IT IS ALL but certain that Cuban exile terrorists were responsible for the bombing of an Air Cubana plane last month and the resulting death of the 73 aboard. Another exile organization is suspected in the assassination two months ago of former Chilean Foreign Minister Orlando Letelier. These were simply two incidents in an epidemic of bombings, killings and kidnappings carried out by anti-Castro exiles based in Miami over the past three years. The frequency and ruthlessness of these attacks have reached the point where the possibility must be considered that we are witnessing the coming of age of the first serious American-based terrorist movement.

An effort to understand who these people are and to gauge the danger they pose might well begin with a single stark case history.

Luis Crespo seemed a most unlikely candidate for terror. He was a shy, 32-year-old father of two, a drug store salesman, just another of the 450,000 or so Cubans in Miami. But there he was in March of 1974 assembling a book bomb. Just after midnight he was fitting the C4 explosive into a hollowed-out copy of “British at the Gate” when it blew up in his hands.

Crespo, believing himself dying, was rushed to the hospital shouting “Viva Cuba Libre.” The police, unnerved, shackled Crespo to his bed. The Miami papers identified him and his partner in the venture, Humberto Lopez Jr., as members of the National Cuban Liberation Front, a newly formed anti-Castro terrorist group. But why this group had formed, exactly who its members were, and why such seemingly upright young men were attempting such acts went unexplained.

It might all have seemed less puzzling if the background had been examined. Far from being suddenly possessed of terrorist notions, both men were veterans of guerrilla campaigns against Castro backed in another era by the CIA. Lopez had participated in an Agency-financed program based in Nicaragua. Crespo had been a member of one of the CIA’s elite commando teams operating from Miami during the Kennedy years. He had been trained in the use of explosives and sabotage techniques and was then sent on raids to Cuba. Like all of the CIA’s full-fledged agents, he had signed a secrecy oath, submitted to polygraph tests, served under the command of an American case officer.

Crespo is Washington editor of Harpers magazine and author of a book to be published by Doubleday on the CIA’s Cuban operations.

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When he went to work for the CIA, he was just 21, one of almost 2,000 Cubans recruited in Miami for Operation Mongoose, the Kennedy administration's secret war on Cuba. He served under Rip Robertson, the legendary American case officer who had led the Brigade ashore at the Bay of Pigs. There had been no question in those years about the U.S. commitment to the exiles' cause.

Crespo was then a totally reliable instrument of U.S. policy. The policy changed in time but, like the broom of the sorcerer’s apprentice, Crespo could not be induced to stop.

When President Johnson halted the CIA’s paramilitary operations in 1965, Crespo left the Agency and began to mount independent raids with other Agency veterans. When Customs and the Coast Guard began to arrest the raiders, he turned to terrorism as the only tactic available.

Then came the bomb accident. From the hospital, he was taken to the Dade County jail. When I talked to him there, he had just started a hunger strike to dramatize his cause. He now looked the martyr, an emaciated, boyish figure with a hook where his right hand had been.

He had long ago, Crespo explained, committed his life to the cause of “liberating” Cuba. Any regrets for his losses were outweighed by pride in his sacrifice and the pouring out of sympathy and respect from his fellow exiles. “I have been paid richly in moral payments, far more than I deserve, for what little I have done.”

His only smile came when he spoke of Rip Robertson. He liked the CIA men he had known. They were honest, dedicated anti-Communists. But he did not see how he could be criticized for resorting to terrorism. He was only doing what he had been trained to do. And what, after all, had Robertson been if not a terrorist, like him, against Castro?

Foreign Connections

IT IS PEOPLE like Crespo, driven by similar ambitions and molded by the same conditions, who are at the heart of the terrorist cadres today.

There have been scores of bombings in Miami since Crespo’s bomb blew up 2½ years ago. Rolando Otero, who at the age of 16 had been the youngest soldier in the CIA’s 2508 Brigade at the Bay of Pigs, is now facing trial in a Florida state court for bombing the Miami FBI, the state’s attorney’s office, the Dade County police department and Miami International Airport. These attacks were clearly aimed at officials investigating the terror; it is a miracle that no one was seriously injured.

Even more alarming are the political assassinations. Five exile leaders have been murdered since the Crespo incident, and several others seriously wounded. Some of the victims advocated moderation toward the Castro regime. Emilio Milian, the leading exile radio commentator, had both legs torn off by a bomb in his car after he had criticized the terrorists for committing such acts within the United States.

A similarly designed bomb killed Letelier. Significantly perhaps, that assassination came only a matter of months after the machine-gunning of Bernardo Leigh- on, a former Chilean Christian Democratic leader, and his wife in Rome.

Although at least one press report suggests that Italian fascists were responsible for the Leighton incident, some investigators tend to believe it was the work of ZERO, a particularly ruthless Cuban exile organization which claimed credit in a communique describing the weapons used, the number and caliber of shots.

It is known that a number of exiled activists have been working closely with the right-wing Chilean junta. And, according to U.S. government sources, they may have carried out or arranged the Leighton attack as part of an ongoing mutual assistance agreement with DINA, the junta’s secret service.

The extent of the foreign assistance available is particularly significant. Just as the Palestinians have been able to operate only with the help and financial backing provided by Libya and other Arab countries, so too do the Cuban terrorists require the support of friendly governments in this hemisphere.

They have built-in bases of support within a number of Caribbean and Latin American countries. Venezuela, for instance, has a prosperous and influential exile population of about 25,000, and exiles have held sensitive posts in the Venezuelan intelligence service since the early 1960s, when the country was under attack from Castro-trained and -armed guerrillas. Some of those arrested in Venezuela in connection with the Air Cuban bombing were meeting with high government officials not long ago. They had even been given a $1,000-a-plate fund-raising dinner for their cause in Caracas.

One of the men indicted, Luis Posado Carilles, had been both a CIA veteran and a high Venezuelan security official. He is reported to have been a link between the government of Venezuelan President Perez and the Chilean junta.

A Violent Tradition

THE EASE with which upright members of the exile communities of the Caribbean murder their political enemies, or finance those who do, may startle people in the United States, but terrorism does not carry the stigma among Cubans that it does for Americans. Rather, it is the time-honored instrument of revolutionaries against any regime they considered unjust. Had it not been for the CIA’s virtual monopoly on the anti-Castro activities in Miami in the early 1960s, there probably would have been major outbreaks of organized terror earlier. As it was, there were two short-lived campaigns inspired by men who figure prominently in recent events.

The first began in 1964 with the mortar attack on the U.N. when Che Guevara came to address the General Assembly. This was the work of the fanatically right-wing Cuban Nationalist Association, made up of disgruntled Bay of Pigs veterans who warned the exiles not to trust the CIA, calling instead for an Algerian-style terror.

Today the Nationalists are active once again; two veterans of the U.N. bombardment, the Nove brothers, are prime suspects in the Letelier assassination.

The second outbreak came in 1968 with bombings in Miami harbor of ships flying the flags of countries that had relations with Cuba. Readers of Miami’s daily papers were introduced to “Ernesto,” the mysterious leader of “Cuban Power,” through “clandestine, exclusive” interviews in which the terrorist would appear in a black hood and whisper his intentions to bomb Cuban installations and kidnap and assassinate Cuban officials around the world.

Later, “Ernesto” dropped the nom de guerre and re-
leged role in the Air Cubana bombing. Rumors persist that Bosch had received CIA training before the Bay of Pigs. But there are no indications that he was ever a controlled agent. On the contrary, he was one of the first exile leaders to turn against the Agency. In the mid 1960s, Bosch bitterly denounced the CIA for "dispersing, dividing and destroying the anti-Castro revolution." He, for one, would pursue an independent path. Thanks to his Cuban Power, Miami led the world's major cities in bombings — 44 — in 1968. The terror promptly stopped late in that year when Bosch and eight followers were arrested and jailed.

Some exiles responded favorably to Bosch's efforts in the 1960s, but few of the CIA's Cubans or the mainstream anti-Castro leaders took his work seriously. They saw the bombings as symbolic gestures without real impact, and they continued to look to the U.S. government as the last, best hope of liberating Cuba. Once the Vietnam struggle ended, they believed, the green light would be given by Washington to resume the secret war. But events were under way which would radicalize many of the mainstream exiles and, in 1973, precipitate the first popularly supported terrorist campaign. The decisive development came when the United States signed a treaty against hijacking with Cuba and began vigilantly to arrest those exiles still trying to raid the island; in some cases they were the very veterans the CIA had trained and sponsored on such missions only a few years before. Sens. Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.) and Jacob Javits (R-N.Y.) went to Cuba and Dr. Kissinger began talking as if he planned to open negotiations with Castro.

"Fish" in the "Sea"

I T WAS AT this moment, when all seemed lost for the exiles, that Palestinian gunmen were demonstrating that terror could make a considerable political and public relations impact; soon Yasir Arafat would appear, with a pistol at his belt, to address the U.N. General Assembly. With the example of the Palestinians very much in mind, the bickering factions among the exile activists moved to unite and to renew their war. Conveniently, Dr. Bosch had just been paroled after four years in prison; the activists swiftly embraced him as their prophet, theoretician and indisputable leader. In the autumn of 1973, representatives of 70 different exile organizations gathered in San Juan for a congress; an umbrella organization was formed and shortly thereafter the terrorist campaign was initiated by the bombing of several Cuban diplomatic missions.

It is a part of the doctrine of "liberation" movements that terrorists must function as "fish" in the "sea" of a supportive environment. The "fish," men such as Luis Crespo, seem to be in abundant supply among the exiles. The critical factor is the hospitable sea. Without it, a terrorist cannot finance his activities, cannot escape his enemies and, perhaps most important, cannot sustain him self emotionally. It is here that the shift in sentiment among the mainstream exiles counts; it has created a substantial subculture within the Miami community which has so far provided the support needed to sustain the current terrorist war.

Take the instructive reaction of Carlos Prio Socarras, the last constitutional president of Cuba, to the new developments. From his exile in Miami, Prio warned that exiles would react violently to any move by the United States to recognize Castro, adding: "My position is against indiscriminate terrorism. I don't like dynamite; it is too blind. It's not good to kill innocent people. But it is good to attack the Castro people wherever they are. That's okay. I'm not against this kind of political terrorism just because it is inside the United States. It's all right with me."

Perhaps even more significant was the position voiced by Dr. Miro Cardona, who had been Castro's first prime minister and then, as president of the Revolutionary Council, the man selected by the CIA and the Kennedy administration to become president of Cuba once Castro was overthrown.

He was a highly respected jurist, but over the years he had become increasingly embittered. As he neared the end of his life, he began to meet with Dr. Bosch and to advocate a policy of terrorism: "We are alone, absolutely alone...there is only one route left to follow and we will follow it: violence, the internationalization of the struggle for the freedom of Cuba at all levels."

Miro's words, spoken at the end of 1973, served as a battle cry and moral justification for the new campaign. Overnight, the initials of the new exile front, FLNC, were painted on walls across Miami's Little Havana. Either out of respect or fear, no one painted them over. Later that year, when a young terrorist died while trying to bomb the Cuban embassy in Paris, he was given a martyr's funeral in Miami. Hundreds, including former President Prio, attended. An article in the Miami Herald went so far as to make analogies between the slain man and Jose Marti, the father of Cuban independence.

And then, early in 1974, a FLNC communiqué declared that henceforth "anyone, anywhere who negotiated with Castro would become a military objective."

Shortly after this warning, George Davis, the FBI's chief Cuban expert, served a subpoena on the man whose house had been Luis Crespo's bomb factory. The following morning a car without lights started up rapidly behind Davis and, accelerating, bore down on him. He was barely able to leap to safety.

A week later, on Good Friday, exile leader Jose de la Torriente was assassinated in his living room while
Dr. Orlando Bosch: jailed in Venezuela on bombing charge.

Radio commentator Emilio Milian had his legs blown off when a bomb exploded in this car.

The Washington Post

Sunday, November 7, 1976

Dr. Orlando Bosch: jailed in Venezuela on bombing charge.

watching "Ben Hur" on television. His killer left a note identifying the assassination as the work of ZERO, the same group which claimed responsibility for the Leighton machine-gunning in Rome. A subsequent letter threatened other old-style leaders who had "misled" the exiles in the past. Alarmed by these developments, the FBI advised Senators Pell and Javits, who had become identified in exile eyes with the effort to renew U.S. relations with Cuba, to vary their routes to and from work in the Capital, just in case.

Though the terrorism created bitter debate within the exile community, the new campaign did gain in popularity. At a rally held to raise a defense fund for Crespo and Lopez, hundreds of simple folk in Little Havana walked in off the street and contributed more than $12,000, mostly in $1 and $2 sums. When the two men went on trial, Miami's Mayor Maurice Ferere wrote the judge asking that mercy be shown but, after newspaper publicity, withdrew the letter.

The Brigade's Decision

There have been hundreds of anti-Castro organizations formed in Miami over the years; at one point the police files listed 105 revolutionary groups. Nevertheless, only one of these organizations, the Bay of Pigs Brigade 2506 Association, commands universal respect.

The Brigade Association, with its approximately 1,500 members, has always managed to remain aloof from Little Havana's internecine intrigues. Until a year ago it
had been a fraternal organization. But at its 14th anniversary ceremonies in April, 1975, a marked shift was apparent, a shift which would soon bring about a fundamental change in the terrorists' campaign.

Twelve years earlier the Brigade had presented its flag to President Kennedy. The President hailed the Brigade as the standard-bearer of freedom in the hemisphere and, before tens of thousands of cheering exiles in the Orange Bowl, pledged to return its flag to the free soil of Cuba.

Now the Brigade veterans were making speeches accusing the United States of betraying their cause, and they demanded that the Kennedy Library return the flag, that they be given a chance to storm the library if refused. Wisely, the flag was returned. The Brigade concluded its ceremonies by awarding its first Freedom Award to Gen. Pinchet of the Chilean junta.

Dr. Bosch, too, was apparently establishing close links with the Chileans. He had jumped parole, fleeing the United States just after the Torriente killing. He was interviewed in Curacao by an exile newsmen who reported that Bosch was being escorted by a band of armed Chileans and had access to all the money he needed. (The reporter also said Bosch was reading a biography of Yasir Arafat.)

State Department files indicate that the Chileans were offering safe haven, passports and even the use of diplomatic pouches to some Cuban terrorists. One government investigator says that a remote control detonating device, used in the assassination of the exile leader Rolando Masferer in 1975, had been brought into the United States in a Chilean diplomatic pouch.

The Chilean connection is beyond dispute; the question is just how far it goes. Max Lenzik, the publisher of Little Havana's largest newspaper, Replica, says that some of the exile terrorists are performing strong-arm services for DINA. "The Chileans are using the Cubans; they use them because the Cubans are crusaders. You tell them there are 10 Chileans in Paris who were close to Allende and that Allende was close to Castro and they will go kill them."

Like other prominent exiles, Lenzik has resorted to bodyguards. At the end of our interview he pulled out a 45 and said, "It's incredible, but I need this to survive as an editor. You American newsmen feel you don't need to carry a gun but think what it was like in the Old West. It's like that here. Everywhere I go, I take a man with a pistol and other weapons. If the police take them away from me, then I die."

Lenzik's problem is particularly thorny because he is a confessed socialist and fought alongside Castro in the Sierra Maestra. Some of the exiles, he says, cannot distinguish between socialism and communism and doubt his loyalty to the anti-Castro cause. However misguided they may be about Lenzik, it is understandable that some exiles are confused about the loyalties and even the identities of their comrades.

Such suspicions were reinforced by the nature of the violence in 1974-75. Although the terrorists did strike at some Castrolite targets abroad, they concentrated their attacks in Miami and most of the targets were other exiles. The campaign was by no means universally supported, but none dared to be outspokenly critical.

Some of the exiles, however, came to see the terror campaign as suspiciously counterproductive. It not only spread fear and suspicion within the community but also alienated the U.S. government and public.

That the exiles have been deeply penetrated by agents from Havana is a view long held within the FBI and other interested agencies. No one seriously questions the fanatic sincerity of most of the terrorists, but some exile leaders and U.S. officials have begun to theorize that agents provocateurs were behind some of the inflammatory incidents most likely to create dissension within the exile community or to enrage U.S. opinion.

Such observers cite the history of Carlos Rivero-Collado, Brigade veteran, son of a pre-Castro prime minister and a leading member of the oldest and most fanatically right-wing exile terror group, the Nationalists. He was said to have been one of the Nationalists' most formidable members, with a personal following among the younger terrorists. Suddenly, in the fall of 1974, several months after Torriente's assassination, Rivero-Collado defected to Cuba, publicly denouncing the terrorists as fascists and — more significant — describing their membership in detail. Their plans, he claimed, included assassination of U.S. officials.

The Offensive Begins

THE CIVIL war aspects of this supposedly anti-Castro terror campaign grew in intensity after Rivero-Collado's departure, culminating in December, 1975, with a sudden rash of bombings, including those against the FBI and state's attorney's offices. Then the violence in Miami all but stopped. And a true offensive was launched against Cuban targets in Europe and the Americas.

The apparent explanation for this reversal in targets is to be found in the sudden entry of veterans from the Bay of Pigs Brigade into the struggle. The decision was reached at the 15th reunion of the Brigade Association last April 17. Brigade leaders claim to have negotiated an agreement with the terrorists to call off the war at home; in return, Brigade veterans would take part in the anti-Castro war.

This new coalition has been tied to the following incidents:

April 6 — two Cuban fishing vessels machine gunned, one Cuban killed. April 22 — a bomb kills two Cuban embassy officials in Lisbon. July 5 — Cuban U.N. Mission bombed. July 9 — bomb explodes in luggage cart in Jamaica before being loaded aboard Air Cubana flight. July 10 — Cuban airlines office in Barbados bombed. Aug. 9 — two embassy officials in Buenos Aires kidnapped. Late August — one Cuban official killed in Mexico City, and an unsuccessful attempt made to kidnap another in Yucatan.

In the midst of the campaign last summer, Brigade leaders met in the Dominican Republic with representatives of Dr. Bosch and of several terrorist groups, including the Nationalists. A new agreement was reached to form a united front to carry out a coordinated campaign of international terror against Castro targets wherever they could be reached. The new organization's name, CORU (Commandos of United Revolutionary Organizations), would not become known to the American press.
until the group was implicated two months later in the crash of the Air Cubana plane en route from Barbados to Havana.

During the Labor Day weekend the Brigade took an unprecedented step, apparently designed to broaden the base of the terror movement. It held its first congress and there announced the opening of a "war chest" to establish an exile "government in arms." The only organization universally respected among the exiles had now lent its prestige to terror.

Like Luis Crespo, Brigade activists do not quite understand why the United States should disapprove of their latest effort, now that the violence in Miami has abated. Seventy exiles have reportedly been subpoenaed to testify before a grand jury in Miami; others have been called before a grand jury in Washington in connection with the Letelier killing.

Knowledgeable exiles say the activists believe they have violated no American laws; most of the activists are American citizens and they are careful to conspire abroad.

One longtime veteran of America's secret wars against Cuba spoke of his bitter resentment at the activists being labeled terrorists. "To us a terrorist is a man who sets a bomb off and doesn't care who he kills. A revolutionary is a man who uses the methods and equipment available to him at the moment to hit Fidel Castro. They are revolutionaries."

The explanation he offered for the Air Cubana crash was that the new terror campaign is aimed at the Cuban economy. The crash, it was assumed, would damage the tourist trade.

"Also," he said, "98 per cent of the people on that plane were Communists and our war is against Communists." It was hoped, he added, that the terror actions would lead to increased tension between the United States and Cuba.

Facing Realities

And indeed Castro quickly abrogated the anti-hijacking treaty, charging that the CIA was behind the terrorism. This was just what the terrorists wanted—to put Cuba and the United States back at loggerheads.

There is no reason to believe Castro's charge that the CIA is sponsoring today's terrorists, but there is also no way of denying the past intimate CIA connections with many of these men.

The impression should not be left here that all or most of the CIA's Cuban veterans have become terrorists, or that all or most of the exiles support the terrorists. This is not the case. But there are enough militants and supporters to cause terrible problems for some time to come.

The Air Cubana bombing, which caused the death of the entire Cuban national fencing team among others, is taken by the Cuban people as a national tragedy.

In a speech shortly after the crash, Castro warned that henceforth his government would retaliate for attacks. The terrorists, for their part, say there will be new attacks, and soon. The prospects are ominous.

The natural tendency is to dismiss the exile terrorists as fascists or part of some lunatic fringe. But not so long ago they were our closest military and ideological allies, acclaimed by President Kennedy as the champions of freedom in the hemisphere.

If we are now to find a way of containing these men, we must begin by remembering our own part in starting them down the desperate path they are following.