

INSIDE THE

CUBAN REVOLUTION

FIDEL CASTRO AND THE
URBAN UNDERGROUND

JULIA E. SWEIG

HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
LONDON, ENGLAND 2002

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sweig, Julia.

Inside the Cuban revolution :
Fidel Castro and the urban underground /
Julia E. Sweig.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-674-00848-0 (alk. paper)

1. Cuba—History—1933–1959. 2. Cuba—History—
Revolution, 1959—Underground movements.
3. Movimiento Revolucionario 26 de Julio. 4. Castro,
Fidel, 1927—Relations with revolutionaries.
5. Revolutionaries—Cuba—Attitudes. 6. Guerrillas—
Cuba—Attitudes. I. Title.

F1787.5 .S96 2002

972.9106'3—dc21 2002017151

Designed by Gwen Nefsky Frankfeldt

FOR REED, ISABEL, AND ALEXANDER

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Acknowledgments

This project began as graduate research, continued as a dissertation, and ended, to my great fortune, as a bona fide published book. I have accumulated many debts during that process and wish to extend my thanks to all of those individuals and institutions that have encouraged me to complete this endeavor.

The Council on Foreign Relations, where I work as senior fellow and deputy director of the Latin America program, graciously—in fact, insistently—allowed me to clear my desk of day-to-day duties in order to transform the text into a readable manuscript. Leslie H. Gelb, president of the Council, has been a true champion, demonstrating his commitment to nurturing young foreign policy scholars, giving me generous advice and, most important, the time and encouragement to finish this project. It is more than a dream come true to have been able to focus first on Cuba and now more broadly on Latin America at an institution of the Council's prestige, under Les Gelb's magnanimous leadership.

I am profoundly grateful for the advice and example of Kenneth Maxwell, distinguished senior Latin America scholar at the Council, who has enthusiastically encouraged me since the day I showed up at his door by reading portions of the manuscript and generously providing crucial advice and guidance. Larry Korb, the Council's vice president and director of Studies, deserves sincere thanks for nurturing my work. He, along with my close friend and adviser Walter Russell Mead, paved the way for my meeting Les Gelb and joining the Council. Mike Peters, Alton Frye, and Paula Dobriansky each provided much crucial advice along the way, as have Janice Murray, David Kellogg, and Patricia Dorff.

My research associate, Jessica Duda, worked far beyond the call of duty in providing last-minute research, reading and rereading, editing, and proofreading the final manuscript. She posed challenging questions throughout that forced me to clarify my argument and made this a far more coherent book than it could have been otherwise. I am truly fortu-

nate to have had such a spirited aide-de-camp during the final round of work. We were blessed this summer by the appearance of an intern, Margaret Myers, then an undergraduate at the University of Virginia. Her energy and wizardry in fact-checking and research came as an unexpected boon, for which we thank her. Tomás Amorín, Charlie Day, Theo Gemelas, Linda Harsh, Chris Sierra, Deepak Trivedi, Lorena Cohan, and Michael Marx McCarthy have my special thanks.

This work would not have been possible without the support of many individuals at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). The director of the Latin America program, Riordan Roett, opened many, many doors for me—and kept me from walking through some others. It wasn't exactly fashionable to wear one's motherhood on one's sleeve in my particular field, but Dr. Roett had several working mothers in his graduate program whom he avidly supported as we raised babies, produced books, and built careers. Moreover, his intellectual and institutional guidance was consistently of great value. My thesis adviser, Piero Gleijeses, gave me the confidence and support I needed to launch this project. I am grateful to him for the many hours he spent reading chapters, talking over my research, and helping me navigate through the often choppy waters of politics and bureaucracy that a project of this nature inevitably confronts. I say more about the value of his guidance in "About the Research." Wayne Smith deserves my heartfelt gratitude for trusting me with one of his projects, *CubaINFO*, and for his guidance, friendship, and time since I moved to Washington, D.C. in 1987. Franklin Knight's comments on my chapters and insights into Cuban history were indispensable, as was his camaraderie and support when we met on research trips in Cuba. Cynthia McClintock of George Washington University read the manuscript and volunteered to sit on my committee, and I thank her for her valuable comments and generosity with her time. At the Bologna program, I was fortunate that John Harper encouraged me to begin pursuing some of the ideas herein. My thanks go as well to Steven Szabo, academic dean at SAIS, Peter Promen, Linda Carlson and the entire staff of the SAIS library, and finally Diane Monash, for her support to all of us in the Latin America program.

I also benefited along the way from research assistance by Jon Elliston, Lourdes Prado, Ben Smith, and Carol Sweig. My best friend, Jaimie Sanford, spent a week with me at the Eisenhower Library in Abilene, Kansas, sifting through government records. David Haight, senior archivist at the Eisenhower Library, provided energetic assistance during my research there. Three friends who are also accomplished writers, William Arkin,

Robin Broad, and Marianne Szegedy Maszak, gave me desperately needed advice in organizing the material and structuring the story. Gail Reed, Virginia Schofield, and Janet Shenk are true friends and great critics. Consuelo García also deserves many thanks, as do June Erlich, Steven Goldstein, Bunny Kolodner, Martin Poblete, Stephen Schlesinger, Victor Wallis, and Cora Weiss. The novelist Barbara Raskin treated me like a writer long before this project came close to resembling a book. Her vote of confidence and the friendship of her family have stayed with me long since her untimely passing.

Though they are in no way responsible for the work at hand, I want to acknowledge the intellectual debts I have to several accomplished scholars and observers of Cuban history and politics: in the United States, María de los Angeles Torres, Fulton Armstrong, Philip Brenner, Jorge Domínguez, Peter Kornbluh, William LeoGrande, Marifeli Pérez-Stable, and Louis A. Pérez, Jr.; and in Cuba, Pablo Armando Fernández, Soraya Castro Mariño, Rafael Hernández, Gladys Marel García Pérez, and Oscar Zanetti. I wish also to thank the two anonymous readers during Harvard's review process, whose extensive comments helped me enormously to convert the text from thesis to book.

There is one individual who merits his own category of thanks: Saul Landau, documentary filmmaker, journalist, scholar, teacher, poet, and friend. I met Saul in 1983 when he came to teach at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Since then, he has encouraged me to write and think, especially about Cuba but about so many other things, first as a mentor, then as a boss, and now as a colleague and friend. He introduced me to Cuba almost twenty years ago. In ways too numerous to list, this project would simply not have been possible without him.

For financial support, I wish to thank the Dwight D. Eisenhower Foundation, the Johns Hopkins University Graduate Fellowship program at SAIS, the Cuba Exchange Program also of Johns Hopkins, the Latin America Studies Fellowship Program at SAIS, Hobart Spalding and the Wellspring Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Arca Foundation, and the General Services Foundation. Carol Bernstein Ferry and Ping Ferry, two legendary Americans and dear friends, provided support, financial and otherwise, and I am saddened that neither is here now to consider the final product.

In Cuba, my thanks go first to Dr. Pedro Álvarez Tabío, director of the Council of State's Office of Historic Affairs (OAH), the archive that contains the Cuban primary source documents that form the basis for this book. Over a three-year period, Tabío and his superb deputy, Elsa Montero Maldonado, graciously put the staff and records of the archive

at my disposal and helped arrange many of the interviews I conducted in Cuba. They willingly answered my questions and helped me locate materials even as my requests for material seemed to increase exponentially. My thanks go as well to Manuel López Díaz, director of the Institute of History, whose able staff facilitated my work there with generosity and patience. Also in Cuba, many individuals spent long hours with me talking through different aspects of this project, helped open doors I could not have otherwise pushed through myself, or simply offered friendship and warmth to me and my family during research trips to the island: Ramon Sánchez Parodi, Juan Escalona Reguera, José Antonio Arbesú, and Fernando García Bielsa helped me gain access to the OHA archives; Manuel Fraga, Hugo Yedra, Fernando Remírez, Patricia Semidet, Dagoberto Rodríguez, Josefina Vidal, Milagros Martínez, José Barrios, and Miguel Alvarez facilitated communications at crucial moments; José and María Josefa Fernandez and their family helped me with interviews; Rafael Hernández, Marisel Caraballo, Isabel Jaramillo, as well as Soraya Castro and Fernando García Yip and their family have shared many years of friendship; Gloria Leon Rojas, Antonio Lopez Lopez, and their family welcomed my own into their home and supported my research immeasurably; Elsa Montero Maldonado and José Gómez Abad championed this project; and Pablo Armando Fernández and Maruja Fernández opened their home and talked with me about the research on many occasions. Roberto González and Edelberto Lopez Blanche offered friendship and help at critical moments.

The forty-year-old friendship between Saul Landau in the United States and Pablo Armando Fernández in Cuba has spawned children and grandchildren in a vast extended family that connects many of us in the two countries. Despite the continued enmity between our two governments, these two are in many ways the godfathers of this book and of numerous other cultural and scholarly projects involving the United States and Cuba.

My grandparents Eli and Naomi Blumberg and my parents, Carol Sweig and James Lawry, made graduate school and summer research trips to Cuba possible with their love, support, and enthusiasm. My parents read many drafts of the manuscript, bless their hearts. Heidi Bourne and Michael Sweig, book lovers both, will, I hope, have fun with this one. Sam and Dorothy Sweig would have been wholeheartedly behind this project, had they lived long enough. And I hope that Howard Sweig will one day enjoy reading it.

My husband, Reed Thompson, is the true hero of all of this. In addition to being the über-Dad to our then toddler daughter during a sweltering

summer in Havana, he manned the fort at home during my many subsequent research trips, including the last, to select photos for the book, which meant I was in Cuba and not with my family on September 11, 2001. He read many drafts of the manuscript, listened to me talk about it endlessly, and gave me love and support that only the two of us can truly understand. My daughter, Isabel, now seven, already has her own sense of Cuban history—from direct experience and from following the twists and turns of what she once called “Mommy’s long story,” which I hope she will soon read to her younger brother, Alexander. And I am grateful to their grandmother, Mary Thompson, for her love and support along the way.

Finally, let me extend my sincere thanks to those at Harvard University Press who have dedicated themselves to publishing this book: Aida Donald, now retired, who first accepted this manuscript while it was still a dissertation; Kathleen McDermott, the History and Social Sciences acquisitions editor, who inherited the manuscript and enthusiastically shepherded it through to publication; and Julie Carlson, whose gentle, intelligent edits polished the manuscript.

Abbreviations

AAA	Friends of Aureliano Arango
ARO	Oriente Revolutionary Action
BRAC	Bureau of Anti-Communist Repression
CNOC	National Confederation of Cuban Workers
CTC	Confederation of Cuban Workers
DRE	Student Revolutionary Directorate
FCR	Civic Revolutionary Front
FEN	National Student Front
FEU	Federation of University Students
FON	National Workers Front
FONU	United National Workers Front
M267	26th of July Movement
MNR	National Revolutionary Movement
OA	Organización Auténtica
PSP	Popular Socialist Party
SAR	Society of Friends of the Republic

HYMN OF THE 26TH OF JULY

We're marching toward an ideal
Knowing we are bound to win;
For the sake of more than peace
and prosperity
We will all fight for liberty.

Onward, Cubans!
May Cuba reward our heroism
For we are soldiers who are
Going to free the motherland.

Cleansing with fire
That will destroy this infernal plague
Of undesirable governments
And insatiable tyrants
Who have plunged Cuba into evil.

The blood that flowed in Cuba
We must never forget.
Hence we must remain united
In memory of those who died.

The Cuban people,
Drowned in grief and wounded,
Have decided
To pursue without respite a solution
That will serve as an example
To those who have no pity.
And we are determined to risk
Our life for this cause:
Long live the Revolution!

—Augustín Díaz Cartaya

INTRODUCTION

History, Mythology, and Revolution

INSIDE THE CUBAN REVOLUTION revisits the story of one insurgent force in the 1950s, Fidel Castro's 26th of July Movement (M267), and its attempt to overthrow the regime of General Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar. Though the standard periodization of the *lucha contra la tiranía*, the struggle against the tyranny, dates between 1952 and 1959, the book begins in the early months of 1957, when Castro's rebels were just finding their bearings in the Sierra Maestra mountain range, and the 26th of July Movement ranked as one of several opposition forces on the island. The story reaches its climax in April of 1958 and draws to a close in the middle of that year, six months before Batista's flight from the island, when Castro's organization had become the hegemonic force in the opposition. Based on documentary material from heretofore inaccessible government archives in Cuba, this book examines the internal battles within Fidel Castro's revolutionary organization over politics, tactics, strategy, and ideology. Most of the documents have never been published and debunk several battleworn myths about how and by whom the Batista regime was overthrown.¹

One of the first pieces of conventional wisdom this book overturns relates to the Argentine doctor Ernesto "Che" Guevara de la Serna and his role in forging the historiography of the Cuban revolution. During the insurrection and until his death in Bolivia in 1967, Che played a central role not only in fighting the dictator but also in crafting the Cuban revolution's "founding fathers" myth: that a handful of bearded rebels with a rural peasant base singlehandedly took on and defeated a standing army, thereby overthrowing the dictator and bringing the revolutionaries to power. Che's role as historian emerged during the guerrilla war itself, when he kept a diary of the political and military battles of the twenty-five-month insurrection. After the revolutionary triumph, between 1959 and 1964, Guevara published polished versions of the diary entries in Cuban journals such as *Verde Olivo*. In 1963 he also published the com-

plete (but still edited) war diaries, as well as a number of other articles comprising a body of revolutionary theory, known later as the *foco* theory, which reinforced the central mythology of the Cuban insurrection.²

Virtually all of the scholarly, historical attempts to tell the story of how Castro overthrew Batista start with Guevara's emphasis on the rebel army or guerrilla war as the principal cause of Batista's demise. Guevara delineates two competing camps within the 26th of July Movement: the *sierra*, the rebels in the Sierra Maestra, and the *llano*, the largely middle-class and professional Cubans running the urban underground in Cuba's towns and cities. The *sierra-llano* rivalry, or the ideological, strategic, organizational, and political polarization between the armed rebels in the mountains and the clandestine militia in the cities, remains the leitmotif for subsequent accounts of how the 26th of July Movement seized power in January 1959.³

During the insurrection, Guevara had strategic and ideological run-ins with several members of the urban underground leadership, whom he regarded as insufficiently revolutionary and misguided in their commitment to an urban-based insurgency. When I asked the revolutionary student organizer and current president of the Cuban National Assembly, Ricardo Alarcón, why Che seemed to loathe the movement's urban leaders, he sighed and said, "I don't like to criticize Che. But on that subject he really didn't know what he was talking about."⁴ Nevertheless, Guevara's post-1959 writing about the Cuban insurrection contributed in large measure to widespread assumptions about the causes, evolution, and intensity of the *sierra-llano* conflict. It is significant, then, that the Cuban government, which has historically embraced the mythology that Che helped develop, has now released documents permitting a reinterpretation of this period in Cuban history.

THE SECOND myth this book attempts to overturn relates to the importance of the year 1959. Of course that year was a watershed moment in Cuban twentieth-century history. But almost all of the individual and institutional actors on the Cuban political stage in the late 1950s were consciously playing out a drama that in fact began during the Wars of Independence against Spain and the American intervention in 1898, and continued in the 1930s during the antidictatorial struggle to rid the country of President Gerardo Machado.⁵ It was during the Machado period that a younger generation of Cubans, whose ancestors had fought in the wars against Spain, took on a leading role in the island's politics and in the effort to resurrect the ideals of unity, sovereignty, and independence best personified in the figure of José Martí. The University of

Havana spawned various opposition and clandestine political-military groups, such as the University Student Directorate (DEU), the elusively named “ABC” (which stands for nothing), and its left wing, the Student Left Wing. Another group, Joven Cuba, was led by the former minister of interior under the “government of 100 days.” This transitional government emerged during the brief (1933–1934) presidency of a university professor, Ramón Grau San Martín, who had instituted a socially reformist, nationalist agenda. Grau San Martín had even abrogated the Platt amendment in 1933 before the United States officially repealed it the following year.

The 1930s also marked the period when the Communist Party, which grew to one of the largest Communist parties in Latin America, developed a significant political and organizational base among Cuban workers, particularly in the sugar industry, the lifeblood of Cuba’s economy. During this period, the National Confederation of Cuban Workers (CNOC), a powerful trade union movement heavily influenced by the communists, exploded onto the Cuban political and economic scene. CNOC was capable, for example, of organizing some one hundred strikes between 1934 and 1935, when, with American encouragement, General Fulgencio Batista withdrew his support for the Grau San Martín government, causing its collapse.⁶

Finally, with respect to the United States, the 1930s provided an important lesson to a Cuban generation bent on forging an independent, democratic nation. The intercessions of Franklin Roosevelt’s envoy to Cuba, Sumner Welles, to mediate the crisis between Machado and the Cuban opposition—a coalition that included students, intellectuals, a faction of the armed forces, labor, and initially the Communists—may have helped solve the immediate problem of removing a dictator from power.⁷ But by relying on the Americans to solve their internal problems, Cuban political forces, including many but not all of the 1930s generation, gave the United States *carte blanche* to continue this role well into the future—as Welles’s successor Jefferson Caffrey did together with Batista in removing the Grau-Giuteras regime. Indeed, Fulgencio Batista’s cooperation with subsequent American governments, and the perils of alliances with the armed forces, haunted the next generation of Cuban revolutionaries, who came to believe that they would fail if they continued to rely on either the Cuban armed forces or the U.S. government to achieve their ideals of sovereignty, independence, democracy, and social justice. Indeed, repeated American military interventions between 1898 and 1924, followed by continued political interference in Cuban domestic affairs under the Good Neighbor policy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, drove many

Cubans to seek to separate their country's political culture and economic life from the behemoth of the north. Yet FDR's New Deal also served as a beacon for many young Cubans, who believed that the distortions in the Cuban economy could be alleviated by a welfare state and a Keynesian economic model similar to that implemented by FDR.⁸

Between 1934 and 1940, starting with the first Grau presidency, Fulgencio Batista exercised de facto political control over seven nominally civilian governments, until agreeing to convene a constitutional assembly in 1939 and to hold democratic elections in 1940. Batista won these elections and, under the new and extraordinarily progressive 1940 constitution, presided over Cuba as a democratically elected president until 1944. The umbrella labor federation, by then named the Confederation of Cuban Workers (CTC), and the Communist Party participated actively in public debate and policy on labor rights, wages, and working conditions, while World War II boosted the development of domestic industries and small businesses on the island.⁹ At the same time, Grau and his still substantial Partido Revolucionario Cubano–A (also known as the Auténtico Party), formed in 1937, successfully challenged Batista in 1944 elections, winning the presidency for Grau.

In the early years of his presidency of 1944–1948, Grau continued the moderate, reformist social agenda that a somewhat reinvented Batista had initiated under the auspices of the 1940 constitution. But as World War II ended and the Cold War heated up, Grau came under pressure from his base in the Auténtico Party to wrest control from the Communists over the increasingly powerful CTC. Grau and his minister of labor, Carlos Prío Socarrás, a former student leader and political prisoner from the 1930s, orchestrated an Auténtico-led purge of the Communists from the CTC leadership and from the federation's provincial councils. As historian Jorge Ibarra wrote,

with the Auténtico party in power, the submissiveness and venality of the reformist labor leadership, headed by Eusebio Mujal, became manifest. Although the ascent of Auténtico unionists to positions of power in the CTC was the work of governmental and gang violence, and worker-employer relations from that time on were marked by corruption and capitulation to government policies, some reformist leaders managed to attain a certain prestige by satisfying demands of an economist character. The numerous mediations of the Auténtico governments in worker-employer conflicts were aimed at avoiding spontaneous or Communist-led strikes and protest movements by partially satisfying specific, limited worker demands, designed to strengthen the position of Mujal in the unions. The election of Auténtico labor leaders

in work centers became virtually a precondition necessary to ensure that the Ministry of Labor would show some favor to the workers in the conflicts with employers.¹⁰

There was a bitter irony in the way the Auténticos claimed the mantle of the thwarted revolutionaries of 1933, who had sought to forge a sovereign Cuban republic free of the trappings of both Spanish colonialism and American “*plattismo*.” For in creating their new regime, the Auténticos had begun to slip into a pattern of corruption and political patronage that the party founders themselves had hoped to excise from the island just a decade earlier. In 1947, a splinter of the Auténtico Party broke off to form the Partido Revolucionario Cubano–O, or the Ortodoxo Party. Led by the nationalist, populist orator Eduardo Chibás, the Ortodoxos sought to recover and reclaim the mantle of clean government and realize the progressive vision of Cuba embodied in the 1940 constitution. In 1948 elections, the Auténtico candidate, Carlos Prío, won the presidency over Chibás, initiating a period considered among the most polarized, corrupt, violent, and undemocratic in Cuba’s brief, post-Platt amendment, republican history.

A coup by General Batista against Prío on March 10, 1952, preempted presidential elections in which Batista was slated to run but unlikely to win against candidates from several opposition political parties, including Grau from the Auténtico Party and a second-tier candidate for the Ortodoxo Party, Roberto Agramonte, Sr. Agramonte had been chosen to run after the spiritual and political leader of the Ortodoxos, Eduardo Chibás, had committed suicide, perhaps accidentally, when he shot himself in a moment of high drama in 1951 during his weekly radio show in which he regularly excoriated the corruption of the Auténticos. Whether accidental or deliberate, the shot soon came to symbolize a wake-up call, or *aldabonazo*, for Cubans disillusioned with politics as usual. After the coup, both parties, by then bitter rivals, strained to build a political alliance, known in Cuban political parlance as a “pact,” that would strengthen the opposition and weaken Batista’s ability to stay in power. But a hard-core, Chibás-loyal wing of the Ortodoxo Party, of which Fidel Castro was a member, rejected all political alliances, coveting instead complete political independence as the path to Cuba’s redemption. Militant anti-Batista groups such as the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR), led by a member of the Student Directorate of the 1930s, philosophy professor Rafael García Barcena, began to attract young professionals, university students, and professors. In 1953, the MNR attempted to

stage an attack on a Cuban military base in a Havana suburb on Easter Sunday, but was preempted by Cuban police who arrested, tortured, and imprisoned García Barcena for two years.¹¹ Also at the universities, the Federation of University Students (FEU), led by the extraordinarily charismatic José Antonio Echeverría, developed a critique of Cuban politics and the *batistazo* with a strong social, political, and anti-imperialist bent. And Fidel Castro, who prior to the coup had prepared to run for Congress representing the Ortodoxo Party, soon abandoned the prospect for elections to bring about a peaceful, democratic transition and instead began recruiting men and women for clandestine preparations to assault an army barracks called Moncada. Of the 160 rebels, nearly half were captured, tortured, and murdered. Castro and twenty-six other surviving *moncadistas* and other supporters continued to collaborate in jail.¹² After his release from prison during an amnesty in 1955, Castro departed for Mexico to prepare an armed insurrection. During that time, the new revolutionary organization slowly blossomed, taking its name from the date of the Moncada attack: July 26, 1953. Many of García Barcena's followers, including Armando Hart, the young attorney who represented García Barcena and Faustino Pérez, as well as militant radicals from smaller clandestine organizations around the country such as Frank País, joined the 26th of July Movement after Castro's release from jail. Meanwhile, Carlos Prío, who managed to leave the country a wealthy man, funded an armed action group known as the Organización Auténtica (OA). Likewise, the FEU under Echeverría formed a militant offshoot, the Student Revolutionary Directorate (DRE). And though Batista had outlawed the Communist Party in 1952, Communists in local unions around the country, including sugar workers, continued to agitate and organize, even staging in 1955 (with Ortodoxo and independent trade union leaders and support from Echeverría's DRE) one of the largest strikes of sugar workers in Cuban history.

But in the middle of the decade it was by no means clear that armed insurrection was the only option for overthrowing the new Batista regime. Between 1955 and 1956, the moderate political opposition and civic groups formed the Society of Friends of the Republic (SAR), and attempted to negotiate as a bloc, and directly with General Batista, a solution to Cuba's political crisis. But the failure of those negotiations polarized Cuban politics further and for many, including the nascent insurgent groups, represented the nail in the coffin of a peaceful removal of Batista.¹³ Indeed, Batista's refusal to participate in early elections threw the moderate opposition into crisis, reinforced the rationale for armed insurgency, and initiated a new era of competition to overturn the dic-

tatorship within the moderate political opposition. The different approaches to ousting Batista were represented by, among others, the various factions and offshoots of the Ortodoxo and Auténtico parties, the radical, armed opposition, and armed insurgents fighting for tactical and strategic superiority in the drive not only to unseat the dictator but also to rid Cuba of corruption and longstanding *politiquería*, or dirty politics.¹⁴ After Batista's New Year's Eve flight from Cuba on December 31, 1958, it was Fidel Castro's 26th of July Movement that had accumulated sufficient political and military capital to install the first revolutionary cabinet. But a number of the subsequent political conflicts in the 1960s, particularly between what came to be the three primary revolutionary forces, Castro's 26th of July Movement, the DRE, and the Communist Party, known as the Popular Socialist Party (PSP), had their roots in the conflict within and among those three groups during the anti-Batista insurgency, just as the Cuban political crisis of the 1950s had its roots in the events of a generation earlier.

THE THIRD piece of conventional wisdom this book overturns relates to the role of Fidel Castro during the insurgency. Because of his enduring command of Cuban events since 1959, many still assume that Castro also had his hands in all of the major and minor decisions of the 26th of July Movement during the insurrection and was responsible for all of its failures and successes. An important example is a critical event in the Cuban insurrection and the climactic event of this book: the general strike of April 1958. In part because of the lack of primary source documents from the 26th of July Movement, most scholarly and popular treatments of the Cuban general strike of April 1958 blame Fidel Castro for its conception, timing, and implementation. The most influential of these is the 1974 history of the Cuban insurrection by Ramón Bonachea, who was associated during the insurgency with the DRE and Marta San Martín. According to the authors, Fidel forced the strike upon the urban revolutionaries to do away with the *llano's* challenge to his power within the movement, to frustrate the temptation by 26th of July's Civic Resistance leaders to forge an alliance with reformist military officers, and to force a direct military confrontation with the armed forces in the Sierra Maestra. The authors concluded, "It can be stated unequivocally that Fidel Castro was responsible for the conception of the strike and for its failure."¹⁵

Other scholars generally followed suit. For Tad Szulc, a Castro biographer, the strike became Fidel's mechanism for imposing revolutionary unity not only within the 26th of July Movement but upon all opposi-

tion forces.¹⁶ Robert Quirk also argues that the National Directorate, or core leadership of the *llano*, opposed the strike but obeyed Fidel, who, by exaggerating the strike's chances for success, lured his city-based comrades into accepting his point of view.¹⁷ Historian Thomas G. Paterson has written the best treatment of U.S.-Cuban relations during the insurgency. But on the subject of the insurrection itself, Paterson defers to earlier authors, arguing that Fidel imposed the strike over the objections of the *llano* and after its failure gained the political and strategic advantage.¹⁸ Jon Lee Anderson understood correctly the movement's motives for the strike but misinterprets the *sierra-llano* relationship, suggesting that Castro regarded the urban underground as "perhaps the greatest threat to his power" before the strike.¹⁹ Jorge Castañeda also attributes the planning and timing of the strike to Fidel, implying that in its aftermath Castro shirked responsibility for its failure, pinning blame instead on the *llano*.²⁰ Hugh Thomas properly locates the initiative for the general strike with the urban underground, noting in 1971 that Fidel Castro's own feelings about the strike "remain obscure."²¹

Among Cubans, too, even before Batista fled to the Dominican Republic on New Year's Eve of 1958, the unsuccessful uprising eight months earlier had become a watershed in the history of the Cuban insurrection, marking the demise of the *llano's* hegemony within the 26th of July Movement. Writing in 1964 in *Verde Olivo*, the journal of the Cuban armed forces, Che Guevara summarized the effect of the strike's failure on the political and structural balance of power within the 26th of July Movement in a widely reproduced and cited article, "A Decisive Meeting."²² In the twenty-five years after Guevara published the article, discussion or analysis of the strike remained taboo. Little has been published since except anecdotal first-person accounts of specific actions carried out by the underground prior to and during the strike. In 1988 and 1990 the history department of Havana's Communist Party released a two-volume collection of these articles accompanied by more analytic pieces written by Armando Hart Dávalos, who though jailed at the time of the strike was the movement's national coordinator in the *llano*, and by Faustino Pérez Hernández, the National Directorate's Havana representative and chief of the national strike committee.²³

Likewise, the absence of Cuban documentation to date has hampered accounts of this period, creating narrative gaps between the April 1958 strike, the rebel army's defeat of a summertime offensive in the Sierra Maestra, and the political consequence of that military victory: the July 1958 Pact of Caracas, a unity agreement that marked the 26th of July

1

“Tactics in Politics and Tactics in Revolution Are Not the Same”

FEBRUARY–MAY 1957

We aspire to remove, demolish, destroy the colonialist system that still reigns, to do away with bureaucracy, eliminate superfluous mechanisms, extracting our true values and, according to the particularities of our own idiosyncrasies, introducing the values of modern philosophical currents that currently prevail in the world. We aspire not to do this in a piecemeal fashion just to come out ahead but rather to conscientiously and responsibly plan the construction of the new nation with seriousness, intelligence, and dispassionate love of country that characterizes the 26th of July. This idea, these projections, should be widely disseminated and discussed by every part of the movement.

Frank País, to leaders of the 26th of July, May 17, 1957

ON MAY 14, 1957, JUDGE MANUEL URRUTIA

Lleó of the district court of the province of Oriente issued a landmark ruling in a case brought by the state against 151 men charged with participating in various antigovernment activities. Among the defendants were twenty-two men captured in December 1956 after Fidel Castro’s boat, the *Granma*, arrived in Oriente from Mexico, ready to take up arms in the Sierra Maestra against the Batista regime. Judge Urrutia’s ruling dealt a major blow to the government by essentially legitimizing armed insurgency: it declared that “in view of the usurpation and illegal retention of power by Batista and his followers, the defendants had been acting within their constitutional rights.”¹

Among the revolutionaries acquitted and released from jail that day was an aspiring schoolteacher from Santiago de Cuba, Frank País. The twenty-three-year-old País had been active as early as 1953 in the clandestine resistance to General Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar, who on March 10, 1952, had overthrown the democratically elected president, Carlos Prío Socarrás, in a pre-election coup. A member of the clandestine

Oriente Revolutionary Action (ARO) and later a leader of National Revolutionary Action, País merged his organization with the 26th of July Movement (M267) in 1955, becoming “chief of action and sabotage” in Oriente province. With his rare combination of meticulous organizational skills, keen sense of politics, and strategic vision, País’s involvement in the Havana-based M267’s plans was absolutely vital. País first met Fidel Castro in August 1956 while Castro was in Mexico, and from then until the end of the year he worked, at first against his better judgment, to plan and stage what was to be a major uprising in Santiago on November 30, 1956.² On that day, a popular insurrection in the provincial capital was to coincide with Castro’s landing in the province, pinning down the army and police in order to give Castro and his men time to reach the hills. But only a handful of work stoppages and targeted acts of industrial sabotage were carried out, while most of Castro’s *Granma* companions were either killed or arrested. Only Fidel and a handful of survivors made it safely to the nearby Sierra Maestra mountains.

Before his arrest in the ensuing police crackdown of the province, País and several 26th of July comrades visited Castro in February 1957 and brought along the veteran *New York Times* war correspondent Herbert Matthews. Matthews’s front-page reports with photographs of Castro caused a major splash in Cuba because they contradicted earlier reports by the Cuban information ministry and UPI that Fidel Castro was dead. The new reports and pictures renewed the M267’s notoriety and popularity on the island: they also gave the movement’s key activists, who accompanied Matthews to the Sierra, the chance to sit down and hash out strategic and organizational plans with Castro and Che Guevara.³ Before the talks, some activists wanted to convince Castro to abandon the Sierra Maestra, go into exile, raise money, and rally the international community to the cause of Cuban liberation. Instead, after two days of deliberations, the core of the M267 underground from Havana and Santiago agreed instead to Castro’s plans to expand the underground’s forces and the new guerrilla front. País, Faustino Pérez, Haydée Santamaría, Armando Hart, and the other underground activists left the Sierra meetings with a substantial undertaking before them: to build up Castro’s guerrilla force, create new fronts, form an urban militia in each of Cuba’s six provinces, build a national civic resistance of middle-class professionals, and organize the Cuban working class to take on the Batista regime in a “general revolutionary strike as the capstone of the struggle.”⁴

País returned to Santiago from the Castro meeting energized and ready to tackle the considerable disarray that existed within the 26th of July Movement. Three weeks later, however, he was arrested and had to cool

his heels in jail for over two months. Not until his release following Judge Urrutia's ruling was he able to rapidly set to work carrying out the monumental and multiple tasks that he was charged with as the movement's chief coordinator for the entire country. The main components of the insurgency—communications, organization, fund-raising, internal philosophical and ideological unity, "propaganda," organizing and arming an urban militia, sending men and material to Castro, and creating new guerrilla fronts—were each lacking both leadership and resources at this early stage of the insurrection.⁵ The U.S. embassy concurred with País's assessment of the movement's disarray in the *llano*, writing that "embassy intelligence sources . . . add that while the forces with Castro are fairly well organized, and he is clearly the leader, the same cannot be said for his organization outside of the hills. While many people are either in the '26 of July' Movement or sympathetic to it, the organization is loose and confused and suffers from considerable inefficiency."⁶

At great personal risk and often with emotional angst, País laid down the organizational architecture and began to outline the 26th of July's strategy of overthrowing Batista with a nationwide general strike supported by armed struggle (a model that was to dominate the movement's operations for the following year). He began to build the urban underground into far more than the rearguard supporting the guerrilla struggle in the mountains. The scope of his initiative and decision-making authority, conferred by Fidel Castro himself, was vast. The guerrilla, or *sierra* forces, completely depended upon the *llano* for everything from medicines, weapons, ammunition, food, equipment, clothing, money, and domestic and international publicity. With more and more comrades falling into police custody, País carried the burden of satisfying virtually all of these requirements.

In one of several memoranda sent around the country to M267 activists, País also made it clear that the movement must avoid overtures from traditional opposition political parties and even from other insurgent groups. País explained the movement's place in Cuban history, its differences with the island's "pseudo-opposition," the problems in building unity, and the new ideology the revolution would seek to awaken. He determined why the Santiago uprising of November 30, 1956, failed: a lack of both preparation and ideological and organizational unity. "We are living a moment of great confusion," wrote País, "confusion the government welcomes and that shakes the pseudo opposition in its clumsiness, egotism, and unbridled ambition." País spared no pity for "the pseudo-opposition," which "in all its ambition, fights battles, criticizes itself, lacks unity, and is destroying itself, each one of its factions trying to oc-

copy the position of leadership” in dealing with the government. As a result, one by one, opposition parties and politicians “converse and collaborate with the government, play its game, then look ridiculous accepting their so-called pacifist solutions, all while the government deceives and confuses” public opinion. The 26th of July, however, represented a departure from politics as usual, and País was intent on persuading the movement’s cadre that they and all of Cuba must regard the movement as completely independent. As the opposition politicians “rub shoulders and smile with the regime’s figureheads,” he wrote M267 activists, “a gallant youth finds itself in the Sierra Maestra and a National Movement is laboring clandestinely every day, following its own orders.” In the midst of such “demagogy, division, and lack of revolutionary ideas . . . we are forging and achieving a clean, intelligent and new program, with an honest, valiant, and revolutionary generation that captures in its ranks all of those who feel for and aspire to a true revolution.”⁷ País was keenly aware that the 26th of July was a heterogeneous group of young men and women: Ortodoxo Party members, nationalists, social democrats, intellectuals, and socialists. Though many of the core cadre of the 26th of July remained deeply anticommunist, País sought to situate the 26th of July in a historical and ideological context that would appeal to the anti-imperialism of Cuba’s Communist Party, the Popular Socialist Party (PSP), as well as to the nationalism of a population whose independence and sovereignty had been repeatedly thwarted since the turn of the century. The 26th of July, he wrote, represented “a new idea that captures the frustrations of Cubans from 1902 through today, and tries to take advantage of our historic experiences to unite them to our economic, political, and social needs of our country, and give them true solutions.”⁸

País developed a new organizational plan for the movement that drew from the lessons of the short-lived November 1956 uprising and from his analysis of the ideological, political, and security environment in which the M267 operated. He centralized a “National Directorate” under the leadership of a core group that included himself and a longtime comrade from the underground, Léster Rodríguez. Meanwhile, Armando Hart, Faustino Pérez, Marcelo Fernández, Haydée Santamaría, Celia Sánchez, Vilma Espín, and Carlos Franqui would serve as “adjunct” members who, for the time being, were not responsible for the day-to-day management of the movement’s plans. He divided the M267’s tasks into six separate “sections”: organization, labor outreach, civic resistance among the Cuban middle class, sabotage activities and an urban militia, propaganda to promote the movement’s cause, and a treasury to raise funds. País moved the movement’s headquarters from Havana to Santiago, where, com-

pared to the capital, the M267 maintained cordial and cooperative relations with other opposition groups, such as the Organización Auténtica and the PSP.⁹

Moreover, País and the entire National Directorate had also committed to providing for the *sierra's* very survival as well as creating new guerrilla fronts, and recruiting, training, and arming members for a nationwide militia cell structure. Quickly, País sent a group of fifty reinforcements to the Sierra Maestra, among them René Ramos Latour and Jorge Sotús, both longtime co-conspirators from the Oriente underground. At the same time, he laid the groundwork for opening a second guerrilla front in the Sierra Cristal range of Oriente. He also asked comrades around the country to prepare to "quickly create several more fronts . . . to carry out intensive work in the regions that may be used for future fronts, studying them, making contacts, maintaining them, providing . . . all of the details to the National Directorate but discreetly, without awakening a stir, without promising anything, without talking more than is necessary."¹⁰ Expanding the armed activities of the M267 increased the movement's vulnerability to penetration by government security or paramilitary forces. País thus warned that any leaks or betrayals would be punishable by death. Militia members in the "action and sabotage" cells were to keep "strict norms of discipline, silence and organization, punishing even with their lives those cases of mistakes or indiscretion. Anyone who is arrested and talks will be automatically sentenced and this sentence should be carried out in prison. Our sabotage machinery must be perfect; it cannot abide mistakes."¹¹

País, who had operated only in Oriente and did not personally know many of those members from other parts of the country, nevertheless attempted to take charge and demand allegiance and obedience from his colleagues in Cuba's other five provinces. Just as Castro was geographically isolated from the urban movement, País was isolated in his Santiago safe houses and felt frustrated at the lack of response from activists around the country over whom the National Directorate hoped to establish control. Despite País's promotion to national coordinator, the movement's provincial coordinators in Las Villas, Matanzas, Pinar del Río, and Havana replied slowly, if at all, to his letters, memoranda, and orders. At this juncture, the movement's hold on anything that could be described as a national movement was so loose that in many cases, País did not know to whom to direct sabotage instructions or where to write to core members.¹² Yet, despite this abysmal lack of communication and the mere skeleton of a real organization, País ordered the five other provinces to prepare to unleash during June 1957 a flurry of attacks on

bridges, highways, telephones, and electrical generators, to coordinate with “military actions” in his own province, such as the opening of the second front.¹³

The central strategy of the revolutionaries during this period was to organize a nationwide general strike, which was to be reinforced by military actions carried out by guerrillas in the Sierra Maestra. To succeed at such an undertaking, the movement would have to involve substantial numbers of Cuban workers in actively opposing the regime. While the failures of the November 30 uprising had encouraged País to promote a more comprehensive, horizontally organized national movement, that episode had its partial successes—particularly on the eastern end of Oriente province in the city of Guantánamo, as well as with the working class and PSP. In Guantánamo, under the direction of militia captain Julio Camacho Aguilera, who later became one of the movement’s key liaisons with the Cuban military, the M267 shut down highway traffic and took over the Ermita sugar mill. In early 1957, the 26th of July worked with labor activists to stage “small attempts at general strikes,” demonstrating to País that out of the Cuban working class it was possible to “create cadre and leadership, indoctrinate them, discipline them, and train them.”¹⁴

Moving the M267 beyond what País nevertheless regarded as “superficial and superfluous” outreach to workers required overcoming several formidable obstacles deeply rooted in the historical role of organized labor and the PSP in earlier Cuban anti-dictatorial movements.¹⁵ The movement’s cadre also brought to their work political, ideological, and sectarian baggage that prevented most from seeing Cuban workers and organized labor as potential allies in the struggle against Batista. Anti-communism within the 26th of July cadre itself was common, both because of the Cold War climate of the 1950s and because the PSP, officially banned in 1952, had a reputation for having collaborated with Batista from the 1930s. Since 1947, Eusebio Mujal Barniol had controlled the Confederation of Cuban Workers (CTC). A former communist who joined the Communist Party in 1930, Mujal had orchestrated the purge of the PSP from the leadership of the Cuban trade union movement in 1947. Mujal injected the CTC’s policies and statements with a potent dose of anticommunism and routinely oversaw the firing of workers who participated in antiregime activities or violated the CTC’s standing policy prohibiting work slowdowns, stoppages, and strikes. In exchange for preserving a compliant working class, he secured salary increases and other benefits for the CTC’s rank and file. His personal reputation for venality and corruption made him and his cohorts a target of numerous assassi-

nation attempts by the 26th of July "Action and Sabotage" groups. Yet, despite the corruption and conservatism of the CTC leadership, throughout the decade dissident factions and affiliates—many of them communists, Ortodoxos, or independents—rejected collaboration with the regime and actively supported and worked with the 26th of July and other opposition groups.¹⁶

Cooperation between the 26th of July and the PSP, however, was key to a successful national strike given the party's longstanding ties with workers, particularly those in sugarcane production and cultivation. Among sugar, tobacco, and transportation, and to a lesser extent the electrical and banking sectors (those trades where organized labor had not been thoroughly depoliticized during the Mujal era), the PSP exercised some influence on organized labor, though other than in Oriente it had lent only nominal, conditional support to the 26th of July. In the areas surrounding the major towns of Oriente—Bayamo, Manzanillo, and Guantánamo—where both sugar and tobacco were cultivated and processed, the party remained active, making the province, in País's view, a potentially fertile ground for collaboration between the PSP and the movement.¹⁷

País did not have such high hopes for the movement's potential collaboration with its rival insurgent forces, the Student Revolutionary Directorate and the Organización Auténtica (OA). On March 13, 1957, forces from both organizations staged a frontal assault on Batista's presidential palace. The premise of their plan was that a successful assassination of the dictator in his own office would, with one single blow, bring an end to his entire regime. Though the Directorate's "chief of military operations," Faure Chomón, and the M267's Faustino Pérez had discussed the possibility of the movement joining the assault, bringing Herbert Matthews to the Sierra took precedence for the 26th of July. Acting as Matthews's guide, Pérez stayed in Oriente until after the palace attack with no intention of returning to participate. In fact, though many of the 26th of July's members were close friends and collaborators of José Antonio Echeverría and other DRE members, and the two organizations had hashed out a joint statement of objectives during Castro's tenure in Mexico, the rivalry between the two organizations was unmistakable, as the M267 developed plans to form its own separate provisional government based in Santiago if the assassination attempt succeeded.¹⁸ But the assault on the palace failed miserably, at great cost to the assailants and their organizations. More than forty men were killed in the attack, including Echeverría, the charismatic Directorate leader and president of the Federation of University Students, a multiclass student organization

with roots in the anti-Machado uprisings of the 1930s.¹⁹ The U.S. embassy reported that “the government’s reaction was swift and violent,” with “as many as 400 arrests,” while others “died under mysterious circumstances.”²⁰ Indeed, the government crackdown did not discriminate between revolutionary organizations. By the end of March 1957, Frank País, Faustino Pérez, Carlos Franqui, and Armando Hart also found themselves in jail.²¹

Despite the debilitating arrests of nearly half the National Directorate’s members and the crushing loss of Echeverría, the 26th of July was quick to benefit from the attack’s failure. On the afternoon of the palace attack, three members of Havana’s underground commandeered a truck full of weapons that the DRE had left on a side street near Batista’s palace. After storing the weapons in the home of the man who later became the founder of Cuba’s intelligence services, the underground operatives shipped them in several cars to a safe house in Santiago. Though the Directorate demanded that the M267 return the weapons, Frank País was able to use the arms for his plans to open a new guerrilla front in Oriente.²²

The OA was another armed insurgent force loyal to and funded by Carlos Prío Socarrás, Cuba’s president from 1948 until the coup in March 1952. After the palace attack, virtually all of the surviving members fled the country, many settling temporarily in South Florida or in the Dominican Republic, where they trained for eventual guerrilla operations back in Cuba. Just as the DRE had ample reason to resent the 26th of July first for not participating in the attack and then for stealing their weapons, the 26th of July harbored equal if not more rancor toward the OA for similar reasons. On the eve of the November 1956 uprising in Santiago, País asked the OA to contribute some weapons they had been stockpiling and to stage some support actions in Havana to coincide with the *Granma* landing. But when push came to shove, the OA did neither and the 26th of July was left without the assistance it expected.²³

País did not hesitate to voice his dismay at this slight. After his release from jail in May, he found a letter waiting for him from Alberto Bayo, the Spanish Civil War veteran who had trained Castro’s own expeditionary forces in Mexico in 1955. Bayo was then under contract with Prío to train OA forces for their imminent return to Cuba. Knowing that the movement was vulnerable to accusations of a “lack of national cooperation,” Bayo asked for the 26th of July to support the OA landing. The cheekiness of the request incensed País, who accused the OA of “selfishness” and “undignified behavior” in refusing to give weapons to the M267 during the November 1956 uprising. “I suppose,” País wrote Bayo, “that

those of you over there don't know the cowardly and irresolute [character] of your cadre here. I sincerely do not understand their game nor what they are pursuing, because tactics in politics and tactics in revolution are not the same." Whether the OA had actually "turned over arms to the government in exchange for money" or lost them "by mistake," País warned Bayo to beware of "the thousands of intrigues and jealousies consuming the exiles' time and energy." But he stopped short of rejecting the OA request for assistance.²⁴

País assured Bayo that the movement had "never been reluctant to accept an agreement" as long as it is "effective and yields practical results."²⁵ He recognized the imminent arrival of an OA force—known as the *Corinthia* expedition—as an opportunity for the M267. He planned to support them in opening a new front in Oriente's northern stretch of mountains, the Sierra Cristal, in order to advance the movement's own plans for a second guerrilla front.²⁶ Carlos Prío sent an envoy to Oriente to deliver a personal gift of ten weapons and one thousand dollars for Fidel Castro with the message that the *Corinthia* expedition would not depart without Castro's green light. But País was extremely skeptical of the sudden show of interest in joint action and had no intention of allowing a rival organization to form an autonomous guerrilla group in the same mountain range where he planned to deploy the movement's second front. Indeed, without word from Fidel, País, or Prío's envoy, the *Corinthia* set sail on May 19, 1957.²⁷

Given that Prío stood to provide financial assistance to the 26th of July Movement, País understood it would be highly expedient to demonstrate some sign of support for the rival expedition. If the OA agreed to establish a consolidated front under M267 command, he planned to supply them with food and clothing. If they refused to subordinate themselves to the movement, he planned to "leave them alone so that they can try out a bit of life in the Sierra without supplies or support . . . as they did to us on November 30." Prío's forces, however, did not survive to face the choice. After landing east of Mayarí on the northern coast of Oriente, local peasants informed the army, which surrounded the expeditionaries and assassinated all but a few on sight. The M267 underground later hid some who had managed to escape.²⁸ With the Directorate's palace assault and the OA's expedition both ending in bloody failure, by the end of May 1957 the 26th of July appeared to be the only viable insurgent force on the island.

During the spring of 1957, Frank País operated with the support of both emerging tendencies within the 26th of July Movement, *sierra* and *llano*. Barely two weeks out of jail, he established a framework for an

island-wide underground movement. He reinforced the Sierra rebel forces; trained and recruited men and amassed weapons for a second front; stopped a second M267 expedition from coming to the Sierra from Mexico; initiated talks with dissident members of the Cuban armed forces; and sent out feelers to leading Cuban political figures who sympathized with the 26th of July. At the same time, increased sabotage of utilities, sugar mills, and other economic and political targets in the *llano* heightened the movement's public profile without significantly weakening the Cuban economy.²⁹

Despite the physical isolation of both Castro and País in the Sierra and in the Oriente underground, the 26th of July hardly operated in a political vacuum. After enduring the DRE-OA assault on the presidential palace, a month-long state of emergency, and some pressure from opposition political parties, Fulgencio Batista allowed the suspension of constitutional guarantees to lapse, ended some government censorship of Cuba's many weekly and daily periodicals except for Oriente province, and announced that he would hold presidential elections in June 1958.³⁰ Batista's recent electoral record inspired little confidence. Shortly after the 1952 coup, he announced presidential elections for November 1954. When the Auténtico opposition candidate, Ramón Grau San Martín, withdrew his candidacy at the last minute, Batista nevertheless proceeded with the elections, won by default, and took office, leaving the political opposition profoundly skeptical about his commitment to a democratic transition.

Though the government continued to prohibit press reports and analysis that could be construed to promote revolution or insurgency, a public debate unfolded. The discussions, which involved both major and minor actors on the political stage, aired various alternatives for redressing the political crisis that had enveloped the country for most of the decade. Pundits and politicians associated with the major opposition political parties—the Ortodoxo Party and the Auténtico Party and their various factions—as well as several smaller opposition parties and groups, presented five alternatives for a transition to the Cuban public: elections orchestrated by Batista; elections following Batista's departure from power; a coup d'état and installation of a military junta; a coup d'état and installation of a mixed civilian-military junta; or armed insurrection and revolution.³¹

The 1952 coup that overthrew Auténtico president Carlos Prío Socarrás and preempted elections scheduled for November of that year catapulted both the Ortodoxos and the Auténticos into the opposition, deepening a political and moral crisis that had begun to unfold throughout the

late 1940s and early 1950s. In 1948, Eduardo Chibás had founded the Ortodoxo Party as a spinoff of the ruling Auténtico Party, adopting the image of a broom and the slogan "honor against money" to express the Ortodoxo commitment to clean government and its repulsion with skyrocketing corruption in Cuban politics. Chibás's perhaps inadvertent suicide in 1951 during one of his live weekly radio broadcasts (he shot himself on the air for dramatic effect), as well as the coup, caused members of the party's "youth" section, like Fidel Castro, to defect from the party and traditional politics, opting instead for revolutionary insurrection.³² By 1957, the leaderless Ortodoxos had split into three separate factions.

The largest wing, the Ortodoxos-históricos (historic), was loosely organized around three individuals: Eduardo's Chibás's brother Raúl Chibás, director of a military academy; Roberto Agramonte, Sr., a sociology professor and the party's candidate for the unrequited 1952 presidential elections; and Enrique Barroso, president of the party's youth group. The históricos believed that participating in elections orchestrated by the Batista government would inevitably produce a fraudulent outcome; instead they advocated organized "civic resistance." A second faction, the Ortodoxos-abstencionistas (unregistered), led by an attorney and political science professor who had presided over the constitutional assembly of 1940, Carlos Marquéz Sterling, had also by 1957 steered away from supporting elections under Batista, advocating civic resistance as well. Marquéz Sterling had served as an aide to a veteran of the War of Independence, Don Cosme de la Torriente, who led the Society of Friends of the Republic, or SAR, "the closest the mainstream opposition ever got to a united civic front against the Batista dictatorship."³³ During 1955 to 1956, the SAR and Don Cosme unsuccessfully attempted to negotiate Batista's departure through an accelerated election schedule. At the time, however, Marquéz Sterling had incurred the ire of the históricos faction of the Ortodoxos by supporting the notion that political pacts even with their mortal enemies, the Aúnticos, or elections might strengthen the anti-Batista opposition.³⁴ And a third faction, the Ortodoxos-inscritos (registered), under Emilio "Millo" Ochoa, was prepared to participate in elections held with Batista in power, provided Batista first restored the 1940 Constitution. Throughout 1957, the three factions grew progressively weaker as waves of police brutality, repression, and assassination drove their leaders in and out of exile.³⁵ Moreover, the Ortodoxos had been further divided by splinter groups such as the Movement of the Nation, founded by the Harvard-trained journalist Jorge Mañach, and other opposition movements such as Amalio Fiallo's Radical Liberation Movement.³⁶