

The Heroic Myth



“One thing is certain: wherever he may be, however and with whomever, Fidel Castro is there to win. I do not think anyone in this world could be a worse loser. His attitude in the face of defeat, even in the slightest events of daily life, seems to obey a private logic: he will not even admit it, and he does not have a moment’s peace until he manages to invert the terms and turn it into a victory.”¹ The man who wrote these words is the writer Gabriel García Márquez, a longstanding friend of the Máximo Líder. They give us some idea of what may have driven Fidel Castro for more than half a century to outlast his various enemies, opponents and critical friends: namely, a wish to be proved right, to be morally as well as politically victorious. No self-doubt: “his” Cuba for the Cubans! The final verdict on his “mission” would rest with history alone – although Castro also tried from the beginning to keep the last word for himself and to anticipate the verdict of history. In 1953, at his trial for the abortive attack on the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba which launched his career as a professional revolutionary, he concluded his famous defense plea with the certainty: “History will absolve me!” For García Márquez, “he is one of the great idealists of our time, and perhaps this may be his greatest virtue, although it has also been his greatest danger.”² Yet an even greater danger has always been lurking in the background: the danger of isolation. For only in isolation is there no possibility of contradiction.

With an iron will Castro has survived generations of American presidents, Soviet general secretaries, international leaders of states

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and governments, democrats and potentates, until he has become by far the longest-ruling “number one” of the twentieth century and one of the most interesting figures of contemporary history. Bearded, always dressed in his green uniform, a hero and object of hate in one: this is how the world knows him. Against no one else are so many murder plots supposed to have been hatched. Leaders who are so unyielding, so “unpolitical” in their refusal to compromise, do not usually survive for long in that part of the world; they tend to be overthrown or killed. The fact that Castro is still alive is little short of a miracle. It is due to the alliance of his own well-trained instinct with a ubiquitous security apparatus that is considered among the most efficient in the world. From soon after his twentieth birthday Castro had assassins and conspirators on his trail: political gangsters at Havana University in the late 1940s, henchmen of the dictator Fulgencio Batista, traitors in his own ranks, big landowners evicted during the Castroite revolution in 1959, Cuban exiles in Florida working hand in hand with the CIA and the Mafia. Their bosses, most notably the legendary Meyer Lansky, lost a fortune estimated at more than US\$100 million in hotels, clubs, casinos, brothels and other such establishments – a good tenth of the value of US assets taken over by the Cuban state. That a stubborn farmer’s son from the underdeveloped east of the island simply came and took away this lucrative paradise and sink of iniquity from the fine, upstanding United States; that he went on to humiliate the “Yankees” and President Kennedy in the eyes of the world when they attempted an invasion with exiled Cuban mercenaries in 1961 at the Bay of Pigs; that Soviet nuclear missiles installed for his sake in Cuba nearly led in 1962 to a third world war – these deep narcissistic wounds will never be forgiven, even after his death, by the great power to the north.

There are scarcely any photos that show Castro laughing. Yet the Cubans are a spirited people full of *joie de vivre*. Gabriel García Márquez described Castro as “one of the rare Cubans who neither sing nor dance.”³ He is said to have a good sense of humor – but it is as if he has forbidden himself any public display of laughter or pleasure. Such things are secret, and it is a state secret whether there is a private Castro behind the political Castro.

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Information about himself and his family is filtered for public consumption, becoming partly contradictory or inaccurate. On the whole, then, not much can be gleaned about his personal life. We know that his marriage came to an early end, that he had a few passionate affairs such as those with Natalia Revuelta (once the most captivating woman in Havana) and Marita Lorenz (a German captain's beautiful daughter who was later contracted by the CIA to assassinate him). He has one son from his marriage, Fidelito, a nuclear scientist with a doctorate, as well as several children born out of wedlock and a host of grandchildren. In each case, so it is said, he is a kind yet strict father or grandfather – yet Alina, his daughter by Natalia Revuelta, keeps tormenting him with her hatred. It is well known that Castro likes to go swimming and diving; that he enjoys baseball, sleeps little and has a mania for working at night; that he had to give up smoking cigars for health reasons; that he lives an ascetic existence with few material demands, but is fond of ice cream and likes to cook spaghetti for himself. When García Márquez once found him in a melancholic mood and asked what he would most like to do at that moment, Castro astonished his friend with the answer: “Just hang around on some street corner.”⁴ Did he ever think that perhaps he ought to have become a baseball player? He certainly had the opportunity. For in his student days, he was such a good pitcher that the New York Giants offered him a professional contract. Had he accepted, part of world history would have taken a different course.

Instead, this son of a big landowner from eastern Cuba felt called to lead a handful of comrades – including the Argentinean Che Guevara, later deified as a pop icon of the sixties generation – in a movement to bring down the dictator Batista. Since 1959 Castro has ruled his people like a large family, with the stern hand of a patriarch. The whole island is his “latifundium.” He wants to be seen not as its owner, however, but as its trustee. Under his rule, sweeping reforms have made Cuba's health and education systems unparalleled in Latin America and beyond; and for the first time Cubans have been able to develop a national identity, even maintaining it through a period of political and economic dependence upon the Soviet Union. These achievements, and

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not just the ever-present straitjacket of state security, may be one of the reasons why Castro's system has been able to last so long despite its lack of democratic and material freedoms. For decades now the majority of Cubans have lived with a split mentality: on the one hand, a love-hate relationship with the United States and a longing for the life conjured up by the glitter of Western globalization; on the other hand, admiration and respect for Fidel as their patron even in times of greatest hardship.

Although Fidel Castro seems to have taken more after his father, we should not underestimate the influence that his mother's strict Catholicism and his long years at a Jesuit boarding school had upon his essential character. It is no accident that he has repeatedly drawn parallels between early Christianity and his understanding of socialism, even if he has long been in conflict with the official Church. In this way, he has over the years developed an "ideology" of his own that involves more than just the adoption of Soviet-style Communism. His Caribbean model of socialism is "Castroism," or, as Cubans say, "Fidelism" – a pragmatic mixture of a little Marx, Engels and Lenin, slightly more Che Guevara, a lot of José Martí, and a great deal indeed of Fidel Castro. Martí was the Cuban fighter who, in the late nineteenth century, launched the decisive struggle for the country's independence from Spain; Castro identified with him from early youth and always saw himself in the role of his heir and descendant. "He knows the 28 volumes of Martí's work thoroughly," writes García Márquez, "and has had the talent to incorporate his ideas into the bloodstream of a Marxist revolution."⁵ Martí, who was killed in the early months of war in 1895, was spared from seeing how the United States eventually intervened and, after the Spanish defeat in 1898, established its own dominance over the island. But on the day he died, he wrote with great concern to a friend: "Belittlement by a mighty neighbor who does not really know us is the worst danger for our American continent."⁶ Precisely this is the deeper cause of the Cuban-American and indeed the Latin American dilemma, and it will remain such after Castro himself has departed from the scene.