

Cuba's New Beat

by Stephen Barber

Havana

The refugees include liberals, devout Catholics and people unwilling to "volunteer" for back-breaking weeks in the cane fields. Why does Castro let them go? He holds back technicians and men of conscript age. He is said to hope that the others will embarrass the United States by competing with Americans for jobs. And a fervent Castroite told me, "I don't envy the CIA the task of screening out the agents we are sure to slip into those planeloads."

The Cuban Revolution has passed into its life-is-real, life-is-earnest phase. The slogans of the hour have to do with egg and cattle production, sugar and a campaign against bureaucracy. Even the Bay of Pigs is now a dim memory. The 105mm batteries have gone from the Malecon. The *USS Oxford*, a communications ship reputed able to tap the island's entire microwave telephone system, sits plainly visible beyond territorial waters out at sea, monitoring comings and goings through the blockade; but even she is just part of the scenery now – a handy symbol of Washington's malevolence for the regime to invoke whenever its economic planning shortfalls become too glaring.

Such past follies as pressing headlong into industrialization – a phase to which the Russians contributed greatly by shipping out incongruous items like snow ploughs, and giant draglines operated by high tension electricity of which Cuba has none – can now be freely admitted. A young Chilean economist, an ardent Communist and one of the upper echelon of Castro's army of advisers – now bolstered by 3,000 or 4,000 Russian, East German and Czech technicians – told me: "Oh yes, we made many, many *bad* mistakes." Then he added gaily: "And we shall make more. But they won't be the same ones!"

Sugar is king again, but Castro is trying to bring up some princes. Russian help to this end is costing Moscow well over \$1 million a day directly, and more if one calculates how much the Russian tanker fleet could be earning in Western Europe if so much of it were not tied up on the long haul from the Black Sea to the Caribbean. The strain has created, as neutral diplomats here see it, an ironical parallelism of Russian and American interests; neither superpower is ready to tolerate more Cubas.

Almost all Cubans are either utterly pro- or im-

placably anti-Castro. But it is no longer true that they are starving, which is the picture many refugees present on reaching US shores. Food was very short last year but is now adequate, if monotonous. A British agronomist – an entirely apolitical type engaged in improving Zebu cattle for the European market, who is simply here "for the experience," plus \$3,000 a year paid into his London bank, and ample pesos, house and transport while in Cuba – told me: "For seven million people on an island half the size of England, given some first-class soil and valuable nickel deposits, not to mention excellent fishing possibilities, all of which exist here, it would require quite prodigious indolence and mismanagement for them to go hungry for long."

The snag is that a sizable number of Cubans – the *Habaneros* particularly – have lived so long as an extension of the American market that their standards of what is and is not acceptable are higher than can be realized in a hurry. Because it was easier – and more profitable for the landowner, not to mention United Fruit – to concentrate on sugar to fill the generous US quota that once was allotted to Cuba, normal food crops were neglected. It was cheaper to import vegetables and even cattle fodder from America. More dollars were readily earned, too, by turning Havana into a cross between Las Vegas and Port Said, dominated by the Mafia and catering to gambling and all the exotic variants of sin.

Reaction to the "bad old days" has produced a certain puritanism, but has failed to kill dancing and jazz completely. The Mozambique craze started by the Negro band leader, Pello el Afrikan, has now swept Europe. Pello is so popular, despite his notorious affairs with women – one of whom recently committed suicide – that Fidel this year cut a record with him, allegedly having written the lyrics himself, of a wildly rhythmic sugar harvest song.

Elaborate preparations are under way for the "anti-imperialist" Tricontinental Conference of African, Asian and Latin American Revolutionary Solidarity that is to open January 3. More than 500 delegates are expected to throng those increasingly dilapidated monuments to Havana's glittering past – the former Hilton, the Riviera, George Raft's Capri and its lush Red Room Casino, where the wheels whirl no longer. Cannibalized Cadillacs are being refurbished to ferry the delegates around in the festive interludes between their formal labors.

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These people will not all be Communists, the Cuban hosts explain. "They represent the entire spectrum of progressive national liberation movements" — everything from Dr. Nkrumah's Ghanaian Convention People's Party to whatever Dr. Sukarno's followers will be calling themselves by New Year. "The fundamental objective will be to trace a program of common struggle," the Cubans say.

Last month the Moroccan president of the Tricontinental's international committee was mysteriously kidnapped in Paris. He is — or was — El Mahdi Ben Barka, leader of the Opposition in Rabat. This was relished here as evidence that the wicked reactionaries are shaking in their shoes. Where was the CIA in this? Ah ha!

It will be fascinating to see if China sends delegates, and if they clash publicly with the Russians. The trouble with solidarity is that of late it has tended — as witness the latest Algiers experience — to come noisily unstuck. At first sight the aim of the Havana meeting would seem to be to put Castro back on the map as Latin America's top revolutionary. But it is widely believed that Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, when he visited Havana on his way back to Moscow from the UN last month, advised Castro to restrain his exuberance, and brother Raul, now in Moscow, is supposedly getting the same message.

In Castro's capital today the Chinese are "out." Following the 1962 missile crisis, they were very much "in," as the Russians lost considerable face when Khrushchev backed down before Kennedy. But much has happened since. Whereas Gromyko's visit occasioned a Fidelista fiesta, only two minor ministers were assigned to attend the Peking Embassy's national day reception in Havana in October. Sin Hua, the Chinese press service, has been banned. Chinese students at Havana University, who tried artlessly to pass out bundles of propaganda attacking Moscow's "revisionism," were recently roughed up by their Cuban fellows — spontaneously, so to say.

At mass meetings on September 28 and October 3 — those in which Castro offered to let the *gusanos* (worms) flee to the US — he also unveiled the reasons for the mysterious disappearance of Ernesto Che Guevara, his pro-Peking number-two man — and potential rival — together with the third structural change in Cuba's government in six years. Cuba has now, at last, been formally declared a Communist Republic — *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* — complete with a Politburo and 100-member Central Committee. And Rafael Rodriguez, the old Muscovite party-liner, was put in charge of the constitutional committee that is to hammer out the rest of the frame.

Che is being lauded these days in a way that, as a cynical European Communist put it to me, would be quite impossible were he not politically dead in Cuba. His famous farewell letter to Fidel, supposedly written

in March this year after a soul-searching secret session between the two, has been posted up in facsimile in post offices for all to read. In it, he renounced his Cuban citizenship — and presumably reverts to being an Argentine — along with his cabinet posts.

Some State Department luminaries in Washington have lately hinted that Che is dead. Castro has flatly denied it. The Havana theory is — at least, in Communist circles — that he has gone already, or is preparing to go, to somewhere in Central or South America to fulfill the program he spelled out for himself in his "Guerrilla War — A Method," in which he prophesied that "the Andes will be the Sierra Maestra of Latin America," and urged the creation of a central command to coordinate guerrilla activities "in the life-and-death struggle with imperialism" in Venezuela, Guatemala, Colombia and Ecuador — which countries he specifically named.

Castro — and for that matter the Kremlin — may wish him well in such a new venture. But neither, facing as they must domestic realities, may be keen on his being in too much of a hurry, if only because they have quite enough on their hands for the moment to get Cuba on its feet by the 1970's.

Latino rebel cadres from most South American states have undergone training in the guerrilla arts in Cuba since 1959. But neutral opinion here today is that the departure, voluntary or otherwise, of Che has meant a sharp reduction in that program. Che is now officially disassociated from Cuba, if only to try and exculpate Havana in advance from any future hemisphere adventures. It is worth noting, too, that non-Cuban Communists in this city make little attempt in conversation, even with Westerners like myself, to pretend that in their eyes Castro himself is anything but an improvised Marxist-Leninist, however fervently he may declare himself as among the devout.

"Fidel is a consummate political animal, who keeps three balls in the air like a juggler," one of these told me. "He sees that old-line Cuban Communists get their share of the top jobs along with the ex-guerrilla Fidelistas and the 26th of July underground people — the student crowd of the Batista days. But you can look for yourself: everyone in his Politburo is a Fidelista. Real Communists only show up in the Central Committee, the second echelon."

Fidel Castro is a declared Communist, Russian-model, today because he who pays the piper calls the tune. If he tries dancing to another, the Kremlin will not like it. But while he is licensed to indulge in all the loud declamatory talk he wishes against the American arch-enemy, precipitate external actions seem to be ruled out for him for the present.

"He is difficult to live with," the Muscovite Communist remarked cryptically. "But, for Cuba, he is harder to live without."