

Book Review

Cuba and Revolutionary Latin America: An Oral History

Dirk Kruijt

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During the so-called Cold War days, many believed, and some still do, that Cuba and its people were simply a mindless lapdog of the Soviet Union. In an era of intense myopia, deep critical and historical analysis frequently goes awry. A pervasive context of groupthink leaves little space for other interpretations. The issue around Cuba is far more complex, and the work discussed here, provides some new perspective on times gone by and current developments.

This publication by Dirk Kruijt², renowned Latin American specialist, deals with Cuba and its political activities in Latin America since 1959 and up to 2017. The work stands squarely in the qualitative research tradition. The data collected in the field is substantially backed up by archival research. This research project was executed over a number of years.

Kruijt attempts to bring the experience of the Cuban people and their leadership's thinking and action at home and abroad, up close and personal. In this sense, the work tries to provide the proverbial 'slice of life' as it is known in qualitative research. In qualitative research, the researcher him- or herself becomes but another tool of the research process, and Kruijt does not claim to have a 'God's-eye view' or to be 'objective'. He is far too experienced to do so. He tells the story of archives and oral history of a people. This book traces the work and influence of Cuba's revolutionary generations in Latin America and the Caribbean between 1959 and into the twenty-first century. It is the first systematic qualitative research project published on the internationalisation of the Cuban Revolution in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The book is based on a set of 90 interviews with Cuban veterans and state officials, including those involved in foreign affairs and external deployments. Interviews, diaries, testimonial publications and solicited as well as unsolicited materials, documents and notebooks add to the extensive collage. Thorough consultation of Cuban archives adds strength to the text.

Two primary sets of interviews were used. The first set consisted of 30 interviews with Cuban international combatants of all ranks covering the years 1952 to 1962. Most of these interviews focused on the home front in Cuba and the Cuban revolution itself. These life stories and testimonials formed an important first step on which to expand during the second round of interviews. The first set of interviews was conducted between March and October 2011. The second cycle of interviews followed between November 2011 and March 2013 (with some further interviews a few years later). The second cycle of interviews focused on the role of Cuba in Latin America in terms of support for revolutionary movements and facilitation of workable relations between divided – even antagonistic – revolutionary movements. The 24 interviews during the second cycle were mostly held with persons who worked in the Cuban Departamento América dedicated to work in Latin America (p. 5). These interviews were complemented with earlier interviews, which Kruijt conducted elsewhere in the course of his other research projects in Latin America since 1985. The supplementary materials in the form of field notes, notes and transcriptions of earlier interviews add value to the final product. Interviews in this category were conducted in countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela. Kruijt describes his qualitative methodology, the research setting and treatment of interviews in detail (pp. 3–6).

In typical ‘rich description’, a variety of issues are addressed, in this case, previous Cuban and Latin American colonial experiences, foreign interventions in Latin American politics, Cuban (revolutionary) politics, economic transformation, cultural values, political challenges and choices as well as consistent attempts by Cuba to maintain its national identity and its chosen socialist economic pathway. Issues of external threats, counter-measures to deal with such threats and Cuba’s involvement outside the island in Latin America enrich a remarkable historical, socio-economic and communal publication.

In this regard, some comparative elements enter the picture and provide for rich settings, as qualitative researchers refer to the areas and people within a selected living space and time.

Seven chapters tell the story.

Chapter 1, in dealing with the background to the study, its rationale and methodology, shares useful information. Chapter 2 introduces the legacy and consequences of colonialism in Latin American and, more specifically, Cuba. As part of the broader collage, references are made to Western colonialism in Africa and the global South. Links between Cuba and the rest of Latin America and the Latin American struggles for

independence from the Spanish and North American aggressors long before the so-called Cold War are discussed. This is most helpful in providing a fuller historical picture than the myopic Cold War interpretation with which many Western academics and military staff grew up and then shared their views with willing listeners. The work enlightens one about Spanish and United States (US) colonialism and hegemonic aspirations from early on (for this part, a thorough archival and literature study was used in tandem). The Latin American and Cuban wars for independence led by the poet, politician, journalist and soldier, José Martí, which started in 1895, are justifiably referred to.

Cuba's liberation struggle cascaded into US intervention during the Spanish–American War. Between 1898 and 1902, Cuba was subjected to US occupation (the peace agreement between Spain and the United States excluded the Cubans). It is less well known that the use of concentration camps by the Spanish and the United States led to thousands of Cuban deaths. Interestingly, at the same time, German colonisers under their Kaiser did the same in terms of Herero and Nama people in what is now Namibia, with the German actions coinciding with the genocide of the Herero people (1903–1904). At the same time, during the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902), the British Imperial forces in South Africa extensively used concentration camps holding white and black civilians to break the resilience of the guerrillas in the field. Historically, such mentalities of superiority led to large-scale and brutal transgressions of human rights (one may be forgiven for reflecting upon the notion of a triangle of evil at the time, namely Washington, London and Berlin). The experience of social dislocation and enforced concentration camps was – just as in Namibia and South Africa – to remain in the collective memory of the Cuban people: a remembrance not forgotten and part of the social psyche of the Cuban people and others that experienced the same.

In 1933, Fulgencio Batista, with US backing, came to power following a coup in Cuba. An era of extreme corruption and exploitation followed until Batista was forced to flee before the forces of Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Camilo Cienfuegos and others (1959). The chapter briefly touches on the debilitating sanctions imposed on Cuba by the United States as regional and global hegemon, ill at ease with the strong-willed, non-pliant small nation in its proverbial backyard. Through the interviews, more light is shed on US political interventions to influence or sanction (or topple at whim) governments in Latin America that were not pliant enough for the liking of the political masters in Washington. Fast forward, and we see Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. On a contemporary side-note: if Trump had remained president of the United States, quite a few other countries were to see aggressive military enforced regime changes imposed from afar, such as Iran and North Korea. But then, Biden might be a Barack Obama and agree to topple others, such as Obama did in Libya during 2011. Given the deeply divided American society and an imploding economy, turbo-charged by a massive arms industry, quite a few things can still happen.

Argentina declared its independence in 1816, Brazil in 1889 and Chile in 1818. In the latter case, the United States later engineered, among others, a coup against Salvador Allende, which brought the pro-US President Augusto Pinochet to power, a dictator who oversaw mass human rights abuses and led a dirty war (*guerra sucia*) against his

own people. During his rule, more than 30 000 ‘enemies’ of the state disappeared, never to be seen again.³

Chapter 3 provides a portrait of the rise of what Kruijt refers to as the “revolutionary generation” (pp. 43 ff.). This era marked a move away from insurgency towards socialist thinking (pp. 43 ff.). Chapter 4 relates to Cuban involvement with other liberation and revolutionary movements on the continent of Latin America. Chapters 5 and 6 trace the complexities of Cuban involvement on a spectrum from revolutionary support to mediation between liberation movements and attempts to resolve conflict amidst internal civil strife in some Latin American countries, such as Colombia.

Not so well known are the attempts by Cuba to moderate violence and to achieve peaceful settlements and negotiated resolutions to Latin American conflicts at various stages, especially during the late 1980s and 1990s. In the frenzy of the US media attacks on Cuba since 1959, Cuban attempts to stabilise (or at least pointing out the benefits of peace after civil wars), was ignored by those suffering from the north-western bound gaze. Such Cuban diplomatic efforts, as regional peacemaker, did not fit at the time and for many, still do not fit today and hence were not reported upon in Anglo-American and Euro media. Little of this history is known outside Latin America. Chapter 6 discusses in detail Cuban soft power before and after 1990 up to today. In the concluding chapter, Chapter 7, the legacy of Cuba’s involvement on the Latin-American continent is related (pp. 200 ff.).

As part of informing the reader, Kruijt spends time sharing how the Cuban revolution influenced cultural expressions and lifestyle changes, emerging and evolving cultural role models and changes in education as well as changes in family and gender relations (p. 42). Kruijt – making use of the interviews – creatively links childhood socialisation and historical memory in Cuba to the changes in values towards a socialist society and the political concretisation of a new society.

Kruijt then turns to revolutionary movements, the convictions and world views of the leaders and participants and how they today, years later, reflect on their past. The regime change in 1959 and its internal and external outcomes are outlined. Through this series of interviews with people from high to low ranks in the political and economic life of Cuba, the work brings one close to human experiences of a society in an attempted fundamental social transformation. Some insights gained from Kruijt’s data contradict the stereotype in the United States and other Western media that all Cubans revolutionaries were socialist, Marxist or Leninist:

“I became a revolutionary doing it, without being communist, without being socialist, without such ideas, [only by] doing so, making a revolution, to transform our society, to make it better, more just, more human, more equal” (Angela Elvira Diaz Vallina, research participant, p. 63). Partly because of such attitudes, the Cuban socialist experiment was different in content and quality from others, i.e. Marxism–Leninism, Stalinism or Maoism – indeed, it was a socialism of a different kind. Cuban cultural values were simply different and the notion of revolution was moulded largely by national and cultural values.

By now and more so after the Bay of Pigs (Playa Girón) fiasco, relationships with the United States froze and Cuba and the Soviet Union developed closer ties (p. 63). Following a previous more or less successful attempt by the United States to topple the government of Abenz in Guatemala (1954), a similar exercise was planned for Cuba. The attempt to topple the Castro government failed resulting in an embarrassment for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the US political leadership. The incident became the laughing stock of the 'Third World' and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). One reason for failure was the myopic politico-military 'groupthink' by US leadership (groupthink: a term coined by Irving Janis [1972] where decision-makers decide uncritically within a close circle on action, unable to listen to others and ignoring evidence contrarily to their thinking. A short reflection by the reviewer here: Apartheid as a socio-political experiment (social engineering) and the militarisation of state and society after 1970, also demonstrated the pervasive phenomenon of groupthink).

Groupthink among US strategists was but one reason for this spectacular failure. Firstly, the CIA security measures, while they were training the rebel-invading force in Guatemala and Nicaragua, were poor, and information about the place of landing and numbers of American-backed forces was well known to Cuban intelligence services beforehand (p. 68). Secondly, Cubans were far from dissatisfied with the leadership of Castro while the US decision-makers convinced themselves that Castro was unpopular (again groupthink) while the opposite was true.

The freezing of relations between the United States and the comprehensive sanctions imposed on Cuba brought the Cuban government and the Soviet Union closer to each other, Kruijt argues. Views about the closer Cuban–Soviet relations differed. In Kruijt's study, some research participants observed (some somewhat wryly) that the Partido Socialista Popular (Popular Socialist Party of Cuba) "never broke its allegiance to Moscow, [but] Moscow never backed Cuba's support for revolutionary movements abroad, regarding such efforts as adventurism" (p. 64).

The Cuban missile crisis followed. The crisis worsened US–Cuban relations and brought about sanctions against Cuba aiming at crippling the Cuban economy and, per incidence, trying to prove that Cuban socialism was a failure.

By this time, the Cuban Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR) had grown to between 470 000 and 510 000 men and women. At the time, it was the largest military force in Latin America and bigger than (comparable) countries anywhere in the world (p. 125). Today, the Cuban Veteran's Association (Asociación de *Combatientes* de la Revolución de Cuba) or ACRC established in 1993, has 330 000 members (p. 77).

From the interviews conducted, Kruijt argues, "the impact of the Cuban Revolution on the Latin American armed left was immense. In nearly all Latin American countries guerrilla movements emerged ... (most of them, if not all) drawing inspiration from the Cuban insurgency against dictator Batista". One exception was the Peruvian (Maoist) Shining Path guerrilla leadership (p. 79). Cuban instructors were supplied, but never exceeded more than 20 staff (pp. 79 ff.). The value of such deployments was not always

positive, and critical reflection about lessons learnt was frequently necessary. In some cases, the Cuban presence meant facilitating communication between groups at odds with each other; in other cases, it necessitated mediating conflict and the creation by Cuban-deployed platforms of interaction in close consultation with Havana (Chapter 4).

One of the themes that kept recurring in the interviews was that Cuba was not unwilling to play a pivotal role in solidarity with others in the Latin American struggle. The *Second declaration of Havana* (1962) suggests that revolution cannot be exported, but is made by people and that Cuba provided an example of revolutionary commitment and moral support (p. 82). Cuba also held the First Tri-continental Conference, a solidarity meeting between Asians, Africans and Latin America (1966). At the occasion, members from 82 countries, including Latin America, were present (p. 82). The meeting resolved, “in the struggle against imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism people had the inalienable right to complete independence and to resort to all forms of struggles including armed struggles to achieve this” (p. 82). In this regard, the old debate on the Cold War creeps up: was the so-called ‘Cold War’ a rationale to expand interests or was it the result of actions by people or communities to rid themselves of colonial oppression and its later variants?

Based on his extensive interviews, Kruijt argues that cooperation with Africa was established with African liberation movements through the Directorate of Intelligence. For contact with Latin American movements, the Departamento America was established (p. 84). This was led by Manuel Losada. The Ministerio del Interior (MININT) or Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores (MINREX) or Ministry of Foreign Affairs also worked closely together when so required. Kruijt harvesting data from the interviews, discusses this in detail in Chapters 3 to 5.

The interviews hint at the experiences of those who did duty in other Latin American countries. A quote illustrates, “all our missions were risks, we were always observed by American special services in the countries where we operated” (p. 88).

The Cuban security and intelligence services had to find their way between ideological disparities, splits and divergences in, for example, Salvador, Guatemala, Columbia, Nicaragua and Venezuela. As one Latin American revolutionary participant in an earlier interview shared with Kruijt, “[w]e were Marxist–Leninists versus Marxist–Leninists–Maoists or socialisms based on different assumptions” (p. 98). Some of these interpretations followed a Guevara angle. It is well known that Che Guevara was sceptical about socialist models from the North – or for that matter from the East – when it came to application in Latin America and Cuba Kruijt mentions various people who were involved in finding their way through such a fog of clashing opinions and yet willing to assist in the “struggle” (pp. 86 ff.).

Research participants shared with Kruijt that, when they came to government in 1959, they knew little about intelligence and counter-intelligence and had to start from scratch, educating each other and learning through trial and error. Interestingly Lattel, a CIA officer at the Latin American desk during 1964, remarked that by the 1990s, he

considered Cuban intelligence to be “one of the five or six best such organisations in the world and has so been for decades” (p.91). Cuban operators infiltrated deeply into the anti-Castro Miami organisations and even the CIA (pp. 98–99). By doing so, numerous assassination plots aimed at Fidel Castro were uncovered (some sources suggest that there were at least 300 such failed attempts, but this may be exaggerated). Numerous attempts to export sabotage to Cuba were discovered timely and prevented.

The role of the church in Latin America is less known to academics and laymen outside the Spanish-speaking world and is worth mentioning. In Latin America, the church played an important role in the struggle for justice and equality. This did not prevent the US-backed military juntas in Argentina and Chile murdering hundreds of priests and church workers (something about which the United States and Western media stayed mum). In Chile alone, the number of ‘disappeared’ was more than 30 000. The role of church leaders in these times of resistance during the 1970s should not be underestimated. Frequently, church leaders took on the struggle against capitalist exploitation and political oppression. Among others, Kruijt refers to the role of the Movimiento Estudiantil Cristiano (MEC) in Cuba and elsewhere initiated by Camilo Torres (p. 129). The journal *Christianismo y Revolucion* was widely read (at great personal risk) throughout Latin America (p. 141). “We are not anybody’s backyard and definitely not for sale”, one bishop remarked (p. 155).

The Theology of Liberation became influential in Latin America. Liberation theologians emphasised the “moral relationship between religious ethics and political activism for the benefit of the poor, the exploited and the victims of persecution and injustice” (p. 128). Camilo Torres and many other theologians and church workers were to die in Latin America following this radical calling (interestingly enough, liberation theology in Latin America deeply influenced the [black] theology of liberation in South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s).

Kruijt rightly observes that in Latin America, there was a strong intellectual (and activist) nexus between liberation theology, dependency theory, Marxist sociology and philosophy (p. 129). In Cuba, the theological works of Camilo Torres, Jose Bonino and Gustavo Gutierrez were well known and read (pp. 129 ff.).⁴ And; by many in South Africa together with South African liberation theologians.

Propaganda campaigns against Cuba stereotyped (and even today stereotype) Cuban socialism and its followers as Marxist–Leninist. Another picture emerged through the interviews. Many participants reported that they also read Western (European) Marxists, such as Herbert Marcuse, an influential neo-Marxist. Especially his work, *The one-dimensional man*, was popular (p. 131). Just as widely read was Marcuse’s work *Eros and civilization* (p. 131). Various research participants suggested that Castro was never a dogmatic subscriber to Soviet politics. They argued (perhaps in reflection?) that he applied pragmatically what was useful and disregarded what was not useful in the Cuban context (pp. 127–128).

Chapter 6 is perhaps the most interesting chapter in this book. Kruijt focuses on the years of soft power and Cuba's role in facilitating peace in the neighbourhood. The major role that Cuba played in enhancing negotiated settlements in Guatemala and Columbia is discussed (pp. 207 ff.). Cuba's role in providing medical training in Latin America from early on, but especially during the 1990s and 2000s and the phenomenon of 'health tourism' (people from Latin America, Europe and the East visiting Cuba for medical treatment), are referred to in brief. This comes as no surprise as it is well known that Cuba's medical training standards are high, and research in the field of medicine internationally, cutting edge. In 1998, Fidel Castro advanced the idea of a medical school for Latin Americans. In 1999, this facility, the *Escuela Latinoamericana de Ciencias Médicas* (ELAM) was opened (p. 190). Perhaps for this reason, many people still become angry about Cuban medical contributions. Could it be jealousy, one wonders. The same criticism is seldom levelled at Western medical personnel serving in other countries.

Kruijt's work also refers to the renewed attempts by the United States during the 1990s to put Cuba under pressure through increased sanctions. The Torricelli Bill of 1992, for example, imposed even harsher sanctions. Nothing new here since 1959.

According to the research participants, after relative economic prosperity during the 1970s and 1980s, the 'special period' during the 1990s was economically stressful. More countries were abandoning their policies of economic sanctions against Cuba since the 2000s, seeing it as unnecessary, short-sighted and harmful; yet, the 1990s saw serious economic challenges (this period is frequently referred to by Cubans as 'the special period').

For a short period under Barack Obama, it looked as if some détente between Cuba and the United States would open up. Obama, seriously hampered by hawks such as Hillary Clinton, however, could not move beyond symbolic politics (reviewers' opinion). If there was a gap for Obama later on to better relations, the possibility was destroyed when the volatile and unpredictable Donald Trump was elected as president. What will happen after Trump, recently defeated, but not less verbal, remains an open question.

Kruijt concludes that left and centre-left governments in Latin America are part of the heritage of the Cuban Revolution, but that does not mean any staying power or future political developments will guarantee this. In the view of the reviewer, the rise of a far-right political leader in Brazil is but one example that the 'Left' may not have the staying power, which on the other side does not mean that the so-called 'Left' in Latin-America will disappear as a phenomenon or historical agent. Recent US covert activity as late as November 2020 related to engineered regime change in Latin America is one example. Will Biden handle it better? Or will it be more of the same?

This work by Kruijt is an example of a thorough qualitative study. Rather than generalisability or external validity, qualitative researchers refer to internal reliability. The author succeeded to let the participants speak from their world of experience, rather

than himself. At heart, this is what qualitative research is about. The book is worth reading for social and historical reasons as well as for being a model of how to conduct an extensive qualitative research process (longitudinal qualitative study) in history. In reading this work, many may differ, because the world around us is, as we know, a constructed reality. For those interested in fresher views on Latin America, this is without doubt a work to read and share with peers and students.

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- ³ Various sources quoted in I Liebenberg. "Truth and reconciliation processes and civil-military relations: A qualitative exploration". PhD dissertation. Stellenbosch University, 2008; consult pp. 156, 184, 202 ff., 208 ff., 215, 352 ff.
- ⁴ JM Bonino's one work (1975) was titled *Doing theology in a revolutionary situation*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press and was widely available in Spanish. The work by C Torres was likewise widely published (although not always welcome and frequently banned). In Chile, having a copy almost certainly led to arrest and torture. Torres's work makes for interesting reading for those interested in grounded theology. The title of the German translation is C Torres. *Revolution als Aufgabe des Christen*. Munich: Kaiser Grunewald, 1981. English free translation: *Revolution as a Christian duty or imperative*.