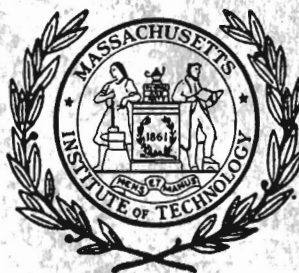


FIDEL CASTRO'S ROAD TO POWER

1. Cuban Politics from Machado to Moncada

by
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Introduction

The success of political leaders and political movements depends on the image which they project, which may be very different from what they really are. The truth about them may come out, but very often only after illusion has changed the course of history.

Fidel Castro has projected a whole gamut of images. At different times and to different audiences, he has successfully presented himself as the democratic opponent of a Fascist dictator, pledged to restore constitutional government and to cleanse it from all corruption, as a humanistic social reformer, as a spokesman for the Third World of developing nations, as a Marxist-Leninist social revolutionary, as the liberator of his country from bondage to a great foreign power, and indeed as a twentieth-century Bolivar, destined to lead a whole continent in a national liberation struggle against Yankee Imperialism. This does not reflect inconsistency of purpose. The images were changed in accordance with changing circumstances, each of them being discarded after its possibilities had been exhausted. Behind the varying images there is a singleness of purpose, and of mind, an unflinching determination to accumulate power. His concentration on this one aim is total. All his remarkable gifts are placed in its service: brilliant intelligence, political acumen, phenomenal oratorical abilities, and above all a unique flair for publicity, demonstrated not only in his skillful handling of public relations, but also in the inventive use of technology. He is a very modern man. No other figure of our contemporary political world has such deep, instinctive understanding of the uses to which technology can be put in the political struggle.

At first glance, modern technology appears to weigh the scales heavily against unarmed opposition to dictatorial regimes, and against armed resistance to any regime. Dictatorships can muzzle television, radio and the press by bribery or by threats which impose self-censorship on the media in order to avoid reprisals. Failing this, they can impose official censorship. In the last resort, they can seize the media and put them totally and permanently under their control, as is the practice of the totalitarian states. In the event of an insurrection, the government of any country equipped with modern means of air and surface transportation can rush troops to the most distant areas of the country within hours in order to stamp out the rebellion or at least to contain it.

Batista's Cuba was a modern country with one of the highest rates of literacy in Latin America, with numerous newspapers, radio and T.V. stations that could be, and were, put in the service of government propaganda, with a system of long-distance telephone communications from one end of the island to the other, adequate roads in most of the country, a motorized army, and an air force equipped with bombers and transport airplanes. Yet Fidel Castro, with very limited material means, managed to defeat an adversary possessed of all these advantages. He accomplished this by psychological warfare, by using the most modern propaganda techniques to project an image of self-sacrificial devotion to the cause of democracy. His militarily insignificant guerrilla bands and the small groups of terrorists operating in the cities were also used as instruments of psychological warfare: not in any vain attempt to overwhelm the bulk of Batista's army, or to paralyze the Cuban economy by material destruction, but to project an image--that of invincibility.

In order to understand how Castro achieved this against an opponent who, in his time, had also been adept at projecting favorable images, and in order to appreciate the originality and efficacy of his techniques, it is not enough to study his own background and early history. One must also study the Cuban political scene on which his struggle took place, the role of Fulgencio Batista, the composition of Batista's following and of the opposition against him, and the exact position of Fidel Castro within that opposition. All these matters are hidden in a dense fog of legend and calumny, counter-legend and counter-calumny.

Fulgencio Batista

In the night from August 11 to 12, 1933, Cuba's dictator Gerardo Machado was forced out of office by an ultimatum from the commanding officers of the Armed Forces, who were acting in concordance with the United States Ambassador, Sumner Welles.

The country had been in a state of political high tension since the arrival of Sumner Welles in May of that year. Welles had not come to Havana as a routine ambassador, but as the special envoy of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, charged with the task of organizing a peaceful transition of power from the dictator to the democratic opposition. Welles called in the opposition leaders for consultation. The Platt Amendment, embodied in the Cuban constitution of 1902, gave the United States the right to military intervention for the restoration of law and order whenever it judged this necessary, and the Cubans were acutely aware that final authority over their country rested with Washington and the U.S. Embassy in Havana rather than with their own President. The news that the United States had withdrawn its support from the dictator, and that its ambassador was negotiating with the opposition, thus rapidly eroded Machado's position.

Machado was a veteran of the Cuban War of Liberation and a nationalist who resented United States supremacy, initiated a protectionist policy in order to build up local industry, and favored European over American exporters.¹ He

¹ For Machado's economic nationalism and anti-Americanism, see James O'Connor, The Origins of Socialism in Cuba (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 27, and Ruby Hart Phillips, Cuba, Island of Paradox (New York: McDowell and Obolensky, 1959), p. 46.

stubbornly resisted Welles' attempts to pressure him into resigning, and in an address to the Cuban Congress on July 27, 1933, openly defied the United States by declaring, "Our land must be maintained free, independent and unhampered by the Platt Amendment."² But a general strike which started on August 3 paralyzed the entire economy, the police proving unable to break it. On August 11 Machado lost his last pillar of support. The Armed Forces, which he had always favored, constantly increasing their budget, expanding them and equipping them with new weapons, turned against him. In her diary the chronicler of the last three decades of Cuban history before Castro, Ruby Hart Phillips, shrewdly surmised that fear of U.S. intervention and of the imposition of an American military government on the country moved the army commanders to desert their benefactor. In order to economize, such a government would presumably have disbanded the greater part of the army, which Machado had built up to a size and strength out of all proportion to the country's needs.³ The officers could not foresee that less than a month after they had removed Machado, an even greater catastrophe would befall them.

Never before had the Cuban army intervened in the political struggle. Cuba was not one of those Latin American countries where military coups are a customary and quasi-institutionalized move in the political game, resulting only in changes of personnel in the uppermost echelons of government, without impairing the normal, day-to-day functioning of the administrative apparatus. The

² Ruby Hart Phillips, op. cit., p. 25.

³ Op. cit., p. 37.

Cuban convulsion went far deeper. Machado had been the first Cuban President to rule as a dictator. He had maintained himself in power by brute force, by police terror. By this he discredited not only himself, but the entire state apparatus which was his instrument. With his downfall, a total crisis of state authority came to its climax.

Once it has collapsed, state authority cannot easily be restored. The provisional government appointed by the Cuban Congress in the early hours of August 12 failed to do so.

Some days after the fall of Machado, Ruby Hart Phillips noted in her diary: "A pointed finger or a single cry of accusation can set loose incredible and terrible violence. There isn't the slightest respect for authority. The police are treading softly, not knowing exactly where they stand, but aware that if they interfere the mob might attack them."⁴ Our chronicler then characterized the situation as one in which "police are more afraid of being arrested than the citizens."⁵

It is a characteristic of the first, anarchic phase of all genuine revolutions that the police, being discredited as instruments of the regime that has just been overthrown, are more afraid of being arrested than the citizens. In August 1933, Cuba was in precisely this phase of total disintegration of established authority. In spite of the existence of a "provisional government," power was lying in the streets, waiting to be picked up by the first-comer. On September 4, a sergeant named Batista picked it up.

⁴ Ibid., p. 52.

⁵ Ibid., p. 53.

Fulgencio Batista was born in 1901 in a hovel in Oriente Province, the son of an agricultural laborer. He was of mixed Spanish, Chinese, African and apparently also Indian origin.⁶

Batista thus carried a double burden. In a society in which personal relations were of vital importance for upward mobility, he was discriminated against as a member of that lower, proletarian sector which has no family or close friendship ties with anyone connected, however remotely, with those who wield political or economic power. He was also discriminated against as being what the Cubans call "colored" (de color). Racial discrimination in Cuba was more subtle and difficult for the outsider to discern than in the United States, but nonetheless it went deep. All affirmations to the contrary by Cuban refugees are deliberate lies. There was segregation in hotels, in the swimming pools of clubs, and on the beaches, which were usually also owned by segregated clubs. Certain occupations, such as banking, were closed to Cubans whose skin was too dark for them to pass as Caucasians. The odds were not stacked so heavily such persons as in Brazil--a sizeable number of Afro-Cubans managed to rise into the middle-income brackets, and a few even acquired considerable wealth. But it was certainly much more difficult for them to do so than for persons not burdened with an African heritage.⁷

⁶ The original Indian population of Cuba was almost totally exterminated by the Spaniards early in the sixteenth century, but in the late nineteenth century there was an influx of Mexican Indians from the neighboring peninsula of Yucatan, who were brought over as laborers for the sugar plantations. A considerable number of Chinese kulis were imported for the same purpose.

⁷ According to the figures of the census of 1952, 12.5 per cent of the

Batista was acutely conscious of the racial problem in Cuba. Hence his veneration for Abraham Lincoln. There were busts of Lincoln in his office, and a framed copy of the Emancipation Proclamation on the wall.⁸ To one visitor, the C.I.A. official Kirkpatrick, it appeared that Batista "would have liked to have been Cuba's Lincoln."⁹ Nor was this admiration of Lincoln a pose adopted in Batista's late years to hide an earlier admiration for Hitler, Mussolini, and Tojo, as one American reporter naively assumed.¹⁰ It was already manifest in his speeches of the nineteen-thirties and early 'forties, and was probably acquired in his childhood, during the few years of formal schooling he received from Baptist missionaries.

After working for some years as a laborer and as a railroad employee, young Batista enlisted in the army. The duties of a professional soldier in the Cuban army were not too onerous. They left him time to take courses in stenography, a skill in which he became so proficient that he could use it both to augment his meager pay by himself giving courses, and for advancement in his military career.

population were negroes and 14 per cent mulattoes, but foreign observers believe the actual percentages to be appreciably higher. See, for instance, Boris Goldenberg, Lateinamerika und die Kubanische Revolution (Cologne: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1963), p. 192.

⁸ Ray Brennan, Castro, Cuba and Justice (New York: Doubleday, 1959), p. 208.

⁹ Lyman B. Kirkpatrick, Jr., The Real CIA (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 166.

¹⁰ Ray Brennan, op. cit., pp. 43 and 208.

By 1931 Batista was a sergeant and the chief stenographer at the Military Court of the Army Headquarters in Camp Columbia near Havana. This was a critical year for the Machado regime. An armed expedition of exiles from the United States landed in Oriente Province under the command of two cashiered army lieutenants; among its civilian leaders were two men who were to play a prominent political role in the years to come: the journalist Sergio Carbó and the engineer Carlos Hevia. After some inconclusive engagements with the army, some of the expeditionaries capitulated, while others dispersed without being captured. In the same year, the two most important leaders of the opposition against Machado, former president Mario Menocal and Colonel Carlos Mendieta, staged a military revolt in Pinar del Rio Province. This was also put down, the two leaders being apprehended and later sent into exile.¹¹ Meanwhile, two recently formed clandestine organizations, the Directorio Estudiantil (Student Directorate) and the ABC, cooperated in launching a campaign of terrorism--bombings and assassinations--against the regime. In consequence of all this revolutionary activity, the Military Tribunal at Camp Columbia and its chief stenographer were kept very busy.

Rubén de León relates that at the end of the session in which he and two other members of the Directorio Estudiantil were tried on charges of sabotage, incitement to rebellion, assassination and having attempted to blow up the Presidential Palace with a carload of dynamite, chief stenographer Batista went to them with words of sympathy and encouragement.¹² The proceedings of

¹¹ For this, see Rubén de León, El Origen del Mal (Miami, Fla., 1964), pp. 294-296.

¹² The three students received sentences of eight years of imprisonment in the penitentiary on the Isle of Pines. There was no death penalty in Cuba.

the Military Tribunal were fair, and its sentences were relatively mild. But many political prisoners were disposed of extra-legally--being tortured to death, thrown to the sharks, or shot "while trying to escape."¹³

Batista's relations with the other clandestine terrorist organization, the ABC, were not limited to such occasional contacts: he actually joined one of its basic cells. The ABC was a tightly organized group with a triple hierarchy--the basic cells of ten members each, the cell leaders, and a top leadership of seven men. It also had a special "action squad" of some 150 terrorists. The total membership of the organization was estimated at 2000.¹⁴

The social composition of the ABC leadership was middle- and upper-class. The leaders were young members of the professions who had links with the business world and with Havana society.¹⁵ It had no clearly defined ideology beyond the customary, hackneyed affirmations of nationalism and social and political renovation, and was later to fall apart into groups variously oriented toward either Fascism or Social Democracy.

The Directorio Estudiantil was more radical than the ABC in its political orientation, though not in its terrorist tactics: it put greater stress on social reform and was more bitter in its anti-Americanism. In the summer of 1933 it rejected the mediation efforts of Sumner Welles, which were accepted by the ABC and most of the other opposition groups. In consequence, it was

¹³ For the brutality of Machado's repressive measures see, e.g., Ruby Hart Phillips, op. cit., pp. 5-10.

¹⁴ For these details on the ABC see Ruby Hart Phillips, op. cit., p. 47.

¹⁵ Rubén de León, op. cit., p. 295.

left out in the cold when Machado fell and the Provisional President appointed by Congress, Manuel de Céspedes, formed his cabinet.

De Céspedes enjoyed the backing of the American Embassy, some of the old opposition politicians, and of the ABC, which obtained key posts in his cabinet. Sergeant Fulgencio Batista, a common member of the ABC, did not benefit from the organization's rise to power.

All through August, while De Céspedes vainly struggled to assert his authority and carloads of ABC were roaming the streets in their role as a self-appointed political police searching for Machadistas, rumors of conspiracies circulated in Havana. The newly appointed Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces was an old friend and protégé of former President Menocal, who had returned from exile, and they were believed to be preparing a coup. The Directorio Estudiantil, on the other hand, was said to be conspiring with a group of junior officers. There is little doubt that both rumors were correct. But these conspiracies of officers with civilians were forestalled by a rising of the NCO's and soldiers at Cuba's main barracks, Camp Columbia outside Havana.

The "Revolution of September 4," or "Sergeants' Revolt," has been variously depicted as an audacious coup masterminded by a genius at conspiracy, Fulgencio Batista,¹⁶ and as the product of mere discontent with the pay scales, a simple, unpremeditated mutiny not even led by Batista, who was only picked as a spokesman by the soldiers because he spoke well.¹⁷ In truth the "Sergeants' Revolt" would appear to have been something more than a spontaneous mutiny,

¹⁶ Thus, for instance, in Edmund A. Chester, A Sergeant Named Batista (New York: Henry Holt, 1954).

¹⁷ See the account by an unnamed officer (possibly Air Force Commander Torres Menier) in Ruby Hart Phillips, op. cit., pp. 87-94.

something less than a coup aimed at the seizure of power. The NCO's and soldiers revolted in the early morning, at a time when their officers were still asleep in their private quarters, which were dispersed in the city. They immediately occupied the building of the High Command and the army telephone exchange and called the command posts of the provincial garrisons, which at this early hour were also manned by NCO's. This procedure indicates premeditation and careful planning. The insurgents' next step shows that they were under capable, politically intelligent leadership--probably that of Batista himself. It was a call to the one non-Communist political group from which they might possibly obtain support: the Directorio Estudiantil. The student leaders and some affiliated older veterans of the struggle against Machado immediately went to Camp Columbia, probably under the mistaken impression that it was their own conspiracy with the junior officers which had succeeded.¹⁸ At this point, the sergeants who had led the revolt were apparently still undecided whether to negotiate with the De Céspedes government or to declare it deposed,¹⁹ and they were persuaded by the Directorio members to take the latter course. An Executive Committee of five men was named as the new provisional government. This Pentarchy was composed of the most prestigious names among the older supporters of the Directorio that could be mustered: two university professors, a lawyer, a well-known journalist who had been one of the leaders of the 1931 landing-party in Oriente Province, a lawyer, and a banker. The soldiers were not yet thinking of replacing the old officer corps. What they wanted was the restoration of the pay- and promotion scales which had been cut by the de Céspedes government. The first move of the

¹⁸ See Ruby Hart Phillips, op. cit., p. 63.

¹⁹ See Jaime Suchlicki, University Students and Revolution in Cuba, 1920-1968 (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1969).

Pentarchy was to negotiate with the officers on the soldiers' behalf. But the officers, who falsely assumed United States intervention to be imminent, refused to accept the authority of the new government. On an impulse that was to have momentous consequences, one of the members of the Pentarchy, the journalist Sergio Carbó, thereupon replaced the sergeant's stripes on Batista's shoulders with the insignia of a colonel, proclaiming him the new Chief of Staff.

The majority of the officers understandably refused to submit to the humiliation of being commanded by a mere sergeant, and handed in their commissions. Of the 500 officers of the Cuban armed forces, only 116 retained their place.²⁰ Batista replaced the rest through promotions from the ranks.

The coup of September 4, 1933 thus put Batista in a position rarely attained in Latin America, that of commanding the absolute loyalty of the army. The former NCO's were fellow-conspirators and owed their commissions to him. The minority of officers who had elected to stay in the service had thereby isolated themselves from their fellows and also cast their lot with him, and his social origin endeared him to the common soldiers. He used his new power wisely, biding his time, remaining in the background and for the moment leaving the affairs of state in the hands of the civilians without making them realize their dependence on him.

²⁰ Ramón Eduardo Ruiz, Cuba, The Making of a Revolution (Amherst, Mass.: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1968), p. 158. According to Ruiz, the officers resigned because they refused to serve under a mulatto commander.

After five days, the Pentarchy was replaced by a provisional government under the presidency of Grau San Martín and with a former student leader, Antonio Guiteras, in the key post of Secretary of the Interior. Grau and Guiteras initiated a nationalist policy directed against foreign capital and labor. Both the big and the small enterprises in industry, agriculture, and commerce were hard hit by a "nationalization of labor" decree obliging them to employ native Cubans for at least half of their work force, and to pay half of their payroll to Cubans. The immigration from Spain was seriously affected by this measure, most of the smaller enterprises in industry, the crafts, and commerce being owned by Spaniards. American capital was hurt by a decree increasing the production quotas of Cuban-owned sugar mills, by the confiscation of two American-owned mills, and by a decree lowering electricity rates; the American-owned Cuban Electricity Company was temporarily taken over by the government. The Cuban delegation to the Inter-American Conference in Rio de Janeiro obtained a decision to annul the Platt Amendment, but this could not be implemented without the consent of the United States, which withheld diplomatic recognition from the Grau government.

Meanwhile revolutionary unrest continued throughout the island, the new government backed by the Directorio Estudiantil being no more successful in stabilizing the situation than its predecessor which had been backed by the ABC. The former officers refused to recognize the authority of the new government and barricaded themselves in Havana's largest hotel, the Nacional. They had few arms, and the hotel had no strategic value. They had picked it for political, not military reasons: it was the temporary residence of Ambassador Sumner Welles, so that the government forces could not attack it without bringing about American intervention. But Welles, though sympathetic to the officers, moved out after some days, and soon afterwards, Batista's soldiers launched their attack. It

was beaten off with heavy losses, but the officers had to surrender for lack of ammunition, and after capitulation, several of them were killed. Batista's opponents hold him personally responsible for the massacre.²¹ Ruby Hart Phillips²² gives the number of victims as sixteen, and attributes responsibility for the killings either to the soldiers or to the student militia of the Directorio Estudiantil which assisted them in the attack on the hotel.

Some weeks later, the government was faced with an even more serious challenge, an armed revolt of the ABC. Batista and his soldiers managed to put it down after prolonged street-fighting. Numerous participants were killed after surrender, including Colonel Blas Hernández, a hero of the struggle against Machado.

To the left, the government confronted the opposition of the anarchist and communist trade unions. In accordance with the leftist-extremist line of the Comintern in its "Third Period" of ultra-radicalism, the communists called for the formation of a revolutionary workers' and peasants' government based on local councils of workers, peasants and soldiers on the model of the Russian Revolution. A number of such councils or "soviets" were actually formed around sugar mills in various parts of the country.²³ The leftist ideological orientation of

²¹ Thus, for instance, Fidel Castro in "History Will Absolve Me." [See Fidel Castro, La Revolución Cubana, Gregorio Selser, Ed. (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Palestra, 1960), p. 58.]

²² Op. cit., p. 86.

²³ For the "Third Period" policy of the Communists in Cuba and other Latin American countries, see Robert J. Alexander, Communism in Latin America (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1960), 2nd printing.

some of its members, especially Interior Minister Antonio Guiteras, prevented the government from resorting to force against this challenge to its authority. Instead, it attempted to demonstrate that it was friendly to labor by intervening in favor of the workers in labor disputes, and confiscating companies that refused to capitulate. This impressed a number of union leaders, but could not change the policy of the Communist party, which was bound by Comintern directives from Moscow to proclaim the need for instant social revolution, and to denounce social reformers such as those in the Cuban government as "social-fascists" more dangerous to the working class than any open reactionary. In consequence labor unrest went on and rural soviets declaring themselves independent from the Cuban state continued to flourish.

Both the workers and public opinion in general inevitably interpreted the government's unwillingness to suppress labor unrest by force as inability to do so. In spite of the supplementation of the police by a student militia and a Revolutionary Guard, government authority thus dwindled fast. By early January, the Directorio Estudiantil was split into factions favorable and opposed to Provisional President Grau San Martín.

Meanwhile Batista was negotiating with the U.S. Embassy, which was still functioning in spite of the fact that Washington was withholding diplomatic recognition. The Embassy assured Batista of its support if he would replace the Grau government, which it regarded as crypto-Communist, by a government more favorable to the United States. On January 15, 1934, Batista summarily ordered Grau to resign. He was replaced by a candidate proposed by Guiteras, Carlos Hevia, who in turn was replaced, one day later, by the candidate on whom Batista had agreed with the U.S. Embassy, the old-guard politico, Carlos Mendieta. The

United States recognized the Mendieta government and, later that year, consented to the abrogation of the Platt Amendment, relinquishing the right to intervene, but retaining the Guantanamo naval base on a long-term lease.

For the next six years Batista ruled Cuba through a succession of puppet presidents from the ranks of the old politicians, each of whom was removed as soon as he tried to assert any degree of independence. Batista needed these men because he had no civilian political base. In a country as resentful of the military as Cuba, his control of the army, though absolute at this stage, did not give him the moral authority he would have needed in order to step forward openly as the head of the government.

Unfortunately for him, the civilian puppets were of limited utility because the mere fact of association with him discredited them and undermined their authority. Similarly, business dealings with the government, though often highly profitable, were generally regarded as disreputable. In Cuba as in other Latin American countries, good contacts with the government were essential for success in business, but most businessmen were unhappy about this necessity; they would have much preferred to deal with a genuinely civilian government.

Batista's great handicap was that, in addition to the general dislike of military rule, it seemed intolerable to many upper- and middle-class Cubans that their country should be governed by a "man from nowhere," of lowly origin, little education and visibly non-Caucasian features. Some weeks after the September 4 coup, when the new Chief of the Cuban armed forces entered a fashionable restaurant frequented by Havana society, the other guests stopped eating and left. Even years later, when he had won the presidency in free elections, he was still barred from membership by the leading clubs of Havana.

Batista was not a revolutionary determined to break down social and racial barriers by force. Like most of the leading Cuban politicians since the inauguration of the republic in 1902, he used political power for the accumulation of personal wealth, and he was quite unscrupulous and extremely successful in this. Yet his frequent invocation of his great hero Abraham Lincoln²⁴ was not mere rhetoric. The heritage of slavery in Cuba was a largely illiterate, negro and mulatto proletariat on the bottom rung of the social ladder. Batista himself had belonged to this stratum; he had been exceptionally fortunate in receiving some years of schooling. In the years after 1933, he made a serious and sustained effort to bring education to the countryside. Under his vast "civic-rural" program numerous rural schools were built. When teachers were lacking, he sent army sergeants to fill their place. In 1936 he established the "Civic-Military Institute" for the housing and education of the orphans of workers, soldiers, peasants and professionals. The "Sugar Coordination Law" of 1936 protected the tenants of small sugar plantations against eviction. Batista also promoted the building of hospitals and the implementation of programs to combat tuberculosis and the intestinal diseases endemic among the rural population. Part of the funds raised for health and education were undoubtedly diverted into private pockets, as had been the practice in all Cuban administrations since 1909. Nevertheless it cannot be disputed that the levels of public health and of literacy increased considerably in the period from 1933 to 1944, in which Batista was first the factual dictator and then the constitutional president of Cuba.

²⁴ For this, see the collection of Batista's September 4th Anniversary speeches from 1934-1944, Revolución Social o Política Reformista, Havana, 1944.

Quite apart from any sentimental considerations, Batista had an excellent practical reason for wooing the rural and urban lower sector population. It was only in this sector, from which he himself stemmed and in which he did not encounter the hostility prevalent in the upper and middle reaches of Cuban society, that he could hope to find a stable civilian base of support.

The Directorio Estudiantil had not resigned itself to the loss of power. Under the titular leadership of Grau San Martín, who had gone into exile in the United States, the student leaders organized a legal opposition party, the Partido Revolucionario Cubano, which came to be known as the Auténtico Party. While the Auténticos were utilizing the legal guarantees afforded by the Mendieta government, the former Minister of the Interior in the Grau government, Antonio Guiteras, organized his own group, Joven Cuba (Young Cuba), which tried to topple Batista and Mendieta by the same terrorist techniques which had been employed against Machado. The Auténticos, whose attempt to set up a legal party organization throughout the country were frustrated by the police, set up a terrorist group of their own, the Organización Insurreccional Auténtica. Bombs again exploded all over the island, and the assassination attempts included one against President Mendieta himself. After the ABC had joined the opposition, a general strike was declared in March 1935. The strike was supported by Joven Cuba, the ABC, the Auténticos, and the Communists. Martial law was declared, soldiers were employed to operate public transportation, and to force the workers back into the factories, and strike leaders and terrorists were executed by firing squads. The strike was broken. Two months later, Guiteras was discovered by an army patrol while attempting to leave the country, and killed in the course of a gun-fight. His supporters and the Auténticos continued their terrorist campaign,

but with diminishing returns. The Auténticos also attempted to set up an expeditionary force in Mexico for a landing in Cuba. They failed to win the support of the Mexican President, Lázaro Cárdenas, for this enterprise, and the arms they had assembled fell into the hands of a Mexican general who later used them for an insurrection against his own government.²⁵

But the most serious threat to Batista undoubtedly came from the Auténticos' attempt to gain control of the labor movement, his only potential base of civilian support. For this the Auténticos made use of the services of a group of labor leaders who had been expelled from the Communist party. At this point, Batista found an unexpected ally--the Communists themselves.

The alliance between Batista and the Communists was paradoxical. On orders from the Comintern, the Communists had discarded their ultra-leftist strategy of instant revolution in 1935, and were now implementing the strategy of the broad, Anti-Fascist People's Front decreed by the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International in August 1935. Batista, on the other hand, had been constantly denounced as a Fascist not only by the Communists themselves, but by all the democratic opposition groups. In particular, his civic-military program, by which army personnel were sent to the many new rural schools which could not find civilian teachers, was declared to be a Fascist measure aimed at indoctrinating the youth with a militarist ideology. In 1936 even Batista's newly elected puppet president, Miguel Mariano Gómez, had turned against him on this issue in a vain attempt to demonstrate his independence. When the Batista-dominated Congress had passed a law levying a tax on sugar production in order to finance the

²⁵ For this episode, see Rubén de León, op. cit., pp. 313-314.

Military-Civic program, Gómez had vetoed it, and his Presidential Secretary had explained the veto with the statement: "The President sees the possibility of Cuba's future sons being educated in a Fascist manner."²⁶ Gomez was impeached by Congress, and replaced by a more compliant puppet.

The agreement between the anti-Fascist Communists and the alleged Fascist Batista was undoubtedly facilitated by a natural affinity between the dictator and the Secretary General of the Communist party, Francisco Calderio (Blas Roca), a mulatto of proletarian origin from Oriente Province like Batista himself. The first result of the accord was the organization of a legal Communist "front" party, the Partido Unión Revolucionaria (PUR) under the leadership of a prominent communist intellectual, Juan Marinello. The cooperation between the PUR and Batista soon became apparent when the PUR called for the election of a Constituent Assembly to draw up a new constitution for Cuba, and Batista welcomed the suggestion and made it his own. In May 1938, the Communist party, though still officially banned, was permitted to publish a daily newspaper, Hoy. A Communist party plenum issued a statement claiming that Batista was "no longer the focal point of reaction, but the defender of democracy."²⁷

Later that year the Trotskyist labor organizers in the service of the Auténtico Party suddenly found it impossible to obtain police permits for their workers' meetings, while their Communist rivals were freely granted such permits.²⁸ In January 1939, the government permitted the centralization of the labor

²⁶ Ruby Hart Phillips, op. cit., p. 178.

²⁷ Robert J. Alexander, op. cit., p. 278.

²⁸ Rubén de León, op. cit., p. 317.

movement in a trade union confederation (Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba--CTC) under Communist control, and with the Communist labor leader Lázaro Peña as its Secretary General. The CTC gave its official backing to the government, and in return, the Ministry of Labor favored it in disputes with the employers. The Cuban unions thus "developed the habit of avoiding direct collective bargaining and taking virtually all grievances and collective disputes to the Ministry for resolution."²⁹

Batista's own talents were those of a negotiator and manipulator rather than of a rabble-rousing demagogue and political organizer on the pattern of Juan and Evita Perón. He thus needed the organizing skills of the Communists in order to obtain a strong civilian base of support in the lower sector, with the trade union confederation as its main pillar. For upper sector support he had to rely on a motley collection of political groups composed of discredited old politicians and their retinue, and on a handful of Auténticos, former leaders of the Directorio Estudiantil, whom he had managed to draw over to his side.³⁰

The bulk of the Auténtico Party remained loyal to Ramón Grau San Martín. They had finally come to the conclusion that the insurrectionary and terrorist tactics by which they had hitherto attempted to topple Batista were ineffective, and thus decided to participate in the elections to the Constituent Assembly. The terrorist groups hitherto maintained by the party suddenly found themselves without financial support. Harried by the police, they found sanctuary on the campus of Havana University. At the time Batista, like most Latin American

²⁹ Robert J. Alexander, op. cit., p. 280.

³⁰ For this, see Rubén de León, op. cit., pp. 318-335.

rulers, respected university autonomy, which prevented the police from entering the campus without the permission of the university authorities. On the campus, these professional terrorists soon split into various "action groups" which "monopolized the sale of textbooks, trafficked in grades and free registrations, practiced extortion on both professors and students, and raided the Finance Office of the University,"³¹ while at the same time engaging in murderous internecine feuds. This was the origin of the "university gangsterism" which was to plague Cuba for more than a decade, until Batista put an end to it after his coup of March 10, 1952.

In the elections to the Constituent Assembly in November 1939 the opposition coalition headed by the Auténticos prevailed over Batista's heterogeneous "Socialist Democratic Front," but in the actual Assembly Batista again maneuvered successfully to draw one of the smaller opposition groups over to his side and thus to obtain a majority.

The Assembly proceeded to draw up Cuba's democratic Constitution of 1940, which has often been praised as the most socially progressive document of its kind in Latin America, a region noted for the proliferation of social legislation, if not for the practice of social justice and equity. It has been pointed out that such social legislation, which in many cases is more extensive than that of Sweden, is inappropriate for underdeveloped countries, many provisions necessarily remaining on paper, and others placing such heavy burdens on the employers that they discourage investment. This was certainly the case of the Cuban Constitution of 1940,³² whose provisions were worked out in competition between two

³¹ Andrés Suárez, Cuba: Castroism and Communism, 1959-1966 (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1967), p. 13.

³² For instance, see the negative comment of the Social Democrat Boris Goldenberg, op. cit., pp. 158-160.

rival Populist groups, the government Socialist Democratic Front and the opposition Auténticos, each striving to outbid the other in social-mindedness in order to win the lower-sector vote in the impending Presidential and Congressional elections.

These elections were held in July 1940. They were reasonably fair by Cuban standards, though by no means above suspicion, and resulted in a sweeping victory for Batista, who defeated the Auténtico leader Grau San Martín in the presidential contest, and in a comfortable majority for his Socialist Democratic Front in both houses of Congress.

For the next four years Batista ruled Cuba as its constitutionally elected President, instead of from behind the scenes as titular Chief of Staff and factual head of the armed forces. Whereas a number of other Latin American governments, both dictatorial and democratic, were sympathetic to the Axis and only joined the Western alliance under strong U.S. pressure,³³ Batista's attitude throughout this period was staunchly anti-Fascist and pro-Western. In January 1941, three months after he had taken office, Batista ordered suppression of all "totalitarian" propaganda. The decree was aimed at the German, Italian, and Spanish Fascists in Cuba, the Communists, who were members of the government coalition although not represented in the cabinet, being exempted from the decree. On December 9, two days after Pearl Harbor, Cuba declared war on Japan, and two days later on Germany and Italy. German, Italian and Japanese nationals in Cuba were interned. Cuba was

³³ The left-of-center, Popular Front government of Chile, although supported by the Communists, was particularly recalcitrant and to the end refused to declare war on Germany.

the only Latin American country to execute an Axis spy during the war.³⁴ Cuban ships were torpedoed by German submarines, and at one point, Radio Berlin singled Batista out as a particularly pernicious anti-German and as a "close friend of War promoter Roosevelt," and threatened to shell his presidential palace, situated near the Havana waterfront.³⁵

Ever since the beginnings of his alliance with the Communists in 1937, Batista had taken pains to project the image of a Popular Front politician. In 1939, when he was still Chief of Staff, he had visited President Lázaro Cárdenas of Mexico, and the trip had not been well regarded by Cuban commercial and industrial circles, who regarded Cárdenas as a dangerous radical.³⁶ In 1940, he joined an international protest movement against the condemnation of the Brazilian Communist leader Luis Carlos Prestes to a thirty-year prison sentence by the Vargan dictatorship. Prestes' biographer Jorge Amado lists "La Pasionaria in the name of the people of Spain, Batista in the name of the people of Cuba, Lázaro Cárdenas and the Mexican Congress in the name of the great Mexican people," as having signed the protest together with Romain Rolland, André Malraux, Paul Langevin, Upton Sinclair and other political and intellectual luminaries of the

³⁴ The German August Luning, arrested in Havana in September 1942.

³⁵ See Ruby Hart Phillips, op. cit., pp. 214-15. For a detailed account of Batista's policy during World War II, see pp. 206-220 of the same book.

³⁶ Ruby Hart Phillips, op. cit., p. 189.

anti-Fascist Left.³⁷ In April 1943, Batista accorded diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union. Already one month earlier, Juan Marinello had been sworn in as Minister without Portfolio, the first communist in history to join a Latin American government. When Marinello resigned in order to run for the senate, Batista picked another communist, Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, to replace him.

Batista could not constitutionally succeed himself in office, and nominated one of his followers, a former leader of the ABC, as his candidate in the Presidential election of 1944 to run against the Auténtico candidate Ramón Grau San Martín. The Communists campaigned vigorously for the government candidate, denouncing the Auténticos as being backed by "American corporations, Spanish Falangistas, and Cuban Trotskyites," and accusing them of totalitarian tendencies and "unbridled demagoguery" on the Nazi pattern.³⁸ But the election, probably the cleanest in Cuban history, was won by Grau, although the Socialist Democratic Front retained a majority in Congress.

Batista took the defeat in good grace, and left Cuba on a good-will tour of Latin America. The report which he wrote on this voyage was later published as a book.³⁹ It is an interesting essay in image-projection. Batista presents himself to his readers as a staunch democrat, donning the garb of an Elder Statesman of the Moderate Left. He enumerates latifundia, monoculture and monopoly as the great evils hampering the economic development of Latin America. He professes

³⁷ Jorge Amado, Vida de Luis Carlos Prestes (São Paulo: Livraria Martins, 1945), p. 320.

³⁸ Robert J. Alexander, op. cit., p. 284.

³⁹ Fulgencio Batista, Sombras de América (Mexico, D.F.: Edición y Distribución Ibero Americana de Publicaciones, S.A., 1946.)

admiration for the domestic achievements of the United States, but is critical of its Latin American policies, demanding non-intervention in the internal affairs of the area, and stressing the need for economic aid on the same scale as that afforded to postwar Europe, in order to ensure the elimination of illiteracy and to raise the level of health. He advocates civilian, democratic government, condemning all dictatorships, military or other, and particularly the Argentinian regime of Farrell and Perón. He strongly denounces Franco as well as Hitler and Mussolini, and warns against the pernicious influence of Spanish Falangism in Latin America.

At the time of his good-will tour, Batista was admired by democratic Latin Americans as the man who in 1940 had voluntarily relinquished military rule, had won the Presidency in a fair and open electoral contest, had ruled his country democratically for four years, and had then bowed to the verdict of the electorate, which had chosen his most bitter enemy as his successor. In Brazil, the opponents of the Vargas dictatorship welcomed Batista as the personification of democratic principle. Reporters asked him leading questions about democracy in Cuba and other Latin American countries, and their newspapers gave special prominence to his statement that "the Cuban people do not permit tyrannies and do not tolerate prolonged periods of one-man rule. In the Brazilian chapter of his book Batista notes the political effervescence which signaled the impending downfall of the dictator Vargas, and stresses his disapproval of "the illegal and prolonged imprisonment" of the Communist leader Luis Carlos Prestes.⁴⁰ In view of his frequent denunciations of the pro-Nazi military dictatorship of Perón and Farrell in Argentina, Batista was unable to include that country in his tour.

⁴⁰ Fulgencio Batista, Sombras de América, pp. 208 and 219.

In Mexico, Batista was honored by an invitation to stay at the country-house of his distinguished friend, ex-President Lázaro Cárdenas. Cárdenas, the man who had nationalized the American oil-holdings and stepped up agrarian reform in Mexico, acted as Batista's guide on a trip through his native state, Michoacan, whereupon they took leave of each other "with a fraternal embrace of profound gratitude."⁴¹ Today, pro-Batista emigré propaganda cites an alleged tie between Fidel Castro and the dangerous Mexican extremist, Lázaro Cárdenas, as evidence that years before coming to power, Castro was already a member of an international communist conspiracy. And Batista himself now portrays himself as the most consistent of anti-communists.⁴²

After his Latin American tour, Batista could not go back to Cuba, President Grau having prudently taken measures to prevent his return.⁴³ He therefore bought a house in Daytona Beach and settled down to enjoy the fruits of labor, the millions he had amassed since his emergence from obscurity in 1933.

⁴¹ Fulgencio Batista, op. cit., p. 300.

⁴² See his books, Cuba Betrayed (New York: Vantage Press, 1962), and The Growth and Decline of the Cuban Republic (New York: Devin-Adair, 1964.)

⁴³ See Fulgencio Batista, The Growth and Decline of the Cuban Republic, p. 18.

The Auténticos in Power

In the ten years that had elapsed since they had enjoyed their brief, four-month long taste of power, the enthusiastic, idealistic and impractical youths of the Directorio Estudiantil had matured into tough professional politicians. The Auténtico Party which they had founded had been the most consistent opponent of the Batista regime, and because of this, had gradually won the support of the great majority of upper- and middle-class Cubans--i.e. of those who were opposed to Batista either out of democratic conviction, or because he was an upstart of proletarian and racially mixed origin, or for both reasons. Smaller political groups which had fallen out with Batista, such as one faction of the ABC and a number of older politicians with their retinue, had been absorbed in the Auténtico Party. Through the group of former Trotskyists who formed its "Workers' Commission," the Auténticos also maintained a slender foothold in the labor movement.

The Partido Revolucionario Cubano (Auténtico) was a typical Populist party of the type that arose in several Latin American countries in the nineteen-thirties and 'forties under the inspiration of the Peruvian ideologist and party organizer Haya de la Torre. Ties of friendship, possibly formalized in a secret fraternity, linked the Auténtico leaders with Haya himself and with several other Populist politicians: the Venezuelan Romulo Betancourt, the Guatemalan Juan José Arévalo, the Portorican Luis Muñoz Marin and the Dominican exile Juan Bosch among them.

The ideology of the Auténticos was socialist, nationalist, and anti-imperialist, their practice mildly social-democratic. But once in power, they found themselves in a peculiar dilemma. The Batista regime which they had dislodged had itself been Populist in character and had already implemented the social-democratic reforms which they had envisaged.

Batista had already pushed social legislation so far that it seriously hampered investment. Labor was organized in a strong Trade Union Confederation which had enjoyed the favor of Batista's Ministry of Labor and was still controlled by his allies, the Communists. Even the rural labor force, which elsewhere in Latin America was left to the tender mercies of the latifundistas, was unionized and in a better situation than in most countries of the area, though still desperately poor by American or West European standards.

The country's basic economic and social problem had not been tackled. It was monoculture and underindustrialization: a high rate of seasonal unemployment and financial dependence on the wildly fluctuating world market price of sugar. Any attempt at rapid solution of this problem would have entailed the imposition of austerity programs so drastic as to be incompatible with the maintenance of democracy, and even then might have been unsuccessful.⁴⁴

The Auténtico administration thus had little choice but to continue on the same path as its predecessor. In labor disputes, the state authorities continued to favor the unions over the employers. The system of state-financed pension funds which Batista had created for industrial and commercial workers was extended to further groups of white-collar workers and of professionals. The pension fund for dentists established in 1944, and financed by a tax on dental products and equipment, set a trend. "During the next ten years," reports Ruby Hart Phillips,

⁴⁴ After ten years of austerity and frenzied efforts to industrialize, Castro's Cuba in 1970 was still dependent on the sugar crop. For the parlous state of the Cuban economy in 1969-70, see René Dumont, Cuba est-il socialiste? (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970).

"consumers were to find themselves paying a tax on almost every product purchased in order to support doctors, lawyers, druggists, architects, barbers, manicurists and other professions."⁴⁵ Auténtico Populism thus copied and strove to outbid the Populism of Batista.

To alleviate chronic unemployment, President Grau San Martín's administration resorted to the palliative of extensive public works programs. Control of the funds allocated to these programs was inadequate, and for some Auténticos, the temptation to graft and misappropriation became irresistible. It may well be, as is claimed by Rubén de León, that the great majority of Auténtico políticos remained honest, and that the President himself, a man of independent wealth, did not use his position to accumulate further riches. But President Grau cannot have been unaware that many of his closest associates in the government shamelessly enriched themselves. And as we shall see, he himself profited politically, if not financially, from the misuse of school funds by his Minister of Education, José Manuel Alemán. In consequence of the malpractices committed in the Ministry of Education, the drive for rural education initiated by Batista ground to a halt.

During his brief spell in office as Provisional President after the coup of September 4, 1933, Ramón Grau San Martín had appeared ineffective, inexperienced and politically naive. In particular, he had disregarded the repeated warnings of his Minister of the Interior, Antonio Guiteras, against the intrigues of Batista with the U.S. Embassy.⁴⁶ The Grau San Martín who assumed the constitutional presidency of Cuba in 1944 was a very different man: coldly realistic in

⁴⁵ Ruby Hart Phillips, op. cit., p. 228.

⁴⁶ For this see Jorge Valdés-Miranda, Cuba Revolucionaria (Havana, 1959), p. 42.

his means of securing and maintaining power in the hands of his party and in his own, and cynical in his use of corruption to make other men his subservient instruments.

Grau knew that the greatest danger to the new Auténtico regime came from Batista's continued control of the army. He therefore converted the former president's voluntary absence from the country into forced exile by preventing his re-entry after the good-will trip through Latin America. And already in the first months of his administration, he moved to purge Batista's friends, the military beneficiaries of the September 4, 1933 coup, from the officers' corps of the Armed Forces. In place of a Batista supporter, one of the officers who had been sent into retirement after September 4 was appointed Chief of National Police. The commanders of the two military posts from which Havana could be dominated, Camp Columbia and Cabañas Fortress, the military chiefs in all six provinces, and several other superior officers were shifted to other posts or retired. Early in 1945 the Chief of Staff who had complied with these shifts and retirements was himself removed from office. He was replaced by a retired officer, Major Genovevo Pérez Dámera, who was elevated to the rank of general for this purpose. Pérez Dámera was a loyal follower of the new President. He had accompanied him into exile in 1934, and after Grau's return, had acted as his aide or bodyguard.

Pérez Dámera energetically continued the purge. "Within a few months," writes Ruby Hart Phillips, "the majority of the officers who had supported Batista were no longer members of the armed forces. . . . Piece by piece Grau broke the hold of the army on Cuba."⁴⁷ In return for his services, Pérez Dámera was allowed

⁴⁷ Ruby Hart Phillips, op. cit., p. 228.

a free hand with army funds. He figures on Rubén de León's list of those who enriched themselves with government money during Grau's Administration.⁴⁸

In his dealings with the Communist Party Grau displayed cold realism. He had the good politician's character trait of never forgiving or forgetting, but being able to wait for the right moment to settle accounts. In 1933 the anarchy created by the ultra-leftist agitation of the Communists had been the main reason for his downfall. Two years later, he had rejected their overtures for the formation of a Popular Front against Batista,⁴⁹ a refusal which had led to their rapprochement with the dictator in 1937. But now their representatives in Congress held a key position. By bringing the Communist congressmen over to his side, he could obtain a Congressional majority. He accordingly made a deal with the Communist party leaders. They deserted Batista, and in return, the Communist trade union bosses continued to enjoy the favor of the Ministry of Labor, and to retain their hold on the labor movement.

In order to augment his personal power, Grau converted the "action groups" of university gangsters into a private army of strong-arm squads, a kind of undisciplined tropical SS. As we have seen, these former terrorists in the service of the clandestine Auténtico organization of the nineteen-thirties and of other opposition groups had been confined to the campus of the University of Havana, where they eked out a living by the sale of textbooks, by extortion and by petty theft. Most of them were not bona fide students. Andrés Suárez describes them as being for the most part "people foreign to the student body, with a very low

⁴⁸ Rubén de León, op. cit., p. 350.

⁴⁹ Andrés Suárez, op. cit., pp. 2-3.

standard of education and from the fringes of society, who were either habitually unemployed or had never given any serious thought to working."⁵⁰

By 1944, the "action group gangsters" were divided into a number of rival gangs, the most important of these being the MSR (Movimiento Socialista Revolucionario), the UIR (Unión Insurreccional Revolucionaria), and the ARG (Acción Revolucionaria Guiteras), each of which used a revolutionary name and a primitive leftist-extremist phraseology to mask its criminal activities. Grau allowed the groups to come out into the open and gave them regular subsidies out of an uncontrolled fund fed by Ministry of Education revenues, and used by Grau and Alemán to maintain the supremacy of their own faction within the Auténtico party. The "action groups" also enjoyed the favor of the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Justice, the investigation of crimes in which they were involved usually being suspended or shelved, and gang members arrested as suspects quickly being released "for lack of evidence." In consequence, the personnel of the "action groups" augmented rapidly throughout Grau's term of office.

Although they sometimes united for common action at the call of the government, the MSR, UIR and ARG were frequently in a state of internecine gangland

⁵⁰ Andrés Suárez, op. cit., p. 14. For the "action groups" see also the telling accounts in Boris Goldenberg, op. cit., pp. 218-219 and Jaime Suchlicki, op. cit., pp. 47-52. Rubén de León, op. cit., p. 351, describes the "university gangsters" as originally well intentioned, revolutionary youngsters who had been corrupted and led into a life of crime by unscrupulous Auténtico politicians who used them to terrorize their opponents and to impose their will on local and provincial party organizations.

warfare. Grau did not put an end to this lethal rivalry between them; it prevented them from becoming a united praetorian guard on which he would have been dependent.

In the Congressional elections of 1946 the Auténticos won a sweeping victory which made them independent of communist support in both houses of Congress. Grau now turned against his former allies. "Action group" members beat up communist students and broke the Party's influence in the university. The "action groups" supplied strong-arm squads to the Auténtico labor leaders, and early in 1947, there began the struggle to wrest control of the Trade Union Confederation from the PSP (Partido Socialista Popular), as the Communist Party called itself since 1944. Grau appointed a strong anti-Communist, Carlos Prío Socarrás, to head the Ministry of Labor. In May 1947, the Auténtico delegates walked out of the Fifth Congress of the Trade Union Confederation after one of their comrades had been assassinated. Together with a group of anti-Communist independents, the Auténtico labor leaders formed their own organization, which was recognized as the official Trade Union Confederation. Since the Ministry of Labor favored this organization, and discriminated against the Communist-dominated independent Trade Union Confederation, the latter was gradually deserted by most of its members, and shrank into insignificance.

The struggle for control of the labor movement went on throughout 1947 and 1948. Trade union officers were assassinated, members beaten up, meetings disrupted. The Communist labor leaders also had their strong-arm squads, but these were at a hopeless disadvantage, since their opponents, the "action group" gangsters in the service of the Auténtico labor leaders, enjoyed the favor of the police.

NOT AN MSR MEMBER
 Early in 1947, and probably in preparation for the struggle for control of the trade unions, President Grau had appointed the top leaders of the two most important "action groups" to high positions in the police. The head of the MSR, Mario Salabarría, became Chief of the Bureau of Investigation, and the head of the UIR, Emilio Tró, commander of the Police Academy. In consequence, the Cuban National Police was rapidly infiltrated by members of the "action groups."⁵¹ But Tró and Salabarría remained bitter enemies, and this soon had serious consequences for the government. In the night of September 15, 1947, Police Major Mario Salabarría at the head of a strong contingent of his MSR followers attacked the home of a police officer where Police Major Emilio Tró and a handful of UIR members were barricaded. In a gunfight lasting several hours, Tró and five others were killed. The scandal was great, and public opinion forced the government, contrary to its usual practice of nonintervention in the gangland warfare between the "action groups," to hold a trial in which Salabarría was sentenced to thirty years imprisonment.⁵²

Meanwhile the "action groups" had also been utilized in an international enterprise co-sponsored by the Cuban government.

President Grau and several other Auténtico leaders, Carlos Prío Socarrás and Aureliano Sánchez Arango among them, were members of the somewhat mysterious international fraternity founded by Haya de la Torre and dedicated to the elimination of dictatorships in Latin America. It was, of course, understood that the governments installed after the overthrow of the dictatorial regimes were to be

⁵¹ See, i.a. Andrés Suárez, op. cit., pp. 16-17, Boris Goldenberg, op. cit., p. 218, and Jaime Suchlicki, op. cit., p. 50.

⁵² See Ruby Hart Phillips, op. cit., p. 241.

headed by members of the fraternity. In practice, the fraternity was thus an international mutual aid society of Latin American politicians, those members who were in power giving asylum and political, financial and organizational support to their less fortunate associates from other countries.

In 1944 and 1945, the fraternity had been successful in its quest for power in three Caribbean countries: in Cuba through the electoral victory of the Auténticos, in Guatemala through the overthrow of the dictator Jorge Úbico and the accession of Juan José Arévalo to the presidency, and in Venezuela through the seizure of power by Acción Democrática, a Populist party led by a prominent member of the fraternity, Rómulo Betancourt. The next target was the Dominican Republic, which was ruled by one of the most notorious of all Latin American dictators: Rafael Leónidas Trujillo. His downfall and replacement by a democratic government headed by the famous writer Juan Bosch, who was a member of the fraternity, would undoubtedly have profound psychological repercussions in the Caribbean countries and might produce a domino effect, with other dictatorships such as that of Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua falling in their turn. In 1947 it was decided to dispatch an expeditionary force under the command of an exiled Dominican army officer, Juan Rodríguez, against Trujillo.

Both politically and geographically, Cuba was the ideal starting-point for the expedition. The Grau government gave enthusiastic support to the scheme. A desolate island off the north shore of Oriente Province, Cayo Confites, was designated as training-ground and starting point for the expedition. The expeditionary force of Dominican exiles and volunteers from other Caribbean countries included a strong Cuban contingent. The expedition was jointly financed by the governments

of Venezuela, Guatemala and Cuba, the Cuban contribution being provided through the offices of the Ministry of Education.⁵³ The liaison officer between the Cuban government and the expeditionaries on Cayo Confites was the second-in-command of the MSR "action group," Manolo Castro, who had been appointed Delegate for Sports in the Ministry of Education for this purpose. Manolo Castro in turn appointed another MSR leader, Rolando Masferrer, to command the Cuban contingent on Cayo Confites. Masferrer had military experience: he was a veteran of the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War who had broken with the Communists.

Grau and Alemán had clearly entrusted the MSR with the task of organizing and supervising the Cuban contribution to the Dominican expedition. But it would not have been in the interest of the MSR to weaken its fighting force by providing the entire Cuban contingent to the expeditionary force. Members and associates of other "action groups" were also encouraged to join. One of these volunteers was a student politico named Fidel Castro Ruz, a personal friend of the top leader of the UIR, Emilio Tró.⁵⁴

Fidel Castro was born in 1926 at Birán in Oriente Province, the sixth of nine children of an immigrant from Spain who had become a planter and acquired considerable wealth. Fidel was educated in Jesuit schools in Santiago de Cuba and Havana, and had entered the Faculty of Law at the University of Havana in 1945. At the University, he soon became active in student politics, and at one

⁵³ For the uncontrolled BAGA funds of José Manuel Alemán's Ministry of Education, see Rubén de León, op. cit., pp. 350-351.

⁵⁴ For Castro's friendship with Tró, see Herbert Matthews, Cuban Story (New York: George Braziller, 1961), p. 139, and Matthews, Castro (London: Allen Lane, 1969), p. 23.

FALSE

point was elected president of the law students.⁵⁵ The exact nature of his association with the UIR "action group" is in dispute. Andrés Suárez⁵⁶ states that Castro was actually a member of the UIR, albeit a very junior one. J. Suchlicki⁵⁷ and other authors are less definite, merely speaking of Castro's close association with the UIR or its leaders. A UIR source contacted by the present author stated that Castro, while not actually a member, had placed himself "under the protection" of the UIR. Castro's university years were those in which the power and influence of the "action groups" was at its height, and when it was well-nigh impossible to be active in university politics without some such protection. Herbert Matthews⁵⁸ attempts to gloss over the significance of Castro's association with the UIR by describing it merely to his "close friendship" with Emilio Tró. It would of course be naive to assume that a close personal friendship with the top leader of one of the country's two most powerful, government-subsidized political gangs was bereft of political meaning and consequence.

Unfortunately for the Cuban government and the democratic fraternity, the preparations for the expedition could not be kept secret from Trujillo. He registered protests with the governments of the Inter-American Alliance and with the United Nations. The White Book published on the subject shows that the Dominican government had excellent factual information--it mentioned the role of the Cuban

⁵⁵ Ray Brennan, Castro, Cuba and Justice (New York: Doubleday, 1959), p. 49, and Herbert Matthews, The Cuban Story, p. 141.

⁵⁶ Andrés Suárez, op. cit., p. 14.

⁵⁷ Jaime Suchlicki, op. cit., p. 52.

⁵⁸ In The Cuban Story, p. 139, and Castro, p. 23.

Ministry of Education and of its Delegate for Sports--but its interpretation of these facts was deliberately twisted. Only a year before, Trujillo had made his peace with the Dominican communists, allowing them to return from exile, and to set up a legal organization at a time when all other opposition parties were suppressed.⁵⁹ But he now claimed that the Cayo Confites expeditionary force was an International Brigade in the service of a Communist conspiracy headed by Rómulo Bétancourt.⁶⁰

Trujillo had been installed in power by the United States in 1930, when the Marines left his country, and even Franklin D. Roosevelt had refused to turn against him. In 1947 the Truman Administration was in no mood to drop this old ally of the United States, however disreputable he might be. Washington therefore applied strong pressure in Havana, and President Grau had to give in. On the transparent pretext that the expeditionaries were planning a coup against the Cuban government, General Pérez Damera was sent to Cayo Confites with a contingent of troops to bring them back to Havana.

Matthews⁶¹ and others claim that in order to escape arrest, Fidel Castro jumped into the shark-infested bay and swam ashore to the mainland. The one puzzling aspect of this often repeated story is that he had nothing to fear from the government which had helped to finance and organize the expedition, the other expeditionaries being released as soon as they arrived in Havana. The swim through shark-infested waters thus appears as a senseless gesture of defiance.

⁵⁹ For this see Robert J. Alexander, op. cit., pp. 301-302.

⁶⁰ There is a super-abundance of Trujillo propaganda literature about Bétancourt and the Cayo Confites expedition. A typical example of this, containing a few interesting facts in a flood of barefaced lies, is José Vicente Pepper, El Romulato (Ciudad Trujillo: Editora Montalvo, 1947).

⁶¹ Castro, p. 25.

There is, however, another version of this episode which makes more sense. In a book published in 1959 in Havana and favorable to Castro, Jorge Valdés-Miranda reports that when already on board the navy frigate which was to take the expeditionaries back to Havana, Castro was informed by friends that the leader of the Cuban contingent, Rolando Masferrer, had given orders to his MSR followers to have him assassinated.⁶² The Valdés-Miranda version appears plausible because the incident occurred in the last days of September 1947, only two weeks after the resumption of gangland warfare between the MSR and the UIR. The armed clash between MSR leader Salabarría and UIR leader Tró, in which the latter was killed, had taken place on September 15.⁶³ It is more than likely that with the collapse of the Dominican expedition, MSR leader Masferrer had no further use for a friend and associate of the murdered chieftain of the rival gang, and decided to eliminate him.

In a vain attempt to bolster its inadequate cover story about an impending coup against itself, the Cuban government gave details of the armaments seized by the army on Cayo Confites and elsewhere. The equipment confiscated included eleven bombers, hundreds of rifles, many tons of ammunition, and two ships.⁶⁴ 850 expeditionaries out of a total force of 1500 were captured on Cayo Confites. Juan Rodríguez and other participants of the venture were interviewed by the opposition press,

⁶² Jorge Valdés-Miranda, Cuba Revolucionaria (Havana, 1959), p. 320. Based on an interview with Enrique Ovares, the President of the university student federation at the time. J. Suchlicki, op. cit., pp. 52-53 gives a similar version of the incident.

⁶³ See Ruby Hart Phillips, op. cit., p. 241.

⁶⁴ Op. cit., p. 242.

and the cover story was exploded. The scandal was tremendous, and Grau was forced to sacrifice his Minister of Education, who was first demoted to Minister without Portfolio, and later forced into exile.

The war between the MSR and the UIR continued. In February 1948 Manolo Castro, who had succeeded Salabarría as top leader of the MSR, was assassinated as he was leaving a cinema in downtown Havana. Some days later the newspapers announced the arrest of a well-known student politico, Fidel Castro, who had been arrested near the scene of the crime. He was soon released. The assassination of Manolo Castro was clearly a case of gangland vendetta, the UIR's revenge for the killing of their leader Emilio Tró, and Fidel Castro⁶⁵ had been Tró's friend, and was associated with the UIR. Later that year, Castro was again arrested, and quickly released, in connection with the murder of a campus policeman connected with the MSR. Since it was not the custom of the Auténtico administrations to bring gangland killings involving the "action groups" to trial, the release of Fidel Castro cannot, as Herbert Matthews⁶⁶ assumes, be taken as proof of his innocence. Nor do the two arrests prove his guilt, as many of his opponents maintain. They do, however, indicate that the police had knowledge of Fidel Castro's connection with the murderous UIR gang.

⁶⁵ No relation of Manolo's; Castro is a common Spanish name.

⁶⁶ The Cuban Story, p. 139.

In 1948, Fidel Castro also made the newspaper headlines by his participation in the Bogotazo, the three-day riots in Colombia's capital city, Bogotá, after the assassination of the popular leader of the Colombian Liberal Party, Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, in April of that year. Castro had gone to Bogotá as one of four Cuban delegates to a Latin American student congress sponsored and financed by the Argentinian dictator, Juan Domingo Perón, who at the time was attempting to create a continental nationalist, anti-American movement under Argentinian leadership. In order to embarrass the United States, the student congress, with its anti-American diatribes, was planned to coincide with the Ninth Inter-American Conference scheduled to meet in Bogotá.

On the way to Bogotá Fidel Castro stopped off in the capital of Venezuela, Caracas, where he met Rómulo Betancourt, who gave him a letter of introduction to Gaitán, the leader of that faction of the Colombian Liberals linked with the democratic fraternity. Anyone familiar with Latin American customs knows of the great importance of letters of introduction from highly placed persons in the social life of that part of the world. Such letters are not easily obtained; they are a testimonial of confidence that is not handed out to anyone unknown. It is highly unlikely that Betancourt would have handed out the letter if Castro had not been recommended to him by some high-ranking Cuban personality, a member of the fraternity whom he trusted and respected--Grau San Martín or some other prominent leader of the Auténtico party.

In Bogotá, Castro obtained an appointment with Gaitán, but the latter was assassinated on the very morning he was to see him. The assassin, who was mentally deranged, and in all probability had acted on his own, was immediately trampled to death by an angry crowd. The ruling Conservative Party would hardly have wanted

to create political unrest by killing the opposition leader at the very moment when the Inter-American Conference was meeting in the capital. But the working class population of Bogotá, among whom Gaitán was immensely popular, thought otherwise. Mobs began to hunt out prominent Conservatives and to pillage their homes and business establishments. Castro marched with the rioters, who were given arms by the municipal police, then under Liberal command. After three days, the army managed to put down the riots. Castro took refuge in the Cuban Embassy, from where he was shipped home.⁶⁷

The Colombian Communists had been caught by surprise, but soon joined the rioters. The temptation was too strong for the Colombian government: in order to impress Secretary of State Marshall and the U.S. delegation to the Inter-American Conference, the government proclaimed the riots, and indeed the assassination itself, to have been the work of an international Communist conspiracy, led by "foreign agitators." In the hunt for these agitators, the police searched the hotel rooms of the foreign students who had come to Bogotá. In Castro's room, they found the letter from Bétancourt, who was not in the good graces of the Colombian Conservatives, and was forthwith proclaimed to be the head of the conspiracy. The charges against Bétancourt and Castro, backed up by evidence that was patently forged, were later repeated in the propaganda literature of the Conservative regime and taken up by American rightist writers.⁶⁸ A thorough investigation of the murder of Gaitán by a team of specialists from Scotland Yard, whom the government had invited to Colombia, established that the assassin had had no connection with either

⁶⁷ For an eyewitness account of the Bogotazo see Jules Dubois, Fidel Castro (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), pp. 17-23.

⁶⁸ See, for instance, Nathaniel Weyl, Red Star Over Cuba (New York: Hillman-McFadden, 1961).

the Liberals, the Conservatives or the Communists, but the report of this commission was only made public thirteen years later.⁶⁹

In Cuba the administration of President Grau, which had opened with bright promises of total reform, petered out in a morass of scandals. The opposition had gained a powerful new voice, that of Senator Eduardo Chibás, a founding member of the Auténtico Party and veteran of the Directorio Estudiantíl. Chibás, a highly effective orator, had a weekly radio program in which he castigated his former colleagues of the Auténtico Party for corruption, for embezzlement and for mismanagement. He was tireless in his denunciation of the Ministry of Education, of the misuse of school funds for the Cayo Confites Adventure, and above all of the gangsterism of the criminal "action groups" supported and protected by the President.

In August 1947 Chibás registered his new Cuban People's Party (Partido del Pueblo Cubano), which soon became known as the party of the Ortodoxos, i.e. the orthodox revolutionaries who rejected the opportunism and venality of the Auténticos. Auténtico veterans genuinely repelled by the corrupt practices of the Administration, and others disappointed because they had not received what they considered their fair share of patronage, flocked to the new party's ranks. Old politicians of the nineteen-twenties and 'thirties who had been superseded by the Auténticos joined them. Fellow-travelers and crypto-Communists formed a strong left wing.

The Ortodoxo Party was a typical phenomenon of Latin American political life: a broad coalition of the "Outs," men with little in common except the desire to remove the incumbents from office, united behind a capable demagogue whose oratory

⁶⁹ Herbert Matthews, The Cuban Story, p. 141.

was to achieve this purpose. Not having any common ideology or any concept or plan for structural reform, they adopted the emblem that has been used by countless reform parties since the beginning of time: the broom. Corruption was the single issue on which they campaigned; in everything else they merely parroted the Auténtico program and the constitution of 1940.

In the Latin American and especially the Cuban context the outcry against corruption meant little more than the demand to move away from the trough in order to let others enjoy the putrescent fruits of office. Nevertheless the genuine fervor and indignation of Chibás made the cry seem credible in his mouth. He was ascetic in his habits, and untouched by scandal, thus attracting other honest men, and by association purifying even the cynical political practitioners whom he also attracted. He thus cast the mantle or semblance of incorruptibility over his whole party. This was especially effective in Cuba, a country still close to Spain, and honoring the old Spanish ideal of austerity in words if not in deeds. There was a saying in Cuba that "we Cubans do not practice virtue, but we admire it."

Chibás thus rapidly acquired an enthusiastic following recruited largely among the naive and politically inexperienced, but nonetheless politically active part of the population--the youth, and among such middle-class elements as small businessmen, civil servants who wished to remain honest, and officers of the Armed Forces who were disgusted by the financial malpractices of their commander-in-chief, the balloon-shaped Genovevo Pérez Dámera. Chibás ran for President in the 1948 elections. His party was less than a year old, and he was outdistanced by the victorious Auténtico candidate, Carlos Prío Socarrás, who polled 800,000 to Chibás' 300,000 votes. But Chibás' showing was still better than that of the two other

opposition candidates, a Liberal and a Communist, and this established his Ortodoxos as the main opposition force against the Auténtico regime. Fulgencio Batista, running for Senator on the Liberal-Democratic coalition ticket, won his seat even though he was forced to conduct his entire campaign in absentia, from his house on Daytona Beach. The new President allowed him to return to Cuba.

President Prío Socarrás continued the policies of his predecessor, and also, though somewhat less blatantly, many of his malpractices. On the whole, his administration ranks as one of the better and more successful ones in the short history of the Cuban Republic. A timid attempt at land-reform was initiated by the passing and implementation of a law forcing landowners to lease untilled land to the first applicant. A National Bank was established and Cuba for the first time issued its own currency, the peso, which remained remarkably stable until the advent of Fidel Castro. Prío's new Minister of Education, Aureliano Sánchez Arango, stopped the scandalous misappropriation of school funds, but elsewhere graft and thinly disguised embezzlement continued.

Under Prío, Cuba became even more important as a base for the open and clandestine operations of the "democratic fraternity" than it had been under Grau. In November 1948, the Acción Democrática regime in Venezuela was overthrown in a military coup conducted by Colonels Delgado Chalbaud and Pérez Jiménez, and Rómulo Betancourt himself fled to Cuba, joining Juan Bosch and other exiles from the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua who had found refuge on the island. The dictators of Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic, Somoza and Trujillo, frequently accused Prío of furnishing arms and funds for a Central American revolution, and their charges were undoubtedly based on fact.

In May 1950 Prío sponsored an Inter-American Conference for Democracy and Liberty organized by Bétancourt, Bosch and other members of the fraternity. It took place in Havana and was attended, i.a., by José Figueres of Nicaragua and a strong Venezuelan delegation composed of the entire leadership-in-exile of Acción Democrática. Prominent leaders of the Latin American democratic Left not directly connected with the fraternity, such as Eduardo Frei and Salvador Allende of Chile, came to Havana for the occasion. In the United States, the Conference was backed by ADA and the AFL; Waldo Frank, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Norman Thomas and Robert J. Alexander were members of the North American delegation. The Conference decided to create a permanent organization called the Inter-American Association for Democracy and Freedom, which was obviously intended to serve as a front for the clandestine operations of the fraternity and its military arm, the Caribbean Legion. But the fraternity soon fell into hard times, and little more was heard of the Association.⁷⁰

At the time of the Havana Conference, José Figueres was no longer in power in Costa Rica, having been defeated in an election. Through the loss of Venezuela and Costa Rica, the number of governments supporting the Caribbean Legion was reduced to two--Cuba and Guatemala. In the spring of 1951, fraternity member Juan José Arévalo handed over the presidency of Guatemala to his elected successor, Jacobo Arbenz. Shortly before the transition, President Prío made a secret visit to Guatemala to confer with Arévalo. News of the trip leaked out and caused a scandal, since constitutional law did not allow the president to leave the country

⁷⁰ For details on the Conference for Democracy and Liberty, see Alberto Baeza Flores, La Lucha Sin Fin (Mexico, D.F.: Ed. Costa-Amic, 1969), pp. 361-366 and Ruby Hart Phillips, op. cit., p. 253.

without permission. Chibás and other opposition spokesmen castigated the President's violation of law, and pointed to the fact that the subject of conversation between Prío and Arévalo could only have been the uncertain future of their joint clandestine enterprise--the Caribbean Legion.

As Edmund Chester points out in his official biography of Batista,⁷¹ Arbenz was no friend of the Caribbean Legion. The reason for this is clear: the Caribbean Legion was militantly anti-Communist and in 1948, had fought for José Figueres against the pro-Communist government and its Communist trade union militia in Costa Rica. Arbenz, on the other hand, was firmly allied with the Guatemalan Communists, and could thus have no use for an international force of anti-Communist volunteers in his country. Chester fails to mention this, possibly because in 1953, when he wrote his book, Arbenz' Communist sympathies were not yet known to him. Fulgencio Batista himself, in a book written much later, gives a very different version of the incident. Banking on the ignorance of his readers, he portrays Prío as a pro-Communist who had flown to Guatemala to visit not Arévalo but Arbenz, in order to spread Communist revolution in the Caribbean with the help of a band of international Communist adventurers.⁷²

As President, Prío Socarrás continued the drive against the Communists which he had initiated as Grau's Minister of Labor in 1947. They were driven out of the labor movement. In the last trade union congress before Batista's coup of March 10, 1952, only eleven of the 4500 delegates were Communists. The party only recovered some of its lost ground after Batista's return to power.⁷³ In 1950 the government

⁷¹ A Sergeant Named Batista (New York: Henry Holt, 1954), pp. 223-224.

⁷² Fulgencio Batista, Cuba Betrayed (New York: Vantage Press, 1963), p. 231.

⁷³ Robert J. Alexander, op. cit., pp. 288 and 292.

seized the Communists' radio station and their daily newspaper Hoy. The radio station was sold to a commercial broadcasting company, but a court order forced the government to return the newspaper to the Party.

Prío also made a half-hearted attempt to end the scandal of the "action groups" which had so greatly damaged Grau's reputation. The new Minister of Education, Aureliano Sánchez Arango, stopped the subsidies which his ministry had paid to the tropical storm troopers. But Prío's resolution soon weakened, and new subsidies were handed out by the Ministry of Finance.⁷⁴ Prío also tried to buy the "action group" gangsters off by giving them posts in government ministries. On March 4, 1952 the former associate of the UIR, Dr. Fidel Castro Ruz, who had joined the Ortodoxo opposition party and turned against his "action group" comrades, went to the Supreme Court with a list of 2120 posts held by "action group" members in various government agencies.⁷⁵

The Auténticos, like most Latin American parties, were a loose coalition of politicians, each of whom had his own clientele. Prío had not been President Grau's original choice for a successor, but had been imposed on him by other members of the Party directorate.⁷⁶ In consequence, he looked after the interests of his personal followers and of those party oligarchs who had supported him rather than after those of Grau, and many of the former president's protégés were removed from government posts. Relations between the President and his predecessor steadily worsened, and there were rumors that the Chief of Staff, General Pérez Damera, was

⁷⁴ See statement by Aureliano Sánchez Arango in Jaime Suchlicki, op. cit., p. 49.

⁷⁵ Fidel Castro, La Revolución Cubana, Gregorio Selser, ed., p. 98.

⁷⁶ For this, see Rubén de León, op. cit., pp. 356-358.

preparing a coup to put Grau back into the presidency.⁷⁷ One day in August 1949, when Pérez Damera was absent on a tour of provincial garrisons, Prío went to Camp Colombia, called an assembly of the superior officers, and announced the substitution of the Chief of Staff by his second in command. In the ensuing shuffle, officers who owed allegiance to Grau were forced into retirement.⁷⁸

Prío did not succeed in converting the army into an instrument on whose personal loyalty he could depend. Many of the officers sympathized with the Ortodoxo opposition. And while Grau's purges had long cleared the upper ranks of Batista supporters, sympathy for the mulatto farm worker's son who had made good were still strong among the common soldiers and the junior officers risen from the ranks. In the end this was fatal to Prío's Auténtico regime.

⁷⁷ Ruby Hart Phillips, op. cit., p. 250.

⁷⁸ Ruby Hart Phillips, op. cit., p. 252.

The Return of Batista

Fulgencio Batista was allowed to return to Cuba in November 1948. He took up residence at his country estate Kuquine. President Prío detailed soldiers from Camp Columbia to guard the estate,⁷⁹ a chivalrous gesture though unnecessary, since Batista had ample money for bodyguards to protect him against his numerous enemies.

The public showed little interest in Batista's return, general attention being fixed on the new President, who had promised a more honest government, and on his opponent Chibás, who soon resumed his attacks. Although it was only four years since Batista had left the Presidency and gone abroad, he already appeared a figure of the past. For the time being, he stayed out of the limelight, not attending the Senate sessions, leaving the work of discrediting the Auténtico regime by incessant denunciation of its corruption to Chibás and the Ortodoxos. He spent the next two years quietly and patiently building a new machine which was to serve as his instrument for the reconquest of power.

Batista's new machine had two separate sectors, military and civilian. The military sector was composed of retired officers, victims of Grau's purge of the army and police forces in 1944-45. Their leader was Francisco Tabernilla Dolz. At the time of the September 4, 1933 coup Tabernilla had been one of those junior officers who had elected to stay with the new commander-in-chief. In reward, Batista had successively promoted him from lieutenant to general. At the time of his dismissal by Grau in 1944, Tabernilla had been commander of Cabañas, the key

⁷⁹ Ruby Hart Phillips, op. cit., p. 248.

fortress guarding the entrance to Havana harbor. There were no superior officers still in active service in Batista's group; Grau's purge had been too thorough for that. On the other hand, the group managed to establish secret links with a number of junior officers and NCO's, men who did not share the prejudice of the upper and middle classes against the "upstart" and "negro" Batista.

The civilian sector of the machine consisted of politicians too compromised by previous association with Batista to have found shelter in either the Auténtico or the Ortodoxo parties. In 1951 they constituted themselves into a Unitary Action Party, and with this weak prop as his only visible support, Batista announced his candidacy for the presidential election scheduled for June 1952.

Batista's lavishly financed campaign made little progress. Prejudice against him in the upper and middle sector of Cuban society was as strong as ever. Sympathy for him was still widespread in the lower sector, in the largely Afro-Cuban urban and rural proletariat, but he lacked the skilled personnel which could have channeled it into organized support. The Communists with their now largely unemployed corps of labor organizers might have provided this service, but the political price for their cooperation was too high. In 1943, when Batista had taken two Communists, Juan Marinello and Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, into his cabinet, Russia had been the ally of the United States. The two countries were now bitterly hostile to each other, and American soldiers were actually fighting the allies of the Soviet Union in Korea. All his political experience since 1933 had taught Batista that it was folly for a Cuban President or presidential aspirant to provoke the hostility of the United States.

The electoral contest was clearly between the candidates of the ruling Auténtico Party and the opposition Ortodoxos. The government candidate was Carlos

Hevia, the veteran of the 1931 landing in Oriente Province, and provisional president for one day in January 1934. The Ortodoxo candidate was to have been the party leader, Eduardo Chibás, but Chibás' career came to a tragic end in August 1931.

Chibás had received a report that Prío's Minister of Education, Aureliano Sánchez Arango, had engaged in large-scale graft and had invested much of the money in Guatemalan real estate. The information evidently came from someone whom Chibás regarded as completely reliable, since he went on the air to denounce Sánchez Arango, announcing that he would present documentary proof in his next program. But his informant never appeared with the promised documents. Sánchez Arango's subsequent life as an anti-Castro exile in modest circumstances⁸⁰ makes it seem improbable that he had salted away funds in Guatemala or elsewhere during his term of office. Politics is a rough game, in Cuba as elsewhere, and it is not unlikely that Chibás had fallen into a trap, i.e. that he had been deliberately handed misinformation. Since he had built his entire campaign on the veracity of his denunciation of Auténtico corruption, one demonstrably false accusation against a leading Auténtico would destroy his credibility and be his own undoing and that of his party.

A man singlemindedly devoted to the one purpose of wresting the Presidency from his hated former Auténtico comrades might well be seized by utter despair to

⁸⁰ First in Venezuela under the protection of his friends in the Acción Democrática regime, and after the defeat of Acción Democrática in the 1968 election in the United States.

see himself thwarted when he had been so near success. In his last radio address, which came to be known as "The Last Appeal," he repeated his accusation against Sánchez Arango and went on to state:

The only government capable of saving Cuba is that of the Ortodoxo Party with its unnegotiable policy of political independence, which permits no transactions and no compromise. Ortodoxo comrades, forward! For economic independence, political liberty and social justice! Sweep away the thieving government! People of Cuba, arise and march on! Cuban people, awake! This is my last appeal!⁸¹

He then pulled out his revolver and shot himself.

Chibás was gone, but his desperate gesture had saved his party. The simple question whether his accusation against Sánchez Arango was justified dwindled into insignificance beside the magnitude of his sacrifice. He had apparently committed suicide as the ultimate and most drastic protest against Auténtico corruption. The Ortodoxos, his party, became the party of a martyr and thus continued to be a serious threat to the Auténtico regime.

In place of Chibás the Ortodoxos nominated a highly respected university professor, Roberto Agramonte, as their presidential candidate. He lacked the charisma and demagogic talent of the deceased party leader, but besides his reputation for honesty, he had at least one other highly important qualification for a presidential candidacy. He had given courses at the Superior Military School. For obvious reasons, teaching posts at superior military schools are much sought after and cherished by civilian politicians in Latin America. They give these

⁸¹ Fidel Castro, La Revolución Cubana, Selser, ed., p. 35.

politicians the opportunity to establish army connections which will enable them to frustrate military coups when in power, and to engineer such coups when in opposition. In this way, Agramonte had acquired ties with numerous middle- and high-ranking officers.⁸²

One of the candidates on the Ortodoxo slate for the Congressional elections which were to be held simultaneously with the presidential election of June 1952 was a silver-tongued young lawyer, Dr. Fidel Castro Ruz--the former student politico who had once been associated with the UIR "action group" in the pay of the Grau government, had participated in the government sponsored Cayo Confites enterprise, and had later turned against the "action groups" and denounced them to the Supreme Court.⁸³ While the success of the Ortodoxo presidential candidate was in doubt, since Hevia's showing in the opinion polls was consistently good, Castro's own electoral chances for a seat in the House of Representatives were excellent. And once he was a member of Congress, his oratory and flair for publicity were bound to keep him in the public eyes.⁸⁴

⁸² For Agramonte's army connections, see Fulgencio Batista, Cuba Betrayed (New York: Vintage Press, 1962), p. 234.

⁸³ More precisely, to the Tribunal de Cuentas, a juridical body charged with the surveillance of the bureaucracy.

⁸⁴ Rubén de León, op. cit., p. 387, and other emigré politicians claim that before securing a place on the Ortodoxo slate, Castro had asked Batista to include him in the United Action Party slate, but that Batista had turned him down. The story lacks plausibility. Both Castro and Batista were men of considerable political acumen, and the one would hardly have offered his collaboration, nor the other turned it down.

Then came Batista's coup of March 10, 1952. As soon as he had established himself in power, Batista canceled the June elections. The electoral hopes of both the Auténticos and the Ortodoxos were dashed to the ground, and Castro's prospects for a brilliant political career within the framework of representative democracy were ruined.

The coup was executed by the military sector of Batista's machine: junior officers and NCO's under the command of retired superior officers. There is not a single officer in active service ranking higher than a captain among the men listed as Batista's co-conspirators in his official biography by Edmund Chester,⁸⁵ and Chester had no reason to hide any names.

The date chosen for the coup was the night of March 9-10, the final, climactic night of the Havana Carnival season. The streets, the night-clubs and the bars were full of revellers; the conspirators could assemble without attracting notice, police surveillance was lax, and as Batista later explained, reaction to the coup could be expected to be slow.

At 2:43 a.m. on March 10, Batista arrived in a private car at one of the gates to the great military barracks of Camp Columbia near Havana, which was the seat of the High Command of the Cuban Army. With him in the car were two retired officers. The driver, a captain in active service, was not completely trusted by his fellow-conspirators, and^{was} only told by which gate to enter at the last moment. They were met at the gate by the Officer of the Day, a captain who was in the conspiracy. Together they went to the command post, where junior officers and NCO's were waiting for them.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Edmund Chester, A Sergeant Named Batista (New York: Henry Holt, 1954.)

⁸⁶ For these and other details of the coup, see Edmund Chester, op. cit., pp. 227-235.

Meanwhile another small group of conspirators had moved to take the Cabañas' fortress at the entrance to Havana harbor. They were under the command of retired General Francisco Tabernilla, who had been commander of the fortress in 1944 and was familiar with every detail of its layout. The conspirators were let in by the sentry, a corporal, and swiftly seized command in the same manner as Batista at Camp Columbia. The commander of the fortress and the other superior officers were detained in their quarters, the most high-ranking officer of the garrison to participate in the conspiracy being a mere captain.

The Naval Headquarters on the Havana waterfront were occupied by a retired marine colonel at the head of a small group of ensigns. According to Chester, this was done without any help from inside, not a single man in the building being a conspirator.

The Police Headquarters were seized by a group headed by Lieutenant Salas Cañizares, a police officer then under the accusation of murder for having killed a man while dispersing a student demonstration.⁸⁷ Salas Cañizares then sent out detachments of policemen and soldiers to occupy the radio stations and newspaper offices to prevent them from sending out news of the coup.

The various groups of conspirators had succeeded in arresting the Chiefs of the Army, the Police, the Navy, and of the police district and garrisons of Havana. They were transported to the private homes of conspirators for detention. Even Batista's mother-in-law was enlisted as a gaoler. The Chief of the General Staff, General Cabrera, and a civilian member of Prío's cabinet who was judged to be

⁸⁷ Jorge Valdés-Miranda, Cuba Revolucionaria (Havana, 1958), p. 16.

particularly energetic and dangerous, Aureliano Sánchez Arango, were held captive at her home, where, according to Batista, she "treated them like distinguished visitors."⁸⁸

Having made sure that the Havana radio stations were in the hands of the conspirators, Batista sounded reveille and caused the troops to be assembled on the parade ground, where they were informed of the change of command. He also telephoned to the commanders of the provincial garrisons to notify them that he was their new commander-in-chief. They acquiesced, presumably because the bulk of the Cuban army was concentrated at Camp Columbia, and because they did not hear from their superiors, who were being held incommunicado.

The soldiers and policemen occupying public buildings were under orders to act quietly and unobtrusively. The general public only became aware of the coup later that morning, when the radio stations broadcast the official announcement that Batista had taken control of the government "in order to save the country from chaotic conditions which endangered lives and property." Batista himself went on the air to motivate the coup with an alleged plot by President Prío to suspend the presidential elections and establish a dictatorship, ending his broadcast with the appeal to the people to work "shoulder to shoulder . . . for the spiritual harmony of the great Cuban family."⁸⁹

While most Cubans were still asleep and in blissful ignorance of the events that were to change their destiny, the Auténtico and Ortodoxo inner circle were

⁸⁸ Fulgencio Batista, Cuba Betrayed (New York: Vintage Press), p. 241.

⁸⁹ Ruby Hart Phillips, op. cit., p. 259.

alerted within minutes of Batista's seizure of Camp Columbia. Between 3 and 4 a.m. government officials and party leaders who had escaped Batista's round-up assembled at the Presidential Palace in downtown Havana. They included the trade union chief, Eusebio Mujal, and even the opposition presidential candidate, Roberto Agramonte. But the President himself was not there.

President Prío was still at his country estate, where he had given a carnival party. For reasons that are not quite clear, it was found necessary to dispatch a relative to the estate to bring him back by car. Two precious hours were thus lost; Prío only arriving at the Palace at 5 a.m. According to Chester he then drove to the provincial garrison at Matanzas but found that it had already gone over to Batista, so that he had to return to the Palace in frustration.⁹⁰ At one point, some patrol cars under the command of a police lieutenant drove up to the palace, but were repulsed by the presidential guard, causing the only casualties in an otherwise bloodless coup. Eusebio Mujal called a general strike, and student leaders implored the President to resist, while their followers fanned out from the university campus to demonstrate in the streets of Havana.

Prío, however, judged the situation to be hopeless, and around noon left for asylum in the Mexican Embassy. From there he went into exile in Miami. He has been much blamed for his capitulation, but his critics are persons with old-fashioned notions of fighting on barricades who do not understand the decisive changes wrought in insurgency by modern technology. Batista had seized the radio station and he was in a position to monitor all telephone conversations; and to intercept messages sent by telegraph. Under these circumstances, resistance to

⁹⁰ Edmund Chester, op. cit., p. 234. Other accounts do not confirm this episode.

the coup could not be coordinated; it could only be sporadic, and easy to put down. In our times, a government cannot maintain itself in power by sending out couriers to organize, by word of mouth, the resistance of unarmed civilians against an enemy in command of the Armed Forces and controlling the radio, telephone and telegraph networks.

President Prío's situation in the Presidential Palace in Havana on March 10, 1952 was similar to that of the Kerenski government in the Winter Palace on November 6, 1917, as described by Curzio Malaparte in his brilliant study, "Technique of the Coup d'État."⁹¹ Having seized the centers of communication, the insurgents had rendered the government helpless and could deal with it at their leisure. Prío was not defeated through a paralysis of his will, as his critics maintain, but through a paralysis of the government's communications system.

Meticulously planned, carefully and swiftly executed, Batista's Tenth of March was one of the most audacious coups in the history of Latin America. Its success hinged on the speculation that the soldiers and lower echelons of the officers' corps would accept the replacement of their top commanders because they preferred Batista to the superior officers appointed by Grau and Prío. Batista's gamble was successful: his social and racial origin, which was such a handicap to him in his dealings with the upper sector of Cuban society, weighed heavily in his favor with the army. Both his coup of March 10, 1952 and the earlier one of September 4, 1933 were very different from the innumerable Latin American coups perpetrated by high or middle ranking officers, usually in collusion with influential upper sector civilian groups.

⁹¹ Spanish translation: Técnica del Golpe de Estado (Barcelona: Plaza y Janes, 1957), pp. 35-43.

Within a few days of the coup, writes Ruby Hart Phillips,⁹² Batista obtained the support of business and industry by promising to ensure peace and order and hinting that he would curb labor. But if businessmen had hoped that he would reverse the pro-labor policies of the preceding administrations and modify the labor legislation that hampered investment, they were soon disillusioned. The trade unions continued to enjoy government backing, and remained as powerful as ever.

After arresting Eusebio Mujal, Batista made a deal with him. Mujal was allowed to retain dominance of the trade union confederation in return for calling off the general strike, the success of which had in any case been rendered doubtful by government control of the communications media. He thus went over to Batista's side, apparently considering his obligations to the Auténticos terminated by President Prío's capitulation and flight.

Mujal's relations with Batista were, however, those of an independent ally rather than a subordinate. In consequence, Batista could not use the unions to build up a working-class movement fanatically devoted to him, as Perón had been able to do in Argentina in the nineteen-forties with the aid of labor leader Cipriano Reyes. He could not trust Mujal completely. In all probability that is why, to Mujal's displeasure, some Communist labor organizers were allowed to drift back into the unions from which they had been all but eradicated by Prío.⁹³ There was even some Communist infiltration of the staff of Batista's Ministry of Labor, a key position for the control of the labor movement.⁹⁴ Batista needed a counterweight, however small, within the unions as a latent threat in order to keep Mujal

⁹² Op. cit., p. 261.

⁹³ See Robert J. Alexander, Communism in Latin America, p. 288.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 293.

in line. For the time being, the PSP, as the Communist party now called itself, was not suppressed, and permitted to continue publication of its daily newspaper, Hoy.

Batista also sought peasant support. For this reason, he passed a number of decrees extending the de facto right of permanency, enjoyed by the small sugar-growing tenant planters under the Sugar Coordination Law of 1937, to other tenant farmers.⁹⁵

Batista's Achilles heel had always been his unpopularity with the upper and middle classes, the upper sector of Cuban society. In order to obtain some upper sector support, he lured the remnants of the traditional, pre-1933 parties into the government, but as had already happened in the nineteen-thirties, this only increased the disesteem in which these old professional politicians were held.

Batista only managed to draw some minor figures from the Auténtico and Ortodoxo parties into his camp, but he was able to split these two major parties into warring factions, and to prevent the establishment of a united opposition front. By gradually loosening restraints, lifting censorship, permitting oppositional activities, and holding up the promise of free elections in 1953, he created serious differences of opinion on tactics within both parties. Each of them was soon divided into factions advocating use of the opportunities for legal opposition offered by Batista,^{or} boycott and passive resistance, or violence and insurrection.

In the economic field, the Batista Administration was spectacularly successful. Already in 1953, the country began to pull out of the depression in which

⁹⁵ Batista's law decrees No. 247 of 1952, Nos. 664 and 804 of 1953, and Nos. 1274 and 1384 of 1954.

it had been before the March 10 coup, and it continued to improve until 1958, the last year of Batista's government. Public works projects neglected or left incomplete by the Grau and Prió, roads, drainage, aqueducts, hospitals, were financed by lavish deficit spending, with the concomitant graft. Low cost housing was made available through government credits. The state-owned Agricultural and Industrial Bank established agricultural cooperatives for the small farmers and facilitated the establishment of new industries. For the first time, there was a serious effort to diminish the dependency on the sugar crop by diversifying agriculture. The tourist industry, which had been sadly neglected, was expanded into an important source of revenue, partly through the establishment of gambling casinos operated by underworld elements from Chicago and Miami.

Batista put an end to the "action group" gangs in the service of the Auténtico Party. A select few were bought off, among them MSR leader Rolando Masferrer, the veteran of the Spanish International Brigades who had commanded the Cuban detachment on Cayo Confites. Masferrer became a Senator on the government ticket in the rigged elections of 1954. His associate Policarpo Soler was allowed to escape to Spain. Other gang leaders were hunted down and killed.

Through his economic successes and the elimination of the gangs Batista gained widespread sympathy among those businessmen not intimately linked with the opposition parties, and among ordinary, unpolitical citizens who valued order and prosperity higher than democracy. But these sympathies did not crystallize into active political support; Batista's actual political base was narrower than in the nineteen-thirties and early nineteen-forties. He could no longer rely on the army to nearly the same extent as in his previous period of rule. The superior officers appointed by the Auténtico Administrations had been replaced by Batista's old

associates, but for fear of instant revolt, he had not dared to conduct a sweeping purge of the middle and lower echelons of the officers' corps, in which the opposition parties, and especially the Ortodoxos, had many supporters.⁹⁶ Conspiratorial groups from both opposition parties soon involved officers in their plots.

In the Auténtico Party, a hard core of Directorio Estudiantil veterans headed by President Prío himself sought to reconquer power by the violent road. Prío had been so cautious as to transfer the bulk of his very large fortune to the United States, and throughout the period of the Batista dictatorship, from 1952 through 1958, he financed, or helped to finance, the operations of a whole series of clandestine para-military and terroristic organizations. The first such organization, the Triple A, was set up as early as 1952 by Prío's aide, Aureliano Sánchez Arango. It was lavishly furnished with arms by Prío, but Triple A security was faulty, and the arms caches in yachts, country homes and apartments of wealthy Auténticos were frequently discovered by the police. A Triple A plan to seize Camp Columbia with the help of dissident officers failed to materialize, possibly because of the weakness of the Auténtico faction in the officers' corps.⁹⁷ Sánchez Arango later fell out with Prío, and for lack of funding, his organization went into a decline.

⁹⁶ In Cuba Betrayed, p. 238, Batista states that the officers inclined toward the Ortodoxos or himself, and that Prío had little hold on the army. This statement is all the more interesting because it contradicts Batista's own earlier claim that he had been forced to seize power in order to forestall a coup by which Prío would have assumed dictatorial powers.

⁹⁷ For details of this somewhat nebulous conspiracy, see the unpublished Harvard thesis, "Opposition Politics and the Rise of Fidel Castro," by Angel Rabasa, Harvard College, 1970, pp. 25-26.

Another early clandestine organization, the Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario (MNR), was an offshoot of the most militant faction of the Ortodoxo Party. Its leader Rafael García Bárcena, a veteran of the Directorio Estudiantil, was a teacher at the Superior Military School, so that the MNR had far better military connections than the Triple A, and its plan to seize Camp Columbia had good prospects. But Batista's intelligence service was on the alert, and the entire civilian leadership of the conspiracy was arrested in April 1953. Before being put on trial and sentenced to long prison terms, the MNR leaders were tortured. Bereft of its top leadership, the MNR disintegrated, many of its members joining other clandestine conspiratorial organizations.⁹⁸

Both Aureliano Sánchez Arango and Rafael García Bárcena were high-ranking members of the political establishment, veterans who had been active in politics for more than two decades. A third conspiracy was mounted, and far more competently, by a man who had neither the financial backing of Sánchez Arango nor the military connections of García Bárcena. This was Dr. Fidel Castro Ruz, the young Ortodoxo politician who had been a candidate for Congress in the 1952 elections that had been canceled by Batista.

⁹⁸ For the García Bárcena conspiracy see Angel Rabasa, op. cit., pp. 26-27, and Jaime Suchlicki, op. cit., pp. 61-62.

The Moncada Conspiracy

Fidel Castro's first reaction to the 10th of March coup which had thwarted his ambitions for a parliamentary career was seemingly a purely legalistic one. He deposited a charge against Batista for the crimes of sedition, treason, rebellion and nocturnal assault. He was certainly not so unrealistic as to expect court action on his charge, which was in fact simply shelved. The real purpose of his move was obviously to establish the inefficacy of legal action to bring about the restoration of constitutional rule, and consequently the need for violence. This was already the tenor of a speech which he made in the first days after the coup, in the course of an Ortodoxo demonstration at the grave of Eduardo Chibás. While other Ortodoxo leaders advocated a campaign of boycott and "moral repudiation," Castro declared that "the problem was simple: Batista had seized power by force, and would have to be chased from power by force."⁹⁹

Castro then started to recruit members of Ortodoxo party and youth organizations for a clandestine group. For this he made use of the facilities of the Ortodoxo Party office on Prado, the main avenue of downtown Havana, which had not been closed down by Batista.¹⁰⁰ One of the first recruits was José Suárez, the leader of the Ortodoxo Youth of Artemisa, a town in the neighboring province of Pinar del Rio. Through Suárez, most of the members of the Ortodoxo Youth of Artemisa were incorporated in Castro's group. In Havana, some members of an

⁹⁹ Quoted from the brief summary of the speech in Robert Merle, Moncada (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1965).

¹⁰⁰ Marta Rojas, El Juicio de Moncada (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Ambos Mundos, 1966), pp. 26 and 28.

Ortodoxo professional association of accountants joined the group.¹⁰¹ One of them, Abel Santamaría, became Castro's second-in-command. Some further small cells were founded in Havana. In the rest of the island, Castro's organization was rudimentary or non-existent.

From all accounts, Castro's group had no outside backing; it was financially very weak, and numerically small. For the Moncada attack, Castro was able to mobilize some 170 men, and these appear to have constituted the entire strength of his group. There is no record of any part of the organization being held back as a reserve. As Hugh Thomas has pointed out,¹⁰² it is not true that the group was predominantly composed of students and other middle-class elements. According to Thomas only six of the men who embarked on the Moncada enterprise were students, and five of these withdrew on the eve of the assault. Of the remaining 165 only seven apart from Castro himself and his younger brother Raúl, who had just left the University, appear to have had any higher education, and most of the others had had no secondary education. Shop assistants and other white collar workers formed the largest contingent. There were also some industrial workers, both skilled and unskilled, a number of artisans from various trades, a mere handful of agricultural laborers, and one farmer.

Although predominantly of urban lower sector extraction, Castro's group cannot be defined as a proletarian class movement. In his detailed account of the

¹⁰¹ See in Marta Rojas, op. cit., p. 27.

¹⁰² In his contribution: "Middle Class Politics and the Cuban Revolution," in Claudio Veliz, ed., The Politics of Conformity in Latin America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 258-262.

Moncada enterprise, based on numerous personal interviews, Robert Merle¹⁰³ mentions only two men who had a record of trade union militancy, one man who had "several times voted Communist,"¹⁰⁴ and two who had been associated with the Communist youth organization Juventud Socialista. The top leader, Fidel Castro, was a university trained intellectual, the son of a wealthy planter. His "general staff" of seven men consisted of two accountants, two small businessmen, a cartographer, a laboratory assistant, and a worker in a milk-processing factory. As far as is known, none of them had ties with the Communists or with the non-Communist labor movement.

This lack of "proletarian class-consciousness" does not mean that the members of Castro's group were unpolitical. They were militant members of the Ortodoxo party, fervent admirers of Eduardo Chibás. The one ascertainable exception is Castro's younger brother Raúl, a member of the Socialist Youth, who only went over to the group in the last days before the Moncada assault. Raúl neglected to inform the Communists of his decision and from then on appears to have lost touch with them.¹⁰⁵

In the first months of its existence the group experimented with a mimeographed propaganda sheet and a radio transmitter, but the results were disappointing: the mimeograph was seized by the police, and the transmitter was too weak to be of service. After this failure, there were no further attempts to oppose Batista on the propagandistic front; all efforts were concentrated on military preparations.

¹⁰³ Op. cit.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 136.

¹⁰⁵ See Robert Merle, op. cit., pp. 116-122. Merle's interviews with Raúl and the other Moncada participants took place in 1963-64, at a time when they could have had no reason to hide or diminish the importance and extent of their involvement with the Communists.

The group had no political platform or ideology separate from that of the Ortodoxo party, no written program or declaration of principles. Its "general staff" included a treasurer and an armorer and marksmanship trainer, but no propaganda secretary, ideologist, political instructor or political commissar. There were no statutes, no procedures for electing officers or for making decisions. The only debates recorded by Merle were technical ones on how to procure arms; all political decisions appear to have been left to Castro alone.

Such a group can hardly be called a Movement, as Merle and others persist in doing. It was simply an armed band of Castro's personal followers, set up by him as a small, clandestine paramilitary organization within the Ortodoxo party.

The members of the group knew Castro as a former Congressional candidate and as a spokesman of the party in the cemetery demonstration at Eduardo Chibás' grave, hence, as a member of the party leadership. With the possible exception of Abel Santamaría and José Suárez, few if any of them were in a position to know that he was isolated within the party hierarchy. It would have been quixotic and entirely counterproductive for him to have alerted them to this fact, and we may be sure that he did not do so. They would thus naturally assume that in recruiting them and providing them with military training for a counter-coup against Batista, Castro was not acting alone, but in agreement with the party leadership or at least with a powerful militant wing within it. They would regard their own group as the Ortodoxo counterpart to the Auténticos' "Triple A"--a party-sponsored organization so secret as to be unknown to those lower echelon party functionaries with whom they, as humble lower class party followers, might be in contact. In brief, they would consider themselves to be "the revolutionary apparatus of

Chibásism," as Castro himself put it some years later.¹⁰⁶ We know of at least one case in which the situation was presented to a recruit in precisely this light. When Pedro Trigo, an Ortodoxo activist, recruited his brother-in-law into Castro's group, he told him, according to Robert Merle,¹⁰⁷ "without mentioning Fidel, that certain Ortodoxo leaders were organizing an armed Movement to topple Batista. He went further: he named Agramonte as the animator of this movement."

The use of Agramonte's name is significant. The former Ortodoxo presidential candidate was still regarded as the party's top leader by all those not intimately acquainted with the factional strife in the Ortodoxo leadership, and he was known to have been a teacher at the Superior Military School, and thus to have military connections. An insurrection backed by such a man might well find support in the Armed Forces, and would not be regarded as a desperate, almost hopeless venture by the prospective participants.

Castro himself was of course perfectly aware that he had no backers in the Ortodoxo leadership, nor any military connections. He therefore devised an ingenious plan to compensate for this lack. The insurrection of his small band would be staged in such a manner that the party leaders would be unable to issue a plausible denial, and the Ortodoxo sympathizers in the Armed Forces would be stampeded into mutiny against Batista.

Since his small force could not possibly seize the Army headquarters at Camp Columbia with its complement of ten thousand troops, he decided to assault the provincial garrison farthest removed from Camp Columbia and the capital: the

¹⁰⁶ See his message to the 1955 conference of Ortodoxo party activists, quoted in Gregorio Selser, ed., p. 104.

¹⁰⁷ Robert Merle, op. cit., p. 110.

Moncada barracks in Santiago de Cuba, the main city of Oriente Province, at a distance of 540 miles from Havana. Moncada had a garrison of one whole regiment, some one thousand strong, but Castro believed that he would be able to take it by surprise at a time when discipline was relaxed, and the officers were absent. He assumed that the early morning of July 26, the second day of the Santiago "carnival" would be such a time.

The Santiago "carnival" was actually a three-day religious festival in honor of the city's patron saint, St. James (Spanish: San Tiago). Although Catholicism is the official religion in Cuba, it is also the home of a syncretic cult, Santería, in which the Catholic saints are equated with minor African deities, the Orishas. This is the main religion of the lower sector of the population, both Afro-Cuban and white, and it is also practiced, more or less secretly, by members of the upper sector. Religious festivals in Cuba begin in church, are transferred to the African temples, and end up in the streets in bouts of wild dancing to the sound of instruments of the Arara, Yoruba and other African tribes. This was also the case in the Santiago "carnival," one of the wildest such festivals in the entire Caribbean region.

Castro, who had all the contempt of the Latin American upper-class civilian for the common soldier, assumed that in the early hours of the second day of the Santiago "carnival" discipline in the Moncada barracks would be nonexistent. The officers would still be asleep in their private quarters across the road, and the soldiers would either be dancing in the streets or sleeping off the effects of the cheap rum that flowed copiously in Cuban folk-festivals. In any case, they would no more be able to react against a surprise attack than President Prío had been when Batista staged his coup on a carnival morning in Havana the year before.

Castro's men would occupy the command post and the armory, and he would then call the soldiers into the barracks courtyard and appeal to them to "abandon the odious banner of tyranny and embrace that of Liberty."¹⁰⁸ Given Castro's extraordinary powers of persuasion, it could be expected that at least part of the garrison would join him.

As soon as the barracks had been taken, Castro would give a signal to Radio Santiago to alert the population by broadcasting a special program of tapes and records assembled by him. This included patriotic songs, the Marseillaise, some poems written by the poet of the group, Raúl Gómez, and a revolutionary manifesto which abounded in all the usual stereotypes of Cuban populist oratory. But besides these generalities, the manifesto contained a sentence defining the exact position of the insurgents in the Cuban political spectrum: "The Revolution . . . adopts as its own the revolutionary programs of Young Cuba, the Radical ABC"--two terrorist organizations of the anti-Batista opposition in the nineteen-thirties--"and of the Party of the Cuban People (Ortodoxos)."

The deliberate identification of the insurrection with the Ortodoxo Party was to be made even clearer by the longest and most important item of the radio program: a recording of Eduardo Chibás' famous "Last Appeal," the radio address at the end of which the founder of the Ortodoxo Party had pulled his gun and killed himself. It will be remembered that this address culminated in the words:

¹⁰⁸ Fidel Castro, La Revolución Cubana, Gregorio Selser, ed., p. 37.

The only government capable of saving Cuba is that of the Party of the Cuban People (Ortodoxos) with its uncompromising line of political independence, which does not permit transactions and deals. Fellow Ortodoxos, forward! For economic independence, political freedom and social justice! Sweep away the thieving government! People of Cuba, arise and advance! People of Cuba, awake! This is my last message!

As Castro later explained,¹⁰⁹ the Chibás Address was to be "constantly on the air," i.e. it was to be broadcast again and again. Any listener would inevitably be misled into assuming that the Santiago rising was a rising of the Ortodoxo Party, sponsored by the Ortodoxo leadership.

The task of putting the program on the air was to be assigned to one of the speakers of Radio Santiago, Luis Conte Agüero, a fervent young Ortodoxo who in those first days of the dictatorship, when censorship had not yet been imposed, was making a name for himself by his courageous radio polemics against the Batista regime. There was only one hitch to this: Conte Agüero, though a proponent of the violent road to power, was not a member of the conspiracy. He was too close to the Ortodoxo leaders in Havana for Castro to trust him. Therefore, Castro did not even attempt to contact him until the very night before the attack. The only conceivable reason for this delay is that Castro hoped to enlist him by vastly exaggerating the scope of the conspiracy, claiming that it had the support of other leaders of the party and of the Ortodoxo military. At that late hour Conte Agüero would not be able to fly to Havana to consult the party leaders and check Castro's story. Long distance telephone conversations on such a subject with

¹⁰⁹ In the first letter in Luis Conte Agüero's collection, Cartas del Presidio (Havana: Editorial Lex, 1959.)

opposition leaders who were under police surveillance were of course out of the question. But the taking of Moncada would appear to confirm Castro's veracity; Conte Agüero would hardly suspect that the barracks had been taken by a mere band of civilians, without the inside aid of Ortodoxo officers.¹¹⁰

Simultaneously with the assault on Moncada by Castro's main force, a small detachment, less than thirty men, was to attack the army barracks at Bayamo, some fifty miles inland from Santiago on the main highway to Havana. The preparations for this attack and the force assigned to it were inadequate, but even if it failed, it might still have important psychological effects. The news that at the same time when Santiago had fallen to the insurgents there was fighting in Bayamo would give a vastly exaggerated impression of the scale of the insurrection and the number of participants, and might well throw Batista and his government into panic and despair.

Whether in panic or not, Batista's first reaction to the news of an Ortodoxo rising in Oriente Province would inevitably be to order the arrest of the Ortodoxo party leaders in Havana. It would thus be necessary to warn them, early enough to give them a chance to go underground, but not so early that they could undertake anything to sabotage the plan. Castro entrusted this task to a close personal friend and member of the conspiracy, Natty Revuelta, a Havana socialite who was a fervent Ortodoxo and well enough acquainted with the party leaders to have easy access to them. She was instructed to leave her home at the very moment fixed for

¹¹⁰ For the role assigned to Conte Agüero, see Robert Merle, op. cit., pp. 159-160. If Castro had made the slightest attempt to contact him earlier than the night of the 25-26th he would have found out that Conte Agüero was no longer in Santiago, having been transferred to Havana some days earlier.

the attack in far-away Santiago: 5:15 a.m. on July 26, 1953. It would be political suicide for the Ortodoxo leaders to issue a public statement dissassociating themselves from the rising while it was still in progress and might possibly be successful. They would simply be faced with the choice between going into hiding or waiting to be picked up by the police.

It would also be necessary to alert the population of Havana as quickly as possible to the fact that an Ortodoxo rising was going on in Oriente Province. For this, Castro could not rely on Radio Santiago. The inhabitants of capital cities are not in the habit of monitoring early morning broadcasts by provincial radio stations, and Batista might thus gain precious hours before his capital was plunged into a state of tense expectation and political crisis. After warning the Ortodoxo leaders, Natty Revuelta was therefore to tip off the publishers of two leading opposition newspapers, men who could be relied upon to spread the news immediately.¹¹¹

Batista would of course order troops to march against the rebels in Oriente. But the Ortodoxo officers at Camp Columbia would not know that the Santiago rising was the individual enterprise of Castro with a handful of civilians. The radio broadcasts from Santiago would lead them to assume that it was an insurrection of the entire Ortodoxo Party, and the fact that the party leaders were either in hiding or in jail, and in any case incommunicado, would confirm them in this error. They would refuse to fight against their political friends, especially since it would seem that the Santiago garrison had already joined the insurgents. Any attempt by Batista to remove the numerous Ortodoxo officers would only destroy

¹¹¹ For the role assigned to Natty Revuelta, see Robert Merle, op. cit., pp. 219-220.

army discipline; the day after the outbreak of an insurrection is the worst possible ^{moment} / for a wholesale purge of the officers corps.

The army would thus be paralyzed. Bereft of the one instrument that was indispensable to him for the maintenance of power, Batista would be forced to resign.

Castro later stated quite openly that he had envisaged precisely this. In his pamphlet, "History Will Absolve Me," he asserted categorically that if he had managed to take Moncada, the Armed Forces would not have fought against the insurrection: "The navy did not fight against us and would no doubt have joined us later . . . but as for the rest of the national army, would it have fought against the insurrected people? I affirm that it would not have done so."¹¹² He claimed that at the most, a minority of the army would have sided with the dictator: "But if a minor part of the Armed Forces had remained blind to this tragic reality and had decided to fight against the people which was going to liberate them, too, from the tyranny, victory would have been with the people."

These assertions are usually regarded as brave words spoken into the wind, or as the illusions of an inexperienced young revolutionary firebrand. For why should an army assumed to be loyal to Batista refuse to fight against a small band of civilian desperadoes who had managed to seize a provincial barracks? But once it is realized that Castro intended to pass off the Moncada assault as a rising by the Ortodoxo Party, and that the Cuban officers corps, far from being totally devoted to Batista, contained a considerable number of Ortodoxo sympathizers, the same words acquire a very different significance, and far greater credibility.

¹¹² Fidel Castro, La Revolución Cubana, p. 37.

Castro's Open Letter to the Ortodoxo Party on March 19, 1956 makes it clear that in planning the Moncada insurrection, he had had the Ortodoxo sympathizers in the officers' corps in mind. After reproaching the party leadership for not having backed him in his preparations for the Moncada coup, he stated: "I am one of those who believe firmly that if immediately after the [Batista] coup the Ortodoxo Party, with its firm moral principles and the tremendous influence among the people which was the legacy of Chibás, the high reputation which it enjoyed even in the armed forces.¹¹³ . . . would have confronted the regime, resolutely unfurling the banner of revolution, Batista would not be in power today."¹¹⁴

This outline of the Moncada plan is not conjecture; it is confirmed by Castro's own statements. Although he never spelled out word for word that it was his intention to misrepresent his private undertaking as an Ortodoxo Party enterprise, he took no particular trouble to hide this. In his letter of December 12, 1953 to Conte Agüero, he even pointed to the important role of the recording of Chibás' "Last Appeal" in his plan, stressing that he intended to have it constantly rebroadcast. He then went on:

"Our triumph would have meant the immediate assumption of power by the Ortodoxo Party, first as a provisional government and then through general elections."¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Stressed by us. E.H.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 107-108.

¹¹⁵ Luis Conte Agüero, Cartas del Presidio (Havana: Editorial Lex, 1959), p. 21.

The Moncada plan was not "a mad, hopeless, suicidal adventure," as Herbert Matthews has called it.¹¹⁶ It was not the work of an illusionary who hoped that somehow a dramatic, heroic gesture would spark off a spontaneous rising of that vague entity, "the people." Castro did not envisage an insurrection of amorphous masses. He aimed at forcing a specific sector into action--the Ortodoxo sympathizers in the Armed Forces. The whole venture was very carefully planned down to the most minute details, and if only the initial hurdle had been taken, the Moncada barracks captured, the chances of success would have been excellent, as Castro himself has insisted time and again.¹¹⁷

The salient characteristics of Castro's particular brand of genius were already manifest in this, his first independent scheme.

The Moncada plan was based on Castro's realization that man's reaction to an event is not determined by the facts, but by his perception, with which it is possible to tamper. If the Moncada assault had succeeded, the actual facts would simply have been that an adventurous individual at the head of a small band of civilians had taken advantage of a temporary lapse of discipline to seize a provincial barracks. But it would have appeared to be a rising of the Ortodoxo Party, aided by officers within the garrison, and because of this, it would have immediately plunged the country into a deep political crisis.

The Moncada plan shows Castro's understanding of insurrection as psychological warfare. His reason for the assault on Moncada was not the military value of the barracks or the strategic importance of Santiago. Within a few hours, troops

¹¹⁶ In Herbert Matthews, Castro, A Political Biography (London: Allen Lane, 1969), p. 58.

¹¹⁷ See, for instance: Luis Conte Agüero, op. cit., p. 21.

could have been thrown against the city, and there would have been no time to organize effective resistance to them even if the entire population had responded to Castro's call to arms. Moncada was to be seized for a psychological reason alone: because an apparent rising of the Ortodoxo Party would paralyze the army.

The plan was characterized by the utmost economy of means, and by the subordinate role of physical violence. Castro did not attempt to set up a whole underground army with an abundant supply of arms, as Prío and Sánchez Arango had done. He struck as soon as he had assembled a small force just sufficient, in his estimate, to surprise and intimidate a barracks full of soldiers stupefied by rum and sleep. Part of his men were armed only with shotguns.¹¹⁸ Castro envisaged the actual fighting, i.e. the taking of the barracks, as a brief scuffle. After that, the action would shift to Havana and Camp Columbia, and onto the political plane. If, as Castro believed, the army would not fight, Batista might be removed from office without further bloodshed.

The plan was also characteristic of Castro in that it assigned a decisive role to publicity--to the mass media, specifically to radio. Immediately after the seizure of the barracks, Radio Santiago was to start broadcasting and rebroadcasting the recording of Chibás' "Last Appeal," thus identifying the rising with the Ortodoxo Party. And as we have seen, Castro made special provisions for the population of Havana to be alerted to the event, so that it would tune its radios on to the Santiago wavelength. The political crisis in Havana would thus erupt within an hour or two of the rising at the other end of the island, and before

¹¹⁸ Robert Merle, op. cit., p. 166.

Batista had time to dispatch troops against the insurgents. The whole elaborate deception hinged on the existence of radio and would have been impossible without it. Before the days of radio, the government would simply have cut telephone and telegraph communications with Santiago and censored the press. There would have been wild rumors and speculation in Havana, but no mutiny or insubordination of the Ortodoxo officers, and in consequence no paralysis of the army.

If the plan had succeeded, the result would have been, in Castro's own words, "the immediate assumption of power by the Ortodoxo Party." He omitted to add that the Ortodoxo Party would then have been in his hands. The party leaders would certainly have been obliged, by gratitude or by public pressure, to reward the man who had brought them to power by giving him a post in the government. And he would then have been in a position to blackmail them into doing his will, and to discard them one by one, by threatening to reveal that they had played no role in the insurrection, but had simply profited by its success.

None of this came about. The Moncada barracks were not taken, and the Chibás address was not broadcast. Castro later attributed the failure of the Moncada failure to "cruel details of the last hour, so simple that it is maddening to think of them."¹¹⁹

These "cruel details of the last hour" were that there was discipline in the barracks, that the security measures were not relaxed, that the soldiers were not drugged by sleep and rum, and that they fought back when they were attacked.

previous promises

¹¹⁹ Luis Conte Agüero, op. cit., p. 21.

The Failure of the Moncada Assault

Castro and his band left Havana on July 24, some by train and long-distance autobus, others in a small fleet of rented cars which was to be utilized for the assault. Apart from Castro's general staff none of them, not even Castro's brother Raúl, knew beforehand that their destination was Santiago, and that they were to attack the Moncada barracks.¹²⁰

On the evening of July 25, 121 men assembled in Siboney on the outskirts of Santiago, in a farmhouse rented by one of the members of the conspiracy on the pretext that he was going to establish a chicken-hatchery. They were handed their arms, and donned army uniforms which would enable them to drive up to the barracks without arousing suspicion.

While these preparations were going on, Castro left the farmhouse and drove to Santiago with a suitcase containing the materials for the radio program. He arrived at Luis Conte Agüero's house at 3 a.m. in the morning of July 26,¹²¹ just two hours before the attack was to begin. He evidently wanted to deprive Conte Agüero of even the remotest possibility of checking on the story which he was going to tell him in order to persuade him to assume the function of radio speaker for the insurrection.

He was met at the door by Conte Agüero's mother, who informed him that her son had been transferred to Havana, and had already left for his new post. It was a setback, though not a decisive one. Castro made other arrangements, detailing one of his lieutenants to take the radio station by assault immediately after the fall of Moncada.¹²²

¹²⁰ Robert Merle, op. cit., p. 122.

¹²¹ See Castro's letter in Luis Conte Agüero, op. cit., p. 20.

¹²² Robert Merle, op. cit., p. 160.

On his return to Siboney, Castro found that ten of his men had had second thoughts, and refused to participate. They were placed under guard, and released when the others left for Moncada.

The defections reduced Castro's force to 111 men. Of these, 85 under his personal command were to seize the barracks in an assault which Castro hoped would not take more than ten minutes.¹²³ Two small detachments were to occupy adjacent buildings: six men under the command of Raúl Castro the Palace of Justice and 20 men under Abel Santamaría the Civil Hospital. Two female members of Castro's group, Abel Santamaría's sister Haydée and her friend Melba Hernández, had volunteered to go with the men and were assigned to Abel's group as nurses working with the group's doctor, Mario Muñoz.¹²⁴

The caravan of private cars bearing Castro and his men departed from Siboney before dawn on July 26, 1953. Appearing to be a convoy of soldiers returning from the carnival festivities, they did not attract attention on their way to the barracks. The first car with the advance guard of eight men arrived at one of the gates to the barracks compound at 5:15 a.m. Three men jumped out with the cry "Clear the way, here comes the general!" disarmed the startled sentries, and lowered the chain blocking the entrance to the compound. The car drove through and stopped FALSE at a staircase leading up to one of the entrance doors to the main barracks building. The remaining four passengers of the car rushed up the staircase and into the building.

¹²³ Robert Merle, op. cit., p. 167.

¹²⁴ Robert Merle, op. cit., pp. 167-169 gives the above figures. Castro's own figures in "History Will Absolve Me," Fidel Castro, La Revolución Cubana, Gregorio Selser, ed., p. 31, are somewhat higher but he was writing from memory, whereas Merle's book, for all its ideological bias, is carefully researched.

Since none of these four survived, we do not know exactly what happened to them. It would appear that they attempted to reach the armory, but opened the wrong door, and found themselves trapped in the barber shop.¹²⁵ Journalists who visited the barracks some hours later saw several corpses in the barber shop, but these may have been placed there later.¹²⁶

The three men who had disarmed the sentries pushed their prisoners into an open gallery outside the basement of the barracks building. The gallery was being used as an open-air dormitory with some fifty beds. Most of the occupants obeyed the order to stay in their beds; two who attempted to resist were shot at point-blank range by Ramiro Valdés, who was later to become Castro's Minister of the Interior. By this time, alarm sirens were howling, there was firing from the parapets and in the street, and since no reinforcements arrived, the three left the barracks and ran across the street under a hail of bullets to rejoin their comrades.

The car with the advance guard was the only one to penetrate the barracks compound. Following it at a distance, Castro, at the wheel of the second car, had been startled by the unexpected appearance of a two-man patrol, armed with submachine guns, on the sidewalk. In attempting to run over them he stalled the car against the curb. At this point, a sergeant on his way home to the barracks emerged from a side street and pulled his pistol. He was immediately hit by several shots from the third. It was apparently these shots that alerted the garrison. Almost immediately, the alarm sirens were sounded, and soldiers appeared at the windows and on the parapets.

¹²⁵ Jules Dubois, Fidel Castro (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), p. 36.

¹²⁶ Robert Merle, op. cit., p. 242.

Castro attempted to restart his stalled car, but it was rammed simultaneously from the front by the first car backing out of the barracks compound, and from the back by the third car. The approach to the compound was thus blocked. The cars were halted, the men poured out into the street. Castro tried to rally them for an attack, but by now, the area in front of the barracks was being swept by rifle and machinegun fire. The assailants took cover behind the low garden walls of officers' bungalows and began peppering the façade of the barracks. Confusion reigned in the streets, soldiers appeared to be firing on soldiers, and the first patrols sent out from the back entrances of the barracks could not orient themselves. But by 7 a.m., Castro's group was in imminent danger of being surrounded, and he gave the order to retreat.

Raúl Castro and his men managed to withdraw from the Palace of Justice and join them, but Abel Santamaría's group were not alerted, and the hospital was taken two hours later.¹²⁷

Meanwhile the diversionary attack on the barracks at Bayamo had also failed, the assailants being met by rifle fire as they attempted to cross the barracks compound. According to Robert Merle, only ten of the twenty-seven participants survived, the other seventeen being either killed in action or captured and executed.¹²⁸

In Havana, Natty Revuelta left her home at 5:15 a.m. on her mission to warn the Ortodoxo leaders. She first drove to the home of Raúl Chibás, a brother of the deceased founder of the Ortodoxo Party. Chibás listened to her in stunned

¹²⁷ For a detailed description of the Moncada action, see Robert Merle, op. cit., pp. 175-207.

¹²⁸ Robert Merle, op. cit., pp. 213-215.

silence, and accompanied her to the door without uttering a word. She then went to the home of another Ortodoxo leader, Pelayo Cuervo Navarro, a veteran politico of the nineteen-thirties respected for his courage and probity. Pelayo Cuervo predicted that the attack would fail, and asked Natty to leave at once, since the police could arrive any minute to pick him up. Natty's next visit was to Miguel Angel Quevedo, the director of Cuba's most important weekly newspaper, Bohemia, but he had left Havana over the weekend. Finally, she went to see Sergio Carbó, the journalist who had been a member of the revolutionary government in September 1933 and who was now the publisher of the important opposition newspaper, Prensa Libre. Carbó would not see her, but sent a relative down to inform her that the failure of the attack had already been announced on the radio.

Pelayo Cuervo was correct in assuming that Batista's first reaction to the Moncada assault would be to order a round-up of the opposition leaders. Since the insurgents had not taken the radio station and the Chibás address had not been broadcast, suspicion fell on both the opposition parties, and throughout the island Auténtico as well as Ortodoxo leaders were jailed. Batista also seized the opportunity to ingratiate himself with the United States by banning the Communist Partido Socialista Popular and suppressing its daily newspaper, Hoy. He may at first have genuinely suspected them of involvement in the insurrection, for when the dragnet for opposition politicians was cast out on the 26th of July, it caught the leaders of the PSP in the most unfortunate place imaginable--in Santiago, the scene of the insurrection!

The Communist Politburo had probably gone to Santiago in order to inspect the party organizations in Oriente Province, availing themselves of the carnival festivities to escape police surveillance. Their explanation that they were in

Santiago in order to celebrate the birthday of Party Secretary Blas Roca, who was a native of Manzanillo in Oriente Province, does not appear very convincing. But the police investigation failed to establish any link between the PSP leaders and the insurgents. At the Moncada trial two months later two of the top Communist leaders, Lázaro Peña and Juan Ordoqui, were among the opposition politicians who found themselves in the dock with the survivors of Castro's group. Two others, Blas Roca and Juan Marinello, were excused from attending. All four were acquitted of any complicity with the attack.

To this day, Cuban politicians in exile point to the presence of the PSP leaders in Santiago on July 26, 1953 as proof of their contention that already at this early date, Castro had been a Communist. This is merely a speculation on the ignorance and gullibility of the American public. If the Communists had been involved in any way in the Moncada conspiracy, they would have been the first to mention it after Castro's advent to power, when they were frequently accused of being opportunists who had only climbed on the revolutionary bandwagon at the last moment.

The fate of the insurgents after their dispersal also shows that they did not enjoy the backing of the PSP or any other organization: they had no one to hide them, and most of them were picked up by the army or police either on their way home or after their arrival.

According to Robert Merle,¹²⁹ only three of the participants in the attack were killed in action, whereas 68 were executed after capture.¹³⁰ Another 48 of those

¹²⁹ Robert Merle, op. cit., pp. 353-354.

¹³⁰ In the latter figure, Merle includes 4 members of the advance guard and the 17 dead of Bayamo, some of whom, at least, may also have been combat fatalities.

captured survived, and were put on trial in Santiago in September and October.¹³¹
Thus, 118 were either captured or killed in action, and only some 30 escaped.

There is little doubt that many of the prisoners were executed on orders from Havana, after interrogation and torture. Robert Merle¹³² cites a decision by the Council of Ministers, allegedly taken on July 26, to suspend an article of the Statute of Prisons which held the guards responsible for the lives of the prisoners. But he adds that the soldiers of the Moncada garrison needed no prodding to comply with the order to kill, and that the killings had already started before the order arrived. His narrative, based on eyewitness accounts, shows very clearly that the common soldiers of Moncada were beside themselves with fury.

These men were soldiers of the 1st Regiment of the Guardia Rural, a part of the army assigned to police duties in the countryside. They regarded themselves as exercising an honorable, peaceful profession. They did not see their assailants as idealistic young patriots offering their lives in order to rid their country from a tyrant. They saw them as an armed gang. In the midst of peace, on a carnival morning, the gang had appeared in their living quarters for a shooting spree, killing 16 men and 3 officers.¹³³

Castro later asserted that "our intention was never to fight against the soldiers of the regiment, but to seize the command post and arms by surprise."¹³⁴ Yet the conduct of his band can only be described as trigger-happy. The occupants of the second and third car opened fire before even reaching the barracks, thus alerting the garrison, and those of the first car, who had disarmed the sentries, were equally quick on the draw.

¹³¹ Marta Rojas, op. cit., pp. 92 and 99-101.

¹³² Robert Merle, op. cit., p. 221.

¹³³ Op. cit., p. 221.

¹³⁴ Fidel Castro, La Revolución Cubana, p. 37.

To the soldiers of Moncada, Batista was not a tyrant. He was one of theirs who had made good. Approximately one third of the officers of the Cuban army were Afro-Cubans,¹³⁵ and the percentage of negroes and mulattoes among the other ranks was considerably higher. In Castro's band, on the other hand, the Afro-Cuban element had only token representation.¹³⁶ The leader himself was the son of a plantation owner, and his top aides were middle class whites.

One of the few Afro-Cubans in Castro's group, Juan Almeida¹³⁷ was reprimanded by the mulatto soldier who guarded him after his capture with the words that "all Blacks should be for Batista."¹³⁸ Another, Ulises Sarmiento, was severely beaten because his captors were particularly incensed that a man of his color of skin could have participated in a revolutionary movement against Batista.¹³⁹ A third, the night club singer Agustín Díaz Cartaya, was arrested as a suspect after his return to Havana, but released because it seemed impossible that a black singer should be a revolutionary.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ Ramon Eduardo Ruiz, Cuba: The Making of a Revolution (Amherst, Mass.: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1968), p. 158.

¹³⁶ In Robert Merle's book, only ten participants in the attack are identified as blacks or mulattoes. All of those named as Afro-Cubans by Merle escaped with their lives, but there was also at least one Afro-Cuban among the casualties: a corpse on one of the gruesome photographs taken after the attack, and reproduced in Merle's book, between pages 224 and 225, is that of a mulatto.

¹³⁷ Almeida became one of Castro's top field commanders in the Sierra Maestra campaign, and Assistant Minister of Defense in Castro's government.

¹³⁸ Robert Merle, op. cit., p. 315.

¹³⁹ Robert Merle, op. cit., p. 260.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 268. Díaz Cartaya was rearrested and interrogated under torture

In the same way as Díaz Cartaya two other Blacks, Isidro Peñalver and Humberto Valdés, were released after their arrest because the officer before whom they were brought regarded their color as sufficient proof of their innocence.¹⁴¹ Rearrested and brought before a more suspicious interrogator, they were questioned, severely beaten, and then thrown into a cell. Angry soldiers came to take them out into the courtyard and shoot them, telling them that it was "a disgrace to have followed a White like Fidel, instead of serving a man like Batista, who was himself a mulatto."¹⁴² Peñalver and Valdés were saved from execution by the arrival of a black officer, Lieutenant Sarriá, an educated man imbued with the humanistic ideals of Masonry. Subtly turning the soldiers' own arguments against them, he maintained that "these two are surely no revolutionaries, since they are Blacks,"¹⁴³ and thus persuaded them to leave the two prisoners alone.

Fidel Castro himself had managed to escape to the countryside. In the morning of August 2, he and two companions were asleep in a shed when they were surprised by an army patrol. "They are Whites! They are Whites!" shouted the soldiers who discovered them.¹⁴⁴

Robert Merle, who throughout his book tries to represent Castro's Moncada enterprise as a movement of the common people against a Fascist dictatorship supported by the white oligarchy, is embarrassed by this episode. Too conscientious a reporter to suppress it, he tries to explain away the significance of the shout as merely meaning that the presence of three Whites in a region populated exclusively

when it was found out that he was the author of the revolutionary song which later became known as the Hymn of the 26th of July. He was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment in the Moncada trial.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 262.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 264.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 264.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 310.

by negroes and mulattoes was suspicious. But the soldiers would not have announced their discovery with these words if they had not been looking for Whites. To them, Moncada was an enterprise of the Whites, "Whitey's" attempt to regain control of the country which had been wrested from him by the mulatto, Batista.

By coincidence or fate, the commander of the patrol which captured Castro was Lieutenant Sarriá, the same black Freemason who had already saved Humberto Valdés and Isidro Peñalver. Sarriá hid Castro's identity from his own men, who wanted to kill their captive on the spot. He then refused to hand him over to his superior, Major Pérez Chaumont, and took him to the city jail of Santiago instead of to the barracks, where he would have been at the mercy of the military.

By this time the pressure of upper sector public opinion had halted the execution of prisoners. A group of prominent citizens headed by the Archbishop of Santiago, the Rector of the University, a magistrate and the owner of the largest department store, had appealed to Batista to stop the slaughter and hand the captives over to the judiciary to be dealt with in accordance with the law. On July 30, the prisoners were transferred from Moncada to the city jail.

As Robert Merle reluctantly admits,¹⁴⁵ Fidel Castro, his brother Raúl and the other 46 prisoners who survived thus owed their lives to the Catholic Church and to the Notables of Santiago, the representatives of the predominantly Auténtico and Ortodoxo bourgeoisie.

The survivors were put on trial on September 21, less than two months after the assault. Besides Castro himself and 45 members of his group, some sixty persons not connected with the enterprise figured on the list of the accused.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 279-281.

¹⁴⁶ See Marta Rojas, op. cit., pp. 92 and 99-101. Among these were the

The latter were all acquitted because the prosecution failed to establish any connection between them and the plotters. Sixteen members of Castro's group were also acquitted for lack of evidence. Four leaders of the group were sentenced to 13 years of imprisonment, 20 members to 10 years, 3 last minute defectors to 3 years, and the two women, Haydée Santamaría and Melba Hernández, to 7 months.

Fidel Castro himself had been arbitrarily pronounced sick and unable to attend by the prison physician after the first session, presumably because of his highly effective use of the courtroom as a propaganda forum. He was tried one month later with a minimum of publicity, and sentenced to 15 years. Two members of his group who were hospitalized were also tried later, one of them being acquitted, the other receiving a sentence of 10 years.

nominal leader of the Ortodoxo Party, Emilio Ochoa, the Communists Lázaro Peña and Joaquín Ordoqui, and--in absentia, the Auténticos Carlos Prío Socarrás and Aureliano Sánchez Arango, the Ortodoxo José Pardo Llada and the Communists Juan Marinello and Blas Roca.

The Champion of Democracy

In order to stampede the Ortodoxo sympathizers in the Armed Forces into mutiny, Fidel Castro had planned to present the Moncada assault as something it was not: a rising sponsored by the Ortodoxo Party. The assault failed, the broadcast by which it was to be identified with the Ortodoxos was never made, and in consequence the cunning scheme appeared as something else again: as a heroic sacrificial gesture inspired by the purest youthful idealism. Through this, Fidel Castro's public image was changed.

Those who had previously heard of Fidel Castro knew him as a former student politico at the University of Havana who had been associated with the criminal "action groups" and had then turned against them to become a Congressional candidate on the Ortodoxo ticket. It was not a very enviable reputation. Moncada made him known to many more people, and to them, this young but already experienced and hard-bitten politico seemed to be that rarest and most admirable of human beings-- a selfless hero willing to undergo the supreme sacrifice for his ideal. This ideal appeared to be democracy, liberty for his fellow men.

After Moncada, Cubans opposed to Batista thus came to see Castro as the most determined champion of democracy and constitutional government. But there is reason to doubt Castro's devotion to democratic government even at this early date. Robert Merle has published a significant passage from a letter written by Castro in January 1954, from the prison on the Isle of Pines. It is a passage extolling dictatorship of the Caesarian and Bonapartist brand:

Julius Caesar was a true revolutionary, just like Catiline;
Cicero, whom history reveres so much, was the incarnation of

the reactionary oligarchy that ruled Rome. This did not prevent the French revolutionaries from damning Caesar and worshipping Brutus because he had buried the dagger of the aristocracy in Caesar's heart. These men, who had dealt the fatal blow to French, lacked sufficient historical perspective to understand that the Republic in Rome was the Monarchy in France; that the revolt of the Plebeians against the former corresponded to the struggle of the bourgeoisie against the latter. They were thus far from imagining that a new Caesar was about to arise in Gaul, who was going to imitate in fact, and not without good reason, the Roman emperor.¹⁴⁷

The passage reveals the Castro of 1954 as believing that strong-man rule benefits the people, and that constitutional checks and balances serve to protect the rule of the aristocracy and oligarchy. Similar theses have been put forward by a number of Latin American writers and politicians, from Laureano Vallenilla Lanz, who justified the cruel dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gómez in Venezuela as "democratic Caesarism," to the former Social Democrat Juan Bosch, who now advocates "popular dictatorship" as the proper form of government in his country, the Dominican Republic. What concerns us here is not the degree of justification which such views might or might not have in Latin America, but the contrast between the opinion expressed by Castro in a private letter and his public indignation at the violation of constitutional legality by Batista. Castro was no devotee of constitutional legality. He based his campaign against Batista on this issue not out of democratic conviction, but because it was attractive to

¹⁴⁷ Robert Merle, op. cit., p. 345.

that sector of the public in which he sought his base of support.

The restoration of constitutional legality was of course not a very original, novel slogan. It was the rallying cry of the entire democratic opposition. But it was more effective in Castro's mouth than in that of any other opposition leader because he appeared to be willing to lay down his life for it. Moncada seemed to be, in Herbert Matthews' words, an act of madness, but inspired by "idealism, self-sacrifice, heroism, patriotism of the purest sort." It was thus seen as the gauge of Castro's sincerity and selflessness.

A favorable image fades if it is not kept constantly before the public eye. The letters which Castro wrote from his prison on the Isle of Pines, and which were later published by Luis Conte Agüero in a slim volume, "Cartas del Presidio," show that this was Castro's main concern while he was serving his term. "Propaganda cannot be abandoned for one single minute, for it is the soul of every struggle,"¹⁴⁸ he wrote in a letter to Melba Hernández, who had already been released from prison and together with Haydée Santamaría was now engaged in reassembling the scattered remnants of Castro's group.

The same letter contains detailed instructions on how to conduct a propaganda campaign. The main theme was to be denunciation of the massacre of the Moncada prisoners. In addition, there were to be celebrations of the first anniversary of Moncada. The Student Federation was to be contacted for the organization of a commemorative manifestation on the Escalinata, i.e. the broad stairway leading up

¹⁴⁸ Letter of April 17, 1954 in Luis Conte Agüero, op. cit., p. 37.

to the main building of the University of Havana. This would be a terrible blow to the government. Manifestations should also be organized in the private institutes of higher education, and in Santiago. The Ortodoxo Party committees of New York, Mexico and Costa Rica were to be persuaded to stage celebrations in the Cuban communities abroad. As soon as possible, Melba was to travel to Mexico in order to confer with those members of the group who had taken refuge there. In addition, Castro cautioned Melba both against indiscriminate cooperation with other discredited opposition forces and against sectarian polemics which would antagonize these groups: "Follow the same tactic which we employed at the trial: to defend our point of view without causing wounds. Later there will be ample time to crush all the cockroaches together."¹⁴⁹

Castro also informed Melba that he was preparing "a pamphlet of decisive importance both for its ideological content and its tremendous accusations."¹⁵⁰ This was the pamphlet History Will Absolve Me, which purported to be the text of Castro's speech in his own defense at the Moncada trial. The manuscript was smuggled out of the prison. Twenty thousand copies were printed and distributed in Havana and various provincial towns. They had no impact. The public, and perhaps, as Herbert Matthews surmises,¹⁵¹ even Batista himself, remained unaware of the pamphlet's existence.

The failure of the History Will Absolve Me pamphlet confirmed the experience of Castro and his associates in the earliest phase of their activities, in 1952: the small clandestine group attempting to spread written propaganda by its own

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 38 [stressed by us].

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 37.

¹⁵¹ Herbert Matthews, Castro: A Political Biography, p. 68.

efforts is obsolete. As every bookseller knows, it takes efficient promotion and a large distributive organization to spread the printed word. Four years later, in 1958, when these conditions were fulfilled, a second edition was published, and it was only then that the Cuban public took notice of History Will Absolve Me.

But Castro was never a narrow sectarian, and he did not rely on the propaganda efforts of his own group alone. He also sought to enlist others, and in this he was highly successful. On December 12, 1953, less than two months after his arrival in the Isle of Pines prison, he wrote a persuasive letter to Luis Conte Agüero, the Ortodoxo radio commentator. This was the letter in which he pointed out that the victory of the Moncada rising would have meant "the immediate ascension of the Ortodoxo Party to power." He reminded Conte Agüero of the visit to his house at 3 a.m. of the morning of July 26, 1953, two hours before the Moncada attack. Conte Agüero had been absent then, and unable to help; now was his chance to make a contribution. Those who had died in the attempt were members of the Ortodoxo Party. There seemed to be a conspiracy of silence against them, as if the recent restoration of the constitutional guarantees and lifting of the censorship had been bought by a tacit or explicit promise by the opposition not to mention the Moncada massacre. It was the duty of the Ortodoxos to break this silence, to denounce the massacre, and to demand that the perpetrators be tried by a civilian court. The mere publication of the accusation by the newspapers would have tremendous consequences for the government. Castro asked Conte Agüero to propose this to the Ortodoxo leader Roberto Agramonte, and to enlist the publisher of the popular weekly Bohemia, Miguel Angel Quevedo, the noted journalist Enrique Delahoza, and the prominent writer Jorge Mañach, the biographer of José Martí, for a propaganda campaign. He also asked Conte Agüero to draw up a Manifesto to the Cuban

people denouncing the massacre. This would be signed by Castro, and Castro's wife Mirta would try to get it published by the university newspaper, Alma Mater.¹⁵²

The Ortodoxo leaders had condemned the Moncada rising as mere "putschism,"¹⁵³ and while they hardly realized how devious Castro's plan had been, this public statement by their Party Directorate probably reflected their sincere opinion that Moncada had been a hopeless and irresponsible venture which had brought needless harassment upon their heads. But Castro and his men were now heroes and martyrs. The Ortodoxo leaders succumbed to the temptation to use these names for the benefit of their party, and launched a propaganda campaign in their favor. This campaign speedily gathered momentum and caused Batista such embarrassment that finally, a year and a half later, he saw himself compelled to amnesty the Isle of Pines prisoners.

In his letters from prison, Castro spurred on the Ortodoxo leaders, praising them for their efforts, supplying them with information and with detailed suggestions on the conduct of the campaign.

On June 12, 1954 he informed Conte Agüero that four months earlier, on the occasion of a visit to the prison by the dictator himself, the Moncada prisoners had demonstrated against Batista by singing the "Hymn of the 26th of July." In retaliation, the author of the Hymn, Díaz Cartaya, had been savagely beaten, while he himself had been thrown into solitary confinement. On June 19, he made detailed suggestions for a campaign of protest against this measure of punishment: his sister Lidia, Melba Hernández, Haydée Santamaría and if possible Agramonte and

¹⁵² Luis Conte Agüero, op. cit., pp. 13-24.

¹⁵³ Luis Conte Agüero, op. cit., p. 22.

other Ortodoxo leaders should visit newspaper editors and radio stations and persuade them to participate in the campaign. Bohemia should publish letters on the subject. Criminal lawyers should denounce the illegality of such punishments. Conte Agüero should visit the president of the Association of Lawyers and the Federation of University Students and obtain their collaboration. The chain of radio stations for which Conte Agüero worked was to make daily announcements of the time which he had spent in solitary confinement: "so many months, ten days, so many months, eleven days . . . and so forth."¹⁵⁴

In July 1953 Castro heard on the radio that his wife Mirta had been secretly receiving a "botella," i.e. a monthly salary for/^afictitious employment, from the Ministry of the Interior. She had been persuaded to accept this by her brother, Rafael Díaz Balart, a prominent Batista supporter who was Under Secretary in that Ministry. Castro immediately denounced this as a maneuver designed to dishonor him. Batista's Minister of the Interior himself thereupon visited Castro in his cell to apologize and to explain that the blame lay entirely with his Under Secretary Díaz Balart, who was "always behaving like an irresponsible boy." Castro sent a detailed account of the Minister's visit to Conte Agüero for publication. He then sued for divorce, the Ortodoxo leader Pelayo Cuervo acting as his lawyer. In order to avoid further public scandal, his unfortunate wife even had to relinquish custody of their son, who was sent to a boarding school. Through prompt, ruthless action, Castro thus managed to turn personal tragedy to political advantage: the immensely painful episode enhanced his image of incorruptibility.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 35.

Castro and the other Moncada prisoners were released on May 15, 1955, less than twenty-two months after the assault. To the Cubans, their amnesty appeared to be the result of spontaneously manifested public opinion. But public opinion needs spokesmen if it is to become effective. In the city-states of Ancient Greece, these spokesmen only had to raise their voice in the marketplace. Today, they need access to the mass media in order to make themselves heard, and they can only obtain this through the good-will of those who control the media.

In Batista's Cuba, the Ortodoxo leaders enjoyed the good-will of a number of newspapers and radio stations which had not succumbed to government intimidation and bribery. Castro therefore turned to the Ortodoxo leaders and persuaded them that it would be to their advantage to act as his propagandists. If he had not done this, the public sympathy and admiration which the Moncada assault had won for him would have remained silent and ineffective, and gradually withered away. Without his profound, instinctive understanding of the mechanisms by which public opinion is transmitted to and amplified by the mass media, he and his companions would have rotted in jail to the expiration of their terms, to emerge as broken men.