

CUBA'S MILITARY 1990-2005

REVOLUTIONARY SOLDIERS DURING
COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY TIMES

Hal Klepak



CUBA'S MILITARY 1990–2005

STUDIES OF THE AMERICAS

Edited by James Dunkerley
Institute for the Study of the Americas
University of London
School of Advanced Study

Titles in this series published by Palgrave Macmillan:

*Cuba's Military 1990–2005: Revolutionary Soldiers during
Counter-Revolutionary Times*
By Hal Klepak

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Edited by Rachel Sieder, Alan Angell, and Line Schjolden

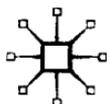
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Cuba's Military 1990–2005

Revolutionary Soldiers during Counter-Revolutionary Times

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First published in 2005 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN™
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010 and
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England RG21 6XS
Companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 1–4039–7202–8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the Library of Congress.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: October 2005

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America.

To my mother, who loved Cuba

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Acknowledgments

Few books on complicated subjects are easy to research and this one, on a subject that is problematic on so many fronts, is no exception. If it was achieved at all, it is because the author was able to count on a large number of open-minded, helpful, and sometimes courageous people willing to speak to him in Havana, Washington, and many other cities in a variety of countries and over a very long period indeed. My gratitude to them, while doubtless appearing diffuse, is nonetheless real.

Since he was in some senses the first to help, I would like initially to thank Rafael Hernández, tireless and loyal strategic thinker as well as editor of the prestigious revue “Temas” and researcher with the Instituto Juan Marinello, whose help was essential in getting a grip on so many elements of Cuban politics, economics, and history. Immensely useful as well, and also for reasons related to what she calls the *surreal* aspects of modern Cuban life, has been the advice of Isabel Jaramillo Edwards of the *Centro de Estudios de las Américas* (CEA).

They were joined in this by Jorge Mario Sánchez and Omar Everleny, delightful colleagues from respectively the *Centro de Estudios de Estados Unidos* (CESEU) and the *Centro de Estudios de la Economía Cubana*, of the Universidad de La Habana, who kept me on the straight and narrow on Cuban affairs when I was starting to lose the way. The same role was played by retired Navy Commander Gustavo Placer of the *Instituto de Historia de Cuba* who listened patiently to my often inadequate understanding of Cuban history and attempted with equal patience to put me right. One of Cuba’s great intellectuals, Luis Suárez Salazar, busy now doing his thing in the “freelance” world, still found the time and energy to share his thoughts on many related matters with me.

On the more official side, I take pleasure in thanking Colonel (and Dr.) Luis García Cuñarro, late of the *Centro de Estudios de Defensa y Seguridad Internacional* (CEDSI), and now the key player at (directing) the *Centro de Estudios e Información sobre la Defensa* (CEID), for

his help. His sharp mind and no-nonsense approach saved me from more than one error of interpretation.

At the Cuban Foreign Ministry (MINREX), I benefited from the assistance, always happily given or at least they were good enough to make it so appear, of Ambassadors Carlos Fernández de Cossío (then Havana's dynamic ambassador in Ottawa) and Carlos Alzugaray. The then desk officer for Canada at MINREX and former political officer at the Cuban embassy in Ottawa, Camilo García-Trejo, was a constant support in all my efforts to understand Cuba and Cubans. The late Roberto González took me into his home on numerous occasions and tried to use that very pleasant environment to make the complexities of Cuban reality clearer to me.

To the hundreds of Cubans, and indeed Canadians, Americans, Spaniards, Mexicans, and many others with whom I have been able to speak on Cuban defense matters, and whom I cannot of course name here, my thanks. This was especially difficult for many Americans and Cubans, and I cannot say how much I needed their courage in being willing to talk on this often-uninviting subject.

I benefited from the advice of three Canadian defense attachés, resident in Mexico City but active in Cuba: Colonels Gaëtan Tremblay, Ian Nicholls, and finally René Gervais did sterling work assisting me in meeting some key people in the Cuban defense establishment. Ian, along with his wonderful wife Marie-France, offered both hospitality and friendship over the years of this project. At home in Canada I had the immense honor and pleasure of working with John Kirk, without doubt the finest *cubanista* in my country. John's friendship and support were essential to the project and a joy to have. In the United Kingdom, I learned particularly of things Cuban from Toni Kapcia, surely that country's foremost Cuba watcher and one who understands the island and its people in an enormously profound way.

At Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs I had help and advice over a long period. Ambassador Michael Small was a delightful interlocutor on the subjects of this book and his keen interest in Cuba was often reflected in sound analyses of the island. His predecessor, Keith Christie, was also "there" for me and other academics when needed. Russell Stubbart, later Christine Climenhage, and especially Paul Gibbard and Simon Cridland also deserve particular thanks. Paul actually understands the Cuban electoral system and has tried to share that understanding, as with so much else Cuban, with me. Indeed, I owe him a special vote of thanks for his kindness (and trepidation) in volunteering to read and comment upon a draft of this manuscript.

The Royal Military College of Canada, where I work, has been generous in the extreme in allowing me time, including a half-sabbatical leave, to complete this study and my reflections on its subject. My earlier head of department, the wonderful historian of colonial Canada Jane Errington, has been more than patient with my needs for support, and has shown understanding of the challenges facing me when dealing with such a topic in the Cuba of today. Her successor, Michael Hennessy, has done the same. Two deans of arts, Ronald Haycock and Joel Sokolsky, seemed to vie with each other to see who could be more helpful. To these academic colleagues, who doubtless would have preferred to see me work on things closer to home, my sincere thanks.

I would be remiss, however, in not remembering others who have helped me in the work of understanding this island nation over 47 years. I think of Pola, tireless aid in my efforts, as an adolescent, to work out what was going on around me, from the last months of the Batista dictatorship to the dramatic days of early 1961. And to the families, those of Van Heuven, Tessier, Sánchez, Pedroso, Castelvi, Gutiérrez, Delgado, Espinosa, several of which are tragically dispersed after those events and far from their much-loved island, my appreciation from afar in time and place for their wonderful desire to make me love it. My own father was also a major part of this effort.

The conclusions to these reflections are of course debatable. Modern Cuba attracts much attention and passion and if ever the expression “more heat than light” applied to a debate, the Cuba of today would bring it close to its maximum. They are the results of analysis, sustained usually but not always by traditional academic support, for reasons I try to make clear in my *avant propos*. Despite all the assistance received, the responsibility for them is mine and mine alone.

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Avant Propos

The history of Cuba's defense is the story of changing strategic, political, economic, and social circumstances against a backdrop of steadier geopolitical realities and wider international forces. Cuba since the arrival of Columbus has seen all manner of external and internal threats faced by its leaders and population. From pirates and corsairs, to foreign fleets and armies, to insurgent plotters from abroad to their equivalents at home, from internal revolutions against the exploitative state to the opposition of the greatest power since Rome.

Little wonder then that the story of Cuba's defense, and the people engaged in it, should be so fascinating as well as so challenging to understand. On occasion superficially easy to grasp, Cuban society is in reality anything but that. Unity was never a strong point in Cuban society and yet the need for unity in the face of powerful threats was almost always there. Indeed, today's calls for unity, while doubtless shrill, are the result of the understanding on the part of most Cubans that past divisions have been disastrous for the island and that only the union of the highly individualistic Cubans could ever hope to ensure effective security. Names which will become familiar in this text—Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, Máximo Gómez, Antonio Maceo, José Martí, Fidel Castro—are all associated with the difficulties of unity and defense. Such calls for unity should not, however, blind us to the variety behind them. Defending coastal towns against pirates is a different matter to defending a revolution against its enemies. Defending a colony against an enemy army is a different proposition altogether to protecting the interests of voracious dictators against the more progressive inclinations of the politically active elements of their people. The arms and armies needed varied greatly from context to context.

The history of Cuban security affairs includes all of these elements and many more. At almost every stage of the island's post-Columbus history there have been questions of internal *and* external defense—defense against foreign pirates but with smoldering slave discontent just below the surface at home; defense against the British but with

contraband with those same enemies essential to colonial prosperity; defense against insurgent enemies on the continent while having their sympathizers much closer to home; civil war as a reality from 1868 to 1878 and to some extent from 1895 to 1898; and more recently defense against the United States while facing potentially important opposition on the island and close by among its migrant communities.

Cuba's importance in geopolitical terms for a series of great powers complicates matters still further. Spain needed Cuba not for its own sake but for its geographic position, superb harbors, and utility as a base for expansion. Later Madrid needed it as a support for its operations in defense of the empire against its rebelling subjects. Still later it kept the island for the wealth it brought the mother country. United States' interest in control of the island, as we will see, has been constant if varied in intensity and *raison d'être*. Washington saw the island as a "rotten fruit" ready to fall into its hands, as a needed strategic asset which should and could be seized and held, as a valuable holding which had to be kept out of others' hands, or as a political hot potato that must be controlled but not maintained as "American" in any too visible sense. Long seen as a bridgehead for a foreign ideology and power that threatened the United States and its world position, it was finally seen as a holdover from a bygone era whose political importance had become domestic rather than international as a result of the power and influence of its "exiles" within rather than without the U.S. body politic.

These and many other factors have entered or still enter into play when Cuban defense and security are discussed. Tracing their force and interrelationship is not easy. But the story that such an overview of events can give is enlightening on any number of levels. The natives of Cuba had to fight for their survival as a political entity as well as a civilization. The early Spanish settlers had to struggle to maintain themselves and their settlements against the raids of pirates and corsairs whose victory could lead to the total destruction of their livelihoods and even their lives. As British naval power gained ascendancy it became clear that the colony might have to defend itself against conventional European attack. After Havana fell in 1762 these requirements became even clearer.

Soon after the Spanish American revolutions began in the early nineteenth century their successes showed the need for Spain and loyal Cubans to prepare seriously for defense against their former fellow subjects. Without this the very political system of the colony could be lost and perhaps its social and economic systems as well. Rebellions, filibustering ideas and plots before the Ten Years' War began in 1868 kept the island and its elites on the *qui vive* and the

Guerra Grande of 1868–1878, despite the unpopularity of this interpretation in Cuba, proved a civil war in many of its aspects, and pitted those seeking independence or annexation against those still loyal to Spain in a fierce struggle.

When war broke out again in 1895, divisions on the island were clearer. Cuba would be independent if the insurgents won and would not be if they lost. Both sides made major efforts to make victory theirs. U.S. intervention made both sides lose. And José Martí's nightmare of exchanging one master for another resulted in a humiliating and shattering experience as the country passed from being first under total U.S. occupation and administration to then under a thinly disguised protectorate where U.S. interests were the dominating feature of supposedly independent national life. The Rural Guard and army that resulted from this experience had the unenviable job of defending the interests of Americans and a Cuban elite usually closely linked to U.S. citizens. Little wonder then that when tasked with quelling a legitimate revolution aiming at continuing the work of acquiring real independence, those forces were not up to the job. They collapsed in the face of absurdly small groups of insurgents fighting with few weapons, little money, and no major foreign support.

The Cuban revolutionary government of today, in its defense policy, has a strong sense of history, and particularly a feeling for what went wrong when Cuban defense efforts have been overwhelmed in the past. The lack of unity seemed uniquely present in each case. Little wonder that Fidel drew the lessons of that requirement for unity in everything he did but especially in his dealings with Cuba's massive and overwhelmingly powerful neighbor. Even in peacetime, U.S. policy had been able to ensure that the dreams of Martí and other Cuban patriots were frustrated, and that powerful foreign economic interests were firmly in control in Havana. No unified rejection of that situation could be obtained under the republic, and the United States sat supreme as a result.

Thus, reform, especially significant reform as Fidel had laid out in his speech of 1953 "History Will Absolve Me," could not be carried out without a country unified and determined to do so. Nor would the defense of the Revolution, that cry going back at least to the Ten Years' War if not before, succeed without unified backing. No one can understand Cuban domestic politics, much less foreign and defense policy, without bearing that in mind.

For over forty-five years the Cuban government has faced the often-ferocious opposition of the greatest power in the world, sitting directly across a narrow strait from its capital city. U.S. leaders could with time understand what even a determined anti-Castroist such as

Robert Scheina observed much later that "Fidel Castro's campaign was the most influential military victory within Latin America since the wars for independence that had occurred more than 130 years earlier."¹ There was little likelihood that such a victory for the forces of dramatic reform, not to say revolution, could avoid encountering the determined opposition of immensely powerful domestic and international elements whose aim would be to overturn that victory and all that it might entail. Whatever one may think of domestic or even foreign policy in Cuba since the Revolution's triumph, defense policy has had to be realistic and cognizant of the almost impossible challenge posed by this situation.

Fidel has sought unity above all, unity doubtless under his leadership, but unity nonetheless. He is certain that the loss of that unity will signal the loss of Cuba's independence as well as the destruction of the gains of the Revolution. The handling of human rights reflects this. Fidel has recently said that a one-party state in Cuba is not necessarily a permanent thing and represents a temporary answer to the country's needs. But while such an overwhelming power as the United States remains determined to sink the regime and its reforms, dissidence for Fidel remains little more than treason. Since dissidence for him is automatically linked to the designs of "the enemy"; thus it must be treason. That this fits well with his keen desire to remain in power, while true, may be rather beside the point at this stage.

Fidel and many other Cubans point with some annoyance, when criticized for their human rights record, to how liberal democracies have dealt with human rights when their regimes were threatened with destruction. London, Ottawa, Washington, and Paris are not, in this view, on very firm ground when they criticize Cuba for curbing human rights when national survival is at stake. Commonwealth and U.S. handling of enemy minorities on their soil during the world wars, curbs on freedom of the press and fascist parties, and a host of other examples come to mind. Fidel suggests that no country has faced a more powerful or longer opposition than has Cuba and that never has a regime and system been under greater pressure than have those of Cuba. Thus, Havana is, in this view, more than justified in restricting the human rights of its citizens if they, perhaps unknowingly, serve the interests of the power which is out to destroy their country.

When all this is added to the view that the most important human rights, such as access to education, medicine, housing, and recreation, are more readily provided by Revolutionary Cuba than by any of the governments of Latin America, which are rarely or never criticized on these matters, Fidel feels more than justified in his actions. In all of this the experience of Cuba's military past plays a huge role. And the

degree to which the call for unity still has support within the island is directly related to this experience. This book will begin with a look at the revolutionary traditions of the Cuban armed forces, taking the story to the eve of the “triumfo de la revolución.” Then chapter 2 will look at the evolution of the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias* (FAR) from victory in 1959 until the eve of the disasters of 1989–1991. It will then be possible to assess the importance of what happened to the forces with the collapse of the arrangements with the socialist bloc. This will be done with a view to seeing why and how the Cuban armed forces reacted so dramatically to the situation they, and their country, were quite suddenly experiencing. After this, specific topics of interest in a reflections effort such as this can be undertaken. This will be done usually by posing a question of importance to our story and then reflecting on its answer. The author is no economist but there are economic elements in the FAR response to the crisis that are truly worthy of analysis. A look at the building of confidence between security forces of the United States and Cuba, a little discussed topic, will be undertaken. In addition, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias* (FAR)’s relations with the rest of the outside world in the wake of Soviet collapse will be looked at. A study of this kind without a discussion of the FAR in any eventual political transition would be odd indeed. A final chapter will assess Cuba’s present military deterrence and defense context.

My Own Challenges

This book is neither a history, although a historical approach in many things will be obvious to most readers, nor a political analysis, nor really merely a “reflections” piece. It is instead all of these. The author is a historian of Latin American diplomacy and military affairs. And I set out some years ago to write a history of the Ten Years’ War, a major conflict in Cuba in the mid-nineteenth century about which virtually nothing is written in English. As I undertook and then deepened my research the need for another, and perhaps more important book came to be more and more present in my mind.

I had known not only Cuba but also the Cuban armed forces for several decades. I had myself, as an adolescent, watched the *Ejército Rebelde* march into Havana and had seen the first, alas not the last, fighting in my life during those dramatic days of January 1959. The evolution of that institution into the FAR has always fascinated me. Their combat successes at home and more recently abroad, their sense of honor, their pride in themselves, their revolutionary internationalism, their achievements in racial and gender terms so exceptional in

Latin America, and their loyalty to Fidel Castro; all had captured my attention on many occasions.

When I first arrived in Havana in the summer of 1958, the Rebel Army and its leader were on everyone's lips. Even for a youngster, it was obvious from my first drive to the hotel from the ship bringing my family to the island that something momentous was happening. There were troops and sandbag emplacements everywhere in Havana's center. Police, stony-faced, usually obese and mustachioed, reinforced the army with their ubiquitous presence. And why was all this happening? It was because of a mysterious leader in the mountains hundreds of kilometers away (although his columns at the time were coming west toward the capital at a rapid rate), and of the small army he commanded, determined to overthrow the bloody dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista Zaldívar and bring about deep reforms in Cuba's political, social, and economic structures as well as to make it finally and truly independent after the frustrations of efforts to reach that goal stretching back a century or more.

I then watched Fidel's triumphant march from Oriente, Cuba's then easternmost province, to the capital in the west on the television and newsreels in the cinema until with me on the sidelines across from the then Habana Hilton Hotel I saw the bearded *líder máximo* and his rather ragtag force enter the city's modern center of Vedado and take full control of the country. It was all terribly emotional for a teenager and those events have marked my life as a series of almost dream-like memories.

That *Ejército Rebelde* impressed me then as does its successor now. At the time it was full of young men, and surprisingly at the time, a number of young women. They were, of course, exuberant at victory, hopeful for the future, absolutely devoted to their commander, and idealistic. They seemed to me to be in the main country folk. Frequently bearded but always excited, optimistic, loyal, nationalistic, and smelling of their campaigning, they could hardly fail to leave a strong impression on me.

I left Cuba a little over two years later and while the island and its history drove me to the study of Latin America and to work in the field of its history and current affairs for most of my life, Cuba itself never loomed very large in that work. It was important, of course, and the island remained a strong memory for me, but the nature of research on Latin America, its diplomacy, and its armed forces, pushed me in other directions: civil-military relations during and after the troubled years of the cold war, the Falklands conflict, Central America's civil wars, Canada-Latin American relations, the Peru-Ecuador War of 1995, nuclear proliferation issues, and much else. Cuba remained an

issue of importance, of course, with Cuban–Canadian relations never entirely off the screen, Cuba’s Soviet connection a constant matter of importance and conjecture, its role in insurgencies in Latin America and Africa a source of interest and usually concern, and its internationalist adventures in medicine and sports an amazement. Thus, Cuba was not, could not be, a matter of indifference for someone with my interests. But it was not central to those interests until the Special Period began in 1990 and even then not immediately or dramatically.

The question of what would happen to Cuba in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe, and then of the USSR itself, now loomed very directly indeed. Interest in the Revolution’s fate, and that of its leader, grew as the predictions of those calling the moment “Castro’s final hour” and the like appeared ever more often. And yet there was something false about those predictions even as there was something absurd in linking too directly the Cuban Revolution’s death to those of communism in Europe. This truly seemed worthy of closer study. After all, I knew well that the Cuban government did not come to power as a result of Soviet bayonets as had almost all those in Eastern Europe. Nor was it propped up by those bayonets subsequently although the military connection with Moscow grew to excessive levels. The Castro government, even in the view of its fiercest critics, did not allow the Soviets to make decisions for it, even though when pressed, as in the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, Havana could make shameful decisions to support its friends in Moscow.²

Indeed, the Cuban regime enjoyed considerable legitimacy, as it seemed to me, and to successive Canadian, British, and European governments over the long years of the cold war and the U.S. attempts to isolate and unseat it. While clearly a state quite capable of severe suppression of dissent, Castro’s Cuba did not seem to me to be a classic police state of the Latin American norm or indeed one incapable of garnering majority support for its revolutionary project. While there had been winners and losers from the Revolution, it seemed to me that the immense majority felt that the revolutionary experiment was worth trying and were proud not only of its achievements but also of its successful breakaway from formerly overwhelming U.S. dominance in the years after 1959. That many also felt that the relationship with the USSR was too close was, and is, true. But that as a result the majority rejected the leadership and direction of the Revolution seems to me to be truly an exaggeration.

In addition, although I had and have many close friends among the post-1959 diaspora, I had to acknowledge that the Cuban Revolution could claim quite enormous successes. The degree of racial equality in