

Impressions of Cuba—III

Soviet Cordiality Is Tipoff to What Is Worrying Premier Castro Most

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

By Dan Kurzman
Staff Reporter

The young, yellow-haired Russian technician, dressed in a red-checked sport shirt and ill-fitting brown slacks, greeted me with a lively Slavic smile, taking me for a Czech or a Pole. What other stranger would ask to visit this Soviet compound in the Marianao suburb of Havana?

In a hired car, I had driven to the compound, a fenced-off area embracing scores of neat, modern little bungalows where Soviet

technicians working at nearby military installations lived. The Russian guard at the front entrance, distinguished by a Soviet-style stubby-peaked hat, had called out one of them to see what I wanted.

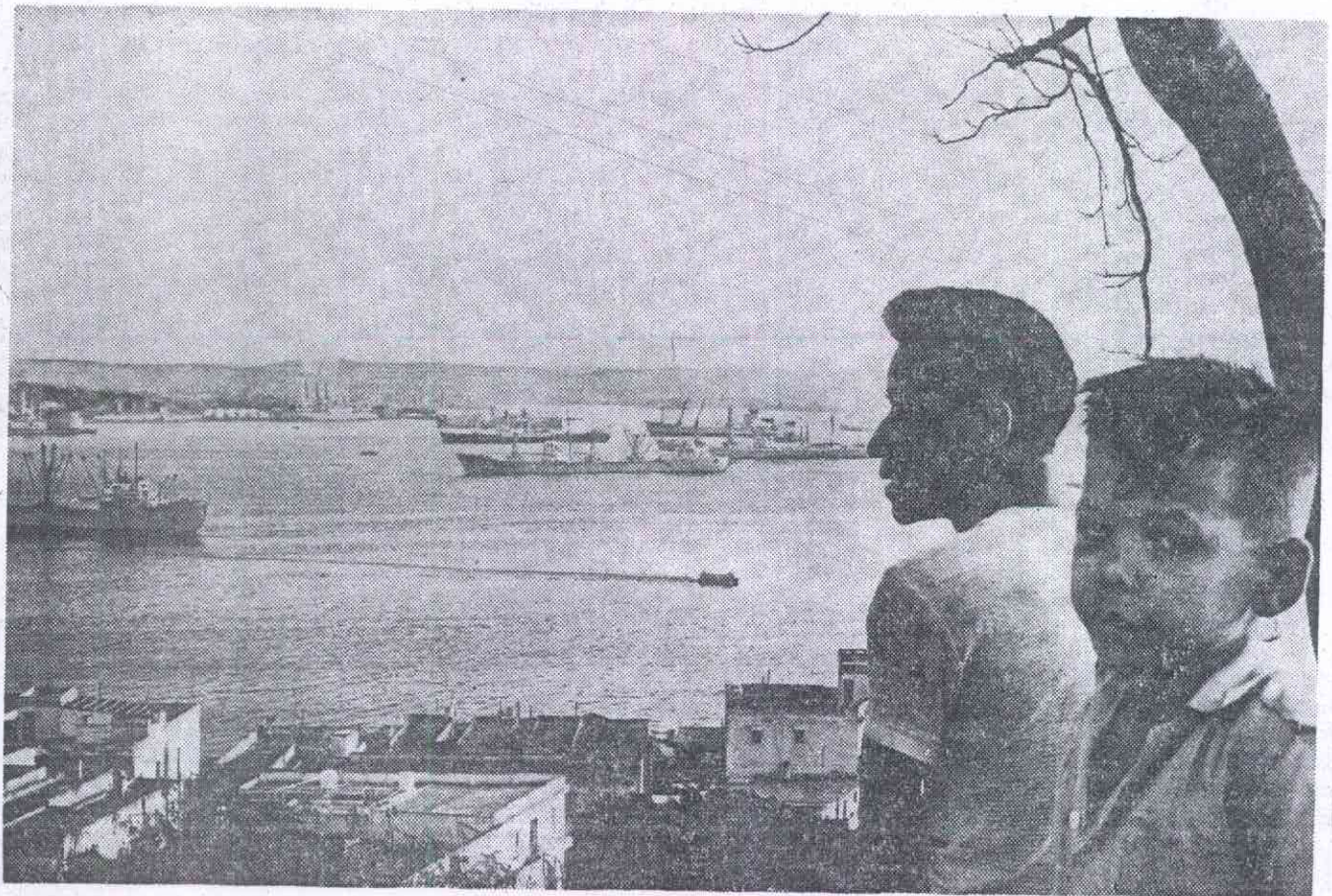
The technician's smile faded into frozen incredulity when, leaning against the side of my car, he learned that I was an American reporter. But it returned more glowing than ever once the fact set in.

"I know you are mature

enough not to ask to come in here or to ask questions about this place," he said, in Spanish, shaking hands with me through the window of the car. "But welcome. Americans and Russians must be good friends."

The Soviet technician, one of several thousand still in Cuba, may not have realized it, but he put his finger on what is worrying the Fidel Castro regime most. Cuban foreign and ideological policy

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IPS Photo by Marc Riboud © 1964 Magnum Photos
Havana Harbor and the old United Fruit Pier now are filled with ships, mostly from Eastern Europe.

Soviet Cordiality Adds to Castro's Worries

appears to revolve basically around one overwhelming factor: fear of abandonment by Russia in the wider interest of its "peaceful coexistence" policy toward the United States.

Conversations I had with many foreign diplomats and Cuban officials have appeared to confirm this central conclusion. And Castro himself hinted at the importance of this factor when he said that Washington's hostile attitude had pushed his government over the brink into the Soviet bloc and full-fledged Marxist-Leninism.

For a Guarantee

On the one hand, Cuba seems to have embraced communism precipitously to guarantee all-out Soviet material and military support against any United States threat. And on the other, it is today seeking to improve relations with the U.S. mainly, it appears, as a safety-valve policy in the event of a Soviet sellout in the future.

"Fidel is wondering whether the day will come," a diplomat in Havana said, "when the U.S. will offer some important concession to Russia — for example, the removal of some of its most dangerous bases—in return for a Soviet commitment to abandon Cuba."

Not One to Take Advice

Other factors have no doubt contributed to the current Cuban effort to conciliate the U.S. It wants to open trade channels between the two countries, at least to the extent that vitally needed spare parts for American machinery now being used in Cuba will be available. Moreover, Russia itself is pressing Cuba to improve U.S. relations in order to advance the Soviet "peaceful coexistence" policy, and permit a reduction of the Russian aid burden.

But these factors do not appear to be decisive. The

trade problem is less important than is often thought, as will be explained in a subsequent article. Nor is Fidel Castro a man to take advice from Khrushchev or anybody else unless he feels such advice is in what he considers his government's best interests.

Despite Soviet pressure, for example, he refused to sign the nuclear test ban treaty. The conclusion of this treaty, in fact, tended to deepen his fear of a broadening U.S.-Soviet detente that could be detrimental to Cuba.

Castro has never fully trusted the intentions of the Soviet Union. Nor, it appears, has Cuba's traditional Communist Party, which has been absorbed into Castro's United Party of the Socialist Revolution. They had noted Premier Khrushchev's disturbing tendency to deal with nationalist leaders at the expense of local Communists. They saw him pouring aid into the United Arab Republic even while President Abdul Gamal Nasser was throwing Reds into jail.

Soviet Shocked

According to informed diplomatic sources the traditional Communists, to insure against the conversion of Castro into another Nasser, as well as against Soviet abandonment of Cuba, pointed out to Castro in early 1961 the lesson of the Bay of Pigs. The U.S.-directed attack had been turned back, but it underscored the determination of the U.S. to destroy the Castro regime.

Only the Soviet Union, the Reds are understood to have said without consulting the Soviet Union, could guarantee his survival in the long run. And whatever its sentiments, it would not be likely to risk World War III protecting him unless he forced its hand by openly proclaiming himself a Marxist-Leninist and joining the Soviet bloc.

Castro, who had been

leaning toward communism anyway, though he might have preferred a more nationalistic brand, apparently agreed, shocking the Soviet Union with his famous "I am a Marxist-Leninist" speech, as attested by its long silence.

But Russia, like it or not, was now saddled with the responsibility of protecting the Castro regime, a respon-

sibility all the more unavoidable in the light of Peking's accelerated effort to picture Moscow as being unfit for world Communist leadership. Simultaneously, the old-line Cuban Reds, traditionally Moscow-oriented, were assured a leading role in the government.

Next: Castro uneasy about Soviet reliability despite strong initial Soviet support.