

Impressions of Cuba—II

p. 278/24/14

5000 Are Taught All About Hardship

This is the second of five articles based on a wide-ranging visit to Cuba.

By Dan Kurzman
Staff Reporter

The Russian truck in which I was hitching a ride arrived in midafternoon at Minas del Frio, in the cool muddy heart of the Sierra Maestre, and deposited me in the midst of a strange assortment of guests.

In a sense, I was the strangest guest. "Yankee imperialists" simply didn't drop in unannounced at Minas del Frio, a sprawling plateau hemmed in by misty mountain peaks. This area, which served once as Fidel Castro's rebel headquarters and now is the site of a "hardship" teachers school, was still regarded as a strategic area probably not yet cleared of counter-revolutionaries.

But I had dropped in, and

by an odd coincidence, almost simultaneously with other visitors—who included three North Vietnamese and three who were introduced to me as Americans.

The guest of honor was North Vietnamese General Dinh Nup, a small, intelligent-looking man with a frozen smile who is known among his admirers as the "Hero of the Mountains." He killed many Frenchmen during the Indo-Chinese war by dumping tons of rocks on them along mountain trails.

Those introduced as Americans were an attractive young woman married to a Brazilian

See CUBA, A12, Col. 6

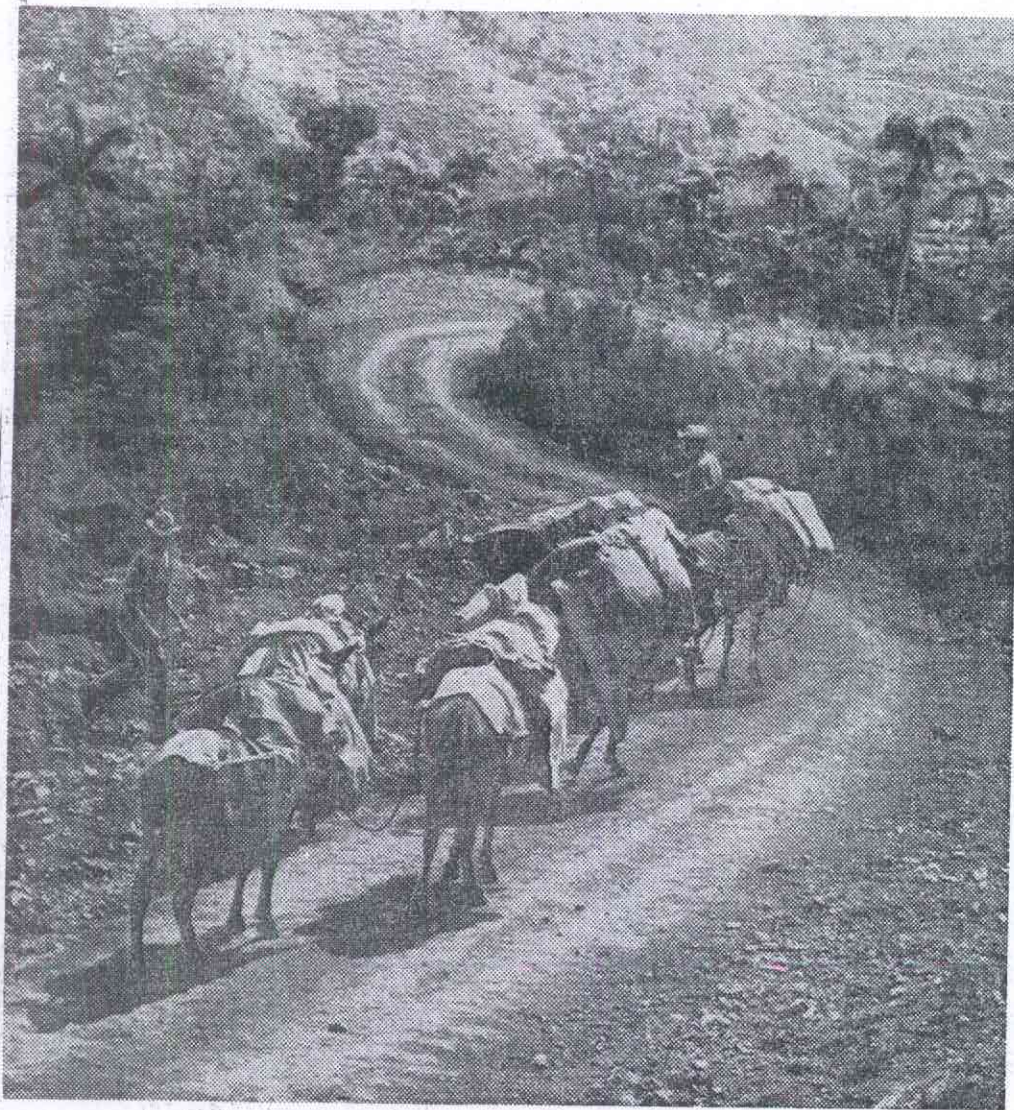


Photo by John Kerr

Cuban peasants lead a string of pack mules along a winding dirt road in Cuba's

Sierra Maestre mountains, near Castro's revolutionary headquarters.

Cuba's Little Red Schoolhouse Houses Hardship Classes Today

and a bald man and his stout white-haired wife, both probably in their 60s, who had come directly from Moscow where they had been living for several years. I never managed to learn much about them except that the man was called "Harry."

The General and two Vietnamese aides showed no hint of surprise when they met me in the dining room of the barracks-like guest dormitory where we were to be bed-fellows. They simply smiled and shook hands. The nervous manner of the Americans, however, suggested that they were as astonished as I at this rather odd meeting in the middle of the Sierra Maestre.

In brief conversations I was able to snatch with them I learned from their evasive remarks only that the couple once lived in New York, had been residing in Moscow for some years, and intended to return to Moscow.

Mind Not Made Up

The young woman replied, when I asked her what she thought of Marxist-Leninism: "I haven't made up my mind yet. But I'm certainly thrilled by all this. Aren't you?"

She was referring to the effort at Minas del Frio to train, under hardship conditions, thousands of young Cubans for teaching service among Sierra Maestre peasants.

After a dinner consisting largely of boiled chicken and rice—the 5000 students were laddled out the same food, army-style, in a huge mess-hall after waiting in endless lines—about 20 or so teachers and guests including myself, gathered in the dining room around General Nup to ask questions.

De Gaulle's Reason

In answer to queries, Nup, through a Spanish-speaking Vietnamese interpreter, assured the audience that the "class struggle" in North Viet-Nam was proceeding well, that the "imperialists" in South Viet-Nam were losing ground every day, and that French President de Gaulle opposed American policy in Viet-Nam only because he wanted to win markets for France at U.S. expense.

Occasionally listeners would glance in my direction, appar-

ently to see what effect Nup's answers were having on me. When the General, dressed in open-shirted khaki and an olive-drab beret, talked himself out, everybody—but me—stood up and gave him a handclapping rhythmic cheer.

Then about 15 students, from 12 to 18 years old, entered and prepared to put on a show in honor of the Vietnamese. After a large, moustached instructor formally introduced all the guests, including "our three North American friends and a correspondent of the important North American newspaper, The Washington Post," marvelously talented boys and girls sang their hearts out.

One small girl, with an enormous voice, dressed, like her young colleagues, in jeans and cotton jacket, brought the barracks down with renditions of such local hits as "It's Fidel" and "I am a Young Communist." Again all eyes were on me; I stood and applauded only after non-political songs were sung.

When the show was over, I found myself backed against a wooden pillar by a friendly but highly emotional group of instructors determined to drum into my bourgeois head the "obvious fact" that the U.S. is run by the Morgans and Rockefeller, is determined to "neo-colonialize" the world, and is intent on keeping the Negro enslaved.

Why Are They There?

The next morning, at breakfast, which consisted of bread and coffee, an aide to Nup, smartly dressed in an olive-drab uniform, took me on in excitable French, asking what the Americans were doing in Viet-Nam anyway.

The "guide" assigned to me, a mild-mannered man in his late 20s, finally rescued me from the verbal barrage. He showed me Fidel's former rebel quarters, a small yellow-painted wooden house at the top of a steep grade. And we watched pupils being taught in outdoor classrooms they had built themselves—a thatched roof supported by wooden beams and no walls. When it rained, classes were conducted in long, wooden dormitories, where the students slept in hammocks that

were taken down during the day.

After touring the area, I climbed into a departing truck, waved goodbye to my hosts, and headed back toward Manzanilla, wondering how deeply the fanaticism I had experienced ran in Cuba—and how resistant Cuban children might be to brainwashing efforts in the long run.

As Strongly Opposed

Whatever the answers, by the time I arrived back in Havana several days later the questions seemed less urgent. For most of the scores of people I met were as strongly opposed to the Castro regime as the Sierra Maestre cadres were for it.

There was the airline steward who assured me during a flight that the plane would be on the way to Miami if a soldier were not in the crew compartment fingering a sub-machine gun.

There was the student I met in Cienfuegos who took me for a taxi ride around the city so that there would be less chance of any government agent hearing him castigate the regime; he trusted only taxi drivers, since virtually all are anti-government.

There was the middle-class widow in Camarguay whose life now revolves around the condition of her irreplaceable refrigerator. "Life isn't worth living now," she sobbed when it broke down. But when it was miraculously fixed, she cried almost ecstatically: "How heavenly life can be!"

Whether such Cubans constitute a majority or a minority in Cuba today, the spirit of Minas del Frio is not likely to spread with ease.

Next: Why Castro wants to improve Cuban-U.S. relations.