

GRIMLY CUBA STRUGGLES TO FIND PEACE

BY RUSSELL B. PORTER

Depression, Effects of Machado's Regime and American Financial Interests Are Factors in Her Troubles

ONE sunny afternoon in Havana, a year and a half ago, white-suited Cubans were sitting quietly on the benches in Central Park, in the middle of the city. Suddenly there was a muffled sound in the distance, as of a body of men moving. Then came a few sharp cracks, the unmistakable sound of army rifles. Machine guns began to stutter their death call. The crowd jumped to their feet, scattered fanwise across the park, and disappeared in the doorways and all sorts of nooks and crannies.

In a few moments the soldiers completed their "demonstration" against Communist agitators, and vanished from the scene. Out of their holes immediately came the people of the park benches. They peered around, saw and heard no signs of trouble, and casually sauntered back to their places. Five minutes later life in the park was going on again just as before.

This incident, in a rough way, may be regarded as a symbol of Cuba's recurrent revolutionary disturbances. Just recently the wings of death have fluttered again over Havana. A new insurrection, beginning with bombs set by terrorists, and continuing through the new revolutionary technique of "progressive" strikes to an attempted general strike, accompanied by sniping from the housetops and fighting in the streets, apparently has been successfully put down by the determined attitude of President Carlos Mendieta, backed by the guns of Colonel Fulgencia Batista, army chief of staff.

Every now and then America is startled by one of these political or social eruptions in the little island off the coast of Florida. As a rule, when the trouble is over, the Cuban people resume their former positions, like the crowd of idlers in Central Park, and life goes on as before. It almost seems, sometimes, as if these disturbances themselves were an indispensable part of normal life in what the Cubans delight to call "The Pearl of the Antilles," and what their former Spanish masters knew as "the ever-faithful isle."

IN view of these repeated dissensions, it is no wonder that some Americans speak of Cuba as "the land of troubles." But why do these conditions persist? That is a question to which one may obtain many answers. If you ask the ordinary American citizen, he probably will say: "Oh, those people down there don't know how to govern themselves, anyway." In Cuba, the violent nationalist would put the blame on the United States, asserting that, even since the abrogation of the Platt Amendment, Wall Street banks and the State Department at Washington dominate the Cuban Government and make trouble inevitable. Business men, American and Cuban both, would lay it to radical agitation, and the Communists would attribute it to the breakdown of the capitalist system.

In between these extremes one may find as many differences of opinion as shades of color among Cuba's 4,000,000 inhabitants between the pure-white Spaniards at the top of the scale and the coal-black Negroes at the bottom.

While none of these explanations would constitute the whole truth, none would be entirely wrong, in the view of an objective seeker after the truth. The Cuban problem is not simple, but exceedingly complex. Without the proper qualifications, it might be a misleading oversimplification merely to pose the question why Cuba is the "land of troubles." This might lead the reader to believe that there is something strange about Cuba's continued troubles. The fact is that they are a perfectly natural development from all the factors out of Cuban, American and world history which combined during the dictatorship of

former President Gerardo Machado to produce a political, economic and social crisis that has not yet been solved, and perhaps will not be solved for many tortuous years.

It is rather hard to identify some of these factors, for Cuba, once the Winter playground of tourists, is now the year-round playground of propagandists, whose function, like that of a clever defense lawyer, seems to be to confuse rather than to clarify. Havana, where life was gay and colorful, has become the scene of a continuing battle in which manifestoes, programs and other statements from this or that political faction cloud the sky by day; in which the secret activities of terrorists make the nights red, and in which open insurrection flares up from time to time.

Morro Castle, at the entrance to the harbor, looks less like a historic monument than a gloomy foreboding of disaster. The famous Malecon, or ocean boulevard, which

skirts the city is dilapidated. The beautiful Prado, with its double row of lovely Spanish laurels, is desolate and lonely. There are pieces of light artillery pointed at the heart of the University of Havana, hotbed of revolt. Machine guns and rifles bristle everywhere. Over everything hangs a fog of uncertainty and bewilderment. Only the beauties of nature remain, the bright blue sky and the dark blue ocean, the warm sun and the cooling breeze, to help one see things in the clear light of reason.

LET us look at some of the most important of these factors responsible for Cuba's continued troubles. By far the primary reason for Cuba's difficulties, in this writer's opinion, is the world-wide economic breakdown leading to social unrest which followed the World War. Cuba suffered earlier and more than most countries. She is a land of one industry—the pro-

duction of sugar. All other business or industry, even tobacco, is either tributary or secondary to sugar.

In 1920 a collapse of sugar prices, after a period of fantastic overproduction and speculation, ruined the native sugar barons, stripped them of their possessions, and left their overmortgaged mills and estates in the ownership or control of American banking interests. In 1925 a second collapse, from which the industry has not yet recovered, completed the economic destruction of the island. From 1929 to 1933, of course, Cuba shared fully in the misery produced by the successive strokes of deflation in the world depression.

When people cannot work and cannot eat—even an ordinarily docile people like the Cubans—they revolt. That can be regarded as a law of nature. Americans are no longer surprised at the revolutions which occurred after the war in Russia and in Germany—to men-

tion only the two most prominent cases—or at the failure of those powerful nations to solve their problems without recurrent internal troubles. Why should they be surprised or confounded by the failure of the Cubans to govern themselves well under similar or worse circumstances?

In this writer's belief, it would be more logical to be surprised that a small and weak country like Cuba should have made the valiant efforts she has to solve her problems without cutting the Gordian knot. Democracy has been put to a severe test in Cuba, and its fundamental principles have been suspended so often as to make its hold on the country very tenuous, but at this writing it has not been finally abandoned for either fascism or communism. There have been killings by the armed forces and by the revolutionists in civil disturbances, attacks by terrorists and retaliation by the soldiers, abuses by the government and retaliation by its opponents; but as this is written there has been no Hitler blood-purge and none of the Soviet's widespread execution of oppositionists.

That is, there have been none of those dreadful occurrences in Cuba since the fall of the Machado dictatorship. When one considers that the worst years of the economic depression in Cuba, from 1925 to 1933, coincided with the tyranny, oppression and bloodshed of President Machado, who ruthlessly suppressed all manifestations of discontent, it is all the more surprising that the reaction was not more violent than it was after the country's pent-up social unrest was released by the abdication and flight of Machado.

It is true that for a few days after Machado fell there was a condition of virtual anarchy, in which Machado's porristas, or members of his secret police, were hunted down and killed like animals in the streets of Havana, and in which the homes of wealthy Machadistas were looted and burned. But these were acts of mobs and individuals taking revenge for the torture and murder of students and other anti-Machadistas by the secret police, and for the looting of the public treasury by Machado officials. They took place because the new government was too weak to stop them, but they ceased as the revolutionary government gathered strength. They were not the acts of a government.

SO the Cuban revolution cannot be blamed for any such bloody excesses as the Soviet revolution, for instance, or the historic French Revolution. There has been no Danton or Robespierre in the Cuban revolution; neither has there been an Ogpu. But the repercussions of the Machado régime still persist in Cuba, constituting a second important factor for her continued troubles. There will be no lasting peace in Cuba until the final remnants of the Machado régime, and the whole system of oppression and exploitation for which it stood, has been wiped out by sweeping reforms.

That brings us to a third factor—the relation between the United States and Cuba as an element in the Cuban domestic problem. The abrogation of the Platt Amendment and the granting of a new commercial treaty to Cuba by the Roosevelt administration have been a great help to Cuba, politically and economically, but have not fully satisfied the nationalistic ambitions of some of the most active sectors of the Cuban revolution. Even if Cuba, now that the Platt Amendment no longer exists, is at last a really free and independent nation politically, she is still, it is argued, under the economic domination of the big Wall Street banks and the holding companies which control her sugar industry, her railroads and her public utilities.

Cuba has suffered not only the abuses of financial exploitation and holding-company control such as



Again the Flag of Revolt Is Unfurled in Cuba—A Scene From the Recent Uprising.

International

have been seen in the United States, it is charged, but also has felt these in combination with the effects of an absentee ownership which has bled the country as white as the sugar which Americans use on their tables. The benefits to the sugar industry under the new treaty, it is alleged, go chiefly to Americans, not to Cubans.

In reality, these three foregoing factors are linked together in the minds of Cuban revolutionists. The economic depression, the Machado tyranny and the domination of American business and financial interests all have interrelationships. There is a lingering smart of resentment on the part of those who believe that money lent by American banks enabled the Machado régime to oppress them, and that in turn Machado tyrannically taxed them to their last penny in order to pay off American bondholders while Cubans starved.

Of course, there are other factors in making Cuba the "land of troubles." There is a Cuban tradition of misgovernment, corruption in public office and tyranny that dates back to the three centuries when the "ever-faithful isle" was ruled by the Spanish captains general, with their ever-ready guns and tax collectors.

Some Cubans believe that their capacity for self-government has been seriously weakened by the three decades of the Platt amendment, which made their country a virtual protectorate of the United States and caused her leaders to look to Washington and Wall Street for a solution of their problems instead of working them out themselves. Others believe it was a mistake to try to adapt the American Presidential and representative system of government to Cuba when she became a republic. The racial problem in Cuba, producing diverse interests among whites, blacks and mixed breeds, also complicates the lesson of self-government.

Again, factional disputes and the perpetual Latin-American warfare of the "outs" against the "ins" for control of public offices have their share of responsibility for Cuba's troubles. Especially at a time when the economic structure in many lands is crumbling or being assaulted, resulting in a scarcity of work in business and industry, government jobs in a country like Cuba become more of a prize than ever.

The agitation of a fanatical fringe of extreme nationalists has also played a part in the continuance of Cuban unrest, but this may be regarded as a temporary factor which feeds upon the food of discontent in the three main factors, and which



Havana Slums—"The Collapse of Sugar Prices Brought About the Economic Destruction of the Island." Photo by Walker Evans From "The Crime of Cuba" by Carlton Beals. (Lippincott.)

should disappear in the future with the gradual improvement of economic conditions and the reform of old abuses. So also with Communist agitation, which has certainly been a factor in stirring up trouble, but has been overrated both by Communist and anti-Communist propagandists as an element in the problem.

AMONG the leaders in Cuban national life today there are those of the old order and those of the new order. President Mendieta represents the best, and probably the last, of the old order.

Like General Machado, General Mario G. Menocal, and virtually every other Cuban leader in the last thirty years, President Mendieta fought in the War of Liberation against Spain. This group of patriots and soldiers became the leaders of the Cuban Republic, and now those who are left constitute the remnants of the old order.

Against the older leaders the newer and younger group of Cuban leaders brings many charges. Some of the old patriots are charged with

tyranny, some with oppression, some with dishonesty, and some with all of these and more. All of them, as a group, are charged with a consistent subservience to Washington and to American business and financial interests. They are regarded as men who were patriots in the beginning, but who were so corrupted or misled by professional politics that they lost sight of their country's real interests, and failed to be prepared with any national program to meet the changing economic and social problems which have followed the World War.

Except for Estrada Palma, the first President of the republic, Colonel Mendieta is the only President of Cuba whose record is clear of charges of corruption. Even his strongest political enemies give him credit for honesty. He is nationalistic in his views, and his political party is called the Union Nacionalista, but he is not an extremist. He is conservative by nature, and believes in going slowly, both in domestic reforms and in freeing his country from foreign domination.

That Mendieta is another Machado, seeking as Machado did to perpetuate himself in office by the use of the army and by the murder of political foes, as charged in some quarters, is incredible to this writer. Such accusations have the ring of radical propaganda in some cases, of disappointed hopes in others, and of the outbursts of impractical and uninformed sentimentalists in other instances.

It is true that President Mendieta has felt compelled to govern with a strong hand, to suspend constitutional guarantees, and to permit Colonel Batista's army to exercise powers over the civil authorities. It is true that he is a very determined man, who is not afraid to do whatever is necessary when he is convinced that he is right and that he is doing his patriotic duty. It is also true that he and Colonel Batista used some of the most drastic measures in the history of the republic to put down the recent revolutionary movement.

But President Mendieta is faced with this stubborn fact: that no one has been able to govern Cuba without Colonel Batista's support. This

has been the case since September, 1933, when the present chief of staff, then an army sergeant, headed the army revolt which ejected the Machadista commissioned officers, ended the abortive Céspedes government, and put into power the short-lived student-soldier government headed by Professor Ramon Grau San Martin of the University of Havana, whom Batista ousted in turn fourteen months ago in favor of Mendieta.

Unless the charges are true that Mendieta is trying to do what Machado did, which this writer does not believe, the logical inference to be drawn from the policies of the Mendieta government is that it is trying to pacify and stabilize Cuba, and to bring about a certain measure of economic recovery, before attempting the social reforms which the New Order ardently desires.

IN the New Order the two most important groups are the A. B. C. and the Cuban Revolutionary party. The A. B. C. is now a formal political party, an outgrowth of the secret revolutionary society composed of young graduates of the University of Havana and other young men who cooperated with the students of the university and the high schools in an underground war of terror against Machado for two years before his fall. The Cuban Revolutionary party, popularly known as the "Autenticos," or "authentic revolutionists," is headed by Dr. Grau San Martin and the student leaders who supported the Grau government. In addition, there are innumerable smaller factions of every shade of political opinion, from extreme Right to extreme Left.

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ing impatiently forward to the New Cuba of their dreams, have joined forces with various other factions against President Mendieta. They have demanded that he push forward immediately with the reconstruction of Cuba by reforms to end the abuses, oppressions and exploitations of the old system, whereas he has insisted on waiting until the country has become sufficiently pacified so that peaceful elections can be held for a constitutional convention. It should be remembered that Mendieta is a provisional President, governing (when it is not suspended) under a provisional Constitution and with decree-laws, the old Constitution having been abolished after the fall of Machado. His attitude is that reform should wait until the new Constitution.

His opponents of the New Order also are impatient at his failure to assert the civil authority over the military. They want Batista ousted, and the supremacy of the civil power established. This is really linked with the previous issue, because they say that their reforms cannot be achieved until the military is subordinated to the civil power. When this is done, they say, especially the "Autenticos," that the goal will be "the economic liberation" of Cuba from American domination. Until this is done, they will feel that they, as the real revolutionists who risked their lives and carried on the revolution against Machado after the purely political opposition surrendered, have been cheated of the fruits of their victory.

ALTHOUGH the different groups united against Mendieta, or rather against Batista, they are split with factional differences in other respects. The fact that they had not been able to agree upon any unified, constructive and detailed political program militated against the success of their recent revolutionary effort. It obviously was partly the cause of their failure to get the support of the Cuban masses, without which the general strike was doomed to failure as a revolutionary effort.

In this respect the movement against the Mendieta government is strikingly different from the anti-Machado revolution, which both the masses and the classes supported whole-heartedly. That was clearly a great popular uprising, deeply rooted in long-continued wrongs committed upon the people. There was something inevitable about it. The recent attempt to unseat Mendieta did not have this character. On the contrary, it smacked a great deal of factional disputes over the methods by which the aims of the anti-Machado revolution should be realized, and the ambitions of the "outs" to replace the "ins" on the public payroll.

NOW for the outlook. What of the future in Cuba? Predictions are always dangerous, but it appears certain that the future belongs to the New Order.

The Mendieta government is evidently a transition government, a link between the old and the new. It must be realized that the Cuban revolution did not end with the fall of Machado, any more than the French Revolution ended with the fall of the king, the Russian revolution with the fall of the czar, or the Mexican revolution with the fall of Diaz.

What many do not understand is that the Cuban revolution, although on a smaller scale, belongs historically with these precedents. It was rooted in similar oppressions, and was made effective with similar popular support. Although its aims are different in degree and detail, they are like the aims of those revolutions in calling for

sweeping political, economic and social reforms.

There is a great deal of vagueness, confusion and difference of opinion about these aims. Different political factions are pulling this way and that, trying to convince the general public that one or the other particular reform or set of reforms is paramount. Meanwhile the masses of people seem uncertain and bewildered and in need of a breathing spell in which they can have peace and quiet to let them and the leaders they choose to support determine what course to follow.

Thus the Cuban revolution is to be considered as one that is still in progress and must continue until those of its objectives which are sensible and practical are substantially achieved. That is part of its inevitability.

PRESIDENT MENDIETA, honest, patriotic, courageous and wise, does not share in the responsibility for the abuses of the Old, but at the same time he does not think in the terms of the New Order. If he can prevent extremists on either the Right or the Left from seizing power, if he can save Cuba from the Dantons and the Robespierres on one hand or the Hitlers and the Goerings on the other, he will have performed his historic function.

If he can keep things steady until some measure of economic and social balance is restored to Cuba as well as to the rest of the world, so that a constitutional convention can be held in an atmosphere of at least comparative peace and quiet, he will have done his part in starting Cuba on the way to the necessary reforms.

But sooner or later he must give way to the New Order. The masses of the Cuban people are patient now, evidently having faith in him, believing that he is right in going slowly, and feeling that he is justified in using strong measures (up to a certain point) in defending his government from assaults that might if successful produce a condition of anarchy in Cuba. Although they might accept a more or less benign form of dictatorship (not a return to the Machado type of régime) temporarily until things settle down, the Cuban masses inevitably will demand a new constitutional form of government which will give them the fruits of their victory over Machado.

When the students and young professors of the Autenticos and the young professional and business men of the A.B.C. reconcile their factional differences and unite upon a broad and constructive program, or when these or some similar group representing the new order gain popular ascendancy, the picture of new Cuba will become clearer.