²³

Castro's denunciation also extended to the U.S. naval base at Guantánamo, which he called “a permanent violation of our national sovereignty” and an obstacle to the island's security. He stated:

“There is a base in the heart of our territory that represents a grave risk for us in case of conflict. It was imposed on us by force during the first years of occupation and has remained ever since, against the will of our people. It is well known that, in virtue of the Platt Amendment, imposed by force upon our people, the Government of the United States assumed the right to establish naval bases on our territory, a right forcefully imposed and maintained. A naval base in the territory of any country is surely a cause for concern. First of all, there is concern over the fact that a country

²³ Castro, Fidel. *Speech Delivered by Dr. Fidel Castro, Prime Minister of the Republic of Cuba, at the Fifteenth Session of the United Nations General Assembly*. 1960. United Nations Digital Library.

which follows an aggressive and warlike international policy has a base in the heart of our country, which brings us the risk of being involved in any international conflict, in any atomic conflict, without our having anything to do with the problem, because we have absolutely nothing to do with the problems of the United States and the crises provoked by the Government of the United States.”²⁴

The issue expanded beyond the borders of the American continent to the interest of Third World countries and non-aligned movements. Cuba was no longer perceived merely as a beleaguered nation, but as a representative of a changing world, the global South wanted to possess its own autonomous role in the international scenario.

On October 19th, 1960, President Eisenhower responded with an executive order, adopted under the Export Control Act, banning the export of all U.S. goods to Cuba, with the sole exception of food and medicines. This measure was an economic sanction of a permanent nature, not subject to diplomatic conditions for lifting, nor part of a multilateral negotiation process. The blockade was extra-legal because it was implemented without the support of an Organization of American States resolution or the approval of the United Nations Security Council. The aim of the embargo was to trigger social unrest and discontent to promote regime change and the restoration of the previous political order.²⁵ This embargo marked the end of Cuba's dependence on the U.S. economy and was also the first real act of Cold War on the continent. The country's economy suffered severe consequences: the interruption of the flow of U.S. goods and technologies progressively paralyzed the industrial sector. Another cornerstone of the economy, the agricultural sector, was severely compromised: Cuba was no longer self-sufficient in food production and became dependent on supplies from socialist bloc countries. The embargo also destabilized the health system, with a reduction in the availability of essential medicines.²⁶

²⁴ Castro, Fidel. *Speech Delivered by Dr. Fidel Castro, Prime Minister of the Republic of Cuba, at the Fifteenth Session of the United Nations General Assembly*. 1960. United Nations Digital Library.

²⁵ Lamrani, S. *The Economic War Against Cuba: A Historical and Legal Perspective on the U.S. Blockade*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013.

²⁶ Garfield, R., and Santana, S. The Impact of the U.S. Embargo on the Health of the Cuban Population. *American Journal of Public Health* 87, no. 1 (1997): 15–20.

Despite the combination of these hardships, the United States was unable to achieve its goals, because Cuba turned this difficulty into the main element to strengthen collective national identity through shared sacrifice. Fidel Castro stated:

“If our people go hungry, it will be in defense of dignity, the homeland and sovereignty. If our people go hungry, it will be because others have deprived us of our bread, but not because we have been unable to produce it; not because we have been unable to work and earn our living; not because we have been unable to defend our rights and our resources. We shall go hungry, but we shall go hungry with dignity. We shall go hungry, but we shall go hungry with our heads held high. We shall go hungry, but we shall go hungry defending our rights. We shall go hungry, but we shall go hungry defending our sovereignty. We shall go hungry, but we shall go hungry defending our independence. We shall go hungry, but we shall go hungry defending our revolution.”²⁷

Consensus with the new government and internal unity were consolidated along with links with anti-imperialist movements, non-aligned countries and the international left. The government's main means of international legitimization was precisely the economic bloc.

1.3 The diplomatic break between Cuba and the U.S. (January 1961) and the beginning of anti-U.S. propaganda

After months in which diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States had been critical, amid indirect confrontations and tensions, the rift took on a definitive legal and symbolic character on 3 January 1961, with President Dwight D. Eisenhower's decision. This act was justified by the need to protect U.S. diplomatic personnel in Havana, President Eisenhower declared it impossible beforehand due to the hostility of the Cuban population. It was all part of a strategy to close the channels of communication, sanctioning Cuba's alignment with the Soviet Union, carrying out covert operations and political delegitimization.

²⁷ Castro, Fidel. *Speech Delivered by Dr. Fidel Castro, Prime Minister of the Republic of Cuba, at the Fifteenth Session of the United Nations General Assembly*. 1960. United Nations Digital Library.

According to international practice, the breaking of legal ties was not possible, as a protecting power, Switzerland, was appointed, which from that moment on represented U.S. interests in Cuba. The adoption of this mechanism transformed the Cuban question from a bilateral crisis into a Cold War ideological front, showing the inability of the United States to negotiate with its neighbors, and marked the beginning of a more unstable phase of American policy in the hemisphere. On January 4th, 1961, came the response of Fidel Castro, who addressed the population via radio in a lengthy speech, in which he denounced the American actions, calling them an act of “*psychological warfare*” against national sovereignty. According to Castro, Cuba could no longer rely on a country that for such a long time had treated it as a mere colony to be exploited for its own interests.

In the previously mentioned speech at the United Nations General Assembly, Castro expanded on achieving national emancipation, stating:

“Cuba was the last country of America to shake off Spanish colonial rule... For thirty years the Cubans fought alone for their independence; thirty years which are also part of the strength with which we are now resisting the new forms of domination. [...] What has the revolutionary government done? What is the crime committed by the revolutionary government, for it to find itself confronted by such powerful enemies? When we came to power, were we possessed with the desire to find international difficulties? No. What we wanted was to devote ourselves to the settling of our own problems at home; to carry out a program for the betterment of the people, as all governments do that are truly concerned with the progress of their country. [...] They do not forgive us for having carried out a socialist revolution right under the nose of the United States. They do not forgive us for having taken back the land, the factories, the mines, and the banks and given them to the people. They do not forgive the dignity, the courage, the ideological strength of the Cuban people.”²⁸

What he uttered were real political codes that incorporated the revolutionary identity in an anti-colonialist key. Castro took the opportunity to internally re-legitimize the regime

²⁸ Castro, Fidel. *Speech Delivered by Dr. Fidel Castro, Prime Minister of the Republic of Cuba, at the Fifteenth Session of the United Nations General Assembly*. 1960. United Nations Digital Library.

and the revolution as the realization of a true national sovereignty, and at the same time to take revenge for the historical humiliation and economic dependence suffered²⁹.

From this, a system of anti-American propaganda was created, that insinuated itself into every aspect of Cuban public sphere. Radio Rebelde³⁰ and the Granma newspaper³¹ became the main voices of propaganda, publishing articles and satirical cartoons that portrayed the United States as the aggressor and the reason for Cuba's hardships³². In the educational sector, the Ministry of Education introduced programmes in schools and universities that were aligned with the Marxist-Leninist view of history and economics, with the aim of forming a conscious and compact generation³³. Universities not only offered civic education programmes, but also militant education activities, such as the University of Havana, which quickly became the center of the new revolutionary pedagogy³⁴. Propaganda had expanded its boundaries from a tool of political communication to a genuine alternative educational system designed to redefine Cuban identity.

In 1960, the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDRs)³⁵ were established, strengthened in 1961, and assumed the role of a permanent mechanism of social surveillance and political mobilization. There was at least one committee per neighborhood, their task was to monitor the behavior of citizens, organize political

²⁹ Suchlicki, J. *Cuba: From Columbus to Castro and Beyond*. Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2002.

³⁰ It is a Cuban radio station founded in 1958 by Ernesto "Che" Guevara, with the aim of broadcasting the goals and messages of the 26th of July Movement led by Fidel Castro. Originally created as a revolutionary communication tool, it later evolved into a national broadcaster and continues to operate today, transmitting music, news, and sports 24 hours a day.

³¹ It is the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba. Its name commemorates the yacht Granma, which carried Fidel Castro and 81 other revolutionaries from Mexico to Cuba in 1956, marking the beginning of the Cuban revolutionary struggle.

³² Brenner, P., LeoGrande, W. M., Rich, D., and Siegel, D. *A Contemporary Cuba Reader: Reinventing the Revolution*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008.

³³ Yaffe, H. *Cuba's Socialist Economy Today: Navigating Challenges and Change*. London: Pluto Press, 2011.

³⁴ Hart, Armando. *Aldabonazo: Inside the Cuban Revolutionary Underground, 1952–58*. La Habana: Editorial José Martí, 1961.

³⁵ The Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs) were grassroots organizations established in Cuba in 1960 to promote revolutionary vigilance, mobilize support for government policies, and monitor counter-revolutionary activity at the neighborhood level. Functioning as instruments of social control and political participation, they played a central role in consolidating the revolutionary state by fostering ideological unity and reporting dissent.

activities and transmit information to the central authorities.³⁶ The CDRs helped create a “culture of permanent mobilization”, in which every citizen had to take part in the defence of the socialist government. Underlying it all was the belief that the revolution could not survive without direct control, making society on permanent alert.³⁷

Visual propaganda became increasingly popular, elaborated by the Department of Revolutionary Orientation (DOR)³⁸, which plastered the country with murals depicting Fidel Castro, Ernesto Che Guevara or the people in struggle, posters with slogans such as “*Patria o Muerte*” and “*Venceremos!*”, had documentaries and commercials shown in cinemas or in squares depicting the clash between Cuban patriotism and American arrogance. This was not limited to a national audience but was also designed to have an impact on anti-colonial movements and international leftists, who were to associate Cubans with heroes.³⁹

Castro interpreted the final diplomatic break as exemplifying the impossibility of geopolitical neutrality and the gradual achievement of a stable alliance with the Soviet Union. Until then, the revolutionary government had wanted to show itself as independent of foreign hegemony, but it was now clear that this was no longer possible and that its entry into the bipolar paradigm of the Cold War was now inevitable. The geopolitical condition of the island was redefined as “encircled revolutionary fortress”, which meant that it could only survive with the support of Moscow.⁴⁰

Another important element of this period was the presidential handover of power from Eisenhower to Kennedy, which took place on January 20th, 1961. Eisenhower's strategy

³⁶ Rodríguez Menier, J. A. *Los Órganos de la Seguridad del Estado: 1959–1961*. La Habana: Editorial Capitán San Luis, 2006.

³⁷ Yaffe, H. *Cuba's Socialist Economy Today: Navigating Challenges and Change*. London: Pluto Press, 2011.

³⁸ The Department of Revolutionary Orientation (DOR) was a key ideological body within the Cuban Communist Party, responsible for shaping political messaging, controlling media content, and ensuring that public discourse aligned with revolutionary principles. It functioned as a central instrument of propaganda and ideological supervision during the consolidation of the revolutionary regime.

³⁹ Yaffe, H. *Cuba's Socialist Economy Today: Navigating Challenges and Change*. London: Pluto Press, 2011.

⁴⁰ Fursenko, A., and Naftali, T. *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958–1964*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.

was based on economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation, while Kennedy's⁴¹ aimed at more active interventions, such as training Cuban exiles, arms procurement and naval invasions.⁴²

The diplomatic rupture changed the militarization of the conflict: clandestine operations were increasingly frequent; all channels of formal communication were closed and punitive action against Cuba was on the horizon because it was justified by public opinion as a looming threat. Kennedy considered it of paramount importance to show hostility to communism this perception of urgency, so much so that he urgently accelerated the transformation of the Cuban question into a national security crisis.⁴³

1.4 The failed Bay of Pigs invasion (April 1961) and Castro's official alignment with the Soviet bloc.

The landing at the Bay of Pigs, officially called "Operation Zapata", on April 17th, 1961, initiated one of the most critical phases of the crisis between Cuba and the United States. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) planned the attack, first with the support of President Eisenhower, and later President Kennedy. The operation was aimed at triggering a popular uprising to overthrow the Castro regime and consisted of naval landings supported by air raids on Cuban airports. Two days after the landing, on April 15th, bombers from Nicaragua attacked three airports, causing just little damage. The military failure and the fear for eventual escalation and its international spread forced Kennedy to reduce direct U.S. involvement. He did authorize air missions planned for April 17th,

⁴¹ The transition to John F. Kennedy's presidency in 1961 marked a shift in U.S. foreign policy from Eisenhower's doctrine of massive retaliation to a strategy of flexible response, aimed at addressing different levels of threat with proportionate means. Kennedy promoted increased engagement in the Global South, launching initiatives such as the Peace Corps and the Alliance for Progress to counter Soviet influence through economic aid and development. Domestically, his election reflected a change in public sentiment: economic concerns, the perceived need for more active leadership during the Cold War, and the appeal of Kennedy's modern image led voters to prefer the Democratic candidate over Republican Richard Nixon. Kennedy's youth, communication skills, and promise of renewal resonated with a society facing both internal transformation and international tension.

⁴² Kornbluh, P. *Bay of Pigs Declassified: The Secret CIA Report on the Invasion of Cuba*. New York: The New Press, 1998.

⁴³ Blight, J. G., Allyn, B. J., and Welch, D. A. *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis, and the Soviet Collapse*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002.

which could have been decisive, and this contributed to the final defeat of the invading forces and the damage to Washington's image.⁴⁴

The members of “Brigada 2505”, rebel Cuban exiles, landed at Playa Girón at dawn, but found themselves in difficulty due to the lack of U.S. air support and the delay in unloading supplies. The Cuban air force, although not as organized and strong as the U.S.’ managed to inflict heavy losses on the enemy ships and obstruct the arrival of naval support.⁴⁵ Despite numerous assessments, U.S. efforts were in vain because they underestimated the strong consensus enjoyed by the Castro regime. The attack was unsuccessful, the isolated Brigada 2505 resisted for a short time, until it surrendered on April 19th.⁴⁶

The Bay of Pigs event was one of the most serious defeats of the United States during the entire Cold War, because for the first time a Third World country, led by a socialist government, had managed to overwhelm U.S. power.⁴⁷ Fidel Castro seized the opportunity to turn his victory into a political statement for himself. During a speech he gave on April 16th, he publicly declared that the Cuban revolution had a Marxist-Leninist character, something that had never been done until then, and was in opposition to the Western bloc.⁴⁸

In light of these events approaching East, reuniting with the West was as far as ever ideologically. Military failure on the States’ side made sure it clear that the U.S. were

⁴⁴ Kornbluh, P. *Bay of Pigs Declassified: The Secret CIA Report on the Invasion of Cuba*. New York: The New Press, 1998.

Gleijeses, P. *Ships in the Night: The CIA, the White House and the Bay of Pigs*. *Journal of Latin American Studies* 27, no. 1 (1995): 1–42. LeoGrande, William M., e Peter Kornbluh. *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

⁴⁵ Blight, J. G., Allyn, B. J., and Welch, D. A. *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis, and the Soviet Collapse*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002.

Gleijeses, P. *Ships in the Night: The CIA, the White House and the Bay of Pigs*. *Journal of Latin American Studies* 27, no. 1 (1995): 1–42.

⁴⁶ Gleijeses, Piero. “Ships in the Night: The CIA, the White House and the Bay of Pigs.” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 27, no. 1 (1995): 1–42.

Kornbluh, P. *Bay of Pigs Declassified: The Secret CIA Report on the Invasion of Cuba*. New York: The New Press, 1998.

⁴⁷ Blight, J. G., Allyn, B. J., and Welch, D. A. *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis, and the Soviet Collapse*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002.

⁴⁸ Suchlicki, J. *Cuba: From Columbus to Castro and Beyond*. Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2002.

ready to use brutal force over diplomatic means. Eventually, the fear of further military intervention by the U.S. pushed Castro into an even closer alliance with Moscow. The Cuban leader realized that in order for the country to survive and prosper, it needed Soviet support, both economically and militarily.⁴⁹

The United States, on the other hand, aware of its international failure and worried about its prestige, opted for a destabilization strategy based on covert operations, sabotage and assassination attempts, all described in the “Mongoose Programme” that was launched by President Kennedy in November 1961.⁵⁰

After the events of 1961, Cuba joined the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON), through which it received military supplies and assistance from Soviet advisers to modernize its armed forces, and Cuban military bases were, one by one, included in the Soviet Union's defense plans in the Western Atlantic.⁵¹

The alliance reached its climax during the spring of 1962, when the USSR took the decision to install nuclear missiles on the island, to consolidate Cuba's role as an outpost of the Soviet bloc on the American continent and to strengthen its deterrence strategy against Washington.⁵²

Thus, it was that the logic of the Cold War crept into the Caribbean context, turning the conflict into a global crisis. The Soviet Union found itself forced to take direct responsibility for Cuba and its security, making it a strategic and crucial node in the clash between the two great powers. Operation Zapata was only the beginning of the nuclear imbalance that shook the world, caused by the Missile Crisis of 1962.⁵³

⁴⁹ Fursenko, A., and Naftali, T. *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958–1964*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.

⁵⁰ Kornbluh, P. *Bay of Pigs Declassified: The Secret CIA Report on the Invasion of Cuba*. New York: The New Press, 1998.

LeoGrande, William M., e Peter Kornbluh. *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

⁵¹ Brenner, P., LeoGrande, W. M., Rich, D., and Siegel, D. *A Contemporary Cuba Reader: Reinventing the Revolution*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008.

⁵² Blight, J. G., Allyn, B. J., and Welch, D. A. *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis, and the Soviet Collapse*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002.

⁵³ Garthoff, R. L. *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1989.

Finally, after the events of 1961, the geopolitical order of the western hemisphere was redefined, accelerating the alliance between Cuba and the Soviet Union. The crisis was no longer limited to a regional context, but rather a global one, because the island had now become an important instrument of the Cold War. This confrontation between socialism and capitalism would mark the various international dynamics during the 1960s.

Chapter 2

The Cuban Missile Crisis (1962)

2.1 The deployment of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba and the U.S. reaction.

One of the most critical moments of the Cold War was in October 1962, with the placement of Soviet ballistic missiles in Cuba, caused by a combination of various factors, strategic, geopolitical and ideological. Nikita Khrushchev⁵⁴, then top leader of the Soviet Union, was concerned about the global balance, which he considered to be dangerously tilted towards the United States in terms of numbers and armaments. Washington possessed a large quantity of nuclear warheads and Jupiter missiles stationed in Italy and Turkey, both NATO member countries that were near the borders of the USSR, this gave it a great strategic advantage⁵⁵.

The Kremlin wanted to re-establish a balance in deterrence and destroy the sense of vulnerability it felt towards the U.S., which is what the installation of missiles on the island was for. Cuba was less than 150 kilometers from U.S. shores, so Khrushchev believed that Kennedy would be forced to change his position in the international sphere, especially in places where tensions between the two powers were still high, such as West Berlin.

The Soviet operation was not only designed for military purposes, but also ideological ones, as the two models of society were in increasing competition, Cuba had brought the socialist revolution to the borders of the United States. Moscow, after the Bay of Pigs attack in 1961, was increasingly interested in the survival of the Castro regime and protecting it from a possible second American offensive, to show that it could defend its allies and that the socialist bloc was strong and united.

⁵⁴ Nikita Khrushchev, leader of the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1964, pursued a foreign policy marked by de-Stalinization and an assertive approach toward the West. While promoting peaceful coexistence, he simultaneously escalated Cold War tensions through actions such as the Berlin Crisis (1958–61) and the deployment of nuclear missiles to Cuba in 1962.

⁵⁵ Garthoff, R. L. *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1989.

Khrushchev wanted to assert the USSR's global position, dealing with Washington as an equal, he himself declared that he wanted to 'give the Americans some of his own taste', referring to U.S. missile bases in Europe.⁵⁶

The Soviets were convinced that the United States would not oppose the installation of the missiles, for fear of nuclear war, but they were wrong, because Kennedy regarded the initiative as a threat to his own national security.

"Operation Anadyr" was risky and impressive. The code name used was chosen to divert suspicion, Anadyr was in fact a river in eastern Siberia. The aim of the operation was to transfer nuclear weapons and military forces to Cuba in secret, without the U.S. knowing about it until its completion. The Soviet leadership had placed great faith in the success of the operation and in Cuba, which was willing to run the risk of conflict so to obtain assurances against the U.S..⁵⁷

The Soviet Union transported by sea, in absolute secrecy, around 42,000 men, R-12 (SS-4 Sandal) and R-14 (SS-5 Slean) ballistic missile batteries, mobile missile launchers, MiG fighters, warships, tanks, radar systems and anti-aircraft artillery, and 36 nuclear warheads. To camouflage the transfer, merchant and military vessels were used, passing them off as civilian vessels so as not to attract attention, all in a relatively short period of time. The USSR exploited disinformation, visual deception and strict security measures: soldiers were embarked wearing winter uniforms, unsuitable for Cuba's tropical climate, absolute radio silence was instituted, and travel documents were blacked out.⁵⁸

On the one hand, Moscow was confident that the U.S. was unlikely to respond to the operation before it was over, on the other hand, Washington underestimated the possibility that the USSR could install nuclear missiles close to U.S. territory. American intelligence noticed heavy Soviet maritime traffic, but thought it was the construction of conventional defensive bases. Both superpowers had made serious errors of judgement, taking for

⁵⁶ Fursenko, A., and Naftali, T. *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958–1964*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.

⁵⁷ Garthoff, R. L. *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1989.

⁵⁸ Garthoff, R. L. *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1989.

granted that neither would ever risk a global nuclear conflict, due to an analytical bias whereby provocative and more catastrophic options were discarded.⁵⁹

The role of the Cuban government in this operation was almost entirely irrelevant; Fidel Castro had been informed of the sending of Soviet military assistance since April of that year, but until the summer, when the operation had already begun, no more relevant details had been revealed to him. The Soviet administration regarded Cuba as a strategic outpost rather than an equal ally, just as the United States had done until then, despite the fact that the alliance between the two States was based on common principles and ideologies. The strategic planning of the operation was thus developed unilaterally, sharing with Cuba only the bare essentials for logistics.

The basic principle behind the whole of Operation Anadyr was to wrap it up before being discovered, quickly and with surprise effect. Despite the efforts, on 14 October 1962 the operation ran into U.S. air surveillance and was discovered.⁶⁰

This event initiated the most dangerous crisis of the Cold War. The U.S. Department of Defense in coordination with the CIA sent a U-2 reconnaissance aircraft on surveillance over the island of Cuba, which took the first high-resolution photographs revealing the presence of launch pads for medium-range ballistic missiles in the area of San Cristóbal.⁶¹ In the images one could clearly identify locations for SS-4 missiles, weapons capable of striking from a distance of 2,000 kilometers, thus, enough to reach the United States, including the capital, Washington D.C.. In addition to the ramps, fuel depots, control centers, radar systems and military personnel were seen. The next day, the CIA, at the National Photographic Interpretation Center (NPIC), analyzed the photographs and confirmed what had been surmised, the armaments were offensive and under construction.

⁵⁹ Hershberg, J. G. *Anatomy of a Controversy: Anatoly F. Dobrynin and the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Cold War International History Project Bulletin 5 (1995): 62–80.

⁶⁰ Hershberg, J. G. *Anatomy of a Controversy: Anatoly F. Dobrynin and the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Cold War International History Project Bulletin 5 (1995): 62–80.

Hansen, J. H. Soviet Deception in the Cuban Missile Crisis. *Studies in Intelligence* 46, no. 1 (2002): 1–10.

⁶¹ Welch, D. A., and Blight, J. G. *The Eleventh Hour of the Cuban Missile Crisis*. *International Security* 12, no. 3 (1987).

The discovery came weeks later, due to the interruption of the U-2 reconnaissance aircraft between 5 September and 14 October, because it was feared that diplomatic relations would be further soured. It was precisely because of this delay that the Soviets were able to act undisturbed. If the suspension of reconnaissance flights had lasted an extra week, allowing construction work to be completed, the U.S. would not have been able to respond in such a short time, and the crisis would have been handled differently.⁶²

The U.S. response came on October 16th, 1962, President Kennedy, after receiving official confirmation, decided to set up a select committee, the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm), to assess the options strategically and confidentially. The ExComm operated as an advisory unit outside the traditional institutional channels, allowing the U.S. president to directly control military and diplomatic choices⁶³. Kennedy's goal was to act in a balanced way, using military technical expertise and international governance skills. Various response options were considered during the meetings, all carrying the risk of destructive escalations in relation with the Soviet Union, such as surgical bombing and a military invasion of the Island. One of the ExComm members, Robert McNamara, proposed a naval quarantine, a defensive blockade to prevent supplies being sent to Cuba. This was the most suitable option for Kennedy, who wanted to act prudently, because it left room for eventual compromise.

President Kennedy and the ExComm, from October 16th to 22nd, operated with strategic silence, to prevent the press or Congress from learning of the country's hypothetical next moves. They wanted to act with lucidity and without outside interference, in order to plan a winning strategy and to initiate diplomatic contacts with the Soviet Union. It was not until October 22nd that the president informed the public, in a speech broadcast live on television, of his decision to impose a naval blockade and the demand to dismantle Soviet missile installations.⁶⁴ Kennedy declared:

⁶²Holland, M. *The "Photo Gap" That Delayed Discovery of Missiles*. *Studies in Intelligence* 49, no. 4 (2005): 1–20.

⁶³ It included some of the most important political and military figures, such as: Robert McNamara, Robert F. Kennedy, Dean Rusk, McGeorge Bundy, Lyndon B. Johnson and George Ball.

⁶⁴ Fursenko, A., and Naftali, T. *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958–1964*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.

“This Government, as promised, has maintained the closest surveillance of the Soviet military buildup on the island of Cuba. Within the past week, unmistakable evidence has established the fact that a series of offensive missile sites is now in preparation on that imprisoned island. The purpose of these bases can be none other than to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western Hemisphere. [...] Acting, therefore, in the defense of our own security and of the entire Western Hemisphere, and under the authority entrusted to me by the Constitution as endorsed by the Resolution of the Congress, I have directed that the following initial steps be taken immediately. First: To halt this offensive buildup, a strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba is being initiated. [...] Second: I have directed the continued and increased close surveillance of Cuba and its military buildup. [...] Third: It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union. [...] Fourth: As a necessary military precaution, I have reinforced our base at Guantánamo, and the personnel at that base have been placed on a maximum alert status. [...] Fifth: We are calling tonight for an immediate meeting of the Organization of American States, to consider this threat to hemispheric security. [...] Sixth: Under the Charter of the United Nations, we are asking for an emergency meeting of the Security Council to take action against this threat to international peace. [...] I have directed the Armed Forces to prepare for any eventualities.”⁶⁵

With this speech, Kennedy wanted to reassure the population and strengthen national unity, and at the same time, dissuade the USSR from a possible offensive response, showing it that the U.S. would be ready and would not hesitate to act with force. It was a move designed to have effects on multiple levels, such as inducing the Western allies to lend their support. Moreover, it had crucial relevance in reconfirming the United States' positioning within the United Nations on a moral compass level.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Kennedy, John F. *Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Soviet Arms Buildup in Cuba. The American Presidency Project*, October 22, 1962.

⁶⁶ Welch, D. A., and Blight, J. G. The Eleventh Hour of the Cuban Missile Crisis. *International Security* 12, no. 3 (1987): 5–29.

In addition to the quarantine, a process of intensification of U.S. military equipment was initiated, which raised the DEFCON alert⁶⁷ to level 3 on the same day. DEFCON 3 was the highest alert level ever recorded up to that point in the country's history, the closest to a state of nuclear war. The United States wanted to show the Soviet Union, and the rest of the world, that it was prepared to do anything to protect its national security, but it still left room for the enemy to communicate diplomatically.

The ExComm thus provided a deliberative space for rapid but at the same time analytical and detailed confrontation, avoiding internal militarist influences and strengthening the role of civilian leadership. Kennedy was able to keep the situation under control, preventing it from escalating into a nuclear war with direct armed intervention, and using time to reach diplomatic agreements.

On October 25th, 1962, during a meeting of the UN Security Council, U.S. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson showed photographs of the soviet missiles, taken by the Security Department and the CIA, to the entire international community. Stevenson provoked Soviet Ambassador Valerian Zorin with the famous phrase: "I am prepared to wait for my answer until Hell freezes over". With the discovery of the Soviet attempt to conceal the evidence of their actions, Moscow was politically isolated, forcing them to admit all their guilt.

2.2 The Kennedy-Khrushchev compromise and Castro's exclusion from the decision-making process.

After days of great tension, in which fear of the outbreak of nuclear war was high, Nikita Khrushchev, on October 28th, 1962, announced the USSR's decision to withdraw its missile installations from the island. This marked a decisive and turning point in the Cold War and U.S.-Soviet relations. On the other hand, Kennedy gave a guarantee not to invade

⁶⁷ The Defense Readiness Condition (DEFCON) system is a five-level scale used by the United States Armed Forces to indicate the state of military alertness. DEFCON 5 represents normal peacetime readiness, while DEFCON 4 involves increased intelligence gathering and heightened security measures. DEFCON 3 indicates a state of enhanced military readiness, with forces prepared for rapid deployment. DEFCON 2 reflects a situation of near-maximum readiness, just below the threshold of active combat. Finally, DEFCON 1 signals maximum alert, indicating that nuclear war is imminent or already occurring. Each level corresponds to specific operational procedures and is determined by top military and governmental authorities.

Cuba, although this was not enshrined in a formal treaty.⁶⁸ The agreement was advantageous for both superpowers: Khrushchev avoided a direct war, and Kennedy eliminated the nuclear threat on the borders of his territory. Further agreements were made in secrecy: the U.S. would later remove the Jupiter missile installations in Turkey and Italy, passing it off as an action unrelated to the crisis. Kennedy used the missiles as a bargaining chip, although in reality their removal was already part of his military planning.⁶⁹ Kennedy's objective for the secret deal on the Jupiters was to avoid giving the impression, nationally and internationally, that Washington, put under pressure, had given ground. Instead, Khrushchev wanted to show that he had succeeded in defending his country's security.

The compromise had multiple effects: as far as Kennedy was concerned, he was consolidated as a strategic and moderate President, capable of running the country and protecting it without the use of force; Khrushchev, on the other hand, despite having avoided conflict, was seen as weak⁷⁰, a leader who had conceded too much to his adversaries, and for this reason he was subsequently dismissed in 1964.⁷¹

During this period, the diplomatic use of direct and confidential communication channels to resolve conflicts, such as the “red telephone”⁷², was introduced, as well as an increasing use of preventive diplomacy.

Even though Cuba was at the center of the 1962 missile crisis, it was not taken into account during the negotiations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, excluded completely from all decisions and turned into a battleground. Castro was only

⁶⁸ Central Intelligence Agency. (1962). CIA documents on the Cuban missile crisis 1962. Center for the Study of Intelligence.

⁶⁹ Scott, Len, and R. Gerald Hughes. *The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Critical Reappraisal*. *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9, no. 3 (2007): 5–24.

⁷⁰ Within the Soviet Union, Khrushchev's handling of the Cuban crisis led many party officials and military leaders to view him as weak and ideologically inconsistent. His actions were seen as a departure from the assertiveness expected of communist leadership, leading to growing dissatisfaction among hardliners who believed he had compromised the USSR's credibility on the global stage. This perception contributed to a broader sense that Khrushchev's leadership was unstable and deviated from core Marxist-Leninist principles.

⁷¹ Wilson Center. *The Jupiter Missiles and the Endgame of the Cuban Missile Crisis*. February 16, 2023. Center. (2023).

⁷² The "Red Telephone" served as a direct and secure line of communication between the United States and the Soviet Union, intended to reduce the risk of misunderstandings or miscalculations during international crises. It allowed the two superpowers to exchange information quickly and clearly, particularly in moments of heightened tension, in order to prevent escalation into armed or nuclear conflict.

sporadically and incompletely informed by Khrushchev during the thirteen most critical days of the crisis, and only learned of the withdrawal of the missiles over Cuban territory after the decision was officially made.

In the agreement between Kennedy and Khrushchev, the United States promised not to invade the Island, giving Cuba an apparent sense of security, but Fidel Castro felt deeply humiliated by the situation of exclusion in which he found himself in, because it was a violation of his national sovereignty, a principle on which the revolution had been based. Despite the efforts the government had put into building its legitimacy on the defense and independence of the country from imperialism, it again found itself playing a marginal and secondary role during the crisis. Khrushchev's decision to exclude Castro from the negotiations was made of fear that his revolutionary record might influence the agreements. The Soviet government and Ambassador Dobrynin were convinced that Castro could turn the crisis into a disastrous war.⁷³

On some of the most sensitive days of the crisis, October 26th and 27th, the Cuban leader contacted Khrushchev. Among the huge amount of outgoing and incoming communications, there was a letter from Castro arguing for a nuclear first strike, in the event that Washington did not comply with the agreement by invading the Island.⁷⁴ The message only increased the already deep-seated doubts in the Soviets' minds about Castro's ability to keep the situation under control. In order to reach the final compromise between the two superpowers, Khrushchev thought it was more appropriate not to mention the Cuban leader's demands.

Castro's anger was felt in late October and early November 1962, when he signed the "Five Points"⁷⁵, in which he announced his demand for more guarantees for the Island. He wanted to make it clear to everyone that the Cuban issue did not stop with the withdrawal of Soviet missiles alone, but went beyond that, it required the re-establishment of the balance of power between the countries of the western hemisphere. Castro's "Five

⁷³Dobrynin, A. *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents (1962–1986)*. New York: Times Books, 1995.

⁷⁴Fursenko, A., and Naftali, T. *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958–1964*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.

⁷⁵ Castro's Five Points were a political declaration issued by the Cuban government in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis, intended to reaffirm Cuba's sovereignty and independence. They represented the official Cuban position in response to the U.S.–Soviet negotiations and expressed Havana's dissatisfaction with being excluded from the resolution process. The statement served as a reaffirmation of Cuba's demands and ideological stance in the context of Cold War tensions.

Points” demanded: the cessation of trade and economic pressures, including the U.S. embargo and efforts to convince other allied countries to isolate Cuba; the halting of subversive activities conducted against the Cuban government by the U.S. and its complicit territories; an end to “pirate attacks” on Cuba; the prevention of U.S. aircraft and ships from violating Cuban air and naval space without permission; and the evacuation of the Guantánamo naval base.

Castro used this moment to strengthen internal consensus, turning the island into the guardian of dignity and independence from the great powers that wanted to subjugate it. This was possible because its citizens were greatly frustrated, national pride had been wounded due to Cuba's fate been decided by foreigners for the umpteenth time.⁷⁶

The Cuban leader found strong support in Ernesto Che Guevara who saw the compromise between the USSR and the U.S. as a deep betrayal of the ideals they had fought for in the past. According to Guevara, Cuba should not lose its ideological purity and should not allow itself to be influenced and subordinated by foreign superpowers. The union of the two, Castro and Guevara, further consolidated Cuban politics, which was based on mutual support with the anti-colonial movements of the Third World.⁷⁷

Castro's “Five Points” were also considered by conservative countries on the American continent as an ideological threat, they were concerned that they could negatively affect other territories, causing unrest and altering the balance.⁷⁸

2.2 Political consequences for Cuba and Castro’s perception of Soviet betrayal

As mentioned earlier, the unfair handling of the 1962 missile crisis created great dissent and led to the cooling of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the USSR. From the

⁷⁶ Domínguez, J. I. *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

⁷⁷ Fursenko, A., and Naftali, T. *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958–1964*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.

⁷⁸ Domínguez, J. I. *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Cuban point of view, the island was continually underestimated and marginalized, as a secondary actor, even in situations where its very survival was at the center of the issue.⁷⁹ Because of this, Cuba's accountability in Moscow slowly diminished, as it proved to be exactly like the U.S., only interested in its own goals and domination. The formal alliance remained in place, however, the island continued to receive economic and military aid, vital for its economic survival, especially after the U.S. embargo had become even harsher. Despite this apparent cooperation, a new sense of revolution began to take hold among the Cuban population, they wanted to become an independent country, capable of self-supporting and self-managing. What was destroyed was the personal relationship of trust involving Castro and Khrushchev. The Cuban leader understood that in a situation of emergency and global confrontation, the USSR did not hesitate to put its interests first and was able to exclude its most vulnerable allies from negotiations. This was the complete opposite of the principles of solidarity on which the alliance and socialist ideology was based⁸⁰.

Between November and December 1962, the Soviet Vice-Premier Anastas Mikoyan travelled to Havana, at Khrushchev's request, with the task of reassuring Fidel Castro and re-establishing ties. During the talks, Mikoyan found himself in a difficult and tense situation: Castro demanded that the meetings would not take place behind closed doors, but rather with the participation of his closest collaborators. Castro also accused Moscow of putting the interests of the Union, such as maintaining stable relations with Washington, ahead of Cuba. The issue of the U.S. naval base at Guantánamo, which according to the leader was forgotten during the negotiations, was also discussed.

Vice-Premier Mikoyan tried to approach Castro and reason with him, at first acknowledging the reasons for his bitterness, then explaining the importance of not making any rash moves, because the common goal was to avoid a military conflict. The deterioration of relations was, despite the efforts, further confirmed. Trust in the Soviet Union, on a political and personal level, was now irretrievably destroyed.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Blight, J. G., and Brenner, P. *Sad and Luminous Days: Cuba's Struggle with the Superpowers after the Missile Crisis*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002.

⁸⁰ Roeschley, J. *Nikita Khrushchev, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Aftermath*. Constructing the Past 12, no. 1 (2011).

⁸¹ Brenner, P., LeoGrande, W. M., Rich, D., and Siegel, D. *A Contemporary Cuba Reader: Reinventing the Revolution*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008.

Castro's view of the international system changed radically, after the fate of his country had been decided by a third party, he became convinced that from that moment on, it should be the Cubans and no one else's choice. Thus developed the concept of the “lone revolution”, a revolution capable of challenging the capitalist powers and pragmatic socialist mediations.⁸² Compounding the betrayal of the agreement was the two superpowers' disregard for the “Five Points” written by Castro to safeguard the country's sovereignty. For the two big countries, the interests of a small revolutionary nation like Cuba were peripheral, because the international geopolitical balance held a central role. Besides Castro's proposal for a pre-emptive nuclear strike against the U.S., firstly rejected by Khrushchev and later by Mikoyan during his mission to the island, he sent a memorandum to the Soviets. This formal memorandum demanded guarantees from the Soviets before the missiles were removed from the island. The objectives were manifold, such as the island's survival in the immediate term and the preservation of its political sovereignty.⁸³ The following isolation of the Island had profound consequences on its external and internal politics and initiated a process of radicalization.⁸⁴

Regarding foreign affairs, any cautious diplomatic strategy was discarded and a more explicitly interventionist one opted for. Castro's conviction was that for the Cuban revolution to survive, it was necessary to expand socialist ideology to the rest of the world. To make this happen, he increased logistical, military and economic support to all guerrilla movements in South America, such as Bolivia, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Colombia. Aid was not limited to Latin American territory, which was in a difficult situation at that time, and expanded to Africa, an area more prone to revolution. From the beginning of 1963, they began to send concrete assistance to the movements in Algeria and Congo.⁸⁵

⁸²Brenner, P., LeoGrande, W. M., Rich, D., and Siegel, D. *A Contemporary Cuba Reader: Reinventing the Revolution*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008..

⁸³ National Security Archive. *The Soviet Cuban Missile Crisis: Castro, Mikoyan, Kennedy*. Electronic Briefing Book No. 393. The George Washington University, 2012.

⁸⁴ Bayard de Volo, L. *Masculinity and the Cuban Missile Crisis: Gender as Pre-emptive Deterrent*. *International Affairs* 98, no. 4 (2022): 1211–1229.

⁸⁵ Lebow, R. N. *Domestic Politics and the Cuban Missile Crisis: The Traditional and Revisionist Interpretations Reevaluated*. *Diplomatic History* 14, no. 4 (1990): 471–492.

Internally, the Cuban political and military apparatus was reorganized, and the socialist orientation of the state became even more consolidated, along with the Cuban Communist Party (CCP), which took control of every aspect of the population's life, incorporating the nation's various social, trade union and cultural organizations.⁸⁶ The CDR expanded to serve as a means of control, education and social mobilization. The revolutionary army became a central institution of the state, used to defend, but also to form the ideology of the people.⁸⁷ The process of militarization covered every aspect of the nation, from state organization to social and political culture. The central feature of militarism and the model of the citizen-soldier was that every Cuban had to sacrifice himself for his country, its sovereignty and its revolutionary principles, to express a sense of patriotism and virtue.⁸⁸ Even the political language of the island changed, favoring intransigent and harsh tones against American imperialism and the superpower system. The revolution was described as a winning project, capable of sustaining itself, superior to capitalism and Soviet socialism.⁸⁹

2.3 Strengthening Cuba's military and ideological autonomy post-crisis.

This painful period brought Cuba to the realization that it could no longer depend on the protection of a foreign nation, even a superpower like the Soviet Union. As a result of this realization, Castro reorganized his military strategies and strengthened the country's self-defense and autonomy. The government wanted to exploit all its defensive capabilities, because it was now clear to everyone that Cuba had no decision-making power in international negotiations.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Bayard de Volo, L. *Masculinity and the Cuban Missile Crisis: Gender as Pre-emptive Deterrent*. *International Affairs* 98, no. 4 (2022): 1211–1229.

⁸⁷ Lebow, R. N. *Domestic Politics and the Cuban Missile Crisis: The Traditional and Revisionist Interpretations Reevaluated*. *Diplomatic History* 14, no. 4 (1990): 471–492.

⁸⁸ Bayard de Volo, L. *Masculinity and the Cuban Missile Crisis: Gender as Pre-emptive Deterrent*. *International Affairs* 98, no. 4 (2022): 1211–1229.

⁸⁹ Lebow, R. N. *Domestic Politics and the Cuban Missile Crisis: The Traditional and Revisionist Interpretations Reevaluated*. *Diplomatic History* 14, no. 4 (1990): 471–492.

⁹⁰ Brands, H. *Latin America's Cold War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

As for the army, a programme of reinforcement of the FAR, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionaria, was initiated, which was not limited to increasing the number of soldiers. What were most revised were the training, military doctrine and ideology, and the technologies of war equipment.⁹¹ The purpose of all these changes was to create a power capable of protecting itself from future attacks and to solidify the thought that the island and the revolution should be protected by its inhabitants.

A culture of armed defense spread to every stratum of social life, in which military militias, and every citizen, from worker to student, became involved. The process of military training thus established itself nationwide, leading to the creation of the MTTs, Milicias de Tropas Territoriales. These militias were found in every community and were composed of ordinary citizens, so as to have defensive fronts scattered throughout the country. The concept of “popular deterrence”, whereby any attempted invasive external attack would then turn into a guerrilla warfare unmanageable by the enemy, was consolidated.⁹² All armaments, such as heavy artillery, armored vehicles, new-generation weapons, anti-aircraft systems and fighter planes, previously received from the Soviet Union, were also redistributed among the new militias and no longer only to the official military forces.⁹³

Castro had realized during the crisis that the exclusive dependence on Soviet supplies and nuclear arsenal had its limits and was not sufficient to defend the island, which instead should have its own defensive military capability. In the years that followed, the doctrine of the “war of the whole people” was elaborated, which was based on the very concept that deterrence would be achieved through internal military strength and no longer from external strategic threats.⁹⁴

Another new concept was developed, that of “permanent armed revolution”. This doctrinaire model was based on the principle that the revolution would not be safe until the U.S. stopped its imperialist will in the Third World and Latin America. The goals were

⁹¹ Brands, H. *Latin America's Cold War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

⁹² National Security Archive. *The Soviet Cuban Missile Crisis: Castro, Mikoyan, Kennedy*. Electronic Briefing Book No. 393. The George Washington University, 2012.

⁹³ Brands, H. *Latin America's Cold War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

⁹⁴ National Security Archive. *The Soviet Cuban Missile Crisis: Castro, Mikoyan, Kennedy*. Electronic Briefing Book No. 393. The George Washington University, 2012.

to defend Cuban sovereignty and promote the revolution in the rest of the world, with insurrections and the creation of “new Cuba”.⁹⁵

The roots of this new ideology came from the experience of the revolution and the ideology of Ernesto Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. Both believed that small armed groups established in more strategic and convenient territories were sufficient to bring about revolution in unfavorable contexts, a concrete example of which was the Cuban revolutionary movement that had established itself in the Sierra Maestra Mountains^{96, 97}

Three were the basic pillars of the “permanent armed revolution”. The first was the need to have a military defense always ready and able to repel external attacks and threats efficiently. The second was the moral duty to support and help all anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist movements. The last principle was based on the belief that, in order to expand socialism, one had to resort to military struggle. Despite the second value, Castro was selective and only supported insurrectionary movements that were in line with his doctrine, those that he considered “ideologically pure” and acted in a disciplined manner.⁹⁸ Contrarily to what previously elaborated, the USSR promoted the model of “peaceful coexistence”, which is why it was later rejected by Cuba.⁹⁹

Loyalty to the revolutionary ideology of the Castro government was considered indispensable; therefore, internal dissent or opposition was not contemplated, it did not matter if it was in a moderate or intellectual form, anything not in line with Castro's doctrine was considered a threat to society and the revolution.¹⁰⁰ Restrictions and disciplinary measures were applied within universities, religious or intellectual circles if

⁹⁵ Brands, H. *Latin America's Cold War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

⁹⁶ The Sierra Maestra Mountains, located in southeastern Cuba, served as the main base of operations for Fidel Castro and his revolutionary forces during the Cuban Revolution. The remote and rugged terrain provided strategic cover and mobility, allowing the rebels to conduct guerrilla warfare against the Batista regime from 1956 until their eventual victory in 1959. The mountains became a symbol of resistance and the revolutionary struggle in Cuban political history.

⁹⁷ Gleijeses, P. *Ships in the Night: The CIA, the White House and the Bay of Pigs*. *Journal of Latin American Studies* 27, no. 1 (1995): 1–42.

⁹⁸ Gleijeses, P. *Ships in the Night: The CIA, the White House and the Bay of Pigs*. *Journal of Latin American Studies* 27, no. 1 (1995): 1–42.

⁹⁹ Brands, H. *Latin America's Cold War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

¹⁰⁰ Brands, H. *Latin America's Cold War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

they were deemed to diverge from the party line. But political repression did not stop there: all those identified as opponents were imprisoned or exiled.¹⁰¹

The government used propaganda as a tool to ensure loyalty to doctrine: the media and academic and cultural institutions were forced to spread the idea that the revolution represented the salvation of the nation, promoting personal sacrifice and obedience as civic duties. Fidel Castro was elevated to a living representation of the revolution; he was given credit for resistance to the enemy and national stability. Cuba wanted to train new generations, independent and patriotic, who would be ready to risk their lives for the socialist homeland, because all the new structural elements, such as the militarization of the population, total political control and surveillance of society, were not temporary, but distinctive and permanent features of the emerging Cuban state.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Farber, S. *The Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

¹⁰² Ibid. Brands, H. *Latin America's Cold War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

Chapter 3

Cuba Between Soviet Influence and Revolutionary Ambitions (1963-1969)

3.1 Support for guerrilla movements in Bolivia, Nicaragua, and El Salvador.

Following the crisis Cuba experienced in 1962, Castro began a process of restoration and reinforcement of foreign policy. Initially his strategy was based on the survival of his new revolutionary government within a closed and unfavorable international sphere, but with the beginning of 1963 the leader's plan changed, focusing on the internalization of the revolution.¹⁰³ The motivations behind this choice were twofold: the first was the realization that for the government to be considered legitimate it had to make its socialist model spread abroad, because detachment from past colonialism was not enough¹⁰⁴; the second reason was the idea that to safeguard national security it was necessary to create a Latin American unified revolutionary front that would be able to fight U.S. supremacy.¹⁰⁵ The “permanent revolution” doctrine devised by Che Guevara, mentioned earlier, had been inspired by the 1952 revolution in Bolivia¹⁰⁶ and the Cuban revolution, and during this period had become the mainstay of the foreign policy adopted by Castro.¹⁰⁷ Latin America was seen by Castro as the perfect territory to be able to fight the imperialist powers because of its location, conservative political tendency, and great social inequalities and discontents.¹⁰⁸ In addition, the continent's past foreign domination

¹⁰³ LeoGrande, W. M., and Kornbluh, P. *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations Between Washington and Havana*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

¹⁰⁴ Domínguez, J. I. *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989..

¹⁰⁵ Farber, S. *The Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

¹⁰⁶ The Bolivian Revolution of 1952, led by the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (MNR), brought significant reforms such as land redistribution and mine nationalization. Although initially nationalist and reformist, the revolution radicalized the political landscape, creating fertile ground for later leftist insurgencies that would attract Cuban support.

¹⁰⁷ Guevara, E. *Message to the Tricontinental*. OSPAAAL, 1967.

¹⁰⁸ Pérez-Stable, M. *The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Course, and Legacy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

had fostered the spread of the thought of a Latin American “great homeland”, created by José Martí¹⁰⁹, which consisted of the formation of a single united and powerful bloc that could be redeemed.¹¹⁰ In this way, the revolution was no longer limited to the borders of Cuba, but expanded to all countries on the continent that had hitherto suffered oppression, assuming the role of anti-colonial liberator. The Cuban revolutionary internationalist movement was thus the union of political and military strategy and anticolonial ideology, and it matched the process, initiated by the Island, of institutionalization, which ended with the founding of the *Partido Comunista de Cuba* (PCC).¹¹¹

In this context, Cuban foreign policy became totally detached from the canonical diplomatic project of the time, changing its principles from the root. Precisely because of the aforementioned isolation to Cuba's disadvantage, in fact, the expedients of canonical diplomacy turned out to be precluded, and the Castro regime re-invented itself in the revolution, implying, especially, military training and ideological dissemination.¹¹² This stance, however, turned out to be not merely a detachment from the U.S., but a real decision of change intrinsic to the ordinary system, in which Third World peoples were no longer marginal players on the scene, but protagonists of the Cuban vanguard.¹¹³ Cuban internationalism is thus configured as an episode of unique and universal relevance during the Cold War, if for no other reason than its primary characteristics: despite its own limited size, with scarce resources, situated in such an unfavorable geographical dimension, it was equally capable of decisively influencing entire nations.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ José Martí (1853–1895) was a Cuban intellectual, poet, and political activist, widely regarded as one of the leading figures of Latin American independence thought. He was among the first to articulate the idea of a “Patria Grande” as a response to imperialism and foreign domination. His work had a lasting influence on Cuban political culture and played a key role in shaping the ideological foundations of the revolution.

¹¹⁰ Harmer, T. *Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War*. University of North Carolina Press, 2011.

¹¹¹ The Communist Party of Cuba (Partido Comunista de Cuba, PCC) was officially founded in 1965, emerging from the earlier United Party of the Socialist Revolution (PURSC). It became the only legal political party in the country and has since functioned as the central instrument of political control and ideological leadership in the Cuban state. Its establishment marked a key step in the institutionalization of the revolutionary regime and the consolidation of socialist governance under Fidel Castro's leadership.

¹¹² Farber, S. *The Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

¹¹³ Gleijeses, P. *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

¹¹⁴ Grandin, G. *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006.

As mentioned, the change in Cuba's dual strategy, foreign and domestic, was due to the fact that the revolution that took place in 1959 could not suffice as a conquest, but rather as the origin of an expansion of the socialist model globally.¹¹⁵ On the other hand, there was an awareness that Cuba was too weak to cope with a superpower like the United States. In fact, following the Bay of Pigs attack and the missile crisis, there had arisen a relative awareness that Washington would never submit to the possibility of the existence of an anti-American and anti-imperialist regime on its territorial border. This is precisely why the creation of a unified Latin American revolutionary front was necessary so that the U.S. would be equally aware that a further attack on Cuba would be ingeniously risky. This action aimed to prevent and, at the same time, to unite political alliances capable of supporting the revolutionary forces of the various countries of socialist tendency.¹¹⁶

In this context, the Latin American territory turned out to be the perfect setting for revolutionary insurrection: as much because of its geographical coordinates as because of the common economic conditions between Cuba and the other countries on the continent, which enjoyed, likewise, latifundist economies, a condition of subordination to U.S. multinationals and, the lack of agrarian reforms.¹¹⁷

In addition to the aforementioned consideration of common internal characteristics, a fundamental fact arose, namely, the historical-cultural aspect of the states involved. Indeed, both Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, had in common the idea that the overriding interest of the revolution was indeed to recover a political and symbolic unity that had been lost. In this regard, the ideological war against the United States and other colonialist powers was also proposed as an act of moral redemption, as well as a non-ordinary expedient of diplomatic force aimed at eliminating its isolation. As Julia Sweig notes, “Castro sensed that support for the armed struggle could also serve as a lever to create

¹¹⁵ Domínguez, J. I. *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

¹¹⁶ Gleijeses, P. *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

¹¹⁷ Pérez-Stable, M. *The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Course, and Legacy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
Grandin, G. *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006.

relationships and build legitimacy in the absence of institutional recognition”.¹¹⁸ In this sense, Cuban internationalist perspectives were identified in a threefold *modus operandi*: ideological, strategic and cultural.¹¹⁹ As evidence of this, even in Castro's public speeches it was emphasized that the main purpose was to bind Cuba's interests to those of other nations: the warning was clearly to challenge the possibility of continuing to exist in a sphere dominated by foreign populations.¹²⁰ As Che Guevara would declare in 1967, shortly before his death in Bolivia, “revolution is not exported: it is made. But it can be helped to be made. And Cuba has a duty to do so”.¹²¹

Keeping faith with the transnational aims previously clarified, Cuba committed itself to incorporate within its revolutionary strategy the African continent as well. The first step taken by Castro involved a military mission to the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1965, led personally by Ernesto Che Guevara. In this episode, the commander took the side of Laurent-Désiré Kabila's Congolese militias who were rebelling against their own government, promoted by the United States and Belgium, attempting to unify the various subversive factions for a duration of about seven months. Despite his efforts, the expedition failed considering the lack of Congolese discipline and distrust of the Cuban militias, perceived as outsiders.¹²² Nevertheless, the defeat was nonetheless identified as the first concrete evidence of the extent of Cuban internationalist expansion beyond the American continent, paving the way for subsequent expeditions to Angola and Ethiopia. Piero Gleijeses stated in this regard how “the Congo was an experimental laboratory for Cuba, in which idealism, logistics and global ambitions confronted each other for the first time in a real African context”.¹²³

¹¹⁸ Sweig, J. E. *Inside the Cuban Revolution: Fidel Castro and the Urban Underground*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

¹¹⁹ Farber, S. *The Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

Grandin, G. *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006..

¹²⁰ Castro, F. *Carta de Despedida al Comandante Fidel Castro*. 1965. Marxists Internet Archive.

¹²¹ Guevara, E. *Message to the Tricontinental*. OSPAAAL, 1967.

¹²² Gleijeses, P. *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

Johnson, R. *Guevara's Congo: The Failure of a Revolution*. *The Historian* 73, no. 4 (2011): 749–772.

¹²³ Gleijeses, P. *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976–1991*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013.

As early as 1963, in fact, Castro had been active in building alliances with other progressive African countries, sending contingents to Algeria as a show of solidarity with the National Liberation Front (FLN), following its victory over France during the war of independence. Not coincidentally, Algeria became a sort of revolutionary twin for Cuba, having been the first non-Latin American country to receive material aid from Havana, partly by virtue of the fact that the two countries' leaders, Fidel Castro and Ahmed Ben Bella, shared anti-colonial and Third Worldist ideals.¹²⁴

Similar to what it did with Algeria, Cuba also established diplomatic relations with Ghana, headed by Kwame Nkrumah¹²⁵, with the difference being that the aforementioned link never led to direct military intervention, but rather to cooperation centered on common solidarity.¹²⁶ These early intergovernmental relations gave the Cuban government a way to expand its allies and flow into the leadership of the 1966 Tricontinental Conference. Between 1963 and 1966, Havana became the focal point of the Latin American revolutionary movement, at the ideological level and also at the strategic level, hosting young people from the most diverse Latin American countries who were being recruited by the various revolutionary groups and who needed to be educated and trained.¹²⁷

The first of the most notable cases of Cuban support was El Salvador, for which Havana's support in the development of the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN)¹²⁸ was particularly decisive. In this episode, Castro intensified relations with Salvadoran Marxist-Leninist groups such as the Fuerzas Populares de Liberación (FPL) and the Partido Comunista Salvadoreño (PCS).¹²⁹ The recruited militants, once they

¹²⁴ Mesa-Lago, Carmelo. *Cuba in the 1970s: Pragmatism and Institutionalization*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978.

¹²⁵ Kwame Nkrumah was the first Prime Minister and President of independent Ghana, and a leading theorist of pan-Africanism. He promoted Afro-Asian solidarity and built strong ties with Cuba through a shared commitment to anti-colonial struggle and Third World unity.

¹²⁶ Peters, P. (2009). *Cuba and Ghana: A partnership of solidarity*. *Latin American Perspectives*, 36(1), 74–87.

¹²⁷ Gleijeses, P. *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

¹²⁸ The *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN) was a coalition of left-wing guerrilla groups in El Salvador, founded in 1980 during the civil war. Named after revolutionary leader Farabundo Martí, the FMLN played a key role in the armed struggle against the U.S.-backed Salvadoran government, eventually transitioning into a legal political party following the 1992 Peace Accords.

¹²⁹ Ching, E. *Authoritarian El Salvador: Politics and the Origins of the Military Regime, 1880–1940*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014.

returned home, proceeded with the creation of clandestine nuclei that would be key players in the insurrectional process of the 1970s.

The second, on the other hand, concerns the Bolivia mission, which began with a variety of recruitment activities and contact with student and workers groups and the invitation to Cuba of militants from the Partido Comunista de Bolivia (PCB), such as Moisés Guevara and Coco Peredo¹³⁰, to offer ideological and war training courses. Despite several attempts at rapprochement, the PCB was reluctant and not in line with the ideology of Che Guevara, this led to a growing souring of relations between Cuba and Bolivia that ended with the Cuban government's decision to distance itself from the local leadership to operate more autonomously.¹³¹ The Bolivian case did not end there; in fact, Che Guevara crept into the Ñancahuazú area in November 1966, and later Havana sent a military unit, doctors, and clandestine supplies. However, this was not enough, and so the entire operation failed due to lack of local support and trust, general disorganization, and the intended control by the Bolivian government, supported by U.S. intelligence.¹³²

An opposite case, on the other hand, was that of Nicaragua, where the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN)¹³³, deeply influenced by the Cuban government, was located, receiving material support, such as weapons, propaganda materials and training, as early as 1965, with the aim of overthrowing the Somoza dynasty, which held power at the time. Nicaraguan leaders who would later rise to power, such as Carlos Fonseca Amador, Tomás Borge Martínez, and Silvio Mayorga, were all trained in protected residences in Havana during the 1960s, with Fonseca in particular forging strong personal ties with senior Cuban government officials.

Castro always showed a very selective approach when it came to choosing which movements to support; in fact, he did not base his decision solely on whether a movement

¹³⁰ Moisés Guevara and Coco Peredo were Bolivian leftist militants linked to the Communist Party of Bolivia. They were involved in the recruitment and training efforts associated with Che Guevara's guerrilla campaign in Bolivia during the mid 1960s.

¹³¹ Young, K. A. *Blood of the Earth: Resource Nationalism, Revolution, and Empire in Bolivia*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017.

¹³² Gleijeses, P. *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

¹³³ The *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN) is a Nicaraguan socialist revolutionary movement founded in 1961. It led the armed struggle that overthrew the Somoza dictatorship in 1979 and later became a dominant political party in the country.

was in line with orthodox Marxist-Leninist doctrine, but also on the trustworthiness that the leaders showed, the power of the movement, and the consensus they enjoyed.¹³⁴ In doing so, Cuba was able to create a broad system of alliances based on the same ideology, however, which was very diverse because it included both historic communist parties and emerging insurgent groups, maximizing the radius of influence of the Cuban revolution. The Island offered varied types of aid: economic, devolving large amounts of capital, which came from the National Bank to officials loyal to Castro, allowing them to travel and keep revolutionaries hosted¹³⁵; diplomatic, procuring false documents, secure direct contacts and secret routes that allowed militants to move from one country to another undetected and evade migration controls of military regimes allied with enemies.¹³⁶ Much of the credit for the success of these operations must be given to the Cuban intelligence service, the Dirección General de Inteligencia (DGI), which, in coordination that other socialist foreign intelligence, monitored and managed all clandestine activities.¹³⁷

Up to that point, Cuba had been treated as a secondary player, continuing to receive financial and military support from Moscow; thus, the choice to support South American revolutionary movements even without the approval of the Soviet Union showed the strong Cuban desire to achieve complete political autonomy and to become play a major role in the Third World context.¹³⁸

At the same time, an international propaganda strategy was applied by Castro, with the help of the Communist Party Central Committee Spanish and Portuguese language texts were published to support the various militias, from famous magazines such as *Tricontinental*, *Granma Internacional*, as well as news of the future OSPAAAL.¹³⁹ All posters, mocking cartoons and analyses were published and distributed clandestinely by

¹³⁴ Gleijeses, P. *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

¹³⁵ Domínguez, J. I. *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989..

¹³⁶ Blum, W. *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II*. London: Zed Books, 2016.

¹³⁷ McPherson, A. *Intimate Ties, Bitter Struggles: The United States and Latin America Since 1945*. Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2013.

¹³⁸ Domínguez, J. I. *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989..

¹³⁹ Yaffe, H. *Che Guevara: The Economics of Revolution*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

embassies to create a sense of common revolution despite the differences of the various movements.¹⁴⁰

The Cuban revolutionary project found itself increasingly in opposition to the strategy adopted by the United States on the American continent, based on direct interventionism. The case that caused the most stir was the U.S.-backed coup d'état in Basile in 1964, organized by General Humberto Castelo Branco¹⁴¹, with the aim of establishing a military dictatorship. U.S. President Lyndon Baines Johnson¹⁴², justified his country's actions by trying to disguise it as a preventive measure to prevent the founding of a "new Cuba."¹⁴³ This gesture represented the ultimate breaking point; Castro, from then on, repudiated all forms of moderate social transformation in Latin America and defined armed struggle as the only option for achieving his goals. Che Guevara, in February 1965, in Algiers, pronounced, "the peoples of the world must know that there will never be peace until imperialism is destroyed".¹⁴⁴ With these words he wanted to veiledly criticize the overly peaceful handling of Soviet foreign policy because, in his view, it risked abandoning revolutionary movements in the Third World in the name of illusory stability.

Moscow, too, was beginning to become concerned and indignant about Cuban interventionist activities, which it considered too aggressive and potentially dangerous to Cold War stability, because the USSR's political strategy was based on the principle of peaceful coexistence, to avoid any kind of conflict.¹⁴⁵ Despite their skepticism toward Cuba, the Soviets could not risk compromising the alliance by forcing the Island to stop their revolutionary struggle, therefore, they found themselves forced to tolerate the

¹⁴⁰ Weiss, R. *OSPAAAL: Propaganda Art from the Tricontinental*. Havana: Tricontinental Editions, 2011.

¹⁴¹ General Humberto Castelo Branco was the first president of Brazil's military regime, serving from 1964 to 1967 after leading the U.S.-backed coup that ousted President João Goulart.

¹⁴² Lyndon B. Johnson was the 36th President of the United States (1963–1969), known for his role in escalating the Vietnam War and promoting civil rights reforms.

¹⁴³ Rabe, S. G. *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

¹⁴⁴ Hansen, J. H. *Soviet Deception in the Cuban Missile Crisis*. *Studies in Intelligence* 46, no. 1 (2002): 1–10.

¹⁴⁵ Westad, O. A. *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*. Cambridge University Press., O. A. (2005).

situation and officially pronounce solidarity.¹⁴⁶ It was from this implicit ideological discrepancy that a phase of veiled dissension between the two nations began.¹⁴⁷

It was during this period that Cuba emerged as the political centerpiece of the revolutionary left on the American continent.¹⁴⁸ The Soviet Communist Party and the Cuban Communist Party were very different: the former sought to maintain control over follower movements in a rigid and vertical manner; in contrast, the latter, was much more flexible and recognized equality and solidarity.¹⁴⁹ The figure of Castro was decisive for this political project because he was endowed with great charisma; in fact, he was able to keep the fire of the revolution alive, showing it as victorious and symbolic.¹⁵⁰ As stated by historian Samuel Farber, “the Cuban revolution fed on the revolutions of others: every hearth lit on the continent was a piece of its political and moral survival”.¹⁵¹ This means that the revolution project lasted because the countries were all equals, no one wanted to impose themselves on the others, this was only possible with a system of informal alliances, militant networks, and united insurgent movements.¹⁵² Cuba benefited from this in two ways: first, the Island could rely militarily on allies in case the United States tried again to attack; second, every victory, however partial, from physical to ideological victory, strengthened the symbolic capital and influence of the revolution.¹⁵³

In conclusion, the supportive actions taken by Cuba, from 1963 to 1966, against other Latin American militias paved the way, on an ideological and operational level, for future Cuban leadership in the transcontinental sphere, which was exemplified in the 1966 Tricontinental Conference and the birth of the OSPAAAL. Later, it would be through the

¹⁴⁶ Erisman, H. M. *Cuba's Foreign Relations in a Post-Soviet World*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000.

¹⁴⁷ Gleijeses, P. *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

¹⁴⁸ Domínguez, J. I. *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

¹⁴⁹ Gleijeses, P. *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

¹⁵⁰ Grandin, G. *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006.

¹⁵¹ Farber, S. *The Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

¹⁵² McPherson, A. *Intimate Ties, Bitter Struggles: The United States and Latin America Since 1945*. Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2013.

¹⁵³ Grandin, G. *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006.

Tricontinental Conference that Castro would institutionalize the role of revolutionary leadership on the Island.

3.2 The Tricontinental Conference (1966) and Cuba's Global Revolutionary Role

Ten years after the Bandung Conference¹⁵⁴, by which the first movement of non-aligned countries with a predominantly neutral tendency had been created, in 1966, Cuba hosted the first Tricontinental Conference in the capital, which unlike the first, had a decidedly more militant tone, and was intended to coordinate, in a unified front, the anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggles in Africa, Asia and Latin America.¹⁵⁵ It was Cuba's "revolutionary twin," Algeria, that gave the idea for this conference, but it was the Island that defined the final structure. Castro was in charge of organizing activities, so he instructed the PCC and the *Dirección General de Inteligencia* (DGI) to schedule the invitations and make sure all the guests were safe, since most of them were illegal immigrants or wanted.¹⁵⁶ The motivations behind the decision to choose Cuba as the venue for the conference were varied: the Island had been the only country in the Western Hemisphere that had been able to spark a socialist revolution, thus becoming a model to follow; moreover, during 1965 it had managed to establish numerous diplomatic networks with a variety of nations, such as North Vietnam, Ghana, Syria, Egypt, and the liberation movements of Angola and Guinea-Bissau.¹⁵⁷ Havana planned the event in great detail, with simultaneous translation systems in six languages, press centers, reserved rooms for bilateral talks, and secure residences for the approximately 500 invited delegates from 82 different countries. There were more than 40 delegations from non-state revolutionary movements, including underground organizations originating from Guatemala, Palestine,

¹⁵⁴ The Bandung Conference, held in Indonesia in 1955, was a meeting of Asian and African states aimed at promoting solidarity, anti-colonialism, and non-alignment during the Cold War.

¹⁵⁵ Westad, O. A. *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*. Cambridge University Press., O. A. (2005).

¹⁵⁶ Gleijeses, P. *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

¹⁵⁷ Blum, W. *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II*. London: Zed Books, 2016.

South Africa, and Indonesia.¹⁵⁸ The participants were chosen with extreme caution and rigor; Cuba wanted to be sure that the invitees were consistent with its revolutionary and war ideologies; for this very reason, reformist, social democratic or moderate pro-Soviet parties were excluded from the conference. The ultimate goal was to build a militant alliance that had the power and strength to mobilize whole peoples, not to forge moderate diplomatic alliances.¹⁵⁹

It was on January 3rd, 1966, at the Palacio de Las Convenciones in Havana, that the largest political debate in the Third World began, unique because it brought together, for the first time, revolutionary delegations from three continents, marking the Cold War narrative forever.

The keynote address was delivered by Fidel Castro, who declared, “This will be the first time in history that representatives of the exploited and oppressed peoples of three continents will come together without the presence of the imperialist metropolises. This is the authentic voice of Asia, Africa and Latin America finally making itself heard”.

The leader made his intent clear: he aspired to make Cuba the pillar of the new revolutionary internationalism. In addition, he enunciated what the political purpose of the conference was, with the words:

“What does the Tricontinental Conference mean? It means, simply, that the world has changed color. The Third World has ceased to be a passive spectator of History.”¹⁶⁰

What made the event unique was that there was no particular hierarchical division, state and non-state representatives were placed on the same level, each had the right to vote and speak, thus creating a truly horizontal conference. Concrete cases of imperialist intervention and armed repression in the participating countries were discussed, for example: spokesmen from Angola and Mozambique denounced the violence suffered by Portuguese colonial regimes, representatives from Guatemala, Brazil and the Dominican Republic recounted U.S.-backed coups d'état, and Vietnamese representatives showed photographs of the damage caused by the bombings also inflicted by the United States.

¹⁵⁸ Yaffe, H. *Che Guevara: The Economics of Revolution*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

¹⁵⁹ Harmer, T. *Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War*. University of North Carolina Press, 2011.

¹⁶⁰ Castro, F. *Discurso Inaugural en la Conferencia Tricontinental, 3 de Enero de 1966*. La Habana: Ediciones del Gobierno Revolucionario, 1966.

During the event, armed struggle was unanimously recognized as a legitimate form of national self-determination, and at the same time, the criminal alliance between bourgeois regimes and imperialist powers was condemned. In addition, a twenty-point programme was drawn up, defining the achievement of the common goal, namely the creation of a permanent revolutionary alliance of oppressed peoples, based on militant solidarity and the mutual exchange of resources in times of need. This document rejected any peaceful compromise with the Western superpowers and the European bourgeois left and announced the decision to make Cuba the headquarters of the permanent secretariat of the new global organisation: the Organización de Solidaridad con los Pueblos de Asia, África y América Latina (OSPAAAL).¹⁶¹

During the negotiations, there were some difficulties due to complaints from some pro-Soviet communist parties about the use of overly radical language throughout the conference. Despite a few uncertainties, the majority of delegations, especially those from Africa and Latin America, supported the Cuban struggle, the Palestinian cause and the fight against South African apartheid. The Tricontinental Conference proved to be a symbolic event that marked a new political beginning for the global South.¹⁶²

The conference did not go unnoticed and caused a stir around the world, including in Asia and Africa, where it was mentioned in major newspapers, and in Europe and the United States, where it was denounced by the most conservative newspapers and portrayed as a threat. From the U.S. point of view, the Cuban initiative was worrying, so much so that the president tried several times to discourage some Latin American and African leaders from participating. Furthermore, the CIA was tasked with secretly monitoring all the delegations present on the island. Despite President Johnson's efforts to reduce the media impact of the event, the press in Arab, Asian and African countries supported the conference, highlighting Cuba's commitment to promoting such a wide-ranging event and global solidarity. On the other hand, the Soviet Union had a mixed reaction, as the conference expanded the reach of socialism in the Third World, but at the same time discredited Soviet power and the effectiveness of its control over the universal

¹⁶¹Gleijeses, P. *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

¹⁶² Prashad, V. *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World*. New York: The New Press, 2007.

revolutionary bloc. The Tricontinental Conference had definitively conferred on Cuba the role of hub of an organized and armed internationalism; it was no longer seen as an island dependent on foreign powers.¹⁶³

OSPAAAL was an autonomous organization tasked with coordinating alliances between militias and creating a transnational anti-imperialist strategy. The role of Chief Secretary was offered to Haydee Santamaría, a figure who had played a central role in the Cuban revolution and founder of the Casa de las Américas¹⁶⁴. The organization was not a propaganda tool for Cuba, but rather an autonomous militant body operating in the field of concrete solidarity and ideological mobilization. One of its first moves was the publication of the magazine *Tricontinental*, which contained theoretical articles and reports from various fronts, printed in Spanish, English, French and Arabic.¹⁶⁵ The magazine also published propaganda posters depicting prominent figures such as Che Guevara, Amílcar Cabral, Patrice Lumumba and Salvador Allende, spreading slogans of struggle that were then circulated clandestinely in Latin America, Africa, Asia, Western Europe and even the United States.¹⁶⁶ OSPAAAL also performed a logistical and strategic function, facilitating the international movement of militants, providing false documents and financing anti-imperialist and anti-colonial missions.¹⁶⁷ All this was done independently of the USSR, despite financial support from the socialist bloc, creating further tensions in relations between Havana and Moscow, already unstable due to the different strategic and political visions of the two states and the Tricontinental Conference.¹⁶⁸

The Soviet Union employed an international tactic aimed at peaceful coexistence, especially with the U.S., so anything that could disturb the global balance was considered a threat, such as the speeches delivered during the Tricontinental Conference, in which it

¹⁶³ Gleijeses, P. *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976–1991*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013.

¹⁶⁴ *Casa de las Américas* is a Cuban cultural institution founded in 1959 to promote Latin American and Caribbean literature, arts, and solidarity among progressive intellectuals.

¹⁶⁵ Yaffe, H. *Che Guevara: The Economics of Revolution*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

¹⁶⁶ Weiss, R. *OSPAAAL: Propaganda Art from the Tricontinental*. Havana: Tricontinental Editions, 2011.

¹⁶⁷ Gleijeses, P. *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976–1991*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013.

¹⁶⁸ Westad, O. A. *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*. Cambridge University Press., O. A. (2005).

was stated that no one should be subjugated or exploited by powers acting solely in their own interests. Strong public criticism was levelled at the moderate attitude of the USSR, the conduct of the United States, and the Western left and pro-Soviet parties, which were accused of opportunism. In particular, Algerian delegate Lakhdar Ben Tobbal pointed out “the tendency of some socialist capitals to reduce the struggles of the Third World to bargaining chips in negotiations with the West”.¹⁶⁹

The ideological and strategic disagreement between Cuba and the USSR never led to an official break in relations, but simply to a situation of diplomatic duality, in which Moscow continued to offer economic support to Havana, but at the same time demanded greater moderation in Castro's political choices.¹⁷⁰

At the same time, European left-wing parties began to show their opposition to the Cuban revolution, such as the Italian Communist Party (PCI), which refused to attend the Conference because its strong ideology was not in line with that of Eurocommunism.¹⁷¹

The Tricontinental Conference was able to strengthen a network of international militant alliances that would last for a long time, such as the FSLN in Nicaragua or the FMLN in El Salvador in Latin America, the MPLA in Angola or the FRELIMO in Mozambique in Africa, and Palestinian movements, which received material and conceptual support from the OSPAAAL for years.¹⁷² In addition, it built a shared political identity based on solidarity among the weak without any kind of cultural barrier or discrimination.¹⁷³

Nevertheless, the Tricontinental revolutionary project did not have a major impact in some countries, where the movements supported by Cuba were soon suppressed by the regimes or lost popular support.

Often, however, all efforts to maintain a united front proved complicated or almost impossible due to various ideological differences, regional or national rivalries and internal crises.

¹⁶⁹ Harmer, T. *Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War*. University of North Carolina Press, 2011.

¹⁷⁰ Azicri, M. *Cuba Today and Tomorrow: Reinventing Socialism*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000.

¹⁷¹ Gleijeses, P. *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

¹⁷² Gleijeses, P. *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976–1991*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013.

¹⁷³ Prashad, V. *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World*. New York: The New Press, 2007.

Nevertheless, all the slogans, editorials and speeches delivered during the Tricontinental Conference continued to be read or heard, ensuring that the myth of the alliance did not fade away, even though it was never fully realized.¹⁷⁴

In conclusion, the Tricontinental Conference and the OSPAAAL represented, at the same time, the high point of Cuban internationalism and the beginning of a phase marked by great ambitions and hopes.

3.3 Che Guevara's Departure and Death: The End of a Revolutionary Phase? (1965–1967)

The Cuban Revolution reached a crucial turning point during the strengthening of military internationalism, specifically at the Tricontinental Conference held in 1965. This was particularly significant due to the silent yet dramatic disappearance from the scene of Ernesto “Che” Guevara. Throughout the turning point of the Cuban regime, he had been a central figure behind the scenes, leading the ideological transformation of the island and beyond, holding key government positions, including President of the National Bank and Minister of Industry. All this came to an end in 1965, when he abandoned all his previous public offices and left the island for good to take up new missions abroad. He decided to embark on a new path, feeling that his role in Cuba's transition was over, that the revolution could proceed, and that he therefore had a vocation to carry the message to other countries with backgrounds similar to Cuba's. Bureaucratically speaking, his official resignation was only made public months after his personal decision. This took place during the first Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba on October 3rd, 1965. The audience was stunned by a change they had not expected. Che was one of the two faces of a radical change to which they had become attached. Fidel Castro, the other figure who aroused the same feelings among the crowd, then read a long letter written by Che a few months earlier. In that text, Guevara formalized his decision to leave, renouncing everything that tied him to Cuba.

¹⁷⁴ Fernandes, S. *Cuba Represent! : Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of New Revolutionary Cultures*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

"I feel that I have fulfilled that part of my duty that bound me to the Cuban Revolution on its territory, and I bid farewell to you, to the comrades, to your people, who are now also mine. I formally renounce my positions in the party leadership, my post as minister, my rank as commander, and my status as a Cuban. Nothing legal binds me to Cuba, only ties of another kind, which cannot be broken like official appointments. [...]

Other peoples of the world are calling for my modest efforts. I can do what you are denied because of your responsibility on the Cuban front, and the time has come for a final separation. [...]

You know that I do so with mixed feelings of joy and sorrow; here I leave the things I love most [...] and I leave a people who have welcomed me as a son. I leave this break behind in my new form of expression as a revolutionary. In other parts of the world, I will carry the faith you instilled in me, the revolutionary spirit of my people, the feeling of fulfilling the most sacred of duties: fighting against imperialism wherever it may be found."¹⁷⁵

These last words marked a transition that resonated nationally, but above all internationally. They were strong, dramatic words that inevitably went down in history. Guevara was the symbol of the “new man”, the one who could imagine the rebirth of the bourgeois individual, driven by the desire to rebuild institutions on new foundations, in the name of Cuba, solidarity and collective sacrifice. He distanced himself from the entire state apparatus and from all forms of legal and institutional identity. In this way, he reshaped the entire public sphere. Thanks to him, Cuban history was changed forever.

The last thing he refers to is his renunciation of Cuban citizenship, which was not, however, a legal renunciation, but rather a symbolic declaration; in fact, he had already acquired this recognition from Castro in 1959 through an *ad personam* decree. Therefore, this statement simply served to declare himself an international activist and militant, without territorial limits, without ideological limits.

His decision to leave Cuba was not due to an abandonment of ideology, but quite the opposite: he realized that the revolution could not end at the borders of an island, that the

¹⁷⁵ Castro, F. *Carta de Despedida al Comandante Fidel Castro*. 1965. Marxists Internet Archive.

revolution had to go on, it had to continue through armed struggle in places where oppression ruled.

The impact of the letter was devastating. Che returned to his distinctive character, back into the shadows, into operational anonymity, giving him even more of the mythical aura that had brought him to that point. Following this line, the Cuban government did not declare his next destination, thus fueling the aura that had been created around him. This sensational departure thrilled the revolutionary base and crystallized it in order to move on to a new phase of politics: while Guevara chose to go underground, the party took on a stable institutional form, committed to consolidating the results achieved at home and internationally.¹⁷⁶

Che's decision was certainly one with intrinsic personal motives, but it did not stop there; it was sufficiently well thought out to have an impact of international magnitude. He managed to present his decision as a personal sacrifice to bring about a turning point, a breaking point for states of which he was not even a citizen; he wanted to be a martyr for the cause. The people adored him for this. He was a statesman faithful to his original principles, able to adapt them to different cultures and thus become transnational. It was the logic of the underdog, capable of bringing a small island like Cuba to terms with geopolitics, diplomacy and thus a true flourishing survival within the difficult and complex system of the great and most advanced Western powers. People wondered what he could have done for other peoples.

While the Cuban Revolution was consolidating itself as a state, with results that were taking root and could be established as a new national tradition, he wanted to focus on starting this successful process elsewhere. Unfortunately, it was the path that led him to defeat and complete martyrdom.

After his official discharge, Guevara secretly left Cuba and headed for his first destination: Congo. He chose this country because it was the region first occupied by Belgium. When he arrived in 1965, Patrice Lumumba¹⁷⁷ had just died tragically, creating

¹⁷⁶ Kapcia, A. *Cuba in Revolution: A History Since the Fifties*. London: Reaktion Books, 2008.

¹⁷⁷ Patrice Lumumba was the first Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo, serving from June to September 1960. He was a key leader in the country's independence movement and was assassinated in 1961 after a military coup supported by foreign powers.

a moment of internal crisis during which a new independent government took over. Che therefore intervened alongside the rebel forces supported by Laurent-Désiré Kabila. This was both a tactical decision and a declared attempt to export the Cuban guerrilla model to Africa, promoting a militant alliance with the continent's liberation movements. However, the expedition did not achieve the desired results from an operational point of view. Beyond the military outcome, however, the Congolese mission marked a crucial turning point on a personal and political level. Guevara himself, in his private notes, which were published posthumously, lucidly described his growing frustration with the lack of rigor and revolutionary spirit among his African allies. In one of his most emblematic observations, he wrote:

“Our army was small and improvised, but the biggest problem was the lack of will among the fighters. Morale was low, discipline was absent. I saw a people ready to fight, but without the minimum foundations to do so”.¹⁷⁸

This experience in the Congo led Guevara to a stronger conviction that the ideals of revolution could not be automatically imposed abroad. So, shortly afterwards, in 1966, he quietly returned to Cuba. Che was visibly disappointed by this, as recalled by one of his closest companions in the Congo, Harry Villegas, known as “Pombo”: “Che didn't talk much after returning from Congo. He reflected, he wrote. But it was clear that he was looking for a new beginning”.¹⁷⁹ It was a low point for his ideals, but he did not give up entirely. So, he prepared his next attempt: Bolivia, further radicalizing his convictions. He chose Bolivia for its strategic position, as the country is located in the center of the South American continent, making it easier to spread ideology to neighboring states, as had already happened following the guerrilla warfare in Sierra Maestra. Guevara, therefore, began planning the campaign from Cuba at the dawn of 1966. Once ready to leave, in November of the same year, he arrived clandestinely on Bolivian soil in La Paz under a false identity. From there, he moved to the south-eastern region of the country, near Santa Cruz, where he established an operational base in the Ñancahuazú area. There, he formed a first guerrilla group, composed of Cubans, Bolivians and volunteers from other Latin American countries, but it was not an easy undertaking. There were several

¹⁷⁸ Guevara, E. *Pasajes de la Guerra Revolucionaria: Congo*. Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2000.

¹⁷⁹ Villegas, H. *Pombo: A Man of Che's Guerrilla*. New York: Pathfinder Press, 1997., H. (1997).

logistical complications he had not anticipated, such as geographical isolation, lack of infrastructure, mistrust of the local population and conflictual relations with the leadership of the Communist Party of Bolivia.¹⁸⁰ Added to this was intensive surveillance by Bolivian and U.S. intelligence services. In fact, the CIA, which had been closely following Che's movements since Congo, cooperated with the Bolivian army by providing equipment, training and operational personnel.¹⁸¹ Because of all these eyes, over the course of the following year, in 1967, the guerrillas found themselves progressively surrounded and decimated, without external support and with very little contact with the peasant population.

On October 8th, 1967, there was a firefight in the Quebrada del Yuro. It was the perfect opportunity for the Bolivian and U.S. governments to capture Che. However, orders came from above and the local peasants, who did not agree with this decision, did everything they could to hinder the efforts of the two governments. Unfortunately for Che, the group was quickly isolated due to a lack of adequate resources for such a political decision. The U.S. had all the means against Guevara that the peasants could not even imagine. In fact, the Bolivian army was fully supported by U.S. technology and provided with vital intelligence by the CIA, which led to Che's capture. The following day, October 9th, he was summarily executed in the village school of La Higuera, on direct orders from the military command. His body was transported to the hospital in Vallegrande and shown to the international press as proof of his physical elimination. The government's decision to carry out this act was officially justified by the need to prevent Guevara from fleeing to other parts of the world that would be more difficult for the United States to control or from becoming a symbol of other revolutionary struggles, destabilising other governments. For this reason, in order to silence the matter, his death was heavily exploited by the media worldwide. He was photographed and these photos became a further source of notoriety for Che, with the macabre images of his body lying with his eyes open being compared, due to their visual power, to paintings of the dead Christ.

Sadly, thirty years later, in 1997, his remains were found in a mass grave next to the runway at Vallegrande airport. It was not a random discovery, but a joint mission by Cuban and Argentine researchers. At that point, his remains were transported to Cuba,

¹⁸⁰ Anderson, J. L. *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life*. New York: Grove Press, 1997.

¹⁸¹ McPherson, A. *Intimate Ties, Bitter Struggles: The United States and Latin America Since 1945*. Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2013.

where they now rest in the mausoleum of Santa Clara. The United States silenced his activism and his Argentine, Cuban and international ideology, but it was not enough. Today, his tomb is still a place of pilgrimage and a symbol of revolution for the people.

Returning to his death, the news reached Havana a few days later. Fidel Castro, during a memorial ceremony held on October 18th, 1967, in the Plaza de la Revolución, gave a speech that has remained famous. In front of a mourning crowd, Castro expressed the famous words in memory of his friend and comrade: “If we want to express how we want our children to be, we must say with all the heart of the educating people: We want them to be like Che”.¹⁸² From that moment on, Guevara's figure was carved into the national and internationalist memory as a symbol of heroism, consistency, renunciation and supreme sacrifice. The icon of the “*guerrillero heroico*” became a constituent element of the Cuban revolutionary identity, widespread in posters, speeches, pedagogy and the political culture of the island.¹⁸³

In Bolivia, however, Che's death marked the end of a phase of rapid Cuban militant internationalism. Instead, it was the beginning of a gradual strategic realignment of the pre-Che dynamics.

The memory of revolutionary rhetoric remained partly in the hearts of Bolivians, but relations between Cuba and them became limited. The island granted few high-risk military actions, gradually favoring indirect support functions such as diplomatic action or mediated training and the building of alliances with the “world socialism” network.

Che's sacrifice was not in vain, but it highlighted to the Cuban government that revolutionary voluntarism, without local political and social support, risked turning into isolation, repression and defeat. In the official memory, Guevara was immortalized as a moral example, but the practice of international revolution underwent a radical transformation from that moment on.¹⁸⁴

Guevara's death in Bolivia marked the end of a revolutionary era characterized by the ideal of direct militant intervention, based on personal sacrifice and trust in guerrilla

¹⁸² Castro, F. *Discurso en Homenaje al Che Guevara*. Plaza de la Revolución, La Habana, 1967.

¹⁸³ Gleijeses, P. *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

¹⁸⁴ Guerra, L. *Visions of Power in Cuba: Revolution, Redemption, and Resistance, 1959–1971*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

warfare as the engine of social transformation. Che embodied the most radical phase of Cuban internationalism: a vision that believed it was possible to overthrow the imperial order with small pockets of armed resistance. His death closed that cycle and opened a new phase for the Cuban revolution, in which the survival of the state and balance with the Soviet Union would begin to prevail over the myth of the permanent export of revolution. It was the beginning of a slow but decisive strategic rethink that would lead Havana to confront the historical limits of that armed utopia.

3.4 The Prague Spring and Cuba's Conditional Loyalty to the USSR (1968)

The above was the historical background to 1968. That year, the Soviet bloc was shaken by an unprecedented internal crisis, known as the Prague Spring, a process of ideological reform that began in Czechoslovakia under the leadership of Alexander Dubček, secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. Once he came to power in January of that year, Dubček became the promoter of a programme of profound transformation. He thus became the leader of a humanization of the socialist regime, maintaining the collectivist economic structure while introducing extensive political and cultural liberalization. His slogan was “socialism with a human face”, which encapsulated a radical ambition: to combine pluralism and socialism, legality and participation, without renouncing Soviet principles but adapting them to local needs.¹⁸⁵

In the short but crucial period of a few months in 1968, Czechoslovakia found itself at the forefront of a profound civic and political awakening, marked by a partial relaxation of censorship. This process found symbolic expression in the emergence of new independent magazines and growing tolerance for forms of public criticism. At the heart of this renewal was the opening of a structured debate on the democratization of the country's political and institutional structure. While reaffirming his commitment to the

¹⁸⁵ Williams, K. *The Prague Spring and Its Aftermath: Czechoslovak Politics, 1968–1970*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997., K. (1997).

Warsaw Pact and his opposition to a return to capitalism, Alexander Dubček aroused deep concern among the Soviet leadership and other people's democracies, for whom such reforms represented a potential threat to the ideological and political integrity of the socialist bloc. The Soviet Union feared a domino effect that could encourage similar reformist demands in other Eastern European countries, such as Poland and Hungary, thus undermining Moscow's hegemonic authority within the socialist camp. As noted by historian Odd Arne Westad, the main source of concern lay not so much in Czechoslovakia's internal trajectory as in the risk that it could undermine the ideological hold of Soviet hegemony in the broader context of the global Cold War.¹⁸⁶

Following intense political pressure and complex diplomatic maneuvering, on August 21st, 1968, the armed forces of the Warsaw Pact, with the notable exception of Romania, which refused to join the intervention, invaded Czechoslovakia, deploying over 200,000 soldiers and around 5,000 tanks. The operation was carried out with lightning speed: within less than twenty-four hours, the country's main cities were occupied, and the Czechoslovak political leadership was promptly neutralized. Although the population expressed its dissent through peaceful protests, there was no organized armed resistance: the Soviet Union's strategic intent was clear: to nip any attempt to consolidate the reformist project in the bud, decisively reaffirming ideological orthodoxy within the socialist bloc.

The international community's reaction to the invasion of Czechoslovakia was complex and uneven. Western countries formally condemned the military intervention but refrained from any form of direct interference, aware of the potential risk of a global escalation of the conflict. In this context, a significant rift emerged within the international communist movement: several communist parties in Western Europe, particularly in Italy, France and Spain, publicly distanced themselves from Moscow, marking the beginning of the era of Eurocommunism, which sought greater ideological autonomy from the Soviet line. In the countries of the so-called Third World, the response was, on the contrary, more ambivalent: most post-colonial governments chose not to comment,

¹⁸⁶ Westad, O. A. *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*. Cambridge University Press., O. A. (2005).

maintaining a position of diplomatic silence, while only a few independent political organizations dared to openly condemn the intervention, highlighting the latent tensions in the relationship between anti-colonialism and geopolitical alignment.¹⁸⁷

In a context marked by extremely strong ideological and geopolitical tensions, Cuba found itself facing a strategic dilemma of monumental proportions. On the one hand, the Cuban revolutionary government had consolidated a structural alliance with the Soviet Union over time, on which it depended significantly in economic, military and energy terms. On the other hand, the armed intervention in Czechoslovakia raised a question of principle: that of the self-determination of socialist peoples, a value that Havana had repeatedly claimed as a cornerstone of its revolutionary identity in its relations with Moscow. The position that Fidel Castro would take in the days following the invasion would prove highly representative of the ambivalent nature of Cuba's relationship with the Soviet bloc: a conditional strategic loyalty, suspended between ideological adherence and the need for political autonomy. The Cuban government's official response came only on August 23rd, 1968, in a highly anticipated speech delivered by Castro at the University of Havana, two days after Warsaw Pact troops entered Czechoslovakia. The delay in the statement was not accidental: while international public opinion questioned the legitimacy of the Soviet action, Cuba deliberately avoided any immediate reaction, choosing to develop a more measured position that would allow it to maintain its loyalty to Moscow while safeguarding its ideological sovereignty.

In his speech, Castro adopted a strategic language, carefully avoiding any explicit condemnation of the intervention. He never used the term “invasion”, preferring to describe the events as a response to the “critical situation” that had arisen in Czechoslovakia. In his view, the reform process promoted by Dubček was opening the door to Western imperialist interference, jeopardizing the entire architecture of European socialism. From this perspective, Czechoslovakia was portrayed as the “weak link” in the

¹⁸⁷ Westad, O. A. *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*. Cambridge University Press., O. A. (2005).

socialist chain, thus justifying, albeit indirectly, the Soviet intervention in the name of defending the ideological unity of the bloc.¹⁸⁸

The position expressed in that speech was inherently ambiguous: on the one hand, Cuba did not openly side with the Soviet military operation, but on the other, it shared its underlying reasons, arguing that the defense of the revolution should prevail over any consideration of formal legality. Castro stated:

“When we see that a situation was developing there that would lead to an alliance with imperialism, to the restoration of capitalism, we cannot remain neutral. [...] We cannot agree with the invasion. But we cannot agree with the counter-revolution either”.¹⁸⁹

In this way, Fidel Castro distanced himself from the absolutist concept of national sovereignty, reaffirming instead the principle of solidarity between socialist states as the foundation for coexistence within the bloc, provided that such solidarity was supported by constant ideological proximity against any possible revisionist deviation. At the same time, the Cuban leader avoided portraying the Soviet intervention as a success to be celebrated, highlighting instead its complexity and ambivalence. In a significant passage of his speech, he invited Cuban militants to “reflect before judging”, signaling a distancing from propaganda and rhetorical simplifications. In the days that followed, the Cuban press consistently aligned itself with this moderate approach: the media adopted a sober tone, limiting themselves to reporting on developments in the crisis without amplifying its symbolic significance. No popular mobilization campaigns in favor of the USSR were promoted, and even Havana's diplomacy maintained a low and cautious profile. These choices reveal that Cuban approval of the Soviet intervention was not so much an expression of ideological conviction as it was dictated by strategic considerations aimed at preserving the balance between structural dependence on the Soviet Union and the desire to maintain a margin of political.¹⁹⁰ This attitude essentially

¹⁸⁸ Castro, F. *Discurso del 23 de Agosto en la Universidad de La Habana*. La Habana: Ediciones del Gobierno Revolucionario, 1968.

¹⁸⁹ Castro, F. *Discurso del 23 de Agosto en la Universidad de La Habana*. La Habana: Ediciones del Gobierno Revolucionario, 1968.

¹⁹⁰ Domínguez, J. I. *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

revealed a structural dilemma: how to reconcile solidarity with the Soviet Union, the main guarantor of the island's economic survival, with the principle of socialist self-determination that Cuba itself had claimed for years?

In the eyes of international observers, Cuba's position was interpreted as a sophisticated exercise in diplomatic balancing: an attempt not to compromise its strategic link with the Soviet Union, while at the same time avoiding unconditional alignment. Unlike other Eastern Bloc countries such as the German Democratic Republic and Bulgaria, which welcomed the intervention with enthusiasm, Havana adopted a more cautious stance, aimed at safeguarding its political credibility vis-à-vis the Global South. In this context, the repression of the Prague Spring had raised deep doubts about the truly emancipatory nature of Soviet socialism, fueling critical debate within postcolonial revolutionary movements.¹⁹¹

Fidel Castro's speech on August 23rd, 1968 should therefore be understood as an act of political balancing: a gesture designed to reassure the Soviet ally without completely compromising the island's revolutionary identity: Castro carefully avoided offering any legitimacy on the international legal level, allowing a form of loyalty to emerge that was more strategic than real, which would continue to characterize relations between Cuba and the USSR in the following decade. After the 1962 missile crisis, Havana had consolidated an asymmetrical relationship with Moscow based on economic, military and political support. This support proved crucial to the survival of the Cuban revolution: during the 1960s, bilateral trade with the Soviet Union guaranteed Cuba access to essential resources such as oil, wheat, fertilizers and industrial goods, while integration into COMECON offered the island an economic lifeline in the hostile context of inter-American isolation.¹⁹²

On the ideological level, Cuba systematically refused to assume the role of a mere appendage of the socialist bloc or a satellite of the Kremlin. From the very beginning of the revolutionary process, Fidel Castro emphasized the originality of the Cuban path, framing it as a national liberation struggle rooted in the anti-imperialist tradition of Latin

¹⁹¹ Kapcia, A. *Cuba in Revolution: A History Since the Fifties*. London: Reaktion Books, 2008.

¹⁹² Erisman, H. M. *Cuba's Foreign Relations in a Post-Soviet World*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000.

America and guided by a charismatic leadership. In this perspective, loyalty to the Soviet Union was always subject to negotiation and never granted automatically, unlike in Eastern European countries. This is exemplified by the fact that Cuba did not host permanent Soviet military contingents on its territory and maintained autonomous control over its political and military apparatus.¹⁹³ From this point of view, the Czechoslovak crisis was a crucial test of the limits of this autonomy. Although Castro had no real interest in breaking with Moscow, especially in a context of growing economic vulnerability and systematic hostility from the United States, he was not willing to accept the doctrine of armed intervention as a means of safeguarding socialism: the use of force to repress the actions of other communist governments appeared, in the eyes of the Cuban leadership, to be an extreme and potentially counterproductive measure. The Cuban press also reflected this ambivalent position, refraining from publishing celebratory editorials or reports of popular demonstrations: the news of the invasion was reported soberly, and Fidel Castro's speech was published in its entirety, without omissions, thus allowing its ambiguities and internal tensions to emerge clearly.¹⁹⁴

On the diplomatic front, however, Cuba adopted a policy based on consistency and prudence: it refrained from participating in the Soviet propaganda campaign accusing Dubček of treason, but above all it did not support international initiatives aimed at denouncing the so-called “Prague counter-revolution”. While maintaining active relations with the COMECON member countries, Havana avoided taking on a role of political legitimization of the armed intervention, refraining from sending official delegations to demonstrations of support: an attitude that proved to be an expression of silent solidarity rather than genuine and convinced agreement with Soviet ideological guidelines. The crux of this ambivalence lay in a fundamental assumption of Cuban revolutionary diplomacy: the identity of the revolution could not be reduced to subordination to a single hegemony. While the Soviet Union was an indispensable ally in military, economic and energy terms, the Cuban revolutionary project was conceived as an autonomous experience, inspired by its own historical genealogy and destined to serve as a reference point for smaller national liberation movements. As numerous

¹⁹³ Kapcia, A. *Cuba in Revolution: A History Since the Fifties*. London: Reaktion Books, 2008.

¹⁹⁴ Domínguez, J. I. *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

scholars have pointed out, the Cuban leadership's conduct was guided by a logic of “selective loyalty”: while firmly positioning itself within the Soviet order, it sought to preserve margins of strategic autonomy, particularly in foreign policy, so as not to compromise its credibility in the post-colonial global context.¹⁹⁵

The year 1968 marked a crucial turning point in the political and diplomatic trajectory of the Cuban revolution: Havana found itself forced to confront the issue of its strategic alliance with Moscow, as it could no longer sustain a fully autonomous identity without contradictions. This highlighted the complexity of the situation of a small revolutionary state forced to deal with the realpolitik of a superpower intent on protecting the cohesion of its bloc, even through the use of force, and at the expense of alternative socialist paths. The tension between loyalty and autonomy thus became the cornerstone of Cuban foreign policy throughout the Cold War. The Czechoslovak crisis and Havana's measured response marked a point of no return in relations between Cuba and the Soviet Union. While the Cuban revolution continued to rely on the economic and military support of its strategic ally, it firmly reaffirmed its independent vocation, rejecting passive subordination to the line imposed by the center of the socialist system. The year 1968 thus marked the formalization of a conditional loyalty: a relational structure in which the needs of geopolitical survival were intertwined with an increasingly marked intolerance towards the authoritarianism of the Soviet model.

3.5 Challenging Both Empires: Cuba's Critique of Peaceful Coexistence

Towards the end of the 1960s, the doctrine of “peaceful coexistence” had reached its peak. The United States and the Soviet Union saw this theory as a way to consolidate their influence, strengthen alliances and agreements, and keep under control areas where there was a risk of conflict breaking out. This balance was not easy to maintain, but both superpowers had the task of managing their allies and territories with the aim of avoiding any kind of unexpected event, such as autonomous revolutionary processes, which undermined global geopolitical stability.

¹⁹⁵ Gleijeses, P. *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

For Cuba, however, this perspective was a political and ideological threat because, according to Castro, the anti-imperialist struggle of the Third World was of vital importance and could not be sidelined in the name of diplomatic prudence. The agreement between the USSR and the U.S. represented a form of conservative complicity, capable of destroying militant groups and the very idea of revolution for the mere imperialist purposes of the two superpowers.¹⁹⁶

The doctrine of peaceful coexistence was thus identified as a doctrine of compromise and denounced by Castro for its inability to meet revolutionary demands. During the celebrations for the anniversary of the revolution in May 1968, Castro stated: “We do not want an unequal peace, a peace that consecrates the domination of imperialism.

There is no true peace without justice, and justice is not achieved through agreements between the powerful, but through the struggle of the peoples”.¹⁹⁷ With these words, he wanted to publicly declare that peace between the USSR and the U.S., based on the renunciation of change, was comparable to a form of false restoration.

According to Castro, the revolution must not align itself with the geopolitical balance prescribed by the superpowers, and small states had the right to pursue change, especially at a time when the destinies of smaller nations were being decided at the negotiating table by the major powers.

Following the end of the Prague Spring and the death of Che Guevara, around the second half of 1968, the Cuban government began to take a more critical stance towards the Soviet leadership, due to growing discontent among the population over the country's heavy economic dependence on the USSR and its conservative approach, which was interpreted as ideological betrayal.¹⁹⁸

During 1968 and 1969, Castro made increasingly frequent implicit references to socialist passivity in the development of the Cold War. One example is the speech given by the leader in July 1969 in Santiago de Cuba, where he declared: “Some speak of peace as if

¹⁹⁶ Domínguez, J. I. *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

¹⁹⁷ Castro, F. *Discurso del 23 de Agosto en la Universidad de La Habana*. La Habana: Ediciones del Gobierno Revolucionario, 1968.

¹⁹⁸ LeoGrande, W. M., and Kornbluh, P. *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations Between Washington and Havana*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

peace were a virtue in itself. But what is peace without justice? What is peace without freedom? What is peace if it only serves to maintain the domination of the powerful and the humiliation of the poor?".¹⁹⁹

Castro criticized the distorted view of the concept of peace, no longer a tool for real emancipation, but rather a means used by the powers that be to manage the international balance as they saw fit.²⁰⁰

Thus, Cuba's line of conduct changed, claiming the right to support revolutionary movements in other countries, contrary to the wishes of the USSR and the U.S., thus becoming "militant misaligned internationalism".²⁰¹

Unique in its kind, Cuba was politically autonomous and the first country to propose itself as the helmsman of the global revolutionary movement outside the official channels of the Comintern or Comecon. In this transnational dimension, national conflicts were highlighted for their autonomy, but at the same time enjoyed centralized ideological coordination.²⁰²

The island had strengthened its influence thanks on its reputation as a country willing to challenge the two great superpowers, the USSR and the U.S., allowing it to radicalize its leading role in anti-colonial movements and alternative congresses and conferences.²⁰³ It was precisely this model of revolutionary autonomy that allowed it to survive despite great adversity, such as political isolation and conflict with the two dominant poles of the international scene. Due to its radical and militant vision, which was not fully compatible with the diplomatic strategies adopted in the management of the Cold War, Cuba was forced to re-evaluate its plan of action over the following decade.

Cuba's political path, caught in a constant conflict between militancy and survival, saw the emergence of a further contrast between the more extremist vision of Che Guevara and the more diplomatic vision of Fidel Castro between 1967 and 1969.

¹⁹⁹ Castro, F. *Discurso Pronunciato in Santiago de Cuba*. La Habana: Ediciones del Gobierno Revolucionario, 1969.

²⁰⁰ Westad, O. A. *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*. Cambridge University Press., O. A. (2005)..

²⁰¹ Gleijeses, P. *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

²⁰² Yaffe, H. *Che Guevara: The Economics of Revolution*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009., H. (2009).

²⁰³ Gleijeses, P. *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

3.6 Che Guevara vs. Fidel Castro: Diverging Paths of Revolution

Following the failure of internationalist missions in Latin America and Africa, it became increasingly clear that the revolutionary project was as bold as it was structurally limited, bringing the revolution to a crossroads. It was now evident that the two most important and symbolic figures of the revolution, Fidel Castro and Ernesto Che Guevara, were on divergent paths, the former more nationalistic and strategic, the latter more universalist and detached.²⁰⁴

Che Guevara was the idealistic soul of the revolution. He strongly believed that the process of change was an international duty in order to save all oppressed peoples. According to him, it was not necessary to limit oneself to the national sphere, but to go beyond the simple defense of a state; it was necessarily a global issue. His vision can be described by the theory of “guerrilla warfare”, which explains that revolutionary fire can be ignited even in the most hostile contexts by a small armed group, if driven by a very strong ethical conviction and a spirit of sacrifice for the cause. For the leader, armed struggle goes beyond the simple concept of a tool to become an end in itself. It is a personal journey that must forge the “new man”, a person capable of putting the collective interest above individualism. Only through revolutionary and militant solidarity can the main goal be achieved: the destruction of global capitalism.²⁰⁵ It was precisely because of his ideas of communism based on an ethical, anti-imperialist and voluntary process that he left all his positions in Cuba to return to the underground for new revolutionary campaigns. He was the pure expression of militant vocation.

On the contrary, Fidel Castro was a leader who maintained an internationalist rhetoric while building and prospering the Cuban socialist state. Unlike Guevara, one of Castro's distinctive characteristics was pragmatism, thanks to which he managed to consolidate institutional power that survived various foreign pressures. In the early 1960s, he realized that he had to start using more skillful and calculated diplomacy to balance ideological tensions and strategic needs. An example of this is his relationship with the Soviet Union,

²⁰⁴ Anderson, J. L. *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life*. New York: Grove Press, 1997.

²⁰⁵ Löwy, M. *The Marxism of Che Guevara: Philosophy, Economics, and Revolutionary Warfare*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007.

which, despite making the island dependent, guaranteed the necessary economic support and protection.²⁰⁶ Castro was prepared to forge international agreements and alliances in order to defend his revolutionary project, and to ensure its continuity, he understood that the fundamental tools he could rely on were his party, the bureaucratic apparatus and ideological education. Another peculiarity of his strategy, already mentioned above, was the centralized and strategic management of foreign policy. He carefully selected the revolutionary groups to support, based on convenience and the geopolitical situation at the time, subordinating internationalism to the continuity of Cuban socialism and the needs of the country.²⁰⁷

So, on the one hand, Guevara was more inclined towards annihilation in order to maintain ideological purity, while on the other, Castro safeguarded the revolution, ensuring its continuity over time.

What led to the gradual rift between Che Guevara and Fidel Castro was the emergence of conceptual differences regarding the idea of revolution. From 1965 onwards, the division worsened: Guevara believed that the agreement with the USSR and the institutionalization of the revolution represented a threat and a betrayal of his project; Castro, on the other hand, focused more on the survival of the socialist state and its role in the international sphere. So, on the one hand, we find the morality of permanent sacrifice, and on the other, the rationality of state building.

Guevara's approach was morally consistent but had many strategic shortcomings, as can be seen from the failed missions in Congo and Bolivia, because his idea of exporting the revolution through small militant groups did not work in the difficult reality of local struggles. His death was the ultimate symbolic expression of the limits of solitary militant internationalism.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ Domínguez, J. I. *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

²⁰⁷ Harmer, T. *Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War*. University of North Carolina Press, 2011.

²⁰⁸ Hansen, J. H. *Soviet Deception in the Cuban Missile Crisis*. *Studies in Intelligence* 46, no. 1 (2002): 1–10.

In contrast, Castro, however compromised his moral trajectory may have been, was able to reconcile ideology and survival, allowing the Cuban socialist state to survive for more than half a century in the face of challenges posed by external agents.²⁰⁹

In conclusion, despite their differences, the two leaders contributed significantly to defining the identity of revolutionary Cuba, with opposing and complementary models: Che Guevara wanted universal change that would break the traditional bonds of geopolitics, while Fidel Castro opted for a pragmatic and calculated approach, carrying out an organized and lasting revolution.

Even today, more than fifty years later, the two figures represent two prototypical models of political transformation, but it is not a question of choosing the best one, but rather of understanding how both were essential in defining the dual, conflictual and dynamic nature of the Cuban revolution.

As this thesis has sought to demonstrate, the revolution was not a linear event, but rather a place of constant conflict between dream and reality, and between ethics and power, which left a deep-rooted legacy that continues to be discussed today, reminding us that every revolution that can be called such is a permanent battle between what is dreamed and what can be built.

²⁰⁹ Domínguez, J. I. *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Conclusion

This analysis of Cuban foreign policy between 1959 and 1969 highlighted the difficulty of a revolutionary project that was not limited to national borders but took on an international dimension. The reconstruction of historical events revealed how Fidel Castro was able to transform Cuba from a pawn of global powers to an active player in the geopolitical order of the time, adopting a flexible approach that was consistent with the original revolutionary ideology and capable of balancing national survival with the ambition to bring the revolution to other countries.

The first chapter highlighted how the rapid cooling of relations with the United States gradually led Cuba to ideological radicalization and progressive dependence on the USSR. The second chapter showed how Soviet support never translated into total subordination, despite the missile crisis of 1962 representing a breaking point: the military protection received and Castro's exclusion from the negotiations between Kennedy and Khrushchev revealed the limits beyond which Cuban sovereignty could not extend and created mistrust towards both Cold War superpowers.

The third and final chapter illustrated how Cuba's foreign policy took on an internationalist character following the crisis. Support for militant groups in Latin America and Africa, the 1966 Tricontinental Conference and the birth of OSPAAAL confirmed Cuba's desire to see its model of anti-imperialist struggle prevail. This activism distanced Cuba ideologically from the USSR, implicitly condemning the theory of "peaceful coexistence" and the Soviet handling of the Prague Spring. Finally, the comparison between Fidel Castro's and Che Guevara's visions of revolution revealed their differences and similarities: the former focused on the survival of the state, the latter tending towards internationalist militancy and the ideal of permanent revolution.

The main implications of this research concern the way in which small, weak states can succeed in exerting considerable influence in the international balance of power when driven by a strong ideology and guided by effective leadership. The case of Cuba raises questions about the possibilities and limitations of combining revolutionary fervor with the interests of state.

Ultimately, Fidel Castro's foreign policy between 1959 and 1969 cannot be defined simply as alignment with one of the two superpowers, but rather as a unique attempt to reposition Cuba in the international system, confronting US imperialism and Soviet conservatism. As we have tried to demonstrate, the Cuban revolution was a global proposal, rooted in the history of Latin America and the entire world.

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